

## **The Reading Habits of Raila Amollo Odinga**

**By Auscar Odhiambo Wambiya**

From the works written by Raila Amollo Odinga, Kenya's former Prime Minister and a leading Presidential candidate in the 2022 elections in Kenya, there is a great body of evidence that Raila reads widely, voraciously and omnivorously. This is also true in other works written by others about the man. In his autobiography "Flames of Freedom," Raila narrates how the Prison chaplains in the different prisons he was detained in from time to time in the 80s, chose relevant Biblical scriptures to share with the prisoners and how they would have conversations about spiritual matters. Raila confesses to finding it very refreshing and achieving a sense of renewal from these weekly contacts with the chaplain. He says he had a bible for reference purposes. Apparently, the prison authorities were obliged to give one to any prisoner who asked, and prisoners would refuse to eat if they were not given their bible, Raila says.

Earlier, Raila's personal items, including his bookshelves, had arrived at Kamiti a couple of days after his arrival there but for some time he had been too ill to do any reading. He confesses to have begun reading again after a while. Generally, the prisoners would play games for about an hour after breakfast, after exercising first thing, then Raila would read for a while, then have lunch and relax for half an hour, then get up again and play some more games, before reading some more until it was time to shower – with a bucket of water that had been left standing in the sun to warm – and then it was time for supper.

Raila also says in his autobiography that boredom was always a serious problem in prison, but the reading helped a lot, as did conversation with *askaris* while playing games.

Detention offered plenty of time to fill with reading, reflection and analysis, Raila says on page 273. He was able to explore many philosophical and scientific theories, comparing and contrasting, for example, the Marxist theory of materialism and the Darwinian theory of evolution.

Eventually, while at Kamiti Prison again, in mid-1980s, Raila was also allowed to borrow books from the prison library, which was better stocked than the one at Shimo La Tewa. It was the main beneficiary of donations from outside the country and there was a wider variety of reading matter.

While still in Uganda as a refugee, The United Nations High Commission for Refugees Offices in Geneva, Switzerland asked Raila where he would like to go for exile, and he gave them several options—Germany, Norway, the UK and the USA in that order. The applications were made and Raila sat out the wait for responses, as usual making full use of the library of his host, Somalian Ahmed Said Farrah, which was well-stocked.

In the early 90's in one of his international travels, Kenya's Attorney General Amos Wako arrived in London on a tour and the authorities raised with him the matter of Raila's status in Kenya. Eventually, it was agreed that Raila would in due course get a one-way travel document home, with assurances that nothing would happen to him after his return. It was not clear at that point how long Raila would stay in Norway. He spent a lot of time reading in the excellent Norad library, which received newspapers from Kenya, even if a day late.

Raila also narrates that, during their days as young children, Oburu Odinga and himself would sit on the verandah outside and listen, sometimes far into the night as Jaramogi Oginga Odinga and

other leaders, including Mzee Martin Odera, would talk at length about what the white man was doing and what the black man should do. That was when Raila began to be aware of political issues at about age 10. He also loved the radio and listened in at every opportunity. He had an insatiable appetite for news.

There were about 200 students in the German School where Raila undertook his college studies. The Herder Institute student body was divided into classes of 20. Once Raila and other international students were more fluent in German, they also studied German literature and European history, reading such great masters as Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe and Bertolt Brecht.

Raila's first few months in Magdeburg Otto-von-Guericke University to study Mechanical Engineering were challenging but comfortable and pleasant. They allowed him to get to know German people better, their psyche, their culture and their history, and he soon found himself integrated into German society. All lectures and seminars were in German but by now he was fluent, having passed all his German language exams with distinction and having studied German classical literature. Meanwhile, he was studying hard and continued to find learning very exciting.

"We would often go to the library of the University of Cairo," – Raila Amollo Odinga says of his brief stay in Egypt in 1962 on transit for further studies in Germany. "Our ship had a library and we students often went there," – Raila says of his trip to Germany for Studies.

About six months after his first real friendship with a real girlfriend faded, Raila says he was at a local carnival when he met Margita, a teacher at a school in Arendsee, a town north-west of Magdeburg. They became friendly and she used to come to see Raila in Magdeburg, Germany, while he also visited her in Arendsee, a pretty holiday resort on the shores of an island sea. Raila stayed with her several times and would take his books to study while she was working."

One day, Prof. Peter Anyang' Nyong'o came with Joe Ager to Mukhisa Kituyi's house where they found Raila and they discussed what had happened around the mid 1980's when the Moi regime was repressing all forms of dissent. This was in the early 90's. It was clear that the situation was becoming grave and the four concluded that Raila's only option was to leave the country. They talked about Kamau Kuria's escape via the US embassy just over a year earlier and decided that they could try something similar. They went off and spent the next three days planning how he could do it. Raila stayed at Kituyi's house, for the time being, reading books from his library and playing with Mukhisa's children.

When they were still in Kamiti, the prison authorities had begun to allow prisoners some books, sent to them by their families. The books Raila had were a mixed bag of novels, history books, technical engineering manuals and different journals. They were not allowed any overtly political books or newspapers. At Shimo la Tewa, the prisoners were also allowed to borrow books from the prison library. The disadvantage was that they were not allowed to go and select books themselves but had to rely on the warders to make choices for them. Most of the warders were only semi-illiterate and had no idea what they were choosing but, in their situation, absolutely anything to read was a blessing.

Thus, it was, from these prisons experiences, that Raila confesses to have read an eclectic mix of romantic novels, historical books about war, books about exploration and expeditions such as the Kon Tiki, Comedies, books from old British and American libraries and many religious tracks.

Ida was also allowed to send books to Raila, while he was in prison, and she would send about 20 books at a time. They would be censored and only about 10 would arrive. The next time Ida would include the 10 that had been rejected and, on this occasion, some would reach Raila, because of the ignorance of the prison guards. This way, over time, Raila got virtually everything Ida sent. Those doing the censoring among the prison warders failed to realize how political many of the books were, including those by Shakespeare and even the Holy Bible according to Raila Odinga.

Raila says in his autobiography that the books he found particularly entertaining included some by Anthony Trollope, Sherlock Holmes detective stories by Arthur Conan Doyle, books about daring escapes, such as *Papillon* by Henri Charriere, books about intrigue in high places, such as *God's Banker* (about the Vatican) by Rupert Cornwell, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (a political book if ever there was one) and Shakespeare's plays, all of which, he says he read in detention. And just as the detainees had established secret channels of communication with the outside world, so they also received smuggled books. By now, Raila had quite an impressive library and the authorities found themselves obliged to provide him with some bookshelves.

In a situation where you are deprived of freedom, the Bible becomes a great solace according to Raila Odinga. Most people's early reading of the Bible occurs in school, when Bible study is fairly mechanical and undertaken mostly to pass exams, and most people don't stop to think then about the deeper meanings of the words. But Raila found, in detention, the Bible helped him to look at situations in a different light. He found many of the biblical stories very, very meaningful like the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, the discovery of Jesus by Peter, the trial before Pontius Pilate, the Jews crying for Jesus' blood and demanding the release of Barnaba, the sermon on the Mountain, Moses' exodus and the trials and tribulations of the Israelites on that journey, the story of David and Goliath. He had read the bible in remand and he read it again when he was in detention, right through several times. He had the King James Version in English, and also had copies in Kiswahili and in German. He read the Bible in all these languages. Raila further says he would read from Genesis to Revelations, stopping in stages to reflect, finding comfort and encouragement in some of the stories and messages there.

At Shimo La Tewa Prison, besides the Bible, Raila had copies of the Koran, in English and in Swahili. He had wanted a Christian teacher to come and give him bible instruction but none had been cleared by security to enter the detention block. The Koran teacher did have clearance, however. He would come once a week and they would sit together outside for an hour. Instruction is needed to understand and interpret the Koran unlike the Bible, and his teacher guided me in appreciating the Koran's teachings.

From the foregoing, it is evident that Raila's indefatigable memory, his grasp of issues and his articulatory abilities have been sourced from the written material he absorbed in the early days and which he continues to absorb. The enigma is yet another evidence that books and power relate.

***The Writer is The Author of "The Relationship Between Books and Power," a book that shows that the world's most powerful people have specific reading habits. Reach him through; milestones14@gmail.com***