



End of Empathy in Kenya

By Silas Nyanchwani



Presently, you can divide Kenyans into three groups.

There are those who are ambivalent, unsure of which political direction the country should take, trusting neither the Jubilee side nor the NASA side, even as the unity of the principal is under intense scrutiny following the no-show of the three other principals for the much-hyped 'swearing in' of Raila Odinga as the 'President of the People'.

Second, are the loyal supporters of the government, who despite any misgivings, have some hope, however forlorn that Uhuru Kenyatta will deliver on his promises, that he has christened "Four Pillars."

Third, are the implacable supporters of Raila Odinga, the thousands who filled Uhuru Park to witness his swearing-in, and the many who explicitly or implicitly support his disruptive antics as continues to fight electoral injustices.

The latter two categories of Kenyans hardly see each other eye to eye. The middle-class among them may be civilized and restrained, but their dinner table talks are frank and clear about their mutual distaste for each other's political choices. Outside the middle-class, it gets a bit cruder.

If you watched online activity during the charged swearing in, most Jubilee government supporters online dismissed Raila Odinga's supporters as Zombified, swum in schadenfreude when the three

principals failed to show-up, effectively turning the ceremony into a 'Luo Affair' as a senior government official told me last November.

"The game now is over, next is to make every demonstration look like a Luo affair and Kenyans will go back to their normal lives," he told me, in an informal set-up (Ruracio), obviously, tongue-in-cheek. But as a Jubilee supporter, he felt that they had outmanoeuvred, one last time, and hopefully one final time. It is common among Jubilee fans to gloat about their unbeatable numbers, unparalleled business acumen and everything to rend credence to elections that one-half of the country for the fourth time feels that are not fair.

So, you have gloating on one side and grumbling on the other. But the grumbling has gotten louder and more militant, while the gloating cautious, made the more uncertain as Jubilee's dubious policies begin to ruin the country. It is a constitutional lawyer Wachira Maina who captured it best in an article in the [Daily Nation](#) when he said,

"Mr Odinga's problem is that his base is now more militant and intransigent than he himself ever was."

The swearing in, even though deemed inconsequential, was cathartic, to his base, and a nuisance to the Jubilee side, that craves for sense of normalcy in the country often interpreted as no protests. Crime, deteriorating health sector, the ever-increasing cost of living, badly managed education system hardly concerns them.

The environment needed for a reasoned national conversation is now permanently fouled as no side will listen to the other. We are now so numbed, even something as humane as blood donation appeal provides a useful window into how Kenyans now look at each other.

On September 2, 2017, a day after the shocking annulling of the 2017 presidential election, Carol Radull, the celebrated sports presenter, made an urgent blood donation appeal on Twitter for Grace Wangui Mwangi who was hospitalized at the Kikuyu Hospital.

Urgent Blood Appeal: Kikuyu Hospital Patient Grace Wangui Mwangi needs O- blood urgently. Kindly assist if you can. Thank you

— Carol Radull (@CarolRadull) [September 2, 2017](#)

In good times, many people would have volunteered to donate the blood, without questioning the tribe or the background of the patient. But September 2, 2017 was not a good time to make such an appeal. Reading the responses to her appeal was jarring.

She can get blood from jubilee delivery portal??

— Ashikoye Omune (@omune_ashikoye) [September 3, 2017](#)

Ashikoye Omune responded.

If she can give me original form 34A may be I can give her one drop. But now let her die abit. Si wakikuyu wao wako hapo.

— Zab (@Zablon27) [September 11, 2017](#)

And Zablon though it was the best time to crack his sarcasm.

There were other many responses, so crude, so heartless, so crass, so bereft of any shred of human decency, it was galling. Most were jabs at the perennial obsession of Central Kenyan politicians with the subject of circumcision, which even the soberest politicians from GEMA hardly ever criticize.

Willing to donate but I'm not circumcised. I fear it won't work well with her.

— Otoy K'ondeng' (@kamtula) [September 3, 2017](#)

It was difficult to process the dumb and numb comments.

Yet, those responding with irony, cheap sarcasm to the appeal carried in their tweets certain undertones that if you stopped to think for a second, did not exist in a vacuum. They were a product of injustices and abuse, real and perceived. We all look for a chimney to vent our frustrations. And the appeal provided a channel for some frustrated NASA supporters to parade their frustrations.

Any sensible tweet, calling for restraint and common sense was drowned in the odious smoke of hatred from what were mostly NASA supporters from Luo Nyanza.

It's funny we only talk about love Kikuyus are in need. When luos are being butchered you are all celebrating on the sidelines.

— Ogolo (@IBRAHIMOGOLO) [September 3, 2017](#)

It is true when the state released the police on its citizenry, mostly of Luo extraction, comments by some people who support Jubilee approved the use of whichever means to contain the protesters. While there were those who obviously opposed to the use of excessive force, most were ambivalent, and some preferring to keep quiet.

When Daily Nation reported the shooting of three protesters in Kisumu, Mbugus James wanted more:

And Bony Kamau was full of compliments.

And Macharia Mwangi knew who the protesters were.

Political comments in the blogosphere and social media provide a useful window into the soul of the nation. If we can use our usual stupid marker of literacy-the ability to speak and write in correct English-you will notice most of the people commenting are learned, with university degrees, no less.

The mutual disdain between Kenya's two most politically active communities, Luos and Agikuyus has deteriorated to such despicable levels, it is disgusting. Education in this case, hardly thaws prejudice, opening an avenue of tolerance and celebration of diversity. Learned people on either side of the politic divide are so prejudiced,

The most ironic thing is that when the two communities work together, they always lift Kenya to a higher ground; think of 1963, 2002, 2007/08 (the risky power-sharing deal) that gave us the new constitution.

Given other communities rally behind on either community depending on which side of the bread of their tribal chief is buttered, we end up with either pro-Luos tribes and pro-Kikuyus tribes.

There is a bigger picture, indeed, a political ideology behind the tribal arrangement. The two communities that have held power since independence are more conservative in their politics, keen for resources not to be redistributed. The rest usually are more liberal and socialist, advocating for a fair redistribution of the country's resources. But all this is lost as tribal chiefs pursue their selfish interests instead of the larger good.

In such an environment, it is impossible to have a conversation about national values, and what makes us Kenya, the best country in Africa if you ask me.

Since 2007, our general elections have been flawed in the favour of one side and to the exclusion of the other. Whereas, in some cases it is purely a question of perception, the recalcitrant refusal of the ruling elite to address the root cause of the problem has made a bad situation worse. Every successive flawed election puts the country on the edge, and now we are hanging on a cliff so precipitously, just one nudge and the country will tumble down.

It is easy to dismiss the people who comment online as idlers whose thoughts and ideas have no real consequence. But as a fairly educated man, with a Masters, and middle-class (for argument sake), I have participated in conversations, online and offline that usually shock me. When I travel to the village and talk to the villagers, their comments about the Agikuyu community scare me. The comments belie a deep-seated antipathy towards Kikuyu that grows with every flawed election.

Back in Nairobi, when I have a candid talk with my Kikuyu friends, you know those dinner table conversations in safe spaces where people can afford to be painfully honest, it is always discomfiting when they lay down their fears and explain why they coalesce around their preferred candidate.

"When Kalonzo stands in front of a multitude and declares 'we ask Mt Kenya people to lie low' we are left with no choice but vote for someone we can trust," a Douglas Kanguru, a Public Policy expert says, citing Raila Odinga's obsession with the land question in the country. As the people who received the largest brunt of the colonizer's brutality, displaced from their 'ancestral land' and even further dispersed after we became independent, and also the recipient of the worst brutality meted on a community in election-related violence since 1992, they have little choice but stick with what is convenient, Kanguru argues.

But this only tells half the story. The ugly truth that is hard to discuss, creatively blockaded by those in power until kingdom come is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that may address some of

the historical injustices that are the root cause of our growing antipathy towards those of a different political persuasion. The land question is the thorniest.

In several WhatsApp groups that I belong to, especially those from college colleagues, the love is not lost between the members of the two political divides. Again all the members in all the groups are educated to university level. But the level of discussion reveals the pain and trauma that people carry with them. Virtually since August, most groups have banned political discussions. In most groups many people left, before group leaders decided to ban politics. Others maintaining a stony silence adopting the "Accept and Move on" philosophy, finding political conversations draining and becoming more and more numbed.

As a middle-class fellow, I may not pick a machete and hack someone of a different political persuasion to death. But if some ethnic chauvinist arranges a fundraising drive to donate money to empower an army of young men to protect my community's interests, I will find myself obliged to pay, in the pretext of self-defence.

When the Nairobi Business Community came to prominence at the height of NASA's call for demonstration, I accompanied my Kikuyu friend to a hotel in downtown Nairobi to meet another lady for some transaction. In the introductory small talk, of course the Nairobi Business Community featured prominently. Mistaking me for a Kikuyu, and feeling safer, she said, she was extremely happy that the Nairobi Business Community had flexed its muscle, scaring those (insert expletive) away. Business was now good. And she fully supported them.

Objectively, I held nothing against her. She did not know what she did not know. We all like expediency. I am sure if another vigilante group surfaced on the NASA side, it would receive implicit or even explicit support from the NASA supporters such what happened in Kawangware.

What most people, surprisingly even the most educated, hardly know is that the vigilante groups that communities and political parties turn to for protection when the police fail, share one trait: both are disenfranchised young men, with nothing to live for and they are all products of the bad politics played by both sides of the political divide. If indeed successive governments, were the governments of the people, by the people, you will not have millions of young men on either side of the political divide ready to pick a machete and descend on fellow countrymen.

The cowardice of the country's elite to confront these problems head-on, instead of using the problems to divide the country further has made us emotionless towards each other's plight.

Prof. Anyang Nyong'o wrote a powerful essay in The Star in the aftermath of the 2017 election arguing, that a poor woman in Limuru has the government to blame more than a Luo in Kisumu for her plight. Ditto a poor Luo man in Kisumu, his enemy is the government and not another community. Yet, not everyone can see these things this way.

When you have empty political heads with no better vision to sell, preaching ethnic prejudice and hatred all the time, the result is feelings of marginalization and entitlement, adding fuel to a state of permanent conflict. With agitation and aggression on one side, and the other side becomes defensive. This stretches emotions. And elections provide a chance to correct the notion of dominance and marginalization. When they are flawed, or perceived to be flawed, the agitation persists.

Now, we are all out of patience. Shortly after the Rwandese genocide, where nearly one million people were killed in 100 days, Gregory Stanton, then the head of Genocide Watch presented a briefing paper to the United State Department of State identifying the "8 Stages of Genocide". They

include,

1. a) Classification: where people divide themselves in the narrative of US versus THEM. We already have the “42-against 1” and its many variants.
2. b) Symbolization: whereby people are labeled with lowly references. The competing communities have monikers to identify pariah groups in their eyes. Both political sides of the divide use certain references, often in derision, whether it is Moses Kuria’s obsession with circumcision, or those in NASA who perceive Kikuyus as thieves, the labeling is getting stronger and stronger.
3. c) Dehumanization: When one group denies the humanity of the other group, equating the members of the other groups to animals, vermin, insects or diseases. Not to overemphasize, but increasingly seeing the humanity of others with a different political view is becoming impossible.
4. d) Organization: Stanton argued that genocide is always organized, using special army or militia, trained and armed. We may not yet have organized and trained militia, but militias are a part of political organization. A friend from Central Kenya told me in 2013, “Never again shall we be caught unawares, like in 2007. We will permanently be ready and vigilant.”
5. e) Polarization: Polarizing propaganda, made the worse by the advent of fake news was evident in the 2017 election, another indicator of the dangerous road we are traveling down.
6. f) Preparation: At this stage victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic and religious identity. In 2017, we saw the Luo community targeted both in Nairobi and Nyanza, with the state enjoying the monopoly of violence and no awards for guessing where the strings were being pulled from. Various vigilante groups like those that wreaked violence in Kawangware are a harbinger of how things can turn ugly at the snap of a finger.
7. g) Extermination: killers at this stage are so numbed out, they will not see the humanity of those being killed.
8. h) Denial: the perpetrators deny committing the crimes or underplay their role.

When you look at these stages, you can see we are at a stage where we have dehumanized our political rivals and refuse to see their humanity. Empathy only exists in a few rational voices.

For now, silence works. But deep within, people are demon-possessed, and soon or later, the true colours will surface. We may wish to ignore, maybe some of us are a bit melodramatic, but reality has a way of blindsiding one, before slapping the illusion out of folks. By then, it is usually too late.

Featured response to this article by [Dorcas Sarkozy](#), a blogger.

RE: The False Equivalence in the lack of empathy among Kenya’s many tribes.

FALSE EQUIVALENCE: An argument that simultaneously condemns and excuses both sides in a dispute by claiming that both sides are (equally) guilty of inappropriate behavior or bad reasoning. While the argument appears to be treating both sides equally, it is generally used to condemn an opponent or to excuse one’s own position.

EMPATHY: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another; (1) the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another, (2) the imaginative ascribing to an object, as a natural object or work of art, feelings or attitudes present in oneself:

There is a piece in the online publication "The Elephant" titled "End of Empathy in Kenya" by Silas Nyanchwani that on the surface reads like a thought-provoking and balanced analysis of a very worrisome trend (lack of empathy) currently pervading Kenya but upon further cogitation, IS part of the worrisome trend.

The writer cites several clips from social media - Facebook, Twitter and reader comments in a local daily (Daily Nation) as evidence of this lack of empathy some Kenyans have towards one another.

He does so via a 2400-worded piece that effectively rehashes some known/common stereotypes Kenya's various communities have of one another; that Luos have of Kikuyus and vice versa.

This he does without broaching head-on, the elephant in the room.

As a result of this crucial omission, deliberately or otherwise, the writer evenly apportions responsibility for the inability of Kenyans to empathize with one another, the glaring imbalance of power dynamics between the main antagonists, the Kikuyu and the Luo, notwithstanding.

For the record, the elephant in the room is the responsibility that comes with having power: political, economic AND military power.

I have previously alluded to a modicum of schadenfreude the writer is pointing out, but I would like to believe that I have usually done so as a cautionary tale of what happens when one refuses to assign responsibility where it most resides and chooses instead to tie themselves into a knot justifying or rationalizing why glaring obviousities are different depending on who is involved.

To illustrate the foregoing phenomenon, consider the differences in characterization and reactions when Uhuru Kenyatta cautioned Kenyans against "selling their land" and when Raila Odinga did the same thing.

Somehow the former's "advice" was seen as an illustration of his business acuity; his understanding that "land is a factor of production".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uE3088jpkE>

Conversely, RAO doing the same thing - to the Masaai in Kajiado - was seen as illustration of his "belligerence"; that he was "advocating 'violence' against persons not indigenous to the region i.e. Kikuyus".

https://www.the-star.co.ke/.../2.../06/17/uhuru-tells-off-raila-over-talk-of-land-invasion_c1581163

Or when the 2017 Madaraka Day Celebration held in Nyeri degenerated into a celebration of the region's (and Uhuru's) culture replete with use of exclusionary language instead of the national celebration the day is meant to denote.

Readers will recall that attempts to call out the ethnicization of the national event (and snubbing of RAO) was characterized by commentators and supporters of Uhuru Kenyatta as the usual (and unfair) "demonization of the Kikuyu" by people "who are jealous of the tribe's many accomplishments and rich culture".

<https://www.nation.co.ke/.../440808-3954512-122fx9.../index.html>

Throughout Kenya's post-independence history, one side and one side alone has had all three permutations of power:

The Executive.

All four Kenya's presidents - from Jomo to Moi, Kibaki and now Uhuru - have controlled political power.

While military power is a function of the office of the president i.e. as the commander-in-chief, Kenyatta Pere & Son, Kibaki and Moi have also used their office i.e. political power to accumulate inordinate amounts of wealth i.e. economic power.

As famously offered by Mao Tse Tung, "power grows out of the barrel of a gun".

Abraham Lincoln, America's 16th and arguably its most famous president offered a different take on power. That, it, power, tested a man's true character.

Kenya's leaders have proceeded to use their monopoly of these variants of power, unfairly and with impunity, AGAINST those who dare challenge or stand up against their respective regime.

Mr. Nyanchwani knows only too well the outcome that overwhelming military might brings to bear in the fight for empathy or as Homer famously said, "woe to the vanquished".

Might makes right - even when the mighty is wrong!

You get a sense of the writer's bias - wittingly or unwittingly - in the second and third paragraph in his characterization of the role played by two of the three groups he identifies as being present in today's Kenya.

Kenyatta's supporters are seen as "loyal....who despite any misgivings, have some hope....(he) will deliver on his promises.....christened "Four Pillars."

Raila's supporters, true to form, are characterized more ominously as "implacable....who filled Uhuru Park to witness his swearing-in, and the many who explicitly or implicitly support his disruptive antics..."

(The third group consists of those who are ambivalent, unsure of which political direction the country is headed.)

Language is a powerful tool.

When well-used (or mis-used), it can create equally powerful imageries that add to, placate or challenge existing perspectives/paradigms or stereotypes people have of one another.

From the opening few paragraphs, not to mention the title of the piece, the writer chose/chooses to either add to or placate the stereotypes Kenyans have of the two antagonists - Luos and Kikuyus.

Kenyatta's supporters are "loyal", have "some hope", for "promises christened".

Conversely, Raila's supporters are "implacable", "explicitly or implicitly support" his "disruptive antics".

Disruptive antics?

Being at the vanguard of Kenya's fight for the very values that allows Mr. Nyanchwani to pen his views, however questionable some may feel said views are, may be "disruptive". However, the fight for a free, fair and transparent electoral process not to mention an end to corruption and impunity

are not “antics”.

Asking to verify the accuracy of the vote tallies inside the IEBC server is not “foolish”.

Insisting to understand why corruption and impunity has been so rife in two Kenyatta governments – father and son – is not an “outrageous” request.

Standing up to a militarized law enforcement apparatus armed with the best-in-class riot suppression gear with nothing more than one’s strength of conviction and stones is not “amusing behavior”.

“Antics” is defined as “foolish, outrageous” and “amusing” behavior.

<https://www.google.com/search...>

While the article touches on a close relative of the elephant in the room, it does so almost as an afterthought; this without identifying, by name, those who are simultaneously responsible for creating the problems AND also able to fix what is at the core of the country’s instability.

The writer points out that the oftentimes deadly struggle between Kenyans was precipitated, then exacerbated by the country’s refusal to address its mélange of historical injustices that are the root cause of the growing antipathy they have towards one another; towards those who hold different political views.

He then offers that of all the historical injustices facing Kenya, “the land question is the thorniest”.

Those who have acquired land, oftentimes through nefarious means, also control the levers of military/law enforcement power.

These are the same people who have benefit/ed from pillaging resources from the various communities throughout the country – throughout Kenya’s history. In so doing, these individuals have accumulated economic power while simultaneously angering those whose communities were pillaged.

It is the clamor for the “power” of self-actualization promised at/by independence; by the dangled but unfulfilled promises of “matunda ya uhuru” that have Kenyans angry; angry at one another and angry at their government.

Until those standing on the opposite end of the barrel of a gun can walk a mile in the shoes of those facing the barrel of the gun, they will not empathize one with another.

This is particularly true if those holding the trigger believe that their stations in life are a function, not of malevolent machinations, but of an abundance of benevolent (divine) happenstance.

The false equivalence is that both sides of the divide are culpable in the lack of empathy the article alludes to.

It is a false equivalence because with power comes responsibility and power comes from the barrel of a gun and one side has a monopoly on guns.

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