I’m African . . . Not African American

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I’m African...not African American.

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“I’ve gotten into a lot of trouble for saying I’m American instead of African American. But I’ve been to Africa...and believe me, I’m American.”

~Whoopi Goldberg (quoted in Wamba, 1999)
My experiences growing up as an ethnic minority in Kenya left me with a profound distrust of people, even those who look like me, and an indelible mark on my psyche. I learned to make snap judgments based on people’s outward appearance(s). I did not view my prejudices as being racist; I didn’t even recognize them as prejudices, even though I realized I had an aversion for that which I did not fully understand.

It is with all this in mind that I embarked on a reflective journey to open my mind and heart to learn about the black American culture, specifically why they dress, speak, and behave as they do. After all, I was doing the same thing to black Americans that had been done to me – viewing them through a single lens, using just one aspect of their culture to discount them as a group based on my perception of what I thought was appropriate. I had a lot to learn.

“Elimu haina mwisho.”
(You’re never too old to learn.)
~Swahili proverb

“The only mistake in life is the lesson not learned”
~Albert Einstein
KERICHO

It’s alright if you’ve never heard of Kericho…it’s a sleepy little town in Kenya that is home to the country’s relatively large tea industry. In addition to lush and widespread tea plantations, which are nurtured by almost-daily rainfall, another of Kericho’s claims to fame is being home to several world-renowned Kenyan long-distance runners. A relatively small town, even by Kenyan standards, it nonetheless boasts a “golf and country club” – a relic of the British colonial days. Growing up, I spent many a day at the club...waiting, with other children, for our parents to finish playing a round of golf, and have the obligatory cocktail after the fact. While some of these children were black (Africans) like me, many of my playmates were white and Asian (mainly of Indian origin).

For about as long as I can remember, the word “mzungu” (plural “wazungu”) – loosely translated as white person – has been part of the Kenyan vernacular. My earliest childhood memory of being unlike my friends had to do with somehow being different from my mother’s bosses’ children; not because we were different races...but in terms of social standing. Even as a six- or seven-year old, I understood, on some level, that wazungu (and wahindi – people of Indian descent) were treated with a deference not reserved for me or my fellow Kenyans. After all, they were the ones whose parents held positions of power in the town’s premier social institution – the aforementioned golf club.
I suppose this mentality dates back to colonial times – the club being the cultural and socioeconomic mainstay of the upper middle class; that is, anyone who “mattered.” The golf club is where I learned my social cues, if you can call them that. It’s where I grew up to be the proper young lady everyone expected me to be. My parents were relatively well-off (as least socially, if not financially), and I was obliviously happy for most of my childhood. After school, I spent many an afternoon in my mother’s office, playing in a corner or under her desk until it was time for her to leave work. Occasionally, I would while the time away at one of her bosses’ homes – playing with their children (having been picked up from school by one of their drivers) until she finished work and could take me home.

Naturally, I was too young and naïve for this to mean anything, and only now do I cringe at the thought of having had chauffeurs drive me and my cohorts around. (Let alone the maids who served us tea and neat little cucumber sandwiches.) Needless to say, I grew up relatively privileged, by many standards, and was certainly sheltered from much of the turmoil many children my age experienced in my part of the world. By the time the Kenyan social and political climate began to transform, I had been shielded from the realities of life long enough to be completely in the dark about the sheer depth of animosity human beings can harbor towards their fellow man.
Imagine a country with just one political party, ruled by the same president, for a quarter of a century. That was Kenya. We had one president from 1978 to 2002. I was three years old when he assumed power, and had graduated from university when he finally relinquished it, bowing to pressure from the international community. A select few groups of people (tribes) had benefitted from the legacy of Kenya’s colonial masters, among them members of the president’s tribe. They maintained a tight grip on power for decades, and there was no end in sight to this trend of inequality. So while Kenya had, in 1963, gained political independence from the British, we had simply traded in the colonial master(s) for one of our own kind.

As such, Kenyans, like many other oppressed peoples, had been living in a powder keg for decades; one ready to blow at the slightest provocation. It was just a matter of time before that happened, and sure enough, with the late ‘80s and early ‘90s came a discontent that spread across the country like wildfire. It was rooted in political, social, and economic disparities, and related issues stemming from the colonial days. This is around the time I started to hear the phrase “mkosa kabila” which literally translates to one without a tribe.

I had never really identified myself in terms of either of my parents’ tribes. I suppose, with my parents being from different tribes, my sense of belonging to either was not nearly as strong as that of children whose parents were from the same tribe, and who therefore spoke the language(s), and learned the cultures and customs, unlike me and my siblings – we spoke only English and Kiswahili (the national language). Furthermore, we lived in a part of the country where neither of our parents was from, so we did not have strong ties to any one place. Little did we know that this supposed lack of identity would plague us for years to follow.
ETHNIC GROUPS
Population: 37m (2007)
- Kikuyu 20%
- Luo 14%
- Luhya 13%
- Kalenjin 11%
- Kamba 11%
- Kisii 6%
- Mijikenda 5%
- Somali 2%
- Turkana 2%
- Maasai 1%
- Others 14%

SOURCE: CIA, UK Foreign Office, Africa Studies Center
As we soon discovered, Kenyan society had devolved to the point where one’s tribe dictated everything from the caliber of high school you got into and entrance into a college or university, to the possibility of getting a job – any job – if you were fortunate enough to get that far, despite a less than fortunate moniker. The worst of it was that it was next to impossible to hide who you were; tribes in Kenya are easily discernible by name, so short of taking the drastic step of changing name(s), one’s destiny is written before birth.

Many experiences from that era remain with me to this day. I remember having to walk home alone from school as a pre-teen because my friends’ parents no longer wanted their children to be seen with “that Kikuyu” (my mother’s tribe).

In my last year of primary school, I wanted to drop my surname and use just my first and [English] middle name in an attempt to improve my chances of getting into a good secondary school. I was 12 years old, and had gone from being a happy-go-lucky kid playing with her fellow Kenyan (including wazungu) friends, to worrying about not being able to complete my schooling because of where my parents had had the “misfortune” to be born.

All this was in the name of fighting for equality... although I never have understood how the innocent play of children stood in the way of progress. People may not have liked or even understood it, but most put up with it regardless. Maybe they saw it as a necessary step back in order to move forward.
This is a saying my mother is fond of, and one she would repeat often (mainly to get us to stop whining when she accidently burned the tips of our ears while straightening my sisters’ and my naturally kinky hair with a hot iron), or pulled too hard while plaiting it: “Beauty is painful.”

As Kenya violently morphed from a one-party state to a multi-party system of politics, the country and its people certainly experienced a great deal of pain on the [still] long journey to beauty.
What Kenya was going through was no different from the growing pains many other African nations were experiencing around this time. The insatiable yearning for power and wealth (the latter mainly in the form of landownership) created a culture of corruption and tribal/ethnic violence in Kenyan politics that persists to this day. When the country held its first multi-party elections (in 1992), my mother sent me and my siblings away to live with our maternal grandmother for a few months because it wasn’t safe for us to be in our home in Kericho. After all, we were not native to the area, and therefore didn’t “belong.”

While my family and I were fortunate to remain physically unscathed through the years, the tribal hatred definitely took a social and emotional toll. Overnight, it seemed, we were pariahs in the town where I was born and had grown up in. Others were not as lucky, if you consider our circumstances at the time “luck”. My best friend when I was 16 was the daughter of a renowned cleric – one who, despite being from the same tribe as the ruling party, dared to speak out against the establishment, in support of equality for all. Lizzie’s father died in a mysterious road “accident” in 1991, and to this day, theories abound that he was killed by those in power for daring to defy the government.
This was a time when people disappeared, never to be heard of (or from) again, for writing a newspaper article that presented a viewpoint different from the status quo; or for publishing a cartoon that dared to mock a politician. Such crimes were punishable by death. I learned to be wary of everyone around me and careful of what I said or who I was seen with, lest it be misconstrued. At the height of the politically-motivated ethnic turmoil, our grandmother once beseeched my sister and I not to do as our mother had done – marrying outside her tribe; “better to marry someone from another country,” she said. Small town living took on a new meaning, and I couldn’t wait to leave.

I never dreamed of being able to move away, not just from Kericho but actually out of the country, but the wheels in my mother’s brain were churning. She was not about to see her child go through more of what she had been unable to avoid or protect me from. Despite our family having limited financial means, she was determined to send me away, even though (I know now), it broke her heart to do so. She moved heaven and earth to get to me where I am today. I embraced the opportunity to leave and never looked back.

Lizzie, my childhood friend, lives here (in the states) now. In reflecting on where I’ve come from and where I am today, I interviewed her at length, particularly about the current state of Kenyan politics. Her single biggest disappointment is that even now, 21 years after her father died under mysterious and still unexplained circumstances, Kenyans continue to kill each other because of our last names. Sadly, even as recently as 2007, many of us who were visiting home for the holidays had to flee to escape unspeakable tribal violence that flared up during elections. At least this time, I had the means to get on a plane and leave.
Coming to America

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step....”

~Lao-tzu, Chinese philosopher
My experiences in Kenya had predisposed me to prejudge others...

“Say what...?” My introduction to “Ebonics”
In the summer of 1995, a well-spoken 19-year old from a former British colony landed in southeast Houston, home to the city’s renowned Third Ward, and enrolled at the area's preeminent historically black university. It was a world unlike anything I had experienced before, and I understood how Eddie Murphy’s fictional character in the movie Coming to America likely felt. I was out of my element, and for the first time in my life, got a B in English – all because of my pesky habit of spelling words the [proper] British English way rather than following the rules of American grammar. I refused to believe that people who said they were “fixin’ to” do something or go somewhere had a better command of English than I did!

I can’t believe you left the house dressed like that!
Having grown up with a fashionably modern mother (albeit in a fairly conservative culture), I always thought of myself as being on the cutting edge of fashion, and strove to keep up with the latest trends and styles. My initial exposure to American styles of dress left me agape many a day, and I was relieved when winter rolled around a few months after I arrived, and everyone bundled up in unrevealing sweaters and coats. Was this style? For the first time in my life, I understood my mother’s dismay when I dressed in attire she did not deem appropriate.

Can’t you just get over it?
I must admit...I didn’t get what the big deal about racism was when I first got here. Yes, slavery was abominable; unfathomable, really, but it ended, right? After all, Americans were not committing politically-motivated ethnic cleansings like my countrymen still were. As I saw it, all Americans (regardless of color) had myriad economic, social, and cultural opportunities at their fingertips. Policies like affirmative action afforded black Americans entrance to practically any college or university they wished to attend. The government even provided financial assistance in the form of grants and low-interest loans.
My family held a fundraiser to send me to university in the states. The $6000 they raised was all I was going to get. Only now do I realize how hard it must have been for my mother to put me on a plane, wish me well and say, “You’ll figure it out once you get there,” not knowing what was waiting for me on the other end. I worked three jobs to put myself through school, while some of my American classmates got their financial aid and went straight to a car dealership to buy “new wheels.”

**Why so angry?**

During my years living in America, I’ve become familiar with both the “angry black woman” and “angry black man” personas. From my observations, different situations seem bring to these characters out, and I have often failed to understand the underlying reasons for their behavior and actions. They appear to be based on a “mad at the world” mentality that is prevalent among some members of the black community. I came to expect certain (negative) reactions in specific situations, based on my prior experiences with a handful of black Americans I may have encountered previously. I was painting an entire racial group with the same brush, so to speak, and not considering unique circumstances that may have contributed to different individuals.

**Institutionalized self-deprecation**

Some of the funniest performers in Hollywood and the entertainment industry are black Americans. Many are renowned comedians/comediennes, actors, producers, and, of course, musicians. I enjoy great entertainment as much as the next person; however, I take issue with that enjoyment coming at the expense of others. All too often, it seems like black American entertainments seem to be mocking aspects of their culture, or portraying it in a negative way. The films created by up and coming producer Tyler Perry, for example, tend to be satirical takes on black America. While some parts of them are indeed riotously funny, I can’t help cringing at the crass nature of the gags and jokes directed at their own people. It feels opportunistic and self-serving. Rap music often provokes a similar reaction given the crude and vulgar language some of the artists use.
Know what I mean?

“Asiyekujua hakuthamini.”
(He/she who doesn't know you, doesn't value you.)
~Swahili proverb
I’m starting to know you...and know what you mean

As I write, I’m bobbing my head to the latest in “Genge,” a new genre of urban music that originated in Nairobi within the last decade. I always listen to music while studying and especially when writing. I realize that, as is often the case, I’m not really listening to the words, even though I’m singing along to some of the songs (well, at least the parts that I understand.) The language of Genge is mainly “Sheng” – Kiswahili slang. It dawns on me that I’m listening to hip hop, albeit of the Kenyan variety; the former being the very genre of music I’ve been decrying as vulgar, materialistic, and offensive. The hypocrisy is not lost on me, and I note down the Sheng words I don’t quite understand, so I can look them up or ask friends what they mean.

What I discover is that Genge is not all that different from hip hop, and actually has similar beginnings. In the same way young oppressed black Americans turned to music to express their opposition to persecution at the hands of the white majority, Kenyans of my generation, many of whom are fiercely proud of our country, have created an entirely new culture of social, economic and political participation. Music is a common language; it is a medium that unites all young people regardless of tribe or ethnicity. I take delight in being able to listen to Kenyan music and enjoy it as much as I do western music. I realize that this is how black Americans feel about their music. Some of it may use language I consider to be offensive or inappropriate, but that’s the beauty of living in a society where people are free to express their views in different media. This is their music...and they are proud of it.

Music is often closely tied to language in the black American culture, since Ebonics mainly originated from hip hop. In conversing with black Americans from all walks of life, various socioeconomic levels, and in different parts of the country, I recognize that they do not all speak alike. As in Africa, there are many dialects, and they certainly do not all speak Ebonics; in fact, only a relatively small minority do. Besides, I often speak Sheng with some of my Kenyan friends, and think nothing of it; the same goes for black Americans, especially youth, or any other groups that speak a common language. This is their culture, and just as I have recently found myself with a newfound love and respect for my own [Kenyan] culture, this journey has taught me that I must do the same with the black American culture.

Similarly, styles of dress tend to be distinctive from one culture to another. Many westerners who visit any African country may be hard-pressed to describe the attires they come across. Some societies are fortunate to have maintained these unique aspects of their cultures, and passed them down through generations. Black Americans do not have any one particular style of dress and the western fashions they wear come in all manner of designs and varieties. Unfortunately, some are more revealing than they should be; however, the issue is not that this option is available, but rather, the fact that many impressionable young Americans of all races and ethnicities do not receive the appropriate guidance about such issues. The media bombards us with images of celebrities, many of whom young people look up to, dressing provocatively. We, as a society, should step up and counsel our youth on this issue, instead of blaming them for dressing inappropriately. It is not their fault.
“For goodness sake, will they hear, will white people hear what we are trying to say? Please, all we are asking you to do is to recognize that we are humans, too.”

~ Bishop Desmond Tutu

When it comes to the subject of slavery, I concede that I cannot fully comprehend its enduring effects in my lifetime, especially given my inherently different upbringing. I/my people did not suffer oppression to the same extent, so I do not have a context within which I can relate to the struggles of black Americans and their ancestors. They were subjected to involuntary immigration, having to leave behind their families and homes for strange lands. The effects of slavery were thoroughly ingrained in society, and even though we may want to deny this of the world in which we live, continue to be felt by some today.

In speaking with a former colleague – a well-educated black American male who has held positions of leadership at a number of large corporations, he recounted to me some of his experiences in the workplace. Despite having the same or even more education than his white counterparts, he consistently received less compensation than they did. Whenever he walked into a meeting, he would try to “shrink” and make himself appear smaller, so as not to intimidate anyone. He spoke up twice as often as his colleagues, and volunteered for all the projects he could, to dispel any notion(s) that he had been hired merely as a result of affirmative action policy. He made sure his speech and inflection showed no traces of the low income Houston neighborhood he had been raised in by a single mother.

All this to even the playing field between himself and his fellow [white] associates. Not to get ahead; just to get to a place where he would be considered on his merits. He still felt constrained by the bonds of slavery, even though they were no longer visible. To this day, he is the best-dressed person I know. The way he sees it...he has to “play the game” as he calls it, to avoid unwelcome scrutiny. He has to prove himself constantly, all the while being careful to avoid being misunderstood. I’d be angry too.

The story is not all that different for the black woman. She is the glue that holds the black family together, and like the male, is constantly judged for the strong sense of self she has to develop in order to survive. I now recognize that tough outer shell as a much-needed defense mechanism. It’s the same one I developed when I was deemed an outcast by people who had known me my whole life. At least I had my family to lean on; all too often the black female in America is a single mother and sole provider. In black America, poverty rarely, if ever, skips a generation. It can be a vicious cycle, and it is often up to the woman to prop up and support her people, and then pull herself up as well.
Sometimes, you have to look back and learn from past experiences, in order to move forward. In learning more about black American culture, I realized that my upbringing had a lot to do with how I perceived them as a people; I also learned that we (Kenyans) are really not all *that* different, especially in terms of what we want. For that matter, most human beings want the same things – to be heard, validated, recognized, and respected. While we may be different in some ways, we are the same in others. The same way I want us (Kenyans) all to get along, black Americans want to get along with their white countrymen too. However, to do that, we all have to acknowledge and respect each other pasts, and appreciate the effect history will always have in our lives. In retrospect, I was guilty of what those small-minded politicians in Kenya do – judging people based on a single aspect of who they are. I like to think I have always had a good head on my shoulders. Through this project, I have (and will continue to work on) my heart.

A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination.

~Nelson Mandela
RESOURCES

Books:

Films:

Interviews:
- Erica Brown, friend and [black American] single mother.
- Spencer Bynes, Principal, Accendo International; former director of recruitment for Clear Channel Radio, Coca Cola and The University of Texas.
- Elizabeth Muge, daughter of the late Bishop Alexander Muge.