

A History of Racial Tension **By Pius Kamau**

Some new Indian doctors have been arriving in Colorado, the "whitest" medical community in America. A small nest of East Indian physicians has steadily grown around me. It's significant since, for more than two decades, I was one of just three black surgeons and one of about 20 black physicians in a huge community of white doctors. They say misery loves company; perhaps the new arrivals will help dilute the vitriol that chokes so many hearts.

Dark foreigners have distinct pedigrees. Some Indians are Brahmins, others Warriors; to Hindus, blacks are a rung below Untouchables. Medically, we're poles apart. We say little to each other to unthaw a natural chill. Every time we cross paths, the past bubbles up. Like the world's many competing tribes, we suspiciously eye each other from positions defined by history.

Ours is a relationship that mirrors my colonial past. In East Africa, we lived side by side. Africans were always Indians' servants. Indians were second-class citizens. (Europeans were first and Africans third.) Mahatma Gandhi may have led his nation's fight against British rule, but Kenya's Indians never joined Africans in their struggle for independence; colonialism was just fine.

Sometimes a gesture or a look can trigger a flood of memories. Like their kin in Africa, these new arrivals walk and talk together, alone. They look past us, meaning "Expect nothing from us."

Certain religions govern their followers' behavior, controlling every motion, emotion and thought. Hindus can't help themselves. Humanity exists in a rigid chamber in Hinduism; one's caste never changes. Brahmins are empowered; lower castes enslaved. Blacks fit nicely within this group.

After living with Hindu culture for decades, I've found only two Indian luminaries worthy of admiration: Rabindranath Tagore, the poet of love and patience; and Gandhi, who was assassinated for his reconciliatory teachings. Any religion whose gods consign a large number of its children to slavery and bondage is suspect and odious. With due respect to mythologist Joseph Campbell, I find Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu, Krishna and other Hindu gods unconvincing.

Sometimes we're our father's sons, slavish practitioners of the tribe's customs and our history's reflection pond. Aurora's Hindus resemble others in my Africa.

While attending the first multiracial college in Kenya, many of my Indian classmates came from wealthy families. Our Patels, Sharmas, Shahs and Mistris had little time for Africans. To them we'd always be inferior, even though Kenya was "free."

For decades, they had lived privileged lives. Even though blacks had seats in Parliament, Indians owned banks and commerce. My classmates knew that true power lay with those who pay. They shared little with the rest of us; they held on to their commercial spoils until blacks pried them from their hands.

There were exceptions, though; an Indian Christian friend became my roommate all through medical school. Christianity, it seems, releases the Hindu mind from its rigid shackles, unraveling the tight coils of dogma. Like the monotheist Muslims, Christians are more accessible because charity and love of neighbor are the central tenets of their creeds.

In 1972, Uganda's Idi Amin expelled 52,000 Indians from his country. It wasn't a smart move, but it expressed the frustration, anger and envy that many Ugandans felt.

In Aurora, we run into each other in corridors and the past is unfurled before us. But there's no bitterness in me, only a wish they would open their minds to a world that's fluid and not always divided into rigid castes. I wish they could be convinced that we're not Untouchables. We're only trying to make our way through life the best we can.

I'm glad these dark people are among us. I know they'll help relieve some of our misery.

Pius Kamau of Aurora is a thoracic and general surgeon and a commentator on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition." He was born and raised in Kenya and immigrated to the U.S. in 1971. His column appears on alternate Wednesdays.