

A Compulsive urge “kutembelea nchi yetu”

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I had always regretted the fact that I have not seen Uganda yet. My wife tells me happy stories of her couple of visits to Jinja and Kampala while attending family weddings as a young girl. It was a lovely country. However, the visions of what Idi Amin did later to that beautiful country has put me off completely. Further, the hatred expressed by some Ugandan Africans who brutally snatched Asian properties by force is something that is hard to accept. Clips of such hatred feelings are captured on recently filmed documentaries. Best thing is to forget and forgive.

At the same time, I haven't explored much of Tanzania either, in particular the northern and western parts like Arusha, Moshi, Tabora, Dodoma, Kigoma, Mtwara and Mwanza. I don't think I will be overawed by what I will see but it would be nice to say “been there, seen it, done it”.

Mastering languages was never my forte and that too would apply to our parents in general. In Africa, they would learn enough Swahili to get by with the housemaids and the ‘boga’ wallies. Auntie Ji still living in Nairobi comes under the same category and equally same goes for her housemaid, Gracie who hails from Uganda. Gracie has been a faithful companion now for an uninterrupted six year spell and is paid a handsome KES 7500/ per month. And that's for doing a six-day a week duty. Auntie Ji is certainly not cruel with her servants but is assertive enough to get good value for her money from them. When we are there, we find Gracie really stretched out and amongst her household duties, she is often sent out to the local shops for bringing a loaf of bread and milk, which for a strange reason always gets missed out during regular shopping rounds to Nakumart.

On our visits to Auntie Ji in Nairobi, Gracie has that uncanny knack of nicely ‘fixing’ the deaths of her relatives to coincide with our visits. This has happened three times now. The reason is simple enough. As soon as we arrive, Gracie gets pampered with generous cash gifts and other presents from all of us ‘magenis’.

The generosity gets straight into her head and within a few days of our arrival, she reports a dear uncle living close to the Kenya/Uganda border has just passed away. She needs to go out there immediately to observe bereavement and to take part in the funeral arrangements



Boga Wali bani ready to strike a deal for off-loading her heavy vegetable basket at a fraction of supermarket prices



Gracie also quite happy to do the job of feeding the babies and changing their nappies

otherwise her father will not forgive her. Unbeknown to her, I remember from our last trip, her father had already died then. So off she goes and we don't see her for a week. And then suddenly she shows up unceremoniously adorning a new-look Gracie with straightened hair all dyed in golden streaks and all nicely spruced up with a distinctive deodorant scent. It certainly isn't a fitting appearance of her that we were expecting - to enable us express our 'afsos'. The proverbial tears dripping down our eyes in sympathy would look silly and inappropriate. She looked jolly enough.

However, one of the highlights of looking forward to meeting Gracie on our trips is to polish up our Swahili to a certain extent and for her to improve her extremely impoverished English. At the beginning, it is simple words like "Jambo", "habari" or "hakuna matata" but it takes time and you really have to shrug off shyness just in case you make a fool of yourself in front of the fluent Auntie Ji (well at least that's what she makes us think). I remember in 2009, at the breakfast table I very boisterously summoned Gracie to the table and asked her in what I thought was good Swahili "Please bringi me friedi eggi – upesi". That made Gracie confused and ponder for a while but off she went. In the meantime I could see a smirk on Auntie Ji's face. Clearly, Gracie was lost but she came back with a few items in her hands, of which one was a prayer cap – but no egg. And I just wondered if the "friedi" was confused for a clothing item one wore for Friday prayers. Auntie Ji burst out laughing and all I could do was not try my lingual skills in front of anyone for the rest of the trip.

But guys, as days go by, one begins to get the hang of the Swahili language. Last time we were stuck looking for a car parking slot at Nairobi JK airport, cousin Sameer had to quit by explaining at the car park toll gate that he was fed up with having "tume kuwa una zunguka tena na" (going around so many times). I understood it alright.

Let me hear of your lingual experiences too.