

Mututho Law Has Done More Good Than Harm



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As we celebrate the 48th year of independence, it is opportune to take note of a recent national development. A beer law befittingly named after the man behind it, has not only freed many from overindulgence in alcohol but also somehow reclaimed our status as a 'working' nation, especially in the rural areas.

Indeed, the Mututho law, which seems to be an improvement on those existing in the 1980s that had become victim of the widespread impunity, is a wake-up call for all stakeholders of the beer industry. Of great concern is that these new laws have taken more stringent forms whose impact is variously experienced.

Invariably, the law is for the good of this nation, despite being a serious threat to many businesses. This contention could be supported by some noticeable benefits already happening around us. Key of them all can be figured out from an observation during recent tours to the rural countryside.

Apparently, not many people had been able to meet Munyua on his feet in the recent years. Ironically, this self confessed alcoholic is already in his 30's, thus the prime of his life. Prior to the new alcohol law, Munyua had almost been a permanent resident of his favorite drinking joint, somewhere in the hinterland of Karatina town. His only semblance of sober moments were seemingly when en-route to the bar, after short rests in his house that is just a few minutes of staggering distance.

Today, Munyua has no choice but to get home immediately after 11 pm. After this, he is ostensibly imprisoned up to 5pm the following day – therefore being forced into involuntary soberness. Whether Munyua has been gainfully employed during the prolonged soberness is another matter altogether.

Wanjohi is on the other hand an exited beer business entrepreneur. He and his staff are no longer working endless hours serving sometimes monotonous customers like Munyua. This enables Wanjohi to attend to other economic activities in his farm, especially during daylight. On the other hand bar customers start arriving just around 5pm ready to adequately recharge their alcoholic content before 11pm. According to Wanjohi, the customers now seem to be gainfully employed in their farms and businesses. This enables them to become more moneyed than in the past. More still, they get time to feed well, therefore whetting their thirst with even heavier drink doses.

Consequently, the beer sales are better for Wanjohi than in the past. This scenario is replicated by Harun, a bar owner somewhere in Eastlands, Nairobi. He has no qualms with the new law since it has so far not disastrously affected his business. It is particularly exciting that most customers have to pack off before some can get into drunken stupors, which sometimes lead to stressful situations.

Certainly, not all beer businesses are positively affected by the new laws. Moses, who has invested heavily in a beer business situated in an up market locality, is no longer at

peace with his experiences. The sales have dropped substantially. Many customers had in the past been flocking from elsewhere to patronise his pub especially after 11pm. It is no longer viable for customers to relocate to night joints particularly in the estates. They have no choice but to avoid frequent police raids and subsequent heavy penalties.

Nonetheless, all is not lost for those affected negatively. It is imperative that we focus on the positive attributes likely to be achieved once we are all socialised to the new laws. We need therefore to look for the opportunities therein, instead of defying or constantly plotting for deregulation of the same laws.

Specifically, we need to appreciate the fact that, there has been hue and cry over the many societal challenges that have been linked to alcoholism. Apparently, hard and illicit drinks as well as ordinary beers have taken their tolls in different ways. In any case, hard drinking ordinarily graduates from normal drinking. It is from alcoholism that we have witnessed family challenges including reduced birth rates especially in some areas of Central Kenya. The same drinking habits have led to incapacitation of many youths such as Munyua, who would otherwise be contributing favorably to nation building.

In urban centers, it is notable that many hours have been spent in bars any time that people are not at work. Incidentally, cultural studies decry the Africans' concept of 'killing time' compared to the West where time is spent (seemingly wisely). In the process of killing time, overindulgence in alcohol consumption has led to increased stress and poor productivity in many workplace situations. Further, many lives have continually been lost through drunken driving. Moreover, incidences of stress driven diseases such as high blood pressure, strokes and heart attacks have been reported to be on the increase.

Evidently therefore, it may not be insensitive for the authorities to use legal means as encouragement of or even enforcement of a more sober and healthier society. Those whose businesses have been adversely affected need to look out for new opportunities. In fact, the latter are numerous if only we can engage in a process of thinking outside the box. Essentially, it may be more beneficial to work around change than to fight the same.

Existing beer business entrepreneurs could benefit invaluablely, in the event of becoming more creative thus diversifying into new ventures. Perhaps some of the current bar businesses can be treated as part-time occupations. After all, it makes sense to treat beer drinking as an affair of *baada ya kazi* (after work) rather than *badala ya kazi* (instead of work), therefore distinguishing clearly between working and drinking hours. Realistically, it is worthwhile approaching 50 years of independence as a real working and more sober nation.

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