

My Kenyan Story by Tayyab Malik



I was born in Islamabad to parents who were born and raised in Nairobi.

As a child I went to an international school where I shared the platform with several other nationalities and ethnicities. There was no one in my school from an African descent. Both staff and students in my school were predominantly from the Middle East, Europe and Americas. I, whilst being fairly fair skinned without the use of fair and lovely, blended in very well at school yet naturally stood out amongst the local wheatish brown skinned children.

My father is an introvert, and my mother, perhaps the Queen of the imaginary Kingdom of Talkative Land. My parents brought me up telling me tales of their childhood and prime in Kenya. Kenya, the land I had never visited remained a place of fascination and excitement. I felt I knew all there was to know about the country simply based on the anecdotal narrations of my parents - or more simplistically, the love my parents had for their country - their home.

We had never discussed identity at home. My parents did not feel the need to. All of our social gatherings in Islamabad were with the ex-Kenyans similar to my parents or with extension, ex-East African residents. The conversations in these gatherings were all about time spent in East Africa. There was always something on the menu in these gatherings that was East African, most commonly, and mandaazii chevda from Nairobi.

At home my parents conversed with each in Swahili when they wanted to discuss

private matters. Over time I picked up a few Swahili references, for instance, when my mother would state the word "lala" in a sentence in an annoyed tone, I knew I was in trouble for going past the prescribed bed time - the word "lala" became my cue to immediately change into my pyjamas, run to my bed and of course instantly pretend to have fallen asleep.

As you must all know that in Pakistan playing cricket from young age particularly for a boy is given the same importance as learning the recitation of the Quran. Every day during my childhood I played cricket with the other boys my age from the neighbourhood. Every day I spoke to them about the legends of cricket, my father and his team being the legends from Sir Ali Muslim Club - Nairobi. When my dad and I played cricket, he spoke to me about his time playing cricket in Kenya for the club. He spoke to me about his friends who played for other clubs in Nairobi such as The Jafferries, Premier Club, Nairobi Gym Khana, Aga Khan Club, Sikh Union, etc. So, all my knowledge of the VIPs of Cricket came from my father's exposure to cricket in Nairobi.

It was not until I was 6 years of age when I visited Kenya, I realised that not all brown people in Islamabad are from Kenya and that the locals in Kenya are not all actually brown skinned. This was also when I learnt that I held a Kenyan nationality only as a result of my father's patriotism to Kenya.

As we landed in Nairobi, there were a host of my parents' friends awaiting our arrival at the airport. I had never met these people before. These were the people from my parents' narrations of life in Nairobi. To me they were the characters of a fabulous story, only just real. My parents' were swamped in the love of these people. This event is one of the most memorable incidents of my childhood - perhaps one of the most joyful ones as well.

In Nairobi we visited our extended family and my parent's friends. Their hospitality was beyond belief. I noticed that the social visits in Nairobi were no different to the social visits in Islamabad. The main theme of the conversations was how time spent in Nairobi bonded everyone together. Mandaazi Chevda and various types of featured on the food tables with same glamour as it did in Islamabad. Immediately I realised that the people from Nairobi whether they live in Islamabad or in Nairobi itself are all the same. Their likes, dislikes, lifestyle choices, mannerisms, values, traditions were all the same.

Another thing that was the same in Nairobi as was in Islamabad, was that no one could explain to me properly how we were all connected. Simply "friends from Nairobi" was an acceptable introduction and it deserved the same level of love and devotion one would extend towards one's own blood ties. I have grown to notice and appreciate that most "friendships from Nairobi" actually set an example of how blood ties should be.

I was taken to the Nairobi Museum where I saw the tributes to my ancestors and the ancestors of our friends. To learn of the collective and independent contributions towards the welfare of Kenyan social and economic interest was inspiring. As a 6 year old, I felt nothing short of proud of being related to such significant individuals. Of course when I returned to Islamabad, I proudly boasted about my lineage.

As I grew older and learnt History, I learnt that the plight and struggles for independence from the British Raj was a common thread between Kenya and Pakistan. I began advocating that my ancestors fought the same fight for the same reason just in a different geographical location. My commitment to maintain my association with Kenya emerged from respecting my parents close emotional bond to Nairobi but also to validate my own heritage and identity.

When I was 12 my family migrated to Britain. Overtime in the UK, I have met hundreds more "friends from Nairobi, or Moshi, or Kampala, etc" and have found the same love and kindness in them all. What binds these people together is their sense of for East Africa they all hiraeth once knew. (Hiraeth is a pretty cool Welsh word with no English equivalent perfect for this sentence - #feelingsmart).

Ever since we moved here I became fortunate enough to learn History and Political Sciences from the perspective of two contesting nations. Whilst there are, and will always remain several contending facets in the knowledge contained within History as a discipline, none of them will ever be able contaminate the human bonds tied with love. I have learnt this solely from the East Africans in my life.

Thereby, as a testimony to my parents love for their home - Nairobi, and similarly for the efforts my ancestors have placed into Kenyan wellbeing, I am a proud member of BEAMA to ensure that my own identity, the outstanding humanity within East Africans and the courage of our ancestors does not whither away.