

The privilege of African parenting

African mothers, in particular, seem to come equipped with a built-in lie detector. You could confidently announce you are heading to the library, and she will respond with a calm okay. But it is never just okay. It is the kind of okay that suggests she has already seen the full movie on how you will end up eating chips and soda with your friends, laughing like you have no responsibilities. Somehow, in the middle of peeling matooke or stirring beans, she already knows the truth. With African mittes, it is usually less parenting and more prophecy.

BY MARK PETER SSEGGIRIINYA

Just the other day, I was scrolling through TikTok and saw a video that summarised this perfectly. A little African girl, maybe five years old, had been told by her mother to kneel down, I did not get the full context, but I did not need it. Any African who survived childhood knows you do not need context to kneel. Kneeling is both apology and posture of existence. But this little girl clearly from a new generation, kept refusing. She said she wanted to go read her book. The mother, visibly frustrated, repeated the command, and the girl said no again. Somewhere in my chest, my ancestors sighed.

In my day, you did not wait for the words to kneel down. You sensed it in the air. The tone, the silence, the slight movement of your mother's eyebrow was enough. You were already on your knees, face trembling, tears preparing to fall. But this girl stood there debating like she lived in a democratic household. That is when I realised that African parenting, in its pure form, is not about control. It is about respect. Our parents are not caretakers. They are small gods, custodians of thunder, destiny and discipline. You do not reason with them; you interpret them. It is why every African child is fluent in body language, facial cues and tone analysis.

On a random Saturday morning at exactly 7:03am, an African father would scream a name. Not call but scream. The kind of voice that does not just travel through walls; it travels through your bloodstream, rearranges your priorities, and briefly reconnects you with your ancestors. It was always too early for a Saturday, the sacred day of rest in every African household.

Naturally, the child on the receiving

end would pretend to be asleep, hovering between hope and strategy, silently praying the summons had been meant for a sibling instead. We all got that sibling, always on your parents' radar, preferably the responsible one. The dependable one. The one who responds to parental calls like they are on a government contract. But African fathers were rarely mistaken. The second call would come sharper, louder, and carrying that tone, the one that suggested that if it came a third time, the matter would be escalated to the entire bloodline.

And so the child would rise, heart racing, mind preparing for disaster. Maybe the car was on fire. Maybe someone had fainted. Maybe the house was under attack. These were reasonable assumptions. Given the urgency of the call. But more often than not, the scene in the sitting room would be calm. A father seated comfortably, cross-legged, yesterday's newspaper in hand, looking like a man at peace with the world.

"Ah, you are finally here," he would say, pointing casually at a table barely two feet away. "Pass me the remote." The remote, resting well within his reach, would suddenly become a mission of national importance. It needed to be handed over, the TV switched on, and tuned precisely, perhaps to a show like Frank Wachumbi's *Digambo Tshitita*. And just like that, a crisis that began as a state emergency would end in quiet service to weekend television.

Looking back now, it is clear that these moments belonged to a certain generation. Today's children, armed with Wi-Fi, boundaries, and negotiation skills might struggle to relate to such encounters. But for many African households, this was always too early for a Saturday, the sacred day of rest in every African household.

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and perhaps it was but it also shaped a generation. One that learned to read tone like language, respond without delay, and survive situations that made very little sense. It may not have been gentle, or logical, or even fair but it was familiar. And for many, it still is.

The original African Parent 101

African fathers operated on a system that felt more like a quiet, well-run command center. There was always a rhythm to it. He would return home from work, hang his jacket with the seriousness of a man who had just concluded national business, settle in to the couch, and then summon a child with the urgency of breaking news. And the child would appear immediately, already halfway into an apology for something not yet known.

The task itself was rarely urgent. It could be something as simple as removing his shoes, retrieving an item within reach, or adjusting something that clearly did not require a second human being. But that was not the point, the point was the order, the response, the structure. He would lift his legs without looking, confident in the system he had built, and there would be a deep sigh of satisfaction once the task was complete as if a generational contract had been honored.

In those moments, it became clear that fatherhood, in that context, was less about explanation and more about presence. Authority did not need to be announced; it was understood. And

somewhere along the way, children learned that responding quickly was less about the task and more about survival. Often times, this came with benefits like ice cream or being driven around during his errands hours.

African mothers, on the other hand, did not rely on volume as much as they relied on precision. If fathers commanded, mothers calculated. Their sarcasm was not just humour, it was a full communication system. Questions were rarely answered directly, especially if they were considered obvious, unnecessary or slightly foolish. A simple inquiry could quickly turn into a moment of reflection, confusion, and quiet correction. You would ask something expecting clarity and instead receive a response that made you question your entire thought process. And somehow, you would still get your answer just not in the way you expected. They had a look that could silence a room before words even arrived, and a tone that could turn the simplest conversation into a lesson about life, respect, and occasionally your lack of both.

What made it even more striking was the contrast with what we saw elsewhere: households where conversations were negotiated, where children explained their feelings and were met with calm discussion. In an African home, that kind of exchange would feel almost fictional. Here, understanding was not always spoken; it was implied, enforced, and occasionally delivered with a side of humour sharp enough

to leave a mark long after the conversation ended.

The language of "Eh"

Every African child understands that tone is everything. Not grammar, not vocabulary but tone, and no word captures this better than "eh." On paper, it is harmless. Just two letters, barely a syllable. But in practice, it is a full communication system. Depending on how it is delivered, "eh" can signal curiosity, disbelief, a warning, or the quiet opening of your final chapter. The difference lies entirely in timing, pitch, and facial expression. One version invites explanation; another cancels your future plans.

It is through this unpredictable language that many African children become unintentionally emotionally intelligent. Not because anyone sat them down to teach emotional awareness, but because survival demanded it. You learned to read the room, the silence, the shift in tone. You could tell, from a single "eh," whether you were about to eat dinner or enter negotiations for your continued existence.

Growing up in such an environment often felt like living under a monarchy where the constitution changed daily. One moment, you are the celebrated child; the next, a minor mistake transforms you into a national disappointment. The shift is swift, dramatic, and usually triggered by something as simple as forgetting meat in the freezer.

Privacy is suspicious

While other cultures talk about boundaries, African parents are the boundaries. Privacy is something you earn gradually, often by leaving the house entirely. Until then, personal space is less a concept and more a theory, one that is constantly being investigated.

In many African households, privacy is not a right. It is a privilege and even then, a suspicious one. The moment you close your door, questions begin to circulate. Why is it closed? What exactly is happening inside there that requires separation from the rest of humanity? Lock it, and the situation escalates immediately. Now it is not just privacy; it is secrecy. And secrecy, in this context, is dangerously close to wrongdoing.

Stay in the bathroom a little too long, and a knock will follow, not out of concern, but curiosity sharpened by doubt. At that point, it is no longer about bathing; it is about accountability. Time spent alone must be explained.

The African parent lie detector

African mothers, in particular, seem to come equipped with a built-in lie detector. You could confidently announce you are heading to the library, and she will respond with a calm okay. But it is never just okay. It is the kind of okay that suggests she has already seen the full movie on how you will end up eating chips and soda with your friends, laughing like you have no responsibilities. Somehow, in the middle of peeling matooke or stirring beans, she already

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This intuition follows you everywhere. You could be miles away, enjoying life, but by evening, accountability will find you. Whether through a question, a look, or a well-timed comment, the message is clear: nothing escapes her radar.

Then comes the paradox. African parents want you to speak but carefully. Too quiet, and it becomes a problem. Too expressive, and suddenly you are talking back. It is a delicate balancing act, where you learn to measure your words, your tone, even your breathing. And if you ever gather the courage to ask "why?" the room shifts. The answer is swift, final, and unquestionable. In that system, explanation is optional, authority is not.

Apologies, African style

African parents rarely say "sorry." Not because they do not feel it but because, in their system, apologies are not spoken; they are performed. After a heated argument, raised voices, and a life lecture that somehow included your past, present, and projected failures, peace does not arrive with words. It arrives quietly. Casually. Almost suspiciously. A parent will appear later and ask if you want juice, or cut fruit, or casually place food near you like nothing ever happened. That is the apology. No acknowledgment, no recap just vibes and vitamins. You either accept it and move on,

or you sit there holding your grudge alone like an unpaid bill.

Then comes what can only be described as the economics of guilt. African parents have a way of reminding you that your very existence came at a cost emotional, physical, and apparently financial. Sleepless nights are mentioned frequently, as if you personally scheduled your own birth and refused to cooperate thereafter.

By the time you are an adult, you find yourself apologising for things that were clearly beyond your control. And just when you think the moment has passed, a historical comparison appears. Distances walked grow longer with each retelling, responsibilities heavier, struggles more dramatic. By the time the story reaches its final form, your parent has essentially raised themselves under conditions that qualify for a documentary.

And yet, for all the contradictions, something important was happening beneath the chaos. African parents did not practice gentle parenting; they practiced preparatory parenting. Discipline was sometimes preventive, logic was optional, and fairness occasionally took a back seat to authority. You could present evidence, witnesses, even a well-structured argument, and still be told you were digging yourself deeper. There was no court of appeal.

But in that environment, something was built. A certain alertness. A certain resilience. You learned to read tension without being told, to understand sit-

uations before they were explained. It wasn't always soft, or logical, or even consistent but it worked in its own way. And in that moment, you remember exactly who raised you, who shaped you, and why you will always answer when your name is called no matter how early, no matter how absurd, and no matter how close the remote is.

Raised hard, loved loud

As you grow older, the chaos begins to make sense. What once felt like madness starts to look a lot like wisdom just delivered in a language of volume, sarcasm, and the occasional unnecessary lecture. African parents ruled with fear, yes, but also with a deep, practical love. Not the kind that sits you down for emotional check-ins, but the kind that shows up in peeled mangoes, packed meals, and quiet prayers whispered before sunrise. Their philosophy was simple: prepare the child for a hard world. And somehow, it worked.

That is why many of us can survive almost anything: disappointment, uncertainty, even life's daily inconveniences without completely falling apart. We were raised expecting life to be tough, so when it is, we adjust. And in between the drama, the contradictions, and the occasional emotional confusion, there was always care. African parents are exactly that contradiction. Loud but loving, strict but invested, overwhelming but dependable. They may never say the words, but they show them in ways that last.

