

The Black Mzungu

Excerpts:

Though we are so compatible, it seems our first 50 years of life were worlds apart. Saidi was born in a mud-walled, grass-roofed house just meters from what I call home today. He didn't have his first pair of shoes until the age of ten.

Halfway around the world, I shared my room in the Dyckman projects with my brother. My mom would take me to Buster Brown's to get a new pair of shoes at the start of each school year. Six months later, I'd get new patent leathers for Easter.

Saidi often stopped the car to give his salaams (greetings) to the wazee (elders). I hated when the car stopped. With Saidi often engaged in a conversation with an old schoolmate, young children would come to my side of the car and gawk unapologetically. Coming from New York City, where someone could walk through the subway cars naked and not be noticed, I felt panic and extreme anxiety from this unwelcomed attention. I asked Saidi what I could say when people stare. He taught me, "Nina mavi usoni?" or "Do I have poo on my face?" I used it a few times with childish delight. Soon however, I came to realize I needed to understand from the locals' perspective. I was a curiosity. Shoot, all vehicles were a curiosity. Still, I continued to feel insulted and offended when I heard people calling me "mzungu."

As much as I love Jome, sometimes it is nice to get a taste of what I left behind. I convinced Saidi one day to allow us to stay in a hotel that caters to Westerners. I didn't have to do much convincing really. I made a little joke out of it. "Hey, you have taught me how to poo in the bush, live with geckos, treat malaria, take cold showers or take warm showers with a bucket, have intermittent power and conserve water. I have had a monkey in my banda and a rat in my bedroom. Can I please, dear, stay in a mzungu hotel?" He laughed.

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