



Losing My Identity in A State Of Angst

By Arkanuddin Yasin



Who am I? Am I “Catholic”? Am I “Christian”? Am I Kikuyu? Or am I “Kenyan”? Or am I all of them at once? Or the other way around?

Am I “African”? Or am I “Bantu”? Or does it depend on time of day? On place? Or on who’s asking? What is an African?

Who are you? Somali? Kenyan-Somali? Somalian-Somali? Somaliland-Somali? Cushite? Who decides?

Luo? Ugandan? Ugandan-Luo? Kenyan-Luo? Tanzanian-Luo? Nilote? Who decides?

Who are we? Blacks? Africans? Kenyans? Somalis? Arabs? African-Arabs? Who decides?

Who are they? British? Kenyan-British? Foreigners? Kikuyu? Immigrants? JoLuo? French? Italian? Ndorobo? Europeans? Whites? Who decides?

What should we be? Can we decide? Does it matter?

What makes us connect? What connects us?

Nelson Mandela after a 27 year prison stint for his political beliefs under a racist apartheid Afrikaans regime, said that an Afrikaans, a man from the tribe that was for a long time the existential enemy of his own, is at a personal level the best friend one can have, referring to his behind-bars friendship to Christo Brand. What did he mean? Could an Afrikaans really ever truly be a friend to a black native? Can an imperialist and imperial subject really be friends? A slave owner and a slave? In what context? Who decides?

Geography does not seem to mean anything relative to who we are or how we express ourselves or relate. I was once watching the Discovery Channel and was surprised to see a charcoal dark girl from a nomadic tribe of Southern Sudan smile and blush, just like any of the urban girls of Nairobi that I knew. Why did I expect her to be different? What had created such distance? Does the difference in what makes us laugh make us different? Wasn't she from a different socio-cultural environment, a different geography, a distant place? If she was a girl like any other, did that mean all women were exactly the same?

If this be the case, aren't we more than just the same species? Might we all be one family? Might the story of creation be true? If true why did it not seem to affect its purveyors. Being Catholic does not allow one to either own property or live in the Vatican City, while it allows the Catholic church to own vast real estate in all its strongest adherents homelands, Africa and South America?

When I step back, it seems violence, expropriation and colonialism of peoples lands from Palestine, Eastward and Southward was "*legitimate*" and tolerable. While violence against the "*others*" was completely "*immoral*", even when it was just to protect life and honour, let alone property. For centuries of expropriation, slavery and genocide from Latin America through Africa to Asia, "*Forgive and Forget*" even as it continues; for pogroms and concentration camps elsewhere, reparations and "*Never forget*" are never enough, even as the victims of pogrom now become the leading expropriators and *genocidaires*. Are we one family or not? Who decides?

A long time ago, straight out of High School and into the world, amongst my friends was a French Agronomist. He was called John because few either could pronounce Jean or cared to make the effort to. One day in a quick passing conversation with an acquaintance, in John's presence, my acquaintance asked if my French friend John was Italian. Given the rush we were in, I answered yes to end the conversation thinking it of little consequence.

Faux pas! Bouleversant!

Till that point I had assumed all that mattered was whether you were "*Black*" or "*White*", especially to White people. And I was not entirely wrong, Malcolm X had stumbled upon this simple truth on 15th February 1965 when he was barred from entering France for his activities in America, explaining:

"There's a worldwide revolution going on. And it's in two phases.

Number one, what is it revolting against? The power structure. The American power structure? No. The French power structure? No. The English power structure? No. Then what power structure? An international Western power structure. An international power structure consisting of American interests, French interests, English interests, Belgian interests, European interests. These countries that formerly colonized the dark man formed into a giant international combine. A structure, a house that has ruled the world up until now. And in recent times there has been a revolution taking place in Asia and in Africa, whacking away at the strength or at the foundation of the power structure."

[Malcolm X, 15th February 1965]

Well, now I learnt apparently not. Here and now I was about to learn that Whiteness was only united in the rape, pillage and plunder of native peoples, lands and resources. So much so, even the presumably non-negotiable characteristic requirement of skin pigmentation can be conveniently suspended by the elites amongst their ranks when they want to scale up their wars against the weaker peoples of the world. As we saw with US President Barrack Hussein Obama this century and his predecessor Rome's first Black Emperor Lucius Septimius Severus in the dusk of the 2nd Century and dawn of the 3rd Century.

Outside of their imperialist agenda, Whites had tribes! These tribes squabbled in a "World War" ("World" as they consider themselves the "World") scale and strangely got terribly upset if you got their tribes wrong.

Wee Jaluo!

In retaliation, John called me "*you Jaluo*" and stomped off in a huff just like they do in the movies. Having worked in the Central Highlands, the Kikuyu tribe's ancestral homeland, he had come to learn of my tribe of birth fierce post-colonial political rivalry with the JoLuo, and all the contempt and bile that accompanies such relationships. Knowing I was of Kikuyu ethnic heritage he naturally assumed this would offend me. Being an Agronomist he would be forgiven. As an engineer he would not understand the urban-rural socio-dynamics. Simply put, the corrosive nature of cities and urban upbringing on cultural identity in the 3rd world. The city in Africa isn't emergent, it is a foreign body imposed upon the land, and for this reason it remains a sort of "*No tribe's land*" in the "*No man's land*" sense. You therefore acquire friends from everywhere, you live anywhere and interact with everyone as you have neither tribe, nor geography, nor class to limit you. So the tribal diatribe turned out to be a dud when I responded with a befuddled, "*O. K.*".

But what was wrong with him being "*Italian*"? What was wrong with me being "*JaLuo*"? Who decides?

Where's the border?

One weekend without anything better to do John and I decided to drive south from Nairobi. It is a beautiful country. We had a four wheel drive and it had to earn its keep. We followed the compass as the crow flies, rolling over the Salt Lake Magadi, cutting over flat arid lands through Shompole to "the border".

The border? I looked at the map and compass, the coordinates indicated we were right on "*the border*", but when I looked up from the map there was nothing but semi-arid terrain. Not a man-made object or human being as far as the eye could see, except the Toyota four-wheel drive we came in.

I was nineteen, untraveled and unexposed.

I asked John, "*Where's the border?*"

He looked at me puzzled and said, "*We are standing on it*".

"*But there's nothing here...*", I persisted,

"*What were you expecting?*" he asked.

"Well...some kind of fence or something...where this bold line on the map runs."

He laughed, and I understood, asking a rhetorical question,

"Does that mean this border exists only in my mind?" in all our minds? I thought...

I suddenly remembered a book I had stumbled upon when I was sixteen that had created a question in my mind. It was titled *"Building Nation-States"*, I could not remember who the publisher was but it had completely formatted and rebooted a section of my mind.

"Nation-States are built!"

I did not know what to think, the ramifications were more than my mind could process. Making no sense of what was written within, I closed it and to my great chagrin would never find it again, however hard I looked. But from then on the question was blazoned across my mind like a billboard. The question followed me everywhere I went from then on, *"Nation-States are built?"* Was my entire identity artificial? Who was I? Really? Who decides?

So what am I?

Kenyan? Well, definitely not! If by legal definition "Kenya" is a property...

The Kenya Gazette Supplement No. 93 of 7th December 1960 states the term "Kenya" means, the colony and Protectorate of Kenya Crown Land.

...being Kenyan would make me chattel, property of the "Crown". Nope, not Kenyan.

African? I can't be African because it is the name of a landmass connected to another. I mean, if asteroid 3200 Phaethon hit the earth causing the continent to submerge under a tsunami but I made it to the Ark, would it submerge with my identity? I think not. Or in that case I am Gondwanalandian. Or who would I be? Given the anchor of my identity no longer existed? Or would we anchor our identity in oceans? I am from the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic? Who would I have been on Pangaea before the fracture of the supercontinent?

I can't be "Black" because I am neither "Medium-height" nor "Knock-kneed". If my anthropomorphic features define my identity then any feature is as valid as the other. I weigh 82 kgs. If any member of any group where adult men are on average measure less than 150 cm (4 feet 11 inches) tall is referred to as "pygmy" irrespective of continental domicile, colour, culture, then let anthropologists conjure a tribal name for men of 82 kgs and ascribe me to that tribe. For all I care I was from the *Middleweight* tribe when I was a bachelor, lost my membership and slid into the *Cruiserweight* tribe after I married. Strangely, American actor Danny Davito standing at 4 foot 10 inches is never referred to as a pygmy? It seems if one is "White" they are exempted from inclusion in any and all social groups that fall at the bottom of the imperialist social structure, for which skin colour is primary criterion. Who decides?

I am most definitely not Kikuyu. Being Kikuyu would make me not JaLuo, not Somali, not French, not Irish, not Palestinian, all of a sudden all the rest of humanity would become "those" or "others", not "we" and I cannot bare such a crevice. It would suddenly be legitimate for their children to be less important than mine, their existence inconsequential to me, it would be unbearable. For then it would be fine for me to allow my son to be sent to kill their sons. Then, the rape of Samburu girls by British soldiers, Somali girls by AMISOM soldiers, Iraqi girls by American soldiers, Palestinian boys by Zionist soldiers on and on...would all not be my concern, ever, until it was Kikuyu girls. I cannot be of any nation whose bond is based on a material characteristic, be it genetic, geographic or any

such combination because, as Daniel Berrigan famously wrote *“Every Nation-State tends towards the imperial – that is the point”*, and that cannot ever be my point. So, what can I be? What should I be? Who decides?

Yet, for the *“I”* there must be a *“you”*, for the *“we”* there must be a *“them”*. How are they related? For the proton, there is an electron. And there are laws governing the highly precise relationship between the proton and the electron entities. And there is a law governing the relationship between the nucleus and the electrons. The order is perfect. But where is the law to govern the *“I”* and *“you”*, the *“we”* and *“them”*. What are the definitions? Who is a man? Who is a woman? What law should govern how the two entities relate? Who are *“we”*? Who are *“they”*? Define them. How do *“we”* relate to *“they”*? Who decides?

In this quest, I happened upon the idea of the *“Universal Man”*. Was he the holy grail? Was the Universal man the penultimate measure? Was there a tribe of Renaissance men? Was science the code? Were Da Vinci, Aljazari, Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Ibn Sina, Alghazali brothers. But these men defied all these limits. They were as much scientists as they were artists.

It could not be. It was too limited. Why was science separate from art? Why was everything segmented, fragmented into all these discrete hard blocks? And yet while different, the same. Like looking at the different planes of a single crystal and presuming they were discrete objects? Like the spectrum of colours refracted from a single ray of light. Yes, this was what it was. I sensed intuitively looking at the tribes and nations of the world I was looking at the dispersed spectrum end of the human ray of light, all of Humanity was actually Desmond Tutu’s *“Rainbow Nation”*.

But where was the refracting prism? The dispersing drop of rain? It had to be the same prism that was dispersing thoughts, ideas and knowledge into a multiplicity of highly fragmented disjointed subjects. If so where was it? For it was surely the medium by which we would unify knowledge into one and following the ray of white light, man would find enlightenment.

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