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Growing up in Kenya in the eighties, there were certain things we children took for granted. Kenya for instance.

Unlike our parents who were born into the British Empire and who watched the uncertain birth of the country and for whom the country was a continuous experiment with the ever present possibility of failure, a fragile thing that had only just come into being and might very well go out of being, we children knew Kenya as a fait accompli, immense, indestructible, unchangeable, a fact of life. We had been born into it and it was all we knew. For us, it had always been there, and there was no reason to imagine otherwise.

But apparently the creators of the Kenya schools' syllabus along with our teachers shared our parents' sense of the fragility of it all. Every morning at school assembly we would sing patriotic songs, the songs of new nations, songs that spoke of belonging, of ownership. We sang the national anthem and recited the pledge of loyalty and we were made to repeat the mantra of nation over tribe. We are all Kenyans. Kenya is more important than tribe. There are no Kikuyus or Luhyas or Miji Kenda. Only Kenyans.

To my eight year old mind, this notion was self evident, a truism. My friends were from all over the country. It never crossed my mind nor did I ever see the need to seek out my tribe mates for company nor did I ever feel any particular affinity for them. People fell into two categories only, people I liked and people I did not like.

When at home I would hear my parents talking in terms of tribe, ascribing certain values and traits wholesale to one group of people (Kikuyus especially, but later Kalenjins as well), I would bristle and more than once lectured them, pompous and shrill. I could not believe that my parents, two people I loved and respected, otherwise intelligent people, could be so hobbled still by such a retrogressive and manifestly absurd idea.

Kenya in the eighties was a highly repressive and oppressive place, a police state and a single party "democracy." The presidential ballot had only one guy on it and your choices such as they were, consisted in putting the perfunctory X by his name or foregoing voting altogether. President Moi, self-appointed father of the nation and the only guy on the ballot was, he assured us, limiting our choice for our own good. He was saving us from ourselves, from the dark repository of ethnic chauvinism that dwelt deep, or not so deep inside us. Should he be so remiss as to give us a choice, we would all be terrified by the contents of that Pandora's box. We would become our neighbours; the basket cases of Uganda or Ethiopia or Congo or…Kenya was an island of peace in a storm-tossed sea of ruin brought on by tribe. In the event, there was something in the old man's prophecies of doom and gloom.

The first nominally free election in Kenya's history in 1992 was a resounding QED. The Kikuyu voted in numbers for Kenneth Matiba whose incoherent and cringeworthy ramblings in the press cast serious doubt on his sanity. This man whose health, especially his mental health was highly questionable, was propelled to within a hair's breadth of the presidency thanks solely to his tribesmen. It gave me pause.

In Kikuyu constituency, 40,000 constituents voted for the MP on a Ford Kenya ticket. The presidential aspirant on the same ticket, a Luo, Raila Odinga's father, could

manage only a few hundred votes. This gave me even more pause. Mr. Moi for his part could barely restrain himself from self righteous I told you sos.

But the years of deliberate detribalisation would not go gentle. I refused to see the country in terms of competing and antagonistic tribes. I was a Kenyan. We all were. I *felt* Kenyan, not Luhya. Our fates were tied to each other, whether or we liked it or not. We would prosper as Kenyans or dig our collective grave as tribes. After all, we had bigger concerns, concerns that cut across any and all lines; corruption, the crumbling economy, education, infrastructure. The unreconstructed tribalists among us were of the old guard, my parents' peers and they were lost causes anyway. My generation were bigger than this.

In his analysis of the Rwandan genocide, Mahmood Mamdani talks of a 'popular genocide,' of mass killing perpetrated by an entire population, of a nation of criminals. Before the 1992 elections in Kenya, two genocides were well under way in the Rift Valley and at the Coast. In both cases, the main targets were Kikuyu, the perpetrators Kalenjin and Miji Kenda. In the Rift Valley and the Coast, a population of criminals was born, much as is happening now. I could not then drive through Eldoret without wondering which of the men walking down the street had blood on his hands. And because I couldn't tell, I hated them all. Even as the elections had sown my distrust of the Kikuyu, the killing made me loathe the Kalenjin. I was terrified at what was happening, of the utter impunity of it all and I was angrier than I have ever been. I was becoming my parents. Now, when they spoke in broad generalities, I held my tongue.

Now the killings have started again. The Kikuyu, the people most Kenyans love to hate, are being hounded from their homes and killed. My grandfather's shops in my village in Western Kenya, rented out to Kikuyu businessmen have been looted and gutted.

Yesterday I read an article which detailed the vast conspiracy of hatred and murder in Western Kenya, of professionals and peasant farmers and shop keepers taking up arms and slaughtering their neighbours, of young braves waiting by roadsides for their prey. Unashamed, unrepentant. I am angry again and again I am terrified. Talking to my parents over the phone, I can the fear in their voices.

Years of living together and the constant, even casual betrayals we have inflicted on each other have made us wary and suspicious. But the sort of feeling that allows people to casually butcher each other, to kill unarmed women and children, to transform erstwhile friends and neighbours instantly into objects of hatred upon which any horror can be justly inflicted is something I find hard to grasp. Is it mere opportunism? Or real hatred in all its obscene glory? What are we doing to ourselves that allows such animus to exist in our midst, within such easy reach, so accessible and so close to the surface?

I am no longer the unmitigated Kenyan I once was. And now I can see every straining seam, every rivet and every joint that holds us together. And I no longer take it for granted that they will hold.