



From my tribe, I take nothing

By Duncan Kairu



I drive a taxi in Nairobi. This has led me to see the world from behind the wheel, the one position I have occupied for close to ten years now. My wealth of information comes from endless interactions, observations and experiences in the driver's seat. In our world, we are advised to see no evil and hear no evil. This is good for business.

Communication is the key to dealing with clients and respect goes a long way. Like the clothes we put on our backs, people are different and their preferences vary. To win clients over, you need to be neutral like Switzerland, by simply flowing with whatever topics they are comfortable with. The secret is to let them start the conversation. There are those self-absorbent individuals who love to talk about their career goals and achievements. Some are all about their families; business ventures while others are professors of politics. They are all my clients.

In August 2017, a lady client called Julie* hopped into my car. She was in the company of a man she would later introduce as her husband. I was glad to have met him in person given that she was always talking about her husband and kids. We got talking, well, he talked, I just assumed my usual position of the listener, occasionally interjecting with a line or two, to let him know we were still on the same page. Many years of experience in the taxi industry has taught me which subject areas to stay clear of when in conversations with my clients. It lessens the awkwardness that creeps in sometimes which if unchecked inadvertently might stir bad blood and somehow compromise the relationship and the business. Politics tops the list. I find it quite an unhealthy subject to dwell on as

it does more harm than good.

Her husband was called Mr Ongwae* and he became adamant demanding to know my views regarding the nullification of Jubilee's victory in the just concluded election! I could easily tell which side of the political divide, he was batting from and his assumption on my inclination as well. So I told him, that I did not vote because I did not have a preferred candidate of choice for the big office. I went as far as showing him my unstained fingers just to prove my point. Mr. Ongwae had a hard time believing me and let his bias show saying, *"You must have been a thuraku movement adherent, you look like one!"*

The ethnic stereotyping cut to my core as I listened to him carry his argument in an abrasive fashion. Most of the generalisations held by Kenyans about other Kenyans are often just that, generalisations. Like many others, the man was simply tribal profiling and frankly speaking, I was tired of defending my position as a Kikuyu. I am just as entitled to be and do whatever I feel like so long as it is within the confines of the law including running for president. His attempts to draw me into an argument however failed, as I remained tactical with my answers till we got to his hotel destination and breathed a sigh of relief once he stepped out of my taxi.

A few weeks later, Julie would call me one Wednesday morning to request a ride to Jogoo House on Harambee Avenue in Nairobi where she works as a government clerk. She looked sad and I wanted to ask her about it but professional decorum demanded I mind my own business. However, I should not have worried. She broke down crying in my back seat soon after, forcing me to park by the roadside to attend to her. Just so we are clear, I am not cut out for some things, and crying women is one of those things. I could feel a golf ball lodged in my throat not sure how to go about comforting my distressed passenger! When the sobs subsided, she narrated a sad tale, how days after the taxi ride with her husband; they had travelled back home to Nyamira County. The next morning her husband woke up at 4am, in a foul mood and told her to pack her belongings, including their three kids and leave his compound immediately! Julie hails from Ngubu in Meru county and she had made a home and life for herself and family far from her birth place in Nyamira.

"I knew my political affiliation bothered him a lot, but it never occurred to me that his paranoia could go this far!" She reasoned.

"I mean who disowns his own flesh and blood in the name of politics, people that don't even know you exist, who? And, what does it mean when he tells me to "go back to my people? Which people?"

I could taste the bitterness in her voice. What kind of father could be this callous to his flesh and blood, I wondered but I did not voice my thoughts. I sought to understand, if there were any underlying factors that might have led to his cause of action and she replied reassuringly, *"Our marriage has stood for nine years and we have three children, two girls and a boy. Apart from the normal ups and down that happen in every marriage, I cannot complain at all!"* The only thing about her husband, she said, was that he tends to be overly dramatic when it comes to politics. You either align yourself with him and his party of choice or face his wrath. Politics had won and torn a family apart.

So on the said morning the man had rallied his immediate relatives and kicked out his wife accusing her of "betrayal". Her younger sister who was visiting at the time was also caught up in the eviction and found herself walking down a dusty road with a crying toddler in her arms as the other two children followed closely behind still wearing their night clothes also crying. Julie had fallen behind in a faceoff with the crowd of villagers demanding to know what her fault was! But when she noticed how futile her attempts at reason were and how charged her in-laws were, she gave in and left broken-hearted. At the break of dawn, the same crowd descended on her farm and wreaked havoc by

chopping down her bananas and sugarcane plantation! I listened intently, watching her fiddle with her fingers, sobbing softly. *“And have you talked to him ever since?”* I enquired. *“No, he isn’t what you’d call a reasonable person.”* I admired her show of dignity even in frustration. The children asking after their father bothered her a great deal. What was she supposed to tell them, the truth? What exactly do you tell your children when faced by such a situation?

Growing up in Umoja, Eastlands back in the 90’s, the world was nothing but a giant playground. I was free and happy without a care in the world. Back then, neither politics nor tribe meant jerk. We knew no boundaries right from our home in Umoja to Kayole, Dandora, Kariobangi and Huruma now famed for all sorts of societal ills; robbery, murders and rape not to say the least. To date, I still feel at home whenever I find myself in the Eastlands part of Nairobi. I suppose my perceptions of childhood were shaped by my personal experience of freedom and happiness without any excesses. Julie’s children were growing up with rigid boundaries and walls.

During the same August election period, I had another client experiencing some dental problems. A toothache she had ignored for a while had persisted prompting a visit to hospital. The clinic we went to usually takes in a maximum of 6 patients in a day. Extras are booked for another appointment. Upon arrival, we were told that only one slot was remaining yet there were two patients, my client, Beryl* and a middle-aged woman called Vivian*. The two girls behind the desk were both Nyamburas as their nametags suggested. They asked for IDs and Beryl dished hers first. They both looked at it; Beryl Achieng Owada, then Vivian’s; Vivian Waceke Kamau. As if by means of telepathic signalling they simultaneously raised their eyes and gave Beryl one long stare before handing the ID back telling her the slot had just been filled.

The disgust on their faces was unexpected and so when they began giggling and gossiping in Kikuyu I reacted demanding to know what had just happened a second earlier. *“Tutire na wira wa nyamu cia ruguru, niathie agathondekerwo kundu kungi no tiguku”* (*We have no business with Western creatures, tell her to go seek for help elsewhere but not here*). Ordinarily, I would have gone ape giving them a piece of my mind but strangely I found myself speechless, literally, as I watched them walk the lady into an empty room behind the blinds that partitioned the room and my eyes actually welling up. This was a new low. The helplessness of us Kenyans! I tried to engage a man that stood by my side about the girls’ misconduct and one look from him was enough to put me in my place.

“Nikii uregia na maundu ma ta gukonii wee?” (*Why bother yourself with matters that do not concern you?*) And he was talking about Beryl.

The coldness in the clinic was unbearable. Beryl wanted to know what was happening but I just took her by the hand, led her back to the car and drove out of the compound mad as hell to another clinic close by. She demanded to know what had transpired, so to cushion her from the pain of it all, I lied and told her that the lady had an earlier appointment and had come back for surgery. Luckily, the nurse at the second clinic, a Wanjiku from Gatundu North was kind and had the sense not to profile her clients by their ethnic extraction. She was treated and we soon left the premise but the reception we had gotten earlier stuck with me. To date, I still feel angry about it.

I have seen many similar episodes of tribal prejudice in my line of work but the intensity of hate in 2017 left me feeling lost with no one to turn to for intervention. I am just as much a Kenyan as the next guy is, and I cannot understand how easily political affiliations can drive us apart. The politicians we purport to stand with could not care any less about our welfare. I speak from experience as a man who was part of a team that spearheaded a political agenda for an ex-taxi driver in the hope that he would come through for us once he got into office. Well, the good news is, we fought long and hard and he got the seat, finally, but the bad news is that he became a politician. The promises he had made remained unfulfilled. It has been almost five years since he got the seat.

In my opinion, I think it behoves us to ask ourselves the question *“Where did we go wrong?”* When I look around and see people still trying to pick their lives months down the line after the traumas of the 2017 elections, I feel nothing but bitterness for a political system that turns the masses against each other to benefit a few elites. We live in a country where a man can kick out his family because of politics. A patient can be denied treatment because of politics. Or in my case, a taxi driver harassed by a policeman who threatens to confiscate my driver’s license after reading my last name and demands that *“we first relinquish power before he can hand it back”* all because of politics.

Compromise is the essence of diplomacy. Not violence. We cannot just “accept things the way they are and move on” Things can change for the better but that will only happen when we do away with this open hatred we harbour against fellow Kenyans. Though we may claim we are “proud to be Kenyan” the reality behind the sentiment is starkly different. Truth is, we are a broken Nation, battered and scared, to the soul.

Tribal profiling can no longer be a fringe issue, to be discussed in hushed tones in the privacy of our bedrooms but rather a malignant national disease that requires serious attention from all Kenyans. We have to be accountable not only for our actions as individuals but also for the complicity of our silence in the face of injustice against fellow citizens.

**Names changed*

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