

An Encounter with a rude Human Resources Manager

By **Ssenyondo Nasser**

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Towering over surrounding old shanty structures, it looks like a prime plot in a slum. Standing on a busy street, is a magnificent bank that will attract the attention of any passer by. It is located in Kampala's central business district where chaotic heavy traffic jams are a constant menace. The building cannot really escape your gaze for its outstanding height which sets it apart. Whenever I viewed its televised adverts I would marvel at how creative these people are. I was hooked...

When I finished university, I looked for something to keep me busy because I hate idle life. So there I was, looking for employment. When I first set foot inside, I felt it was really a classic bank. Immediately I headed for the Human Resource Department where I was assured of the availability of jobs without a hassle. The human resource officer and her secretary were friendly people and I admired their level of professionalism. I was given an application form to complete and told to return later on Monday, as it was a Saturday and past office working hours. I returned as scheduled, with a colleague - a pre-lingual deaf friend who had also learnt of the same opportunity much earlier. This time we were taken to the department manager for briefing on the nature of the work we were expected to do. We were assured that our contracts would be signed the next day.

We sat in a bright-lit room waiting for the manager. He was an Indian man of medium height and built. He wore a protruding moustache and a graying beard. The first thing I noticed about him was an aura of arrogance and self-importance. With hands in pockets, he paced around the room towering over our heads. His head flung in the air as if he was reciting a poem! He had asked for something and obviously we didn't answer – we couldn't hear: we are deaf – this couldn't register into his head! Anyhow, the human resource officer reiterated that we were deaf. But unlike my friend, I could speak and lip-read. That is when my 'problems' began: being a speaking deaf person! The man became livid and fired up because of my speech. Hell's fires broke loose! His face went red and his moustache quivered as he muttered – fumbling with his words: *How can a deaf speak?!* He yelled thunderously (at the human resource officer), his body trembling with anger as he was gripped with shock at encountering, for the first time in his life, a speaking deaf person! The frightened lady, who appeared older than him, tried to explain but instead he gave her a mirthless, scornful laugh and told her to shut up! Denouncing her selection of a 'speaking' deaf person he retorted: *these jobs are not for speaking deaf people! They are for dumb deaf people! This man here is not deaf but an impostor! A hearing-speaking person! Get these boys out of my office immediately!* How so humiliating, for we were grown deaf men.

I wondered whether there was any intelligence in him or sense of decency. He was abusive, badly behaved and selfish in manner. At this moment, my memory flashed back as I recalled what my father had told us about Indians many years ago: *When employed by an Indian, your age doesn't matter to them: they will call a person old enough to be their father or grandfather: "boy!" They see us black African as inferior humans: with no brains. They treat us in any way they feel like and rob us of our dignity!* For many Ugandans, this was cause for resentment.

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Turning to me with eyes wide open and visibly stretched red veins, he spoke angrily and rapidly, splashing huge drops of saliva into my face. The stench of cucumber and garlic emanating from his mouth, hit my nostrils – I stared right into his eyes with enraged disgust, which seemed to have perturbed him as he hadn't expected my kind of reaction. I wasn't intimidated by him because I knew my worth. It was obvious that he expected me to bend my head in fear and disgrace about my deafness and speech. Knowing that I couldn't hear what he was saying, the lady's fingers fidgeted to write for me what he was saying. This mean-looking man grabbed the paper away from her and stormed out of the room. I wondered whether he was under the influence of drugs! Though he was the manager of this quite well known Ugandan bank which I had previously admired, he had no professional etiquette whatsoever, apart from his awkward tie.

I was extremely puzzled and hurt by this experience – but remained strong. Being deaf is not at all glamorous, obviously not in Africa! So how and why would I, in my right senses, fake deafness which added no value to me?! I wasn't going to stop using my speech just because I was deaf! Yes, he was right: I am a deaf-speaking person, which I feel is a great bonus. Equally so, I use Ugandan Sign Language and speak both Luganda (my indigenous language) and English, with ease. People's attitudes need to change for them to appreciate the diversity of deaf people: we are not all the same. Some Deaf people can use speech or lip read, while others can't.

I went straight home and tried to wash away this disturbing experience from my mind. In about three days I was recalled by the same bank to bring in a medical report proving my deafness, before they could proceed with my job application. I declined instantly and rejected their job offer! My refusal was not out of mere pride but rather an inner feeling of value, self-worth, confidence and dignity. I did not want that man to think of me as desperate for his job. Getting a job is great and that is why I responded to the job advertisement. However, I considered it important to work in a respectful and nurturing environment. Peace of mind at work is important for my job satisfaction and career development. I am proud to be Deaf and although I didn't take this 'opportunity' it was a great learning experience that I soon recovered from!

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Fatalism and Allah's Will

By [Ssenyondo Nasser](#)

I was born hearing. At ten years of age I became deaf after an attack of meningitis, an illness that was misdiagnosed as malaria by our village doctor. Was it Allah's Will that I became deaf?

According to Webster Dictionary, a fatalist is a person who believes that fate decides everything and that no one can control fate. Growing up in a Muslim family, we all believed that whatever befalls man (good or bad) is Allah's Will. Most of my family members attended Sharia schools because our father wanted us to have a strong foundation in the Islamic Faith. These schools shaped our understanding of the Sharia Teachings. It is interesting that all our conversations are punctuated with Arabic phrases depending on given situations. For instance, whenever there is bad news or a frightening situation, we say: *Inalillahi wa inalillahi*; and to talk about the unforeseen future we say: *Inshallah*.

My father was a businessman in Masaka, 150km west of Kampala. He was relatively prosperous. However most of what he had sweated for was either looted or burnt to ashes by Idi Amin's fleeing soldiers during the 1979 war in Uganda. So when I was born a year later, we were not well off, although our parents were hardworking people and made sure we had enough to survive. It was Allah's Will that enabled us survive this tumultuous and horrific war period. We were not allowed to question Allah's Will otherwise we would be branded *Kafir*. I would ask myself how I was to differentiate between Allah's Will and Fatalism. The worst was to come...

At 10 years of age, I had a severe attack of meningitis. In our village we had a male 'doctor' we called "*musawo*" a Luganda word meaning: doctor (but this was no qualified doctor, though he passed around like one!). Health workers were scarce during that time and for this reason, he was greatly respected by our village folk. Though a lean man, he always entered any home that had a patient with a swagger and within seconds, he would diagnose a patient's ailments by merely looking at them!

In my case, without even a blood test or inquiry into symptoms, he shamelessly diagnosed me with severe malaria: by simply looking at me! He instantly fumbled in his old battered leather bag and produced a consortium of chloroquine tablets: only God knows how I hated these bitter pills! One of the side effects was that my entire body would itch - as on fire. My mother paid him for his 'services' and he gleaned, *Ajja kuba bulungi, incha harra*, meaning: *He will be well - Inshallah*. He was not a Moslem but endeavoured to imitate the Islamic Phrase commonly used by almost everyone (Muslim or not) in my home village.

A few days later I collapsed - and on regaining consciousness after two weeks, I found myself in a different environment, a hospital. I had become DEAF! In the early days my parents thought that my hearing loss was a temporally condition and were optimistic that I'd soon recover. Upon being discharged, my parents again hired the services of the same "*musawo!*" To me this quack, who in the first place made a misdiagnosis of my illness and caused my misery, was simply diabolical!

BUT: this time he came on a different mission, determined to restore my hearing, and for this purpose he frequented our home in the hope of performing this miracle! Whenever he visited our home I fought back a surging need to pinch him, slap him, even stone him - I hated the man!

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After one of his visits, burning with rage, I exploded and confronted my father on why he kept inviting this vagrant 'musawo'. I stated vehemently that I didn't want to see him anymore! I was so surprised at my courage to confront my father because he always commanded profound respect. Perturbed by my confrontation, he reacted in the most unexpected and astounding manner: he gently sat me down on his bed. He then whispered something into my ears – but I could NOT HEAR him and instead wept loudly in agony! Tough as my father was, I admired him for his humility. He understood my feelings and fears. As a small boy, I worked towards emulating his character because he represented everything good - everything sweet! I later learnt from my siblings what he was whispering into my ears:

Nasri, he said to me: *Accept Allah's Will as it is*. With these words, I felt like denouncing my religion. How could quack doctor's mistake have been Allah's Will??? How so unreasonable and unacceptable!

I felt terribly lonely. I lost all my friends because none of them wanted to associate with a deaf boy. I was a shame to them because of being deaf. Soon afterwards, I was withdrawn from school as well because I couldn't hear. My school, which I loved so much, had also rejected me because I had become deaf! Whenever I recite my prayers - five times a day in accordance to our Faith, I would proclaim: *Allah: YOU the Most Kind and Most Merciful- Why did YOU Allah make me deaf?* I was a child who felt so miserably dejected. How could He do this to me? At ten years of age, I was a minor according to Islamic Teachings. My childhood happiness was snatched from me by deafness! It's then that I lost meaning for religion, after deep reflection, this became a major turning point in my life. If I had heard of Max Webber's views of God, I perhaps might have become an atheist. As a child, accepting my deafness was an enormous struggle because I'd once been a Hearing person. To alter this existence and enter into an unknown world was traumatic. No one would explain to me why and how all of this happened: My altered state. I had no one to blame – But Allah!

As time went by, I abandoned all illusions of God and tried to glance at all religions with a wider, realistic perspective. Eventually, I returned to school and completed primary education. At secondary school, I decided to secretly study Christianity. My family didn't know this but I aimed to compare Islamic Teachings with those of Christianity. It's very interesting that I learnt more about Allah's nature through taking Christian lessons:

Allah tests people's Faith through Temptations; Suffering and Endurance. He had good reasons for making me Deaf. But at the same time, I began having misgivings about Christianity. For instance, the biological nature of Jesus Christ: *If God created Adam from mere dust, why couldn't he do the same with Jesus?* My teacher's explanations were not convincing at all. Finally when I couldn't find answers I abandon and scrapped Christianity from my subjects, to the enragement of my teacher.

I struggled to understand the meaning of God's Will. *Is it His Will whenever something tragic happens?* As I grew older, I learnt to reconcile myself with my inner Fights about religion.

As an adult, my encounter and acceptance of Deafness has taught me the importance of renewing my beliefs. Not to accept something vaguely, but to accept an irreversible situation that I had no control over. For those of us who become deaf later in life, it is very difficult to adjust to a new existence of being deaf. The evasive childlike thoughts that perhaps one day you'll wake up and Hear again, soon rob you of the beauty and enjoyment of childhood.

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The Deaf World is a New Beautiful World in its own right: Deaf people in different parts of the world have their own Signed Languages and Deaf Culture – they form Deaf Communities that are amazingly intact and a source of Pride and Strength. Failure to adjust to the Deaf World can lead to prolonged isolation and depression. It's challenging to adjust to a new condition like deafness.

But of all the challenges that I've know with my change of existence, is that it is terribly disheartening that a deaf person is called *kasiru* or *stupid one* in my Language, Luganda. This demeaning word is used to refer a deaf people! Society must treat us with respect, understanding and love. Appreciating us the way we are. Although I do agree that Allah's Will may have resulted into my deafness - for Reasons best known to Him, my logic and intellectual abilities are intact.

It is ignorance that leads to Fatalism.

Nasser is a staff member of Deaf Link Uganda and is the TDDP Project Coordinator.

A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH THE DEAF

By **Titus Kakembo**

An encounter with Deaf Link Uganda, a Community Based Organisation working with deaf and hard of hearing Ugandans was an eye opener to a whole new world - it was like seeing the other side of midnight!

After numerous interactions with members of Deaf Link Uganda through KiBO Foundation, I am now well versed with deaf people's life experiences: their potentials, dreams and barriers they face in traditional societies that have, since time immemorial, discriminated against them. It dawned on me that there is nothing under the sun a deaf person cannot do!

We also fall in love, one deaf youth told an attentive audience while debating during a Community Education Programme session at Deaf Link Uganda headquarters on "Sexual Health Education" symposium conducted by Straight Talk Foundation. Another girl eloquently contributed her views about life and relationships. But another discussant swore she could never stand a polygamous marriage because of the Biblical teachings which emphasis one-spouse matrimonial unions. She observed that because of the grinding realities of poverty in our societies and the alarming prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, polygamy was not a viable option. In a heated debate, a deaf peers challenged her views commenting that being deaf, she wouldn't mind her husband having another wife. Not ready to bow down, in Sign Language, she summed men up as sexually insatiable humans. These entire discussion and interactions were fluently and eloquently communicated through Sign Language – with an interpreter on spot – interpreting from signed into spoken language. If it were not for the interpreter I would have been completely lost and left out in this Community. It was amazingly impressive and inspiring to be in the presence of deaf youth. I felt like I had been given a chance to share their views on personal issues, which are commonly considered taboo in our conservative African societies.

During an interview with Deaf Link Uganda's Executive Director: Nassozi Kiyaga, she lamented about the appalling state of affairs regarding the deaf and how they are rampantly excluded from participating equally and benefiting from nationwide HIV & Aids services. Nassozi said: *The Ministry of Health messages specific to reproductive & sexual health, diseases, HIV & Aids/STDs that are put out by the media, should be delivered on television in Ugandan Sign Language.* True to her complaint about the deaf being neglected and marginalised, a survey at **The Population Secretariat** was a shocking revelation that they lacked figures of the number of disabled people in the entire country! There is no data to provide specific information about the number of deaf people in Uganda. Worse still hearing aids, which greatly benefit hard of hearing children, are not available; if found they are exorbitantly priced and unaffordable for poor parents, even if subsidised. Furthermore, deaf children lucky to have a chance to education are subjected by The Ministry of Education to take the same examinations, without special consideration for their special needs, assistance or appropriate resources - as their hearing counterparts. This explains why educational failure among deaf children in schools is very high. There are also very few schools for the deaf in Uganda. To add insult to injury, there are hardly any higher institutes of education

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for the deaf - and if one is lucky enough to get as far as Senior Four or Six, she or he has nowhere else to go in pursuit of a desired career: with employment opportunities being extremely narrow for the deaf. The very few who come from economically well off backgrounds have no choice but to go to neighbouring Kenya or other countries for further studies.

It is absurd and unfortunate that deaf people in our society are referred to by a derogatory term: *kasiru* (idiot). Deaf Link Uganda is engaged in a difficult battle to brave a tall huddle to change negative attitudes towards the deaf nationally. It is disheartening that in some tribes bearing a deaf child is considered an abomination; while the use of gruesome and inhumane methods by some parents is shown when they tie their deaf child with a heavy metal chain and confine them to the backyard. Having a deaf child can be a cause for divorce; while the suffering of many deaf women is evident in their exposure to sexual violence, physical, mental and emotional torture many experience. These experiences and personal agonies remains untold by the media and are continually hidden due to social discrimination, prejudice and stigmatisation, a situation that is compounded by communication barriers.

Uganda needs to wake up and urgently respond to the abuses faced by deaf people: we need to protect our deaf citizens and enable them lead meaningful lives. Deaf Link Uganda is doing a great and commendable job – all its endeavours to advance the welfare of the deaf must be supported.

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Titus Kakembo is a freelance journalist with The Sunday Vision and Features department of The New Vision- Ugandan's leading newspaper. He has special interest in issues concerning deaf and hard of hearing people. Titus candidly shares his experiences and strongly feels that it's time the media took an active role in raising awareness about People with Disabilities by advocating their Rights.