



I'm Lovin' It: Kenyans' Sadistic Fascination With Exams and Failure

By Wandia Njoya



I vividly remember an incident that occurred when I was a graduate student in the US. We were having this conversation with an American on campus, when I animatedly said, “I’m so loving this!” The American then saw fit to correct my English, and promptly told me, “In English, we don’t say ‘I am so loving.’ We say ‘I love.’”

This ignorant American, in his own country, seemed unaware that “I’m lovin’ it” was a phrase that had been popularized by the Justin Timberlake song [“I’m lovin’ it”](#) and, in a classic manipulation of culture by corporations, had become the tagline [for McDonalds commercials](#). I said, “I’m so loving” very aware of that dynamic. I was also teaching undergraduate American students. They said this all the time and I was simply borrowing a phrase from them.

This American knew I was a graduate student and I must have had a fairly decent command of English, but that did not count. His boldness came from his assumption that, listening to my Kenyan accent, I couldn’t possibly know English well enough to play around with the language. He needed to remind me that when it comes to the English language, he ranks higher than I do.

The incident is an illustration of how purist notions of language and grammar are not innocent of certain social assumptions, and most of all, innocent of power. What language is considered

“correct” depends not simply about what people say, but also about our assumptions about a person and their social status.

This complexity of language is exemplified in Health Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe’s [recent humiliation](#) of Kenyan nurses who purportedly failed the English language test necessary for them to work in the UK. The contradictions of the whole incident are mind-boggling. All the social dynamics of language were forgotten when the media, true to its hatred of educated Kenyans, celebrated that Kenyan nurses had failed the entry English test requirements.

Healthcare: The Kenyan middle passage?

Unlike what Kenyans are celebrating, Kagwe did not suggest that the nurses could not speak English. His beef was that they did not prepare for the tests well enough. In fact, he added that the role of the health workers is to prepare for the exams, and at no point did he express concern about the ability of the nurses to communicate in English.

But more troubling is that as the media and Kenyans sadistically celebrate the nurses’ failure, they forget how twisted and insidious the context of the conversation is. The context is the Cabinet Secretary for Health, whose job is to take care of Kenyans’ health, in a government that is supposed to provide work opportunities for Kenyans, telling the clinical officers that he will negotiate and sell their labour to countries abroad. And the conference attendees accepting this logic and clapping.

As [Mkawasi Hall recently said](#) in a conversation with me on this matter, the idea of governments looking for foreign employers for their own citizens comes from a very dark and troubling place, where the government abandons its contract with the citizens and chooses instead to sell them to foreigners as labour.

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This idea is even worse than what Fanon predicted when he said that the African comprador elite would sell their beaches and landscapes to European tourists and make their countries the brothel of Europe. In this case, we are returning to the Middle Passage four centuries ago where African chiefs kidnapped and sold people into slavery. To add insult to injury, our current chiefs have not learned that it is not money, but African labour, that made the West rich, and they are astonishingly ignorant of [Walter Rodney’s argument](#) that the export of African labour underdeveloped, rather than developed, Africa. It defies imagination that the African bourgeoisie can think that the export of African labour will develop Africa because the bourgeoisie are English-speaking, suit-wearing Africans getting dollars from remittances rather than the chiefs receiving guns and cloth of four centuries ago.

Reading Kagwe’s words in print, without the performance, makes the cruelty and absurdity more visible. This is what Kagwe said:

The quality of service that we provide must be at the highest standard possible. Equal to anywhere on earth. If you do that, it will be possible for us to make Kenya a health tourism destination. And if that happens, you (pointing at the audience) will benefit.

As far as I am concerned, we will continue to negotiate for you, and ensure that you work in both Europe and the Middle East. We also have negotiations going on with the Middle Eastern region, and THEY NEED YOU PEOPLE (Kagwe’s emphasis). They need you people (audience

applause) and therefore you must make sure that you go there.

But in order for that to happen, we have got to make sure that the standard of our training is one that is universal. . . . Let me tell you what has happened. And this is the truth.

When we test, because there are certain tests that one has to do, depending on the region in the world that you are going to . . . for instance, the ones who are going to England have got to do tests in English, and they have got to do tests I think in computers. Our failure rate, particularly in English, is extremely high (audience laughter). We sent 300 people to do the English exams. Ten passed (Audience laughter and whistling). Ten.

So I am challenging you that this is going to happen. We are going to negotiate, yes, but you are going to have to pass the exams. Not me. You (audience laughter). So when we do those exams, let's prepare ourselves. Let's set the standards, so that we are sure that there is no exam anywhere on earth, that a clinical officer training in Kenya can fail.

And therefore when we talk about technologies, when we talk about the future, we need to prepare ourselves to be in that space.

It is clear that Kagwe does not care for the English communication skills of Kenyans. He cares that they pass the tests. That the media and their Kenyan adherents do not see this distinction between communicating in English and passing tests in English is baffling, given that the same people vilified 8.4.4 and praised the Competency Based Curriculum for doing away with exam obsession. Mark you, this saga comes in the week where KICD has announced the assessments of Grades 4 and 5, and Kenyans are responding with wishes of good luck to the children, despite the repeated claims that the assessments are not examinations.

So the Kenyans saying that nurses need to pass English tests to prove they can work in English are contradicting themselves. They want to equate passing tests to ability to work, yet, 1) they lament about the obsession with exams, and 2) they do not want to listen to the fact that most educationists agree that passing tests makes you a good test taker and says little about your skill in the work place.

Grammar or communication?

Now let's go to the tests themselves. Kenyan media is mocking nurses based on information from a generic website calling itself [SCL Online](#) that claims that the tests are mapped "against the Common European Framework of Reference used to describe language ability."

First, this SCL Online is not an official examinations body. The media has not done the homework of verifying that this so-called test was the one administered to the nurses. Second, the Common European Framework is for European countries where citizens speak another European language as their first language. In other words, the framework is for a European French speaker or German speaker seeking to work in the UK, or for a European English speaker seeking to work in Spain or in Holland. Those standards do not take into account former colonies where European languages are still imposed through the education system and exist in a coercive relationship with local African languages. So testing Africans from English-speaking Africa using European standards does not gauge the English language competence of Africans.

Let's dig further into the abuse. According to [Kenyan media reports](#), "nurses had 20 minutes to complete 60 multiple choice questions," and some are listed here:

1. My teacher _____ from the United Kingdom.

- A. are
 - B. is
 - C. am
 - D. be
2. What's _____ name?
- A. -
 - B. his
 - C. him
 - D. he
3. My friend _____ in London.
- A. living
 - B. live
 - C. lives
 - D. is live
4. Where _____?
- A. works Tom
 - B. Tom works
 - C. Tom does work
 - D. does Tom work
5. I _____ coffee.
- A. no like
 - B. not like
 - C. like don't
 - D. don't like

First, the structure of the questions is misleading and confusing, because one can put an infinite number of English words in the blanks that can correctly complete the sentences. Question 4, for example, does not capture the Kenyanized version of questions in English. A normal Kenyan expression would be "Tom works where?" It may not be the way English natives would ask the question, but heck it works. An English speaker who knows that the Kenyan is a foreigner would not have trouble understanding what the Kenyan is asking.

Unless, of course, the English patient, like my American interlocutor, is hostile to foreigners and is trying to prove a point about ownership and power. And we do know that in the post-Brexit, COVID anti-vaxxers English empire, many English subjects of Her Majesty are [hostile to healthcare workers](#), whether they are White and English or not.

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When I saw question 5, my instinct was to fill the blank with the word "drink", only to realize that the task is to choose the correct negation of the verb "to like". This question is abusive, because before correctly answering the question, one has to realize that the question is about negation, rather than about the verb "to like". I can categorically say that this question does not test language competence. This test did not need knowledge of English as much as practice at test-taking. Both Kagwe and the nurses' unions are agreed that [the issue is preparing for the tests](#), not nurses' language skills.

My next point about this sadistic fascination with Kenyan nurses failing English exams is related to the fact that Kenya is a country where people will pontificate about African languages and fake

laments about colonial languages. Why should we accept to have a colonial power sneering at our competence in English? As many sane Kenyans have pointed out, when Cuban doctors were brought to work in Kenya, they were not tested for their competence in Kiswahili. In fact, the same media enjoying the problems of Kenyan nurses [was very generous](#) in their reports of Cuban doctors also learning Kenyan languages. Why can't we demand such consideration of the UK, since we teach in their language?

My last point on language learning comes from my own expertise in teaching French as a foreign language. There has been a debate in language teaching circles about whether to train people to speak a foreign language correctly, or to train them to communicate. About two decades ago, there was a feeling that the insistence on direct translation and correct grammar in foreign language teaching did not make learners competent in communication when speaking the language in the real world.

Speakers of a language also do not necessarily speak the language in the grammatically correct way. We should know this because of how Kenyan speakers of Kiswahili mix up their *ngeli*, for instance saying "*kitabu yake*" instead of "*kitabu chake*". In front of Tanzanians who take Kiswahili seriously, a Kenyan will concede that they do not speak Kiswahili well. But the same Kenyan would probably laugh at a European who speaks Kiswahili using the correct grammatical form, saying that the European does not speak Kiswahili like a Kenyan.

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On the other hand, language purists also pointed out that it is difficult to communicate when you do not respect the basic language rules. What this debate meant for us as teachers is that we had to strike a balance between torturing students with grammar and getting them to communicate. For some grammatical errors, it takes time for a speaker to consistently use the correct grammatical form, even though they may know the correct one. For instance, a common error we see in Kenya is the mixing up of gender pronouns in English. And the reason for this is simple: Kenyan languages don't have a gender distinction in pronouns. The English have he-she, in our languages we just have "*anakunywa maji*" for both people and animals. Are we going to humiliate Kenyan speakers because they got a pronoun wrong? Rules of grammar are dependent on many social factors besides the ability to correctly take a test.

Finally, it seems absurd that, with the pronouncements by the private sector, politicians and even Education Cabinet Secretaries that Kenya is wasting too many resources on the arts, Kenyans should be concerned about the language skills of scientists. Where exactly do we want Kenyan nurses to perfect their English, if in the same breath we are saying that the arts should not be taught? Or do we want to blame parents for not teaching their children English, now that CBC makes parents cover up for the faults of the education system?

Kenyan sadism

The fact that Kenyans have been quick to enjoy the humiliation of nurses, sold off by their own government to a former colonial power, despite all their proclamations of "*titi la mama li tamu*", shows that we are dealing with deep cognitive dissonance and sadism when it comes to examinations and language. We make formulaic praises of local languages, we make formulaic laments about obsession with exams, but as soon as a Cabinet Secretary faults Kenyan nurses for failing English tests, we rejoice and sing about quality, competence and the failure of the education

system.

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These contradictions point to a country that is deeply conflicted about itself. We Kenyans are inauthentic and sadistic. We care less for who we actually are and prefer to stick to a make-believe narrative about ourselves, a narrative that is based on fake websites and international (read Anglo-American) recognition. Like my American interlocutor, we are deeply embedded in exerting and affirming the power of the colonial state, no matter what it does to us. We are completely hostile to analyzing power, so we prefer technical explanations and are hostile to social analysis. We lack our own Kenyan narratives about ourselves and keep measuring ourselves by the narratives of the UK and the US. This situation is completely violent, and it shows up in the rise of domestic violence, suicide and mental illness.

We need to abandon our narrative of Kenya as an “island of peace in a sea of turmoil”, and accept that we need healing from this violence that we have pushed underground into our abusive relationships in our private spaces. Other African countries may have wars with weapons against flesh and blood in the battlefields, but in Kenya, our battle is against our soul. And if we don't treat it urgently, in a not so distant future we will be turning the violence, of which the police are already doing a dress rehearsal, into a fully-fledged war between citizens. It's time that we Kenyans faced up to our reality of who we are to heal ourselves of our contradictions.

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