# The Ghost of the Building: When Labor Meets Injustice

After living in a refugee camp for three years, I moved to Nairobi. New in the city, I started looking for employment for weeks until I got one in the construction sector. As they said, "life is the most difficult puzzle; there is no right way to solve it, but determination, resilience, and patience contribute to one's success". The construction industry landscape is full of surprises, which are not limited to hard labor and meager pay. As I look back on my first day on a construction site in Kahawa-Sukari, I felt intimidated by the harsh, unsettling work environment after arriving. But the smiling and friendly faces of other fellow workers inspired me to try and integrate within its setting.

After changing into my working clothes, I was tasked with preparing the workspace and cleaning before starting tile-setting. The place was full of dust, unbearable, but I had to work. I started sweeping at lightning speed since I was an hour late.

What an awful smell, the scent of dust took over my senses, blocked my nose, and made me feel out of place. Overwhelmed by the rate at which I was being pushed, like a child, my supervisor was shouting at me: "Faster, faster! Can't you see that you started late and the Fundis (technicians) are waiting for you? Go bring me one box of tiles first, and we need cement as well as water."

I wondered, hesitated, and asked myself: "Am I going to pull through this? Can I really do this job?" Though it wasn't my first time doing these types of jobs or being disrespected, I felt bad and couldn't change anything. Unfortunately, it was just the beginning of a long and tiring journey. With a leap of faith, I continued and started my new challenge of the day.

"Finish that, then bring fifteen boxes of floor tiles, ten sacks of cement, and start mixing. We are waiting for you, faster!" the supervisor called up to me in a disrespectful, commanding tone. Without hesitation, I worked promptly, finished, and started conducting his orders until the end of the day.

"Come again tomorrow," he said. Though tiring, I became used to the job until payday. Without complaint, the next day, I was first to arrive and kept coming until the weekend.

“Wow, it’s the weekend, my payday!” I mumbled. My mind is telling me to start working, but my body is going through the opposite. With an aching back, I strained myself and kept working through the day while my mind was racing with: “I need this job to survive in this strange city; there is no other way for now.” With that, I comforted myself. I worked as usual, but this time, I was slow, with throbbing hands, and I felt like I wasn’t going to pull through the day.

Self-doubt conquered my mind. “This job is not right for me; I need a better one. As an electrical wireman, I am now mixing cement as a general laborer; it’s a shame. But what can I do? I am not the first to do it, so what!”

These ideas brought me back to reality. I almost forgot that I am an African born, raised, and groomed in Africa, a place where a doctor becomes a taxi driver, a lawyer becomes a bricklayer. So, I am no different. Unemployment is so high, many highly educated people are just staying home. What am I?

With that in mind, I forgot about my exhaustion, kept working. My supervisor, not caring about how tired I am, came to me and said: “Go at the gate, there is a track full of cement to offload, the storekeeper will supervise there, and you will be working with others, so don’t disappoint me there and work as a man”.

I looked at him, while inside, I was dying with anger and resentment, unable to utter a single word. I just said, “I’m tired,” which angered him more than I was.

“Pack your things and go, I can’t collaborate with a weak person,” he replied, then continued to talk to himself like a mistreated, drunk CEO. Then he said you have two choices and … I did not wait for him to finish: “I’ll go,” I replied. Though unwilling, I found others there. The truck was already stationed and waiting for us to empty it.

With sweat-soaked clothes, we slowly took out all the bags of cement. With the storekeeper and the big boss around, we worked collectively until the task wore us down. The boss, experienced in his field, commanded the storekeeper: “Tell them to take a thirty-minute break.” He did.

After thirty minutes, we stood up. With my muscles protesting, just like I felt every morning when I woke up.

“My life is going against my will. What can I do? And what am I still doing here? I was already told to leave. Why didn’t I listen?” I thought. But it was already too late, as we were almost heading for lunch, which meant only

two hours remaining until we knocked off. I resiliently kept emptying the track, then finished before lunchtime. So, this is what they call: "Learning the hard way in English," I thought.

As always, Saturday is our payday, and at about half past four, we gathered in one of the rooms that was already finished. Waiting for him (the supervisor), to our surprise, it took him more than an hour then he came with a long, sad yet pleading face: "Please, guys you need to be patient with, I wasn't given the full amount of money that I owe you, but next week, I will make sure to pay you in full", with that he changed to his mother tongue as the majority of my colleague were his tribe's men.

After finishing with his country man, he came to us, My friend, Theo, a Burundian immigrant, and I were the only foreigner and we could not hear or speak Kamba language, in a friendly yet polite manner he said: "My friend, hope you understand me because my boss said that he's short on cash and he will be depositing the whole amount next week, so you as new you need to wait. I know it is not fair, but these guys weren't paid last week, that's why I am first paying them half of their last week's salary." "It's fine," we said in unison, not knowing that he was a greedy and cowardly person with an angelic voice.

Then he added: "Don't worry, I am a God-fearing man, all these people you see collaborating with me are God fearing men, if you don't trust, you can ask around." Since the project belonged to the church and the security was managed by my Burundian friend's brother, we did not doubt losing our money or suspect him of doing something suspicious.

The week ended just like that, so I headed home to rest. Now resting while looking at the ceiling, I started thinking about the work I have been doing the whole week. It was quite interesting watching those veterans laying tiles easily on the floor. Their efficient movements captured my heart. I believe they have experience as their touch was just like I was seeing magic with my naked eyes.

Truth to be spoken, the unspoken language of the site was interesting. By following their action, you'll understand what they need if you are watching closely and attentively. It was a mind-blowing occasion.

Watching, listening, swallowing pride while learning along the way, I really had fun. The sting of a sharp correction pointed out by the big boss enlightened me once again. The boss, a man in his fifties, could spot a mistake just by looking. You'll hear him saying: "Fundi, tile numbers four, five, nine, and ten on the fourth row are not aligned perfectly." Without

wasting time, everyone takes their water level out and checks, "What a genius!" I said, this man was always correct from the first reproach to the end of the week.

He really reminded me of the French saying that our elders use constantly when asked: "L'expérience m a rendu sage," which can be directly translated as: "experience has made me wise." Though my Fundis were not on par with the big boss, they earned my respect, especially with their funny but engaging stories.

These weather-beaten faces, holding wisdom, gave me a new insight; they taught me how to mix cement without straining my body, told me how far they had come, which was both inspiring and encouraging to me, especially those moments when I was thinking about quitting.

Those stories, lunchtime jokes with shared exhaustion, created peaceful harmony in my brain, a perfect team-building experience. As each one of us had his own tales, we listened attentively in a melodious manner. Though some of us were filled with anguish due to some jokes that crossed their line, we always managed to reach a concord, and we all left the workplace in joy, though we are tired.

On mornings, as some of us are still single, we come empty-handed, while the married ones come with their bag full of delicious food. Sharing a thermos, we became a family bonding over shared misery and small victories, a team solidified by our stories, differences, and experiences filled with distinct cultures and backgrounds.

The unexpected kindness of these tough colleagues created a sense of belonging in my heart, a laughter cutting through the noise. "Oh my God, what a wonderful community." We were strong together until we discovered something that struck our brains.

The supervisor lied to us about the payment. He was paid the full amount, and the boss owed him nothing, which was unacceptable to some. Everyone's head shifted, from the harmonious team to the murmuring and discordant group of workers. Suddenly, the big boss came and told the supervisor, "Make sure to finish this section before the weekend."

With those words, we became active again as the supervisor, good with his words, a sweet talker, changed our discord into a consensus. This man was exceptionally good at public speaking, as we came to accept our fate, as he promised us that our money would be paid at the end of the week, so we had no choice but to wait.

Now, it's the weekend, Friday morning, and this inevitable stumble comes, the big boss said: "Today, there is no work for your team. Please stop everything you are doing, as we will be taking measures to complete the work.

Subconsciously, ideas started racing in my brain. This is the day. Having accumulated quite a sum of money in debt at the restaurant, I was very sure I would pay the money that weekend. So, I stepped aside, watching how the experienced worker, the boss, and his team collaborated with other so-called architects and project managers seamlessly in an interesting yet professional manner, which left us in awe.

Within thirty minutes, they started pinpointing errors, the measurement that cost time and money, so many, for instance, of the engineers called out to our supervisor and told him: "This row and that row are not straight enough, by showing a few tiles to be removed. The loud voices of these experts only amplified my anxiety about getting paid.

Public failure, this was really embarrassing to my tilers as they gathered at the corner of the room, looking lost. They told me, "Go bring half a sack of cement and mix it so that we can fix here; otherwise, we won't get paid." We, as laborers, divided ourselves into three teams. One for the cement, the other bringing water, while the last is removing and cleaning where the tiles were removed. In less than twenty-five minutes, we were done.

Shame, the supervisor took ownership of the mistakes. There came criticism from the other colleagues from the other team of tilers, looking at us like clowns, but we endured these setbacks and fixed them. The pressure, mounting from my brain, "Am I getting paid today? As I saw, the boss had no intention of doing so," I asked my supervisor.

Feeling my body breaking into pieces, I picked myself up in a comforting way as I was seated near the door and asked the tiler, whom I was assisting, "Hey man, are we really going to be paid today?" Though I was talking without reading his facial expressions, the man retorted to me: "It depends on our supervisor's willingness, as I know today is not payday." With that, we finished cleaning the place we worked and headed to the office.

At this hopeful moment, I stopped seeing the site as a burden, a punishment, and started seeing it as a puzzle, a challenge to overcome. Though I was feeling wasted due to the painful physical energy lost during work, I looked confident and hopeful. I believed I would be getting paid as our supervisor was discussing with the big boss while laughing as they were talking. He told us to wait until breaktime, which was at 10:30.

As I turned the corner, while wandering inside the building, looking at the finished product, a moment of clarity came into my mind, and I showered myself with self-praise. Just by looking at the work, I was drawn to the patterns engraved on those tiles, looked at those straight lines that went from corridors, followed them to see if there was any flow, as the project managers said earlier, inexperienced, I saw that everything was perfect.

I thought about my Fundi, a great man whose calloused hands belied a keen skill, and whose face, like a roadmap of hard-won experience, was now set in an expression of frustration. His skills were impeccable, his sense of humor was as if he were part of the "Churchill Comedy Show," as each of his jokes brought laughter to most of us.

With a glimpse of finished work, I kept passing in every room and space we worked on, the toilets, showers, and I wondered what the finished work would look like after grouting. With my newfound strength, I went to find my coworkers and asked if the work was finished, but they told me that our team still had an unfinished task from the big boss, which was the final.

Suddenly, the supervisor finished his talk with the boss and came out. He called us to gather where he was standing and said, "Before we talk about money, let's finish the final task. As commanded by the boss, we must complete the grouting today; otherwise, no one will get paid tomorrow. You need to decide quickly, as it's still ten, we start now, and by eighteen, we will be done."

As we entered the race to the deadline, we immersed ourselves in the job; everyone was like being pushed by some mysterious energy, intensely focused. This reminded me of how we used to burn the midnight oil during exams back in our school days, pushing the boundary, even when hunger struck us, we would remain unfazed.

The adrenaline from long hours took over my body, pushing away the past fatigue. I worked persistently, feeling like my body would pay the price later. Fortunately, we managed to complete the task effortlessly up to the point where the boss was surprised by the final burst of energy. At the finish line in sight, we began to clean out the grout which scattered on top of the tiles. Though tired, teamwork is always strong, as it felt like we were driven by the frenetic energy of completion, the task became simple and easy like child's play.

Standing back, as the boss came to check on our work, I started feeling like my body was breaking apart. Covered in dust. Covered in dust, I looked at my reflection on the window's glass, which seemed like a spell cast on

me. I was mesmerized for a while, then shifted my attention to the finished work. With the visible result of unseen labor, I felt like living a tangible legacy; quiet pride invaded my brain. Such was the culmination of our long days of work. Satisfied and transformed, I went to clean myself up as it was due time for the final word with the boss.

With the boss around, the unending discussion hit back again, payment due tonight as we said, but the word that came out of our boss's mouth broke our hearts. It made us more tired than the work did in those three weeks, as he started by saying, "I owe you nothing." With that, he told us to ask our supervisor.

Halas! The supervisor was nowhere to be seen; he had already sneaked out of the site and taken a taxi before we got to see him. We stormed the office with anger, then heard the boss saying to us, "I told your supervisor to bring me a list of those who have not received their salary, which he did. But he was paid last weekend, and here are the receipts of payment that he signed."

Looking at those signatures and the amount on the papers marked my final day as a worker at that site, a silent goodbye to the familiar rhythms. Engraved in my memory is the hatred of human nature, unpredictable, the ache of living something significant behind, my hard-earned money, as I reflected quietly, I was just unlucky. This bittersweet experience brought back some past events where I was mistreated again. I felt like my universe was shutting down with the ghost of the building in my bones. I looked at the lasting physical mark on my hands, and it was really a heartbreaking moment.

Taking the grit, though, I decided to let go, heading home while powerless and out of energy, just by thinking about the patience, the humiliation I endured just to get there, I resiliently accepted my fate. I looked at my life story, and I found fortitude in thinking about my past. So many people got scammed like this, and they sometimes went through worse than this, and lost more than many, as they were left with disability. I purposely took that experience as a new foundation, a blueprint for the future, and the strength for the next chapter.

Reflecting on this journey, I felt like the person who started it is not the one who finished it. As my story is not about building a building but building myself. Many people are being used to this, especially in these unconventional, informal employment sectors in Africa, where human rights are absent and injustice rules over the weak and poor laborers due to high unemployment. So, I decided to take this as a life's challenge, a

source of inspiration, and a testament to the power of perseverance as I look forward to the future.