

# Cultural Loneliness or Fulfilment? - in non-racial Kenya

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I WAS BORN AND BROUGHT UP in Pretoria, South Africa. One street separated our location from what is called the Asiatic Bazaar. This is the Indian ghetto, just as our locations are African ghettos. We, the Africans, bought from the Indians and worked for the whites. The relationship between Indians and whites, to complete the triangle, was even more businesslike than between us and the Indians. But at least the Indian merchant class could compete—when there was something to compete for. This something is now fading because the government of today in South Africa is moving Indians to areas further outside town to trade among themselves. The fences around the Africans are being tightened and reinforced with barbed wire as it were. So are the coloured people (those of mixed descent) being closed in and treated as a separate group.

We knew nothing about Indians beyond what glimpses of behaviour in a trader-buyer relationship can reveal from time to time. As boys we even thought that Indians didn't die the way we do, because we seldom saw a funeral procession of the obvious kind that was so common in the black ghetto. Until 1948, when the present government came in on their chariots of fire and burned down every visible bridge or line of intercourse between racial groups, there were opportunities for Indians to make their society accessible to us, because we were physically closer than either of us were to the whites. But they did not. Only when their families came out through some backyard gate did we realise how closely-knit the Indian family is—so much like ours. But they did not make themselves accessible. Nor did they try to come into our African world, except for a handful of Ismaeli businessmen.

We called each other by pet names—the Indians and us. We sat together in cinemas and at sports pavilions. But theirs was a closed world to us. In other cities, like Johannesburg and Durban, they even gave Africans separate and inferior seats in their cinemas. We looked at their temples and mosques and wondered what they were like inside. Could we dare even to enquire? Never. These buildings remained as inscrutable, mysterious and distant if beautiful as an oriental woman in her native attire.

THE OPPORTUNITIES ARE GONE NOW for South Africa. We first came to know the white man at the point of a boot, as servants. Then because we had to learn his language and read books that *he* wrote, because we were compelled to take over some of the elements of his culture in order to survive and face him on his own ground, we were bound to know much about the workings of his mind while he knew little or nothing about what went on in our minds. How can you take the trouble to know the mind and the language of someone you regard as inferior, someone who has always to give an account of himself to you. More often than not he lies to you. On the other hand, it is we who work for him. We enter the white man's bedroom, look under his bed, remove his bodily dirt from the bath, minister to his physical comfort and stand always in the shadow of his anger or his contentment. An so there is a way in which we might say that we are looking through a keyhole and seeing everything

the white man is doing but he has no way of seeing us from his room. If he tries to come to the keyhole himself he cannot see anything of us on our side because we were there first.

The situation in Kenya is identical generally. But colonial rule here could never have been as brutal and sustained as white rule has been in South Africa. And yet it is the African who has adopted several European ways of life; neither the whites nor the Asians have tried to live any part of African culture.

We begin to talk of cultural tensions when we consider towns and cities where various races meet in a mixed society. And by a "mixed society" we should mean one the members of which feel committed to making a home in the same place; not, as in a situation of British indirect rule, where the presence of one race is only justified by the will to govern others and then retire to its original home. In the country, where there is a continuity of African culture, even as a tribal phenomenon, and where members of different races do not fall on top of one another, cultural tensions are almost totally absent.

EVERY COMMUNITY THAT IS SHUT OUT of the life of another and segregated develops in time a cultural self-reliance because it is compelled to learn to live on its own resources. Johannesburg, Nairobi, Brazzaville (Congo), Dakar (Senegal), represent one type of urban living in Africa, and Accra and Lagos another. Unlike in Accra and Lagos, which are solidly African, in the former cities Africans have been segregated from the whites. People in these enclaves make their own music, create their own fun in night clubs, bars and other places. Life here is much more robust than in white suburbia. South Africans have lived the longest in the cities and have created their own urban culture—penny-whistle music, jazz, choral music, the kwela dance, and a peculiar style of journalism. There is much that is African in essence in these activities. If the Africans were to continue to live in Nairobi for instance, and in segregated areas, they would also evolve an Afro-urban culture. Now, in an independent East Africa, more Africans will move into suburbia, and they will need to drive on their own steam, as it were, because they will no longer be trapped in locations and have to do something merely to survive a ghetto existence. It is a matter of speculation whether the new African suburban class in Kenya will continue to aspire to European standards or not. It will be a sad day when they take that direction. We only need to observe the relationship formal invitations, formal visits between suburban people, and formal dress develop to be able to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. And yet it need not be more than a passing phase if we are vigilant and understand the dynamics of culture change for what they are.

The African originally came to the cities to work for the white man, and this prevented him from exercising control of the processes of change in his way of life. He is intensely aware of this as he tries to give a deeper meaning to his aspirations for political freedom. He wants to gain control of the direction and degree of change. It would seem that the European's opening of his social institutions to the African has come too late: the African has learned to rely on himself and perhaps

even learned to justify his own institutions which segregation compelled him to create. Much will depend on the extent to which some Africans are aspiring to a better economic standing in order to afford admission to white institutions, because they will feel they have less and less they want to share with the masses.

Why should Europeans and Indians be surprised or feel their cultural systems outraged when Africans show that they want to determine their own education and the necessary changes in their own culture? After all, Europeans, even in South Africa, have imported their culture from Europe, which has nothing to do with the African setting. Their schools, except in South Africa, have always faced outward: they have produced human material that should fit into British institutions. Nor do Europeans need to be apprehensive if they should fail to make good in Britain; they can always come back and fit into British-oriented institutions, even those run by Africans.

THE AFRICAN IS THUS HAVING TO REVITALISE his traditional arts and crafts, social institutions and so on, in order to restore his own self-confidence. He needs to go through a phase of self-realisation to tip the scales towards his side. Then, from a position of self-knowledge and strength, he will consider the extent to which he needs to change.

For, in spite of certain changes that we need to regret, the African's capacity for change can also be his strength. Consider the Indians, who, as a group, never change, never give or take culturally, who remain where they are, predictable like a boulder: their inability to change and their apparently inexhaustible inner resources are their tragedy. It is easy to single them out in a non-Indian setting, to victimise them. One does not need to push them into a state of siege: they live perpetually in this state. They have, in addition, an astonishing capacity for creating the conditions of their own suffering without being able to do anything to help themselves, to avoid the final catastrophe.

Do Kenyans seriously hope for a truly integrated society—the one in which the question of minorities will become irrelevant, one that will be non-racial, not just multi-racial? The term "multi-racial" refers merely to the physical composition of a community, irrespective of the racial ratio. "Non-racial" implies attitudes, no matter who are the majority or minority group. If this is the society that Kenya requires, it will have to reckon with what I have indicated about the Indian's passive resistance and the European's derivative culture and the refusal on the part of either to adopt any part of African culture.

Constitutional safeguards and mere sitting side by side of Africans, Asians and whites in school and university do not resolve cultural tensions. People may act or stand or sing or cry or rejoice or mourn together, but they may go each their own cultural way when a mixed crowd disperses. And minority suspicions and fears may urge them to take cover under the canopy of their own religions and social codes. These may even harden. Education helps resolve conflicts only in people who have a mental and spiritual disposition to open their doors and windows for new impressions to register.

*'But colonial rule here could never have been as brutal and sustained as white rule has been in South Africa. And yet it is the African who has adopted several European ways of life; neither the whites nor the Asians have tried to live any part of African culture.'* Mr. J. S. Gichuru (left) and Mr. Tom Mboya behind the Governor of Kenya's A.D.C. at the ceremony when Mr. Jomo Kenyatta took the Oath of Office as Prime Minister.



This is impossible in a school with only token integration, *i.e.* with a sprinkling of Africans among a large number of Europeans. African children in such schools often develop snobbish attitudes because their fathers can pay the absurdly high fees such schools demand. They have either to conform to European patterns of behaviour and therefore be cut off from their contemporaries in more modest schools, or resist and become isolated.

If Kenya must go through a phase of multi-racial co-existence first before that "far-off divine event" of an integrated non-racial society, then we have no choice but to be content with plural cultural patterns and a frequent encounter of these. These are people who are actually scared of the long-term implications of integration, and would like to stop here. Especially if you jolt their minds by asserting that the corollary to social integration is biological integration. If we are scared of this, and indulge in double talk, then it is no use our talking airy hypotheses. In a situation of multi-racial co-existence we must simply accept the fact that the cultures of the majority group will dictate the pace and even make strenuous demands on the minority cultures, driving them into their own enclaves, imposing a more brutal siege on them and exiling them until they degenerate as a result of in-breeding.

It may be argued that in a non-racial society the minority culture will have to give way anyhow. But this would be for a worthier cause—the building of a nation. And minority cultures would this way learn to give something of their own to the national culture.

I have not said anything about language here. Yet it is a vital medium of any culture. People here need to be taught both English and Swahili. The question which of these will be paramount is an academic one at the moment. It will depend on political forces, the federation issue and so on. The signs are that both English and Swahili will be used in everyday life, in literature, in parliament, and so on.

FINALLY, IT MAY NOT BE AMISS to pronounce a warning. People of both Indian and European descent have refused to assimilate anything from African culture as a way of life; they have persisted in living in Africa with their faces turned outward for cultural inspiration; when they have taken an interest in African culture it has been academic or tourist. I fear it is too late for those of them who are in their adult years to assimilate anything from another culture. But they owe their children a duty to help them assimilate what they (the parents) could or would not. If as adults they think that all they need or can do is to accommodate themselves physically in an African-governed country, without changing their mental attitudes, then they should at least make it possible for their children to change and expose them to the impact of the African way of life. The alternative is to prepare a bitter legacy of cultural alienation and loneliness for their children.

I have posed questions to which I cannot pretend to possess the answers. My chief aim has been to examine the cultural situation in Kenya as the worst representative of East Africa and to diagnose it.