



'Why Are You Running Running?' Losing My Freedom on Nairobi's Badass Streets

By Bulimu Chole



I generally consider myself a happy person. My body speaks for me most of the times, my excitement lifting me up to a low tree branch, just to touch it. It sometimes strikes me with bolts and sprints, and you might find me racing against no one in particular, sidesteps, gooseteps, jump steps.

A close friend once described me as an excessively physically active person, even for a male. He made sure to remind me of this “fact” when we were walking together in town. He said to me, “Considering our physiques, you need to minimise your jumping around. We aren’t so big, but just realise you might scare an innocent person or draw unwanted attention to us.” I don’t know if I have scared anyone yet, but I have certainly got the unwanted attention. Three times so far; twice in the space of one week.

The first incident.

There is some sort of radio communication from the Israeli Embassy’s watchtower. Officers on the ground patrol the road, and the guard at Fairview hotel also monitors the movements outside. Probably wanting to be part of the action, the guard stops me first and asks, “What is wrong, why

are you running running?!”

I hold my calm and ask, “Am I not supposed to run here?” I could have added that this is a public road, and I was practising my freedom of movement whether by walking or running. But two intimidating figures suddenly engulf me.

“Do you know this is a protected area?” one of them asks. He’s in a pair of jeans, denim shirt and black baseball cap, and could have easily passed for an ordinary person on the street if it weren’t for the radio on his side.

“Why are you running running behind a car, do you want us to think you are a terrorist?”

“Are you a Kenyan?”

The questions come in such quick succession that I don’t know which one to respond to first.

So I just say, “yes”, and hand over my ID. His colleague just stands there, saying nothing, probing with his eyes.

My place of birth is Kapsengere, a village in a place called Kapkerer in Terik. They must have considered it remote enough to not be able to produce a terrorist. They advise me not to make myself conspicuous, and then they smile to themselves as they return to position. A naive villager. I want to think this was the reason they let me go, but hindsight gives me a different view which you are going to see when I tell you my third run-in with security agents.

But first, the second incident.

I was stopped on the same road again, at the junction opposite Loreto Valley Road. I had noticed a Red Beret watching me walk down 3rd Ngong Avenue. He stopped me and asked me what I had in my bag. I told him it was my laptop and books. I opened the bag and let him see inside it and then he let me go. But he didn’t look satisfied. Since then, I have been avoiding 2nd and 3rd Ngong Avenue as I go to the library from Valley Road; I’ve been taking the much longer route on 1st Ngong Avenue. I’ve been telling myself that it doesn’t matter, a road is just a road; what matters is that I get to the library, right?

And now, the third incident.

It’s a few minutes past midnight but the night feels young. I’m walking fast, partly skipping and hopping, towards Bus Station trying to get there before the last matatu leaves town. I’m turning right at Naivas on Kenyatta Avenue towards the National Archives on Moi Avenue. Moi Avenue is that conveyor of the city’s nightlife that cuts the city into two, from Memorial Park all the way to Jeevanjee Gardens. The western side of the road is uptown, the other side is downtown.

Moi Avenue at this time of night is like a river, with predators on both sides of the banks. Herds are crossing the valley oblivious that they are prey; the beasts are lurking everywhere, camouflaged, waiting. A stray member of the herd may just step into their snare.

Just as I cross on the other side, I see a commotion. Two older men are throwing kicks and blows at a young man fixed between a canteen and a shoe shine stand. There are three other men around who do not seem disturbed by what’s going on. I didn’t need to think twice about it. It was obviously a robbery. I shout, and run to help the guy. It never occurred to me I would need more than a good

heart and legs with this one.

“Kijana, we ndo unatetea huyu hapa, mko pamoja na yeye eh?” (Young man, so you are defending this guy because you are together?) The gang pulls me in and is about to drag me on the ground when two Administration Police (AP) officers show up.

“Afisa... Afisa nisaidieni!” Help me, I cry out loud, but the gang is not at all shook by their presence. The police officers on their part seem not to be in any kind of rush.

“Afisa!” I cry out again, this time with my big voice, and it sends both parties cracking in laughter.

“Hao pia ni afisa,” (those are also cops), the APs announce as they pass, leaving me in the hands of five men, all plainclothes officers.

“We ni activist sindio, hebu fungua hiyo bag tuone uko na nini ndani!” (You’re an activist, right? Open your bag and let’s see what you have inside it!)

They call me an activist because I was rushing to someone’s aid.

I empty all the contents of my bag on the dusty pavement. Two of the officers fan out; one stands next to a lamp post, another lingers on the opposite side. The remaining three encircle me in the middle, where they alternate in interrogating me.

“Hii ni laptop yako, ebu washa?” (This is your laptop, right? Turn it on.)

“Haina battery na inahitaji moto kuwaka,” (The battery is dead), I say, holding it out for them to see. I’d just started to breathe easy again when they hit me with a totally unexpected plot twist.

“Wapi risiti yake?” (Where’s its [purchase] receipt?)

“Sina,” I tell them. (I don’t have it).

“Haya. Rudisha vitu zako ndani ya bag, uende ukae na yule rafiki yako muliiba naye.” (OK. Put your things back in your bag, and go sit next to your friend and fellow thief.)

I settle next to a man humbled to silence by a proper beating.

“Eh... so you are a student?” The unit leader now speaks. He is a tall, light-skinned man in his forties whom we shall call Tooth. (He has at least two missing teeth in his lower jaw.) He says this while cuffing my left hand the man’s right one. I didn’t want to think about what this meant, choosing instead to focus on the question. I answer him.

“Storyteller and writer.”

“Sasa hii yote inafanyika you are going to write eh?” Tooth asks. (Oh, so you’re going to write about all this?) It’s rhetorical, but my gut’s intention is to keep the conversation going,

“Hapana! Naandika history na oral literature.” (No! I write history and oral literature).

“Haya, pigeni stori na huyo jamaa akwambie kile amefanya.” (OK, so talk to that guy and let him tell you what he’s done.) Tooth climbs up to the seat of the shoe-shining stall, not looking, but surely keeping an eye on us with his ears.

For the first time I engage “the suspect”. He has been squatting silently, as if he was trying to make

himself disappear.

“Me nilikuwa tu nimetulia pale,” pointing to other side of the road, *“Mse mwingine tu akakam akaniambia tuende tunyang’anye huyu kijana hapa simu, kidogo kidogo nikaskia watu wameanza kunipiga. Hata sijui ule jamaa, mi nasukumanga trolley huko Bus Station.”* (I was just chilling on the other side of the road, and some guy told me we should go grab a phone from a boy who was standing here. Before I knew it people were beating me up. I didn’t even know the guy; I push a trolley there at Bus Station).

He adjusts the sleeves of his jacket. I notice he has a silver watch on his left wrist, and a closer look at him shows a face that appears too clean for someone who just got kicks and fists to his head. Now, another person I had not noticed before says he is the victim, and insists that the suspect was holding a broken glass bottle that was used in the robbery.

“Unaona sasa, watu kama hawa ndo unataka kutetea. Ingekuwa ni wewe, tuseme akudunge na chupa ungesema nini?” Tooth says. (Now see, people like these are the ones you want to defend. If he had stabbed you with the broken bottle what would you have said?)

For a moment, Tooth seems empathetic, and I almost get Stockholm syndrome, trying to see things from my oppressor’s point of view. I actually almost feel safe in this moment. With the police, and not the thieves. Wait, I am cuffed together with a thief!

Meanwhile the other officers are on a harvest in the streets. All the targets are young males. Their first catch is a short young man in a black cap with combat (military fatigue) patterns on the front.

“Kijana, we ndo unajifanya unataka kuvaa kama sisi?” (Young man, so you want to wear clothes similar to ours?) The young man is frisked head to toe then told to sit down on the steps of the stall, cuffed to a metal bar.

The second catch surprises me, a street boy barely thirteen years of age brought to Tooth. He (the boy) is not a Nairobiian; this I know from the scanty Kiswahili and Kisii he won’t stop speaking. Let’s call him Sokoro.

“Mbona mnafuata fuata watu mkiwasumbua, iko wapi simu?” (Why are you following following people and disturbing them, where’s the [stolen] phone?) Tooth demands of the boy as another cop warms his palms on Sokoro’s cheeks. He cries a few things in Kisii before he is gagged and left in the hands of Tooth.

Tooth is a real beast. He grabs Sokoro’s arm and starts twisting it, not for a moment setting his eyes off the boy who lets out a painful cry. He stops then repeats his question.

Sokoro is now silent. Tooth is irritated. He brings him closer to where I am and uses the metal bar the combat boy is chained to as a fulcrum. I helplessly watch as Tooth twists and pulls Sokoro’s arm like he would if he wanted to break an adult’s.

“Aaah...aki unanivunja, wacha wacha...” (Stop, please...You’re breaking my arm!) Sokoro screams with tears now welling up his eyes. Tooth pulls one last time then stops.

The other beasts are still harvesting. Two unsuspecting young men, both in beanie hats, are about to be flagged. One of them senses it and tries to escape but the grid is locked. Tooth mentions something about young men dressed like them (in beanie hats, tight pants, sports shoes and Timbaland boots) being troublesome. The procedure is simple and the same for everyone: stop, show ID, get frisked then proceed to the ground after shackling.

Sokoro has broken free! He is running and screaming at the same time. His small frame was his key out the cuffs, but it is also his weakness; he never gets far.

Tooth is the first to land his hand on our boy when he is forced down. Another beast opens his arms wide for a clap. Sokoro is in between. I look away and prepare myself to forget what I'm about to hear.

"Now you want to tell me this one is not a criminal?" Tooth is addressing me now. "Whoever defends such people becomes an equal partner in crime, what we call an accessory. You don't run shouting, *ama* do you know each other?"

Then he surprises me by saying, "*Haya, tafuta kifunguu ya pingu.*" (Look for the keys to your handcuffs.) There is a bunch of keys in his hand; in the middle is a small key, the cuff key. I look at him, then back at the keys.

"Si you say you are a literature man, *tafuta kifunguu ya pingu.*" It takes me a while to figure out what he meant - he wanted money. I had two hundred shillings in my pocket; I tell him I have only one.

Tooth opens the cuffs and sends me to his partner, "*Enda nunulia yeye credit.*" (Go buy him some airtime.) The cop refuses to take my one hundred shillings. I go for my bag next to Tooth's seat, and before I leave Tooth's partner takes out a pen and notebook, writes my name, ID number and phone number and declares, reading out my name first, "You are an accessory, an aide to criminal activity and we have pardoned you."

My legs trembled all the way to the National Archives, with cold air freezing my bones. I never wanted it to be the case of Lot's wife, and my body seemed to understand this very well. The universe seemed to understand this too, and I walked stiffly all the way to Bus Station. I was glad to be safe, to be heading home. But what about Sokoro? Tortured for being helpless and homeless. What about the others? The combat guy, the beanie hat guys. The ones who were equally innocent as myself. They never did anything, what about them?

The Moi Avenue incident is obviously the most violent encounter I have had with the beasts compared to the other two. However, the Red Beret encounter is the scariest one now that I think about it; I was one of the beanie hat boys but on the right side of town, the other side of Moi Avenue. His dissatisfaction with my innocence is the same dissatisfaction Tooth and his unit had with the young men's innocence, based on just their dressing. It didn't matter that they passed every test they set; they looked like criminals and were therefore guilty.

My physical appearance that night with Tooth and Company was almost formal; I didn't fit the profile. At the Israeli Embassy though, I was in jeans and a T-shirt, generally a sporty look. If I had a beard and hair on my head, would things have been different?

In hindsight, there are many reasons why I'm still a free man. Key among them is that I probably did not fit the profile of a criminal or terrorist at the time of the encounters, and when I did, I was in a privileged side of town where things tend to go down much different - where the benefit of doubt is afforded.

I changed my route to 1st Avenue, avoiding 2nd Avenue that is much closer to the library. Just to be safe.

But why do I have to go through all this? I do not want to have to change my route because Israelis feel unsafe with me running outside their embassy in my country. I don't want to change my dressing, my hair's look; I do not want to suppress my joy and happiness.

I want to be able to speak when something goes wrong; I do not want to pretend I do not know that torturing a crime suspect or a minor is wrong. I do not want to feel unsafe whenever I am around people who are supposed to protect me. I do not want to be scared, to feel helpless enough to want to give a bribe.

I do not want to be estranged from myself. I want to be free.

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