

Kanga Woes

'So you only speak one language?'

It's complicated.

Ubungo bus terminal, Dar es Salaam Tanzania. Dusk was turning to dawn as we waited for the bus to fill. We were supposed to leave at 6 am—it was now 7.30 am and there was still no sign of movement. We were truly running on African time. The bus conductor was diligently storing the luggage, which would eventually double up as extra aisle seats, my friend's backpack (unbeknownst to him) being one of them. He sat with my other friend, while I was by myself in my allocated aisle seat, hoping the window seat would remain empty. This wasn't to be. An elderly woman with her head and body wrapped up in a brightly geometric printed cloth called a Kanga sat next to me and eyed me up distastefully. The bus terminal itself rapidly turned into a colourful array of passengers each vying to get on a bus with their luggage, fresh produce, and poultry. Our bus was finally full and ready to leave after a two-hour wait. Had we really waited that long?

The bus moved from town to town passing curios shops, bars, wooden shacks and children with their dazzling school uniforms. It wasn't until halfway through the journey that I felt I could truly relax. We would get to the coastal town of Kilwa Masoko on time to catch the last boat to the Island of Songo Mnara to join a fifteenth-century archaeological excavation. Missing the boat was not an option as it would mean another night on the mainland. My elderly neighbour turned and started speaking to me. I didn't understand a word she was saying; it was either Swahili or one of the many local languages spoken in Tanzania. She looked at me intently, waiting for a response.

'No, sorry. English,' I said.

I'm sure what she thinking:

'How can you be black and not speak Swahili or a mother tongue!'

It's complicated.

We steadily made our way along a deep red dirt track. It felt like an assault course, full of pot holes, and sticks & stones trying to break our bones. Passengers were muttering their discontent. After feeling as if our guts were being disembowelled, we arrived onto a smooth surface and stopped at a lay-by. Did we have a problem? The driver and the conductor got off the bus to inspect the engine. We all followed suit and the driver made an announcement in Swahili. Fortunately, a young man whom one of my friends had befriended translated for us. He told us that a mechanic had been called and that in the meantime we had to wait. He was intrigued about me (I assumed because I was black and travelling with two white friends) and asked my friend where I was from and what languages I spoke. My friend told him England and English. He was gobsmacked!

'She can't only speak one language?' he said.

My friend assured him I did.

To everyone's relief, the mechanic arrived, and we were on the road again after an hour's wait. Angst seeped in as time was running away from us and so would the boat, we couldn't miss it. We eventually arrived at a bus stop where some passengers left, including my neighbour, and more came aboard, including two young men dressed in beige coloured chinos and white shirts. I had moved across to the window seat and one of the men sat beside me while his friend sat in a blue

plastic chair in the aisle next to him. As we made our way along the road, my neighbour stopped talking to his friend, looked up at the open window, and said something to me with a frown on his face in Swahili. Déjà vu, I thought.

'I didn't open the window. The last passenger did,' I said interrupting his grumblings.

'Don't you speak Swahili?' he said in English.

'No.'

'Aren't you Tanzanian?'

'No.'

'Which African country are you from?'

'I'm from England. My parents are from the Caribbean.'

'What language do you speak in the Caribbean?'

'The island we're from, English is the national language.'

'You only speak English?' he said with such disbelief that he tutted and his mouth dropped open for a few seconds.

I wanted to laugh at the array of expressions he displayed, but refrained. He was truly shocked.

'Yeah,' I said feeling the shame in admitting this.

'But you have a mother tongue?'

'Err, not really.'

He looked at me in amazement while shaking his head. He then turned to his friend and conversed in Swahili for a few minutes while staring at me.

'So you only speak one language?'

it's complicated.