



Compte rendu d'entretien
Nairobi – Kenya

PORTRAIT : BILLAL ISA
Date de l'entretien : Juin 09

My name is Billal Isa, I am 45 years old, 46 next month, and I am a family man, married with 2 kids; the elder one is a boy who is 16 now and will be 17 next month and the younger one is a girl who is now 12 years. My boy is at school, he is in form 3 at the moment (equivalent français ?) and the girl is now in class 7 and will be do her primary examination next year.

I was born here in Kibera, and went to school here and was fortunate to be employed here in Nairobi and since I started working I have always been in Nairobi and I am working for Telecom Kenya which is now France Telecom – Orange for about 18 years as a technician. I handle cables; I normally deal with maintenance of faulty lines. Normally I wake up very early, I do my prayers and then wake the remaining girls, which eat and then go to school. My wife does not work but she leads some religious classes at the mosque near by.

My girl go after school to religious classes and then comes back to school at around 6pm

What were doing your parents?

My father was a driver, just a driver. East African Telecommunication which dealing with all telecommunication, from phone to delivering letters employed him. He retired around 1990, and then in 1992 he passed away. We only remained with my mother. I am the fourth one of a family of 7. The first-born is boy then 2 girls, and then me, then all the last ones are all boys.

What are doing your brothers and sisters?

My eldest brother and sister past away. The remaining sister is married with a husband, doing fine. The brother who follows me is in Kampala, Uganda, and work there, working in the processing of vanilla business. The other brother does not work actually. He used to be employed but the c company run by some Indian closed. This Indian, a Kenyan but of Indian origin, felt unsure during the election period and preferred to close the business and went to settle in UK.

How far did you go at school?

I went to a government school up to high school, in fourth form (equivalent français ?). SO, when I completed my fourth form, I could not go on because nobody could pay for my studies, so I manage to get that job with Telecom Kenya, which allowed me to go through the company college, specializing in the cables only. That is how I developed my education



Why did you choose to work for Kenya Telecom?

I did not choose, I just found myself there; because you know living in a country like ours there, it is actually a problem; and sometimes you don't choose what you do because you have no choice; you find yourself doing the job you are fortunate to have because not so many people are employed; you do what you can lay your hands on; but I really feel fortunate because I am doing what I really wanted to do;

Is it because your father was working in the Telecommunication?

No, because when he retired, that was the end of it. He retired in 1989, or 1990, I am not sure and I got the job in 1999, so almost 10 years later, so there was no direct connexion; I used to play football, and this company like to promote football, so some of us were picked here to play football and I impressed them playing football, so they ask us our level of education

So you were hoping to become a professional football player ?

Well it was my hobby, I really liked to play; you see then in those times, football was not a career thing just some part time activity, enjoying ourselves; We were playing for the school, and then, after school, we would form small small clubs, and playing against other neighbourhood of Kibera. There was a lot spaces, the houses were not congested as they are now.

I used to go to the stadium but I ma not going anymore because I feel they are playing quite badly, I wish I could become younger because I do not think these ones are playing better than I do !

Could you describe the neighbourhood you live in and your home?

Well, Kibera is a settlement, I would rather describe it that way, because Kibera used to be home of the Nubians, descendant of the Sudanese people which were brought here buy the British during the colonial era, they were serving in the British army. When their contract was over with the army, they settled here. The army wanted them to settle close from the town, in case they would need them. Initially, the Nubians were the only people living here, with a little farm. The things started to change, people coming to Kibera. The problem is that the Nuibans were not given the ownership, I mean the title to own their land and call it ours, and some people took advantage of it, coming, grabbing some parts of Kibera, putting structures here and there and it changed the shape of this place.

It was not a slum, even now, I do not call the place I leave in a slum , no, because I know it is my home. Even now, as we are talking, the Kenyan government claim there are 42 tribes in Kenya and there are no Nubians, you can imagine. They still feel like we are not part of this country, and yet our grand fathers came, but our fathers were born here, and we are actually the fourth generation here.

So many people came, because Kibera is near the town, and the people thinks it is near their place of work and they can walk to work. So they prefer to come to Kibera, especially in 1969, when a government official was killed and some community were forced out and came to Kibera.



How do you feel about Kibera as it is now?

I am not very happy about it because it looks like a very disorganized place but I am still happy to call it my home, and I still like it; It is difficult for single persons to amend the situation, it needs some big organization, the government or NGO to improve.

They built some better houses now instead of the slums habitations, but when the original inhabitants do not get the houses: some people come and get the houses, so that is how we got squeezed here. I was myself born close by and my grandfather house is just a few meters away, and was built in 1914.

Why you did not go in another neighbourhood? Could you afford it?

I found this to be my home, and did not have any problem living here, and want to stay.

But now I have a son and a daughter and you can see for yourself, even if I wanted to put up something for them here, there is no way I can do it, so what I intend to do is to buy some land somewhere and built something for them there.

Can you describe me your home?

My home has 3 rooms, a sitting room, a kitchen, which is also the room for my kids and there is my bedroom, and now in front these are also my houses but I rent them to get some money out of it.

Only my wife and my daughter are living here, because my boy is in boarding school, he does not stay with us, he only comes for holidays.

I built the other houses to rent them. Depending on our salary alone is not enough.

So how much do you earn?

As a monthly salary they pay me 25 000 kenyan schillings (250 euros), and I rent each room 1600 kenyan schillings (16 euros), and I have six of them. So at the end of the month, I have about 35 000 kenyan schillings (350 euros). I have no other incomes

Does your wife work ?

No she does not. She is just a normally housewife

Do you feel comfortable living with this income, or is it difficult?

It is not very comfortable, it does not take care of all my needs, it is still low, because you see as I told you my son is in high school, so after paying the school fees it becomes a bit heavy for me. My daughter does not go to school very near here, her school is far and I pay to pay for the school bus because there is no public means to take her there.

But there is no school close by?

There is but now you see, the free primary education was introduced in Kenya in 2002 and after this, so many kids started to go to school and the schools around here get congested immediately, full ! You would find a class with not enough seats, kids



would sit on mats; classes with 140 students, the teachers could not take care of all this kids !

The level of teaching went down a lot, so I decided to send my daughter to another school where they are 35 by class

The education is good there?

Actually, it is all right; I think she is getting some quality education there.

I do not blame the teachers of not giving education here, because they just cannot: they do not even have the time to mark the books. The government should have planned it, brought more teachers, built new schools.

How much are the school fees for each of your kids?

For my son, I pay around 18000 kenyan schillings (180 euros) per term, so with 3 term by year, it represents 54000 kenyan schillings (540 euros) each year, but this just the fees; then you have to buy the books, the uniform, whatever is used like toothpaste, soap, And I give a little pocket money.

Why did you choose to send him to boarding school?

Well, because living in an environment like this, sometimes it become difficult for kids : you have friends which are not going to school, because for most parents here it is impossible to send children to high school, so this ones, they can influence my kids badly, telling them they are free; they could convince him to drop out school.

Which of your needs are not fulfilled from your point of view?

My mother is an elder lady and she depends tottaly on me because I am the elder son. I have to look after all her needs. My elder sister, the one that died, left 4 kids which are alos my responsibility. Then fortunately are through high school, and one is now working. The 3rd and 4th one and one is mentally handicapped. She should be sent to some special secondary school.

You see now what I mean ...

How many people are you in charge of?

Apart from the family – my wife and 2 kids – there is my mum, and the 3 children of my deceased sister, so it is 7 with my wife.

It is hard; you have to do a lot of balancing to make ends meet. Sometimes you have to say, “this one does not go to school, and then the other one...” .

For my daughter, I have to pay for school bus, it is 5000 kenyan schillings (50 euros) per term, so 15000 kenyan schillings (150 euros) annually, and then a lunch which is 800 kenyan schillings (8 euros) per months, therefore 9600 kenyan schillings (96 euros) annually, and I give her little money for break time. And there are also extra classes, called tuition, that we pay around 600 kenyan schillings (6 euros) per month.

How do you see yourself in the Kenyan society ?



I would say I am lucky and unlucky. Lucky because there are millions of Kenyan that did not manage to get a little education; I did not get much but just enough to get me going and again I would say lucky because I got some employment.

Now unlucky because I feel I am part of an underrated society and nothing much is handed to us. When you do not have somebody of your community within the government, it becomes very difficult to benefit from the government because normally, people in power always employ people from their own community, so that is why most of the Nubians are unemployed.

Democracy is about number, and since our number is not so big we cannot elect our own person.

So many opportunities are being lost by our community; we have been here for over 100 years but nothing was given to us.

Are you involved into politics ?

We are doing are best. We have formed a club of Nubians elders which represent us and try to fight fro cause. They are not involved into politics but try to fight for our rights as a whole so we can get recognition.

But I am not directly involved because responsibility have been left to elder people because they know more. I am happy with the jobs they are doing, so I see no point of getting involved

Is there solidarity between Nubians in Kenya?

Well, most of us are here in Niarobi but yes there is solidarity with a Nubian village in the rift valley called "ravine", a settlement of Nubian in Kisumu, in Monbasa, ...

Do you feel more part of Kibera or of the Nubian community?

Actually, for Kibera, what come in mind is "Nubian", because we were the first ones here.

And how do you get along with the other communities here?

Very fine ! You know here in Kibera , all the 42 tribes are represented and we get along very well. What brought all of them here is their economical situation.

The events that took place after the election were mainly one community, the Kikuyu, against other communities; most other communities felt that the Kikuyu were having more than them. The first president of Kenya was a Kikuyu, then the second was a Kalendjin then somehow the third president was also Kikuyu, so people think the Kikuyu have more

How did you go through the elections events?

I was not directly involved because we feel that whatever comes, it will not full fill our dreams. I went and voted but we were not expecting much; we were promised a lot by Kibaki, by Reila, the actual prime minister.

Are you involved in a social club?



Yes I am involved in a club called Jubilee, It is a sort of Nubian club because most members are Nubians but there are also members from other communities. When it was founded it was a football fan club. I found it easy to join because most of the members are friends as I like football as I am.

The membership is easy: you must be an adult, and be in good mind condition, and with 3 references of people which are members. Then when approved, you have to pay 500 shillings then 100 shillings each month. There are around 45 members

When you get sick, what do you do?

We have clinics here in Kibera, but for me I am lucky, because my company take care of my health, as well as my wife and my kid. I go to private hospital, which have been appointed by the company.

For the common people it is a bit hard: the cost of medication is high now; that is also why I think I am lucky. For average people, it might be difficult to be evacuated because no vehicle can come take them at their home.

Do you feel a middle class exist in Kenya?

How do you classify them?

A definition could be the ones which are not rich neither poor. Do you feel like being part of that?

I guess that could be the correct definition. But I do not think that in Kibera there are some middle class people, because you have lower class people. The middle class people are the ones, for me, who can afford a vehicle, but not an expensive one, and also maintain it, putting fuel, repair it

He has a house on his own.

The upper class people are the ones that stay in [Mudaiga, Runda estate](#), ..

Do you feel you are part of the middle class?

No ! I have a house but I have no security of this house, because I do not have the ownership of the house due to the situation of the nubians. So the government or anyone can come tomorrow to take that house from me. I do not feel very secure here.

I do not have a saving I can restart things with. I have no savings. You know, when I say, I am not getting enough, it do not allow me to save.