

Why I'm No Longer Talking to Kikuyus About Tribe

Sometime after the 2013 elections, I stopped talking to some of my Kikuyu friends and colleagues, not because of any declared hostility or altercation, but because of an unacknowledged silence that was beginning to characterise most of our conversations. Chats between them and me had become stilted and obscure, focusing on the mundane and trivial. I noticed that we tried hard not to use the K-word and avoided at all cost to discuss the election and its results. In fact, we steered away from politics altogether because any suggestion that Uhuru Kenyatta might not be fit to be the president of the Republic of Kenya, and that he and his deputy might actually have been involved in crimes against humanity, would lead to gasps of denial and revisionism – as if I was the problem because I was incapable of “accepting and moving on”.

Because we could no longer be honest with each other, we stopped communicating altogether. It seemed hypocritical and dishonest to pretend to be on the same page when we were clearly not. This situation was further reinforced in 2017 when Uhuru was declared president for the second time.

I was later to find out that I was not the only one experiencing this. Many of my friends, including progressive Kikuyus, had been losing their Kikuyu friends at an alarming rate.

It is a weird time to be a Kenyan. People are being forced to take sides and to even adopt new identities. Some people have begun asserting their Kikuyu identity by adding a Kikuyu name to their Christian one, or by demonstrating their filial ties to a Kikuyu in-law or spouse by hyphenating their names. It has become very important to have Kikuyu ties – even if you

don't speak the language and have no knowledge of Kikuyu culture and traditions. Having a Kikuyu connection is deemed to have its advantages in today's Kenya. There is a perception that having the right connections will open up all kinds of opportunities, from jobs to tenders.

In her book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, the black British writer Reni Eddo-Lodge explains that she stopped having conversations about race with white people because most white people don't even recognise that racism exists. "I cannot continue to emotionally exhaust myself trying to get this message across, while also toeing a very precarious line that tries not to implicate any one white person in their role in perpetuating structural racism, lest they character assassinate me," she writes.

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The title of Eddo-Lodge's book is deliberately provocative – to look a problem in the eye and force people to deal with it. She says that white people often silence people of colour by pretending that the problem lies with the latter, and not with the former, or by accusing the non-white person of being overly sensitive about race. "They've never had to think about what it means, in power terms, to be white, so any time they're vaguely reminded of this fact, they interpret it as an affront," she says. "Their eyes glaze over in boredom or widen in indignation. Their mouths start twitching as they get defensive. Their throats open up as they try to interrupt, itching to talk over you but not really listen, because they need to let you know you've got it wrong."

"I can no longer have this conversation, because we're often

coming at it from completely different places,” she adds. “Worse still is the white person who might be willing to entertain the possibility of said racism, but who thinks we enter this conversation as equals. We don’t.”

Here in Kenya, some of us have become so emotionally exhausted that we have stopped talking because some of us are afraid to acknowledge that a problem exists – a problem that could be described as “Kikuyu privilege”, the result of decades of bad politics that emphasised ethnic identity. So because privilege in this country is directly related to who is in power, for a long time, we also had what can be called “Kalenjin privilege”, which reasserted itself when William Ruto became Uhuru’s running mate and deputy. The current stand-off between Uhuru and Ruto can thus be interpreted as a battle for supremacy – Kikuyu privilege fighting Kalenjin privilege and vice versa.

Now all those who are not white know what white privilege looks like. It is like oxygen in the air – we cannot see it, but we know it is there. It is that taking-for-granted feeling among people who have never had to explain themselves to others and who have never had to seek permission to exist.

By privilege I do not necessarily mean wealth or opportunities, but a mindset that sets oneself apart from “the other” and treats one’s identity as the norm, and all those who deviate from it as different, not necessarily in an overtly racist Trump kind of way, but in a condescending, paternalistic manner. It is like when a white person asks you how you learnt how to play the piano so well, or when she marvels at the fact that you have a PhD. Or like when (as has happened to me several times), a white person asks if I still eat Indian food with my hands. (Of course I do, not all the time, but only when I dip a roti into a curry – a feat that would be impossible with a fork and knife.)

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In many ways, Kikuyu privilege is akin to white or male privilege in that most Kikuyus are not even aware of it. So they might say things like, “I think he’s quite smart for a Pokot.” Or, “We Kikuyus, unlike those lazy people at the coast, work hard for our money.” Or they might point out that they have a lot of non-Kikuyu friends, just like the white liberal who will emphasise that “many of my friends are black”. (I use the word liberal here deliberately because unlike the rabid white right-wing racist, the white liberal assumes, falsely, that he does not enjoy privilege, and that even if he does, he works consciously to underplay it.) Like white privilege, Kikuyu privilege does not examine the structural and historical reasons for why one racial or ethnic group has an advantage over another, or whether subjugation of the “other” was how this privilege was acquired in the first place.

My critics will no doubt remind me that there are millions of Kikuyus in this country who are poor and who do not benefit financially or politically from their Kikuyuness. Indeed, as I have said so in many of my articles, poor Kikuyus got the short end of the stick at independence. Many were not only dispossessed of their land by former Kikuyu loyalists known as homeguards who went on to form the political elite after independence, but those who were relocated to the Rift Valley have suffered violence in virtually every election since the 1990s. And we must remember that it was a Kikuyu president, Mwai Kibaki, who oversaw the extrajudicial killing of hundreds of Mungiki members – children of the very Kikuyu people who were alienated from their land by the Jomo Kenyatta regime.

Kikuyu privilege, like white or male privilege, therefore, has

little to do with wealth but everything to do with self-perception – and delusion. It is the reason why, despite having suffered at the hands of every regime in Kenya, poor and dispossessed Kikuyus continue to follow the philosophy of *uthamaki*, a belief that Kikuyus are – and should remain – the true and only rulers of this land known as Kenya. And that their ethnic group's leaders must be the main beneficiaries of the country's wealth. (Turned on its head, this philosophy was also adopted by the Kalenjin, who have sought power, wealth and privilege with equal determination.) They do not ask why this wealth does not trickle down to them, why they still remain poor.

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For someone like me who belongs to a tiny ethnic minority in this country, the notion that ethnic identity affects one's life chances is disconcerting to say the least. How can I, with my Indian name and heritage, compete with the largest tribe in Kenya? And because I did not marry into one of the larger tribes, I face an additional disadvantage. My husband's mother belonged to a tribe known as Taveta, one of those small tribes that have been forgotten and that have been marginalised for so long that they are completely off the political and economic radar. His father was Malawian but since my husband never lived in that country, he identifies most with his Taveta roots. So adding his name to mine doesn't help either. On the contrary, being a Kenyan Asian married to a small tribe man in Kenya with a foreign African father probably places me somewhere at the very bottom of the pecking order.

I am not saying that I did not inherit certain privileges on account of my race or class. I grew up in an urban middle class Asian family that did not struggle with money issues and

which took many things for granted. We were not rich, but we were not poor either. My sex placed certain obstacles in my way – Indian culture denies women and girls many privileges, so I learnt at a very young age not to reach for the stars. Sheer stubbornness on my part dismantled some of these barriers and allowed me to pursue some of my goals.

But even as a child, I was aware that the playing field was not level for Asians. So, for instance, I could never aspire for a government job because those jobs were reserved for Africans. And in a society so deeply divided by race (thanks to the apartheid imposed by British colonialism and white settlers that lingered on after independence), it was difficult for me to make a case for why I deserved to be treated equally. Kenyan Asians enjoyed status and benefits under colonialism that their African brethren were denied – a “divide and rule” colonial tactic that kept the races physically, socially and economically apart.

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When I moved to the coast a few years ago, I also became aware of what I can only describe as my “Nairobi privilege” – a misguided belief held by middle class Nairobians such as myself that Nairobi is Kenya, even though Nairobians make up only ten per cent of the country’s population. It is a privilege that assumes that Nairobi is the norm and whatever happens outside its borders is just tourism. Here I saw what marginalisation does to a people. It lowers expectations. People expect less, so they demand less as well. The “Pwani si Kenya” movement was a response to this marginalisation, but that too was crushed.

How can Kikuyu privilege or any other kind of privilege be addressed? The tendency normally is to pass the buck of “awareness raising” on those who do not enjoy these privileges. Black people in the UK, for instance, will be invited to talk about their experiences to white audiences, or to become champions of anti-racist advocacy groups. Muslims and other minorities in the United States will be invited to speak about the discrimination they face. (In Kenya, we don’t even bother with such awareness-raising; we just accept and move on.)

Yet the onus really should lie with the ones having the privilege. They themselves must ensure that not every board member in a parastatal or corporation is a Kikuyu or from just one ethnic group. They must demand that key positions in government be shared in a fair manner among all ethnic groups. They must sensitise their own people about the dangers of uthamaki and other myopic ideologies.

A friend commented that he was surprised that every panelist at a talk he recently attended was a Kikuyu, and he wondered why the organisers of the event had not made more of an effort to make the panel more inclusive of other ethnic groups. My response was that they were probably not even aware of the ethnic composition of the panel because that’s how privilege works – it is invisible to the owner of the privilege but completely obvious to others.

If we are to move forward, we must have a frank and honest discussion about tribalism, and what it has done to us as a society. We – not just Kikuyus but every ethnic group and race in Kenya – must know and acknowledge our individual privileges, and then dissect them for all to see. Only then can we begin having an honest conversation with each other.

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Checking my Kikuyu Privilege in the Face of Racism – A TED

Talk by Maria Mutitu at TEDxWoosongUniversity