

## The Weight of Black Tongues

by Bonface Nyamweya

“Good trial,” he said while placing the white cup of coffee on the glass table, “but beware that they are eager to establish your pronunciation and vocabulary deficiencies. You’ve said *nem* instead of *naym* and *echd* instead of *erdzd*. You have repeated the word ‘I’ five times. All your sentences are simple. You need to include complex sentences, compound sentences, and compound-complex sentences. They don’t like you to repeat ordinary words. Those who do so are assumed to be from an agricultural rural society where people speak just mother tongue as if competing with wild beasts. Be civilized. Wow them with the Queen’s language. Ng’amboile is for scholars. And all scholars must speak excellent English.”

“I see. I want to go to Ng’amboile as a nurse.”

“That means you want to go there as a scholar.”

“True. But does my English have anything to do with my nursing skills and passion?”

“That question is often asked by those hopeless ignorant individuals who want to justify their linguistic deficiencies. But for your case, you have a high probability of going to Ng’amboile. You are not badly off. Just improve on your vocabularies, check on the diphthongs and short vowel sounds. Be time conscious. And, be likable. If you can’t, pretend to be one. Ng’amboile is heaven, it brings a hundred million good opportunities that you can’t find in Humu!”

“I appreciate. However, I don’t like the way these people are using their language to lionize us. It is not rational to measure the intelligence of people just by weighing how they use your language which is actually foreign to them. If we had Kiswahili speaking as a measure of intelligence and as a determinant of who should come here, do you think those guys can ever step on our Humu land?”

“Listen. We are weak. Ng’amboile is a First World Country. Our Humu is a Third World Country. The two are incommensurable. Ng’amboile is like heaven and Humu is a sort of hell...”

“That’s what they’ve made us believe. But, is it true?”

“Young lady, do you want to go to Ng’amboile?”

“Let me ask you sir...”

“It is a yes-no question.”

Nyorita remembered her jobless and destitute papa and mommy. Ng’amboile was a rare opportunity to exit this ugly reality. “I do.”

“Then pay attention to my advice. Don’t be a philosopher here. Let me call a friend who went there five years ago as a nurse. I coached him before he went for these linguistic interviews. I tell you, he made his Ikonyero Village proud because his interview was even uploaded in YouTube by the Ng’amboile Federation of Immigration to show others how it is done. However, they realized that ninety out of hundred people who watched that video made it to Ng’amboile because they could cram the questions and responses as presented in that video. The video was revoked from

YouTube. They don't want everyone from Humu to go there. Only those humble enough to be civilized..."

"Sir, aren't we civilized?"

"Yes. Because of them."

"Really? What is civilization?"

"I know you know this."

"Seems I don't."

"Look, when people of Ng'amboile come to Humu as tourists for example, they see a buffalo and they go back and manufacture a vehicle resembling a buffalo. They see a dolphin and they make a train with a shape of a dolphin. Everything they see sparks wonder in them and they do something out of it to improve humanity. But poor us! Even when we go to Ng'amboile, we only go there to watch football or eat chips or doing simple tasks. If we remain here, it is trouble. We are insignificant...We import even toothpicks, needles, clothes, everything except the free oxygen!"

"I don't believe in that. When Ng'amboileans come to Humu and interrogate our aged persons about our herbs, and they go and develop drugs out of that without acknowledging them, isn't that thievery?"

"It wasn't my duty to make you believe in what I said by the way."

"I mean; it is a noble lie intentioned to instill a kind of inferiority complex in us. I believe we have Humuans who have made great strides in the manufacturing sector. A good number of Humuans are part of the population of Ng'amboile. The only tragedy is that their efforts are not duly recognized but blanketed as Ng'amboile. When citizens who have no roots in Humu do a similar act of say discovery in Ng'amboile, they are exalted. This is the problem."

"You are black, they are white. Hence, they are powerful, you are weak. A language of the weak is weak and that of the powerful is powerful. That's all."

Nyorita felt a rare neuron in her mind plucked and her heart was bleeding. *Is it because Ng'amboileans colonized Humuans that they feel even our language is inferior?* She restrained her tears. She smiled. She had to go to Ng'amboile because of one visible enemy that had turned invincible in Humu: poverty.

He took out his chocolate iPhone 13 made in Ng'amboile and made a video call. As it was calling, Nyorita looked at her watch. It was exactly eight-thirty in the morning. The boardroom was cool save for the warm sunrays that streaked from the open glass window to her left. Ng'amboile's mosaic of their first crew of astronauts to go to space spangled the walls and the floor. She relished the executive ambience by admiring the red carpet. The Ng'amboilean flag on the table and the Humuan flag contrasted in her mind like heaven and hell. She was then reflecting about the question she was asked and the response she had given:

*Heeellow! Kindly introduce yourself.*

*My name is Juliet Nyorita. I am aged 20. I come from Humu, Bichibichi County, Wanoma Sub-County. I have a diploma in nursing from the Humu Medical Training College (HMTC). I can work under minimum supervision. Given a chance to work in Ng'amboile, I will be happy.*

*Drrrrrrrrrrrrrrng!* The phone was ringing aloud.

“Ye men!” Omosh bubbled from the phone, “long time...”

Bazu’s eyes danced beholding the yelling screen.

“Broh!” Bazu whistled in wonder. “You’ve grown big men!”

“Really? Thanks!”

Beckoning her, Nyorita slithered near the phone that was clamped in his hands.

“Omosh! Are you free for a little chat?”

Nodding his head smiling, he spurted softly, “It is eleven-twenty at night here. I’ve just taken dinner. Relaxing. Who is that?”

“A friend. She will introduce herself. How is Ng'amboile?”

“Pretty well. Just handling Covid-19 patients.”

“Isn’t that risky?” Bazu quivered. “You could be contaminated.”

“Well, it is. But we wear protective gears. Besides, the salary is worth it- 20 Ng'amboilean dollars per hour. That’s like 2000 Humuan shillings.”

Nyorita swallowed a dry block of air. That was good money. She reflected on how many days she had slept hungry. She folded two fingers suggesting two. She pondered how many students in Humu graduate in nursing and other courses and end up unemployed. How a good number turn hawkers, motorbike riders, and other shoddy jobs that seldom actualize the skills they learn at the campus. Ng'amboile boiled in her heart and mind.

“Request him to give me some tips regarding that interview.” Nyorita whimpered gently to Bazu.

“Omosh, this friend of mine is looking forward to come that side. She is anticipating the linguistic interview this week on Friday. I have shared with her a few things on her preparations. You can as well share with her your experience and lessons so that she can be ready for it.”

“Oh! Quite impressive.”

Handing the phone to Nyorita, Bazu went for a short call. “Feel free to ask him whatever you think needs clarification on that interview.”

“I sure will. Thank you.” Nyorita said while beholding the shelves behind Omosh. She saw Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Decolonizing the Mind*, Toni Morrison’s *Bluest Eye*, Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and the *Signifying Monkey* of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. All these reminded her of racism. She had read these texts and agonized with the status quo of racial discrimination.

“My name is Omosh. Currently, I’m in the Pinnacle city of Ng’amboile. I work here as a nurse. I have been here for the last five years. I grew up and studied in Humu, Ikonyero village.”

“Pleasure meeting you. I’m Juliet Nyorita. I come from Humu, Bichibichi County, Wanoma Sub-County. I have a diploma in nursing from the Humu Medical Training College (HMTTC).”

“Sounds great. Bravo!”

“Thank you.”

There was a long silence as he gulped mouthfuls of water in the glass before him. “For your interview on Friday, I’ll advice you don’t choose the machine. It is risky since it is just programmed. It stops listening when time is over and records little scores. If you murmur, it indicates a perfect zero. If you mispronounce words, that is digging your own grave.”

Nyorita coiled in fear. “What can I do to be safe?”

“Well,” he seemed to smile for a moment then feigned some seriousness, “if you choose to be interviewed via zoom meeting, that’s better because the interviewer can understand your pronunciations since you are not a Ng’amboilean. Also, if you meet the one with a big heart, he/she can add you extra time to express yourself in case you run out of time. But you’ll need a strong Wi-Fi.”

“This is better.”

Nodding. “Sure. But avoid begging for pardon often. They may think you have difficulties in understanding or ear problems.” There was silence.

“For the linguistic interview, prepare in advance the 35, 000 Humuan shillings.”

Hearing this, Nyorita told herself: *Those are seven fat he-goats gone.*

“A lot. Suppose I pay that amount and I fail the interview?”

“We pray that all will go well. But if you fail, they don’t refund. If you succeed as sure we pray, then we shall rejoice. There is medical checkup fee of 45, 000 Humuan shillings remember. It is mandatory as well.”

Nyorita was now certain that their only eight-months pregnant heifer had to be sold.

“If all goes well, and you get the Ng’amboilean visa, then you’ll need a ticket of 70, 000 Humuan shillings.”

She trembled at this. It was getting worse. She knew her home. This amount was not attainable. Perhaps with the aid of a fundraising plus securing a loan from the village help group. She smiled after remembering something: the amount paid per hour in Ng’amboile. She never worried now about refunding because the amount of money she would receive the other side was huge hence she would easily clear that debt. But, would she make it in that interview?

They exchanged contacts quickly. Bazu sauntered in suddenly and sat next to Nyorita, silent with eyes pinned on the screen. He then stood stooping behind Nyorita, and ensuring his face is seen, “Omosh! I hope you have shared enough with her about it.”

“Mmmm...yes.”

Nyorita seemed restless. There was one question she wanted to ask Omosh. Perhaps that was for another day. But when? Friday she would be interviewed. Their probability of meeting was nearly zero.

“I appreciate your kind advice.” She took a deep breath. “Other than the noble pay, how are the Humuans treated there?”

Omosh adjusted himself in the spongy sofa. “If you care about your dignity as a Humuan, stay there. Stay in Humu if you may, at your own risk because poverty is bitter; come to Ng’amboile if you can and if it is your luck, at your own risk because intimidation and death are the oxygen of Humuans here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Instances of Humuans being lynched in the streets for committing petty crimes are rampant. Humuans are intended to live in fear and trembling in Ng’amboile. They are considered inferior strangers because they are black. Even their languages are unheard of. People here can dialogue in English, French, or Spanish but scarcely in Kiswahili or Igbo or Shona. If Humuans in Ng’amboile speak say Igbo or Shona or Kiswahili and a Ng’amboilean passes by, they can readily switch off for fear of being considered ignorant people who don’t know English.”

Nyorita screamed in her mind. Her nerves twitched. Tears foamed her eyelids but she restrained them from pouring down.

“We call that a risk. You hear?” Bazu insisted to Nyorita who simply nodded weakly.

“Thank you Omosh but before you go, I want you to pray for her. Imagine the blessings she will bring to her family by coming that side...”

Closing his eyes, he held the phone with one hand as the other seemingly stretched from the screen onto Nyorita who bowed her head. She frowned in herself as Omosh prayed with the accent of the Ng’amboileans:

*Laawd Jesus Christ of Nazareth! Turn yo’ precious eyes ‘n’ look inter this po’ girl Nyorita. Yuh said mercy and richness are yo’s ‘n’ ef we ast fer it Laaawd, yuh’ll not hesitate to po’ them in abundance! We’s astin yo’ t’ po’ yo’ mercy now on Nyorita, that she may succeed in her interview on Friday Laawd! Make her ‘black’ tongue light to speak good English. And Laawd, po’ yo’ blessings onto her mind, bless her with good memory, to present what is needed Laawd! We pray this trusting in the mighty name of Jesus Christ our Laawd! Aahmen!*

\*\*\*

The dawn was still in pajamas that week on Friday when Nyorita’s mother stormed her hut. It was drizzling outside. She knocked twice. “Nyorita! *Baba yane* (my dear daughter)!”

Nyorita at first thought she was plunged in a dream. But listening keenly, she noted her mother’s voice. She sat in bed gaining consciousness. She blinked heading to the door.

“Yes mommy!”

“Guti moningi my tota!” Momanyi Mochaywa, her mother, greeted her while still outside. “Put off tat ting if you are not waking up.”

Nyorita learnt that the alarm had been ringing in intervals of ten minutes.

“Sorry mommy!” she put it off and opened the door. “But I’m not going for that interview...”

The mother immediately plucked her rosary and started reciting the Hail Mary prayer in silence. She was sure someone must have bewitched her daughter to change her mind on that last day. Yes. This was the devil’s work.

“My tota! Why?” she showed her a bundle of notes, “we sord ooro the seben goats to get you tis 35, 000 siringis bo your intabiyu! Your bata wir kir himuselobu ibu you ton’t go bo the intabiyu. Are you abureiti obu kuesichons? Got is wit you! You wir make it! My tota. Pris go. Put on your dress. Pris.”

Nyorita shed tears. She pitied herself but more, she pitied her parents. She had made up her mind. She wasn’t going for that interview. For her, attending that interview was like permitting their Humuan culture be unfavorably downtrodden by the Ng’amboileans and their acolytes who were all over Humu butchering the Humuan values and native languages.

“Sorry mommy. I feel for you. But I won’t.”

“Are you marriet and I don’t know?”

“No!”

“Has any siri poy told you nonsense to change your mind?”

“No!”

“I tot you wurd go and pild for us a stone house, and pae for us fieko priting raik a rhinoceros, and pae for us giredi cows, emproy for us workers heripingi in our farm to weed meis and miret...tin’t your papa and I weed other people’s meis to pay your sukuru biis?”

They heard a heavy thud from a distance. Nyorita who was looking down now looked onto her mommy. Silence ensued. Tears poured.

“Sorry mommy! I just feel uncomfortable going to Ng’amboile. Humuans are being killed there because of their skin colour. They live in fear. I shared with a friend of Bazu staying there called Omosh. He told me this.”

“If tat is true, why can’t he stay here? HE CHEATED YOU!”

Nyorita said nothing.

“He cheated you. Listen to me, my tota.”

Scrolling her phone, “See, mommy, he sent me 50, 000 for me to start some business after I assured him that I was not willing to go to Ng’amboile.”

“Chisas! Save my tota!”

“He wants to marry me...”

“Chisas! How rong haf you known him?”

“Since the day I went for the rehearsals at the office of Bazu...Almost a week”

*My daughter is mad. She is bewitched. She is stupid. She thought.*

“Your bata wir decide on tis. He is the head of the home. Ayam sua he wir cry hearing tis pad news tat you are not going for te intabiyu!”

“My lover is coming this summer...”

“What is summer?”

“The season...”

“SAT UP! You habu a chance of going to Ng’amboile and you are rebiusing picos of bia? Isn’t tat man in Ng’amboile enchoingi raibu? Is he deti? Isn’t he mekingi aarot obu manii? My tota, tinki twice piris!”

“It is not this man of Ng’amboile who wants me not to go there. I chose not to go for that interview myself. I feel it is time to show the world that despite being desperate for money, we still value our native African languages. If they will interview me in my Bichibichian mother tongue, with a translator there for them, I will attend the interview.”

*How can my educated daughter, a nurse, desire to compete with me in speaking Bichibichian mother tongue? She is bewitched. She reflected in silence.*

“Imachin how resipekiteti is a mata and bata of a tota who speaks guti English, wakingi in Ng’amboile. Our firechi wourd pi resipekiteti. Mani wir pi arot in our pank. Pat riseni to yuaselobusi gibing up apout goingi teea. So pad...”

“Sorry mommy. I feel for you. But I won’t change my mind. From my first profits after my project has picked, I will however build for you a nice house, buy for you a Friesian, nice clothes, and many of the things you would love to have. I am your only child. I know how much you treasure me with papa...My lover promised further to pay for my fees to advance my diploma in nursing into a degree...”

At this moment, screams were heard:

*Uuuuuuuui! Mategenye is dead...Uuuuuuuui....Mategenye is no more!*

The two jerked out as if they had not been dialoguing. Their head of the home had committed suicide. He had hung himself on an avocado tree near the toilet. The two recalled the moment they heard a thud. Who could console the other? A small note was collected next to his body, written his handwriting:

*Dear God, sorry! I can’t educate my daughter and be in peace watching her outside after refusing to attend the interview to go to Ng’amboile. I sold my goats in readiness to pay for her interview fees. But, no, she can’t listen even to her mother since dawn. I want to meet you now, as a gentleman, to weigh the weight of the black tongues!*

