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By Silas Nyanchwani



*When you use the term minority or minorities in reference to people, you're telling them that they're less than somebody else.*

Gwendolyn Brooks -American Poet.

The average age of knowing that you were born out of wedlock in my village was 5.

For boys, you learnt this news on a football pitch. I don't remember the slight misdemeanor that prompted the insult. Neither did I know the meaning of the expletive, but the viciousness with which it was uttered sent a chill down my spine and I froze on the spot. Afterwards, my mother (a young widow then) could not explain what the word meant, but she warned me never step in that field again. I never did.

The word for a child born out of wedlock in Ekegusii, *ekerentane*, reduces the child to an inanimate object. Loosely it would translate to: something you bring along. Its connotations are untranslatable, there is an undisguised ring of contempt to it. Illegitimate children in my community were objects of ridicule and hostility. The boys at the pitch had put me to my place.

An illegitimate boy was always a target of insults, sometimes even by his own brothers. I scarcely remember any illegitimate boy who ever fully integrated into the new society the mother married to. Illegitimate boys were always forbidden from even performing certain rights like breaking ground for a grave to be dug, or even digging a grave. Such a privilege.

With hindsight, I now know it is the diminishing farming land in my community that motivated the

hostility from our male peers and relatives. Illegitimate girls were the first target of pedophiles and any creep with incestuous inclinations, inured by the belief that as long the child was not related to them by blood, it wasn't incest.

The message was clear: You are an outsider, you can't have an opinion in our village. I recoiled in embarrassment, hurt badly. I will never belong.

Within a short five years of living in our new home, my mother would die in her mid-thirties. I was an orphan at just ten years. Being an illegitimate boy was bad enough. Being an orphaned illegitimate boy was positively vulgar. Nobody wanted to pick you up. Thankfully, my maternal kin took me and locked me in a boarding school.

My mother's eldest sister would take care of me for the next ten years. It was a lovely, inclusive and kind family, but I would always be an outsider. A fact I was once reminded rather painfully. My aunt's brother-in-law died of throat cancer. The brother-in-law was renowned patriarch, the last of a dying generation. In the 1990s, there was still a sense of community, and his death attracted a sizable crowd for the wakes.

During the wake nights, women will huddle themselves in the kitchen (usually a smoky, makeshift, grass-thatched, mudwalled hut, separate from the main house). And men will gather in the main house. It was in one such gathering of youthful men, that I would once again be put to my place.

The gathering was a blazing sitcom; rapturous, filled with rancorous humour and mudslinging that drew the throtiest of laughter. It was during one of the heated exchanges that I made the capital offense of offering my unsolicited opinion. One of the older members of the crowd, shouted me down,

"Shut up! You are a just a relative\* here!". He said it with such deadpan fury, it scared me.

The rage in the voice may have been made to carry with a hint of humour -indeed, the whole house went up in flames of laughter at that putdown- but the message was clear: You are an outsider, you can't have an opinion in our village. I recoiled in embarrassment, hurt badly. I will never belong. Long after the funeral, everyone in that host village would call me "relative" in good humour, and I took it up without begrudging anyone. But deep inside, I started withdrawing from the world to take solace in books. In retrospect, that is how I became a bookworm: To escape the harsh world.

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My high school was a little-known entity buried somewhere in the innards of Gusii Highlands. I joined a fat boy, about to shed all the weight and morph into a 6'4 wiry mesh of bone and flesh. High school was a neutral, anonymous space where no one knew my background. I could be anything I wanted.

I was scared of bullies. But our high school deputy principal, soon to be our principal for the next four years, a man who inspired the fear of God in boys, banned bullying effectively. Only prefects would whip us, but even that they did surreptitiously; if caught, they invited the fist of the principal's fury. Think of Samuel L. Jackson.

That principal now heads Nairobi School.

The high school was Catholic. I grew up in a strict Adventist family, and became an ardent one at a

young age. Soon, I would learn what it means to be a minority. For the small portion—roughly about a quarter the school—that identified themselves as active Adventists, getting a chance to worship on Sabbath was always a hard bargain. There were all sorts of intimidation from the administration. And to meet for Friday evening vespers, or the Saturday afternoon bible study, depended on the magnanimity of the school management. We were rather isolated, ridiculed by some students and we had to know our place, and be thankful to the gracious Catholic administration for the piecemeal hours of worship granted. I never liked that experience.

I did attend an Adventist high school briefly also and I noticed that Catholics were also given very limited time, or rights to worship, same as other Sunday worshippers. You could see the big, authoritarian hand of the Adventist church infringing on the religious liberties of the young men. I immediately wanted the church to be separated from the school system, and I grew to hate any form of authoritarianism even from my own church.

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Ten years ago, I joined the University of Nairobi's Main Campus. To me it felt like coming out of a jail after the unfortunate first 20 years of my life. With guaranteed freedom and housing for the next four years, a burning desire to be a man of my own in my heart, and the financial stipend from Higher Educations Loans Board, I could afford to be a man of my own.

I remember the knife-edge tension in the small room where we were hurled in front of the TV, incredulously watching Kibaki being sworn in at night.

Again, here I could afford to be anonymous. My being illegitimate, or an orphan were no longer a factor of life. At least on the outside. I joined other young men and women, mostly from rural and rustic parts of Kenya on a government loan to pursue my dream, which by then was clear: become a writer.

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### **A brief detour**

Bad things come in threes. The Christmas Break of my first semester coincided with the General Elections of 2007, the first elections I was eligible to vote. My 'paternal' grandmother, died. I may not have been her biological grandchild but, growing up she had this indifference (more of her temperament than any ill will) towards me, but still humane enough in the African way. I visited my 'ancestral' home for the first time in ten years. It was awkward. I will never belong.

The second bad thing: my high school crush, a woman who had unleashed a Sicilian Thunderbolt on me ala` Michael Corleone in The Godfather, died and I could not afford to attend her funeral. In my imagination, she would have been my wife. Or not.

Third thing: the botched elections and the violence afterwards. I remember the knife-edge tension in the small room where we were hurled in front of the TV, incredulously watching Kibaki being sworn in at night. We had all voted for Raila Odinga cashing in on the ODM wave. I was in the village where I had grown up.

I grew up being fed a lot of nonsense about the Luo, but in that election, a brilliant cousin then studying Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Nairobi taught me a lesson on historical marginalization of not just the Luos, but of the Coastal people, of the people in Northern Kenya. He

convinced me that Raila Odinga was the right candidate for Kenya, not just the Luos. He told me Kibaki had broken the MoU that would have probably ridden Kenya of the toxic tribal nature of our politics.

It is this kind of idealism that had led more than 50 per cent of my clansmen to turn to Raila Odinga in that election. But the blatant disregard of the wishes of Kenyans in that election was more than we could take. The men in the room were smacking, clicking, shouting, creaking, rasping and could not believe what was happening.

My cousin Shylock, a brilliant and laidback mathematician, in moment of absolute exasperation, sighed,

“HE IS NOT MY PRESIDENT!”

He was beside himself with anger. Those words are still the realest, heaviest reaction I have ever heard from someone. Everyone in that house was mortified and I remember so many bad things were said about the Kikuyus, all in a moment of madness.

Then the violence erupted. In no time, we learnt that our clansmen were being killed in Kericho for “voting for Kibaki”. We were in town bordering the Maasai and the men in the room had ‘warrior’ instincts borne out of the many years of the inter-ethnic war with the Maasais. They wanted to pick up their bows and arrows and go fight the Kalenjins; indeed, the war did erupt at Borabu on the Kisii-Bomet border.

We got the more sad news—rumours really— that our clansmen had been killed in Kisumu. This was greeted by ambivalence. There was a Luo man, Ouma, who had lived in that market place I grew up, working as welder, widely loved for his wild laughter and boisterous personality. He had spent the evening with us, in readiness for never-would-be Raila presidency.

Even in our devolved units, for some clannish communities, smaller clans have little chance and will always be at the mercies of the numerically bigger clans, handed scraps of leadership to pacify them. Sadly, if you are minority, you have to accept and live with this.

But as soon as the Kisumu news hit us, some of the male cousins suddenly wanted to be hostile towards him, with one insinuating that we should discipline him, and more disgustingly suggesting that ‘we’ should go after the wife.

The thought itself scared me to death. Even then, I knew what it feels like to be a minority in a place dominated by people of a different kind. Luckily for Ouma, nothing bad happened to him, there were more sensible people in that room than the few rotten apples.

But others were not lucky in the Rift Valley and Nairobi. Depending on where you voted, you were targeted for either offensive or vengeful attacks. The rest is well documented.

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When school reopened, in the first class after the coalition government was formed, a Japanese instructor married to a Kenyan and who had lived in Kenya long enough, tried to prompt a conversation on the violence. There is something foolish about being 20-years-old with youthful idealism. Our feelings were raw, and we said bad things against each other, full of stereotypes. We

stopped short of a fist fight. The Japanese lecturer was so scared she had to stop the discussions.

A section of the class wanted to move on. A section of the class felt hurt and cheated by the coalition government. The rancour in our nation politics would visit our campus, only uglier, during the charged Students Organization of Nairobi University (SONU) elections. Ethnicity was a big factor. We had ODM Tribes and PNU tribes.

There were tribal kingpins in college who decided which seat went to which tribe. The big seats went to the 'big three tribes'; (Kikuyus, Luos and Kalenjins). I remember one friend telling me, straight-faced,

All I would have wished for is an electoral body that is above reproach in its conduct and delivery. It is not too much to ask. It is not because my party lost that I think the process is not credible.

"You Kisiis, have to give us the Organizing Secretary." No irony. It was the default set up under which the university operated. Even the university management, top-down had to reflect a sense of equitable distributions of positions, with "minority" tribes in Kenya having a zero chance of ever being in charge of Kenya's largest learning institutions. It was disgusting. Ditto the Kenyan political landscape. Even in our devolved units, for some clannish communities, smaller clans have little chance and will always be at the mercies of the numerically bigger clans, handed scraps of leadership to pacify them. Sadly, if you are minority, you have to accept and live with this.

Another reminder that coming from a minority tribe or clan in Kenya, you must be ten times as good before you even stand a chance. Recently, there were arguments if the newly elected Nairobi senator is a Saboot or a Luhya, the import being, he would rather identify himself as a Luhya and get Luhya votes than risk identifying himself as a Saboot.

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The 2013 elections gave us the phrase for our pathological condition of sweeping everything under the rug and forgetting: Accept and Move On. Yvonne Owuor, in her novel Dust that was set against the backdrop of the 2007 contested elections, called Silence our fourth national language. Besides the 2007 post-election violence, Owuor visited parts of our violent history that have been hushed up to the convenience of one part of the country, and the constant agitation of others.

2017, I expected better. But regardless of the legitimacy of the declared results and how the Supreme Court will decide, the outcome will disappoint a section of the country.

For me, there is no such a thing as 'third time is the charm". All the three elections I have voted, neither my vote, nor my voice has counted. It would be tolerable if the opponents' victory was incontestably clean. The first election was fraudulent. We lived with it. The second time, the opponent's victory was doubtful, made the worse by the curt dismissal at the Supreme Court. We took it on the chin. Third time, we will still go to the Supreme Court, not after a brief, premeditated round of violence on Raila Odinga's supporters by the state. Thankfully, no large-scale violence, but there is large-scale hurt and internal bleeding that will not go away.

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I'm proudly Kenyan. Given my background, I'm condemned to live in a city or a cosmopolitan county. But, I'm not blind to the deep-seated differences that will sooner or later boil over along ethnic lines.

It has made settling in places that are not our ancestral home a scary prospect, as every election approaches.

Our differences can be solved peaceably through constitutional means; amending the constitution to have a better power sharing arrangement, adopting a different voting system that is not based on the tyranny of numbers like in the US, whose constitution we badly plagiarized. Or even increasing funding as some of the measures that can forestall the call for secession - a number of Kenyans are buying into economist David Ndi's call for self-determination.

I have come to understand why people vote the way they vote. Both parties have valid reasons; fear on one side, hope on the other. Fear always prevails. If I was a Kikuyu, and my community has been a target of ethnic displacement or cleansing in 1992, 1997 and 2007, I would probably vote for someone I believe will protect me, especially if the utterances of some of the politicians urge my community to "lie low" hours before the election. Last time someone said such words, our clansmen died. Understandable.

If I have been under systemic neglect and discrimination since independence I will turn to a candidate who promises to address historical injustices, redistribute the national cake and inclusion.

All valid reasons. All I would have wished for is an electoral body that is above reproach in its conduct and delivery. It is not too much to ask. It is not because my party lost that I think the process is not credible. Power is a very temporary thing; the incumbent can lose and another person can take over. I will hate it if the political elite will abuse their power.

But most importantly, is my wish that our country can start having statesmen who think beyond raw power, tenders, real estate, stashing cash in foreign reserves. I hanker after statesmen who will think about future generations and build a world, where race, tribe, religion and such play a tertiary role over competence, humanity and empathy.

Where a child born in Turkana or Wajir, or Kisii, or a slum in Nairobi has as much chance to be a president, as the one born in Kiambu or Siaya. Or Uasin Gishu.

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These things are cyclic. In 1960, Ronald Ngala led Kenya African Democratic Union (an outfit for Kalenjin, Maasais, Turkana and Samburu) to oppose the dominance of the Kikuyus and Luos. If the so called big tribes continue to dominate the political scene, other tribes will continue having deep antipathy towards them.

We need both a political and constitutional solution to this. Otherwise elections will always be a problem, since more and more Kenyans will feel that Kenya is not a place for them. They will find another place they can call home. Hardly the right way. But if pushed...it will be the only way. It is not as farfetched as some people think.

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