



Podcast

Creating a level playing field for collaboration

Tonnie van der Zouwen

Episode 10 – Lucy Wairimu Mukuria: The Essence of Humanity, Unpacking Colonialism and Identity

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Episode description

In this episode, we welcome Lucy Wairimu Mukuria from Nairobi, Kenya. Lucy shares her insights on how Western people often unconsciously reinforce colonial practices. She recounts personal stories about her experiences with racism and colorism, both in Kenya and internationally. Lucy emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and identity, and how these factors contribute to the ability of Africans to stand up for themselves. She also discusses the challenges of social expectations and the impact of historical traumas on contemporary society.

Lucy reflects on her 20 years of experience in psychology and the limitations of Western approaches to mental health. She advocates for a broader perspective on normality and abnormality, highlighting the need for cultural inclusivity and understanding. The conversation concludes with a powerful message about the essence of humanity and the necessity of recognizing and celebrating our shared humanity.

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Transcript

Understanding Colonial Mindsets

Tonnie: In this episode, we welcome Lucy Wairimu Mukuria, based in Nairobi, Kenya. Welcome Lucy.

Lucy: Thank you.

Tonnie: We are friends and we met several times before in conferences and I was really intrigued by what you told me. Actually, I was shocked more or less. And what you told me how often



Western people reinforce colonial practices without even realizing it. And I noticed that I was also sometimes in that pitfall that I invite people to participate in really well-meant processes, but they are invited to my project. And you had some ideas and some stories to share about your experiences. So maybe you could introduce yourself a little bit more before sharing a story.

Lucy: Okay. Happy New Year everyone, 2022, 2025, sorry. I was thinking about 2022 specifically and I'll tell you why. But 2025, like I was telling you earlier, for me, the year of beauty and storytelling. It is the Chinese year of the snake as well. And in as much as I think the snake is demonized, we also know that it has its wonderful and beautiful qualities. And I think one of the things that has happened to me is that just in line with what you were saying was I've been very curious about how different people, different cultures, different traditions understand the world, right? And... just thinking about why I understand the world that I do in the way that I do, I think is what has led me to the many questions that I have. It doesn't ignore the experiences that I've had because, you know, you grow up, you go to school, you go to work and you're like, I'm just living my life. And then one day somebody says to you, get your dirty African, black African hands off my car. And you're like, whoa, what is that? You know? And then you run home and you tell your mother and your mother is like, forget about, forget about it. And then you grow up and you realize they should have held your hand, gone there. And gone like, how dare you? And if the person insisted on standing on their previous statements, maybe they should have received a backhand. I don't know. But what I'm saying is that I think part of the ability to, I think for myself, for Africans to stand up for themselves, we are learning how to do it for ourselves because I don't think we've been taught to do it. I think we've been taught to exist with it, And so you grow up, you go to like international schools and of course there are people from different parts of the world and you're coming from a space where you've been taught to respect everybody and the issue of color is never an issue.

Identity and Race Dynamics

And then you have this assumption that as long as we are black, we are one people. And then you are in the bathroom of this amazing restaurant come disco come cultural center. It's called the Carnival in Nairobi. Back when I was growing up, would eat all types of meat there from crocodile to gazelles to giraffes to when we were growing up. Nowadays with all the conservation efforts, I think you can only eat crocodile and just pork and other types of red meat, but not fish. There's no pescetarian diet there. So anyway, it was a melting pot because that's where you could do that. But also they used to have like amazing music and it was like a dance hall and people would go.

So we are in the bathroom and there are these African-Americans who were exchanged to students. And so we walk in and we're just like, all of us are black. So it's all good. And they go like, are you people sure you're Africans? I'm like, what do you mean? How is it we are darker than you? I go like, what do you mean? So in my head I'm thinking, now is when I know it's known as colorism. So I'm like, wait, why are you upset that you are darker than us? And that's when I realized African-Americans have a superiority complex over Africans. But the cognitive dissonance that they were going through was because they had associated their superiority not just to being Americans, also to having the expectations that Africans should have been darker than them. So the fact that there were light-skinned Africans, was just, it made them very mad and upset. And I saw that trickle to the school and it became an institutional issue, right? And then I saw the things we are now seeing out here. Or things that have been historical, a white girl or a white woman has a relationship with a black man, something goes wrong, and she turns around and says, it was



sexual assault. And we're like, wait, did we all know they were dating? What is this? So having the opportunity to have seen that, I was also like, there is so much savagery in the race's interactions, but I think it's all pegged on this idea that the color of the skin matters. So of course, then it was an institutional problem. And, you know, I was in my late teens, my early twenties, my focus was on partying more than trying to solve that problem. So I let the institution solve it and the institution solved it by number one, dismissing the man, the African saying like, she has said it, we believe her, that's the end of the story. And I was like, okay, that's not cool, but I moved on. And then eventually there was a physical separation, right? And I was like, that's how it's gonna be. Like I said, my focus was on partying. So anyway, life goes on and I end up in a different setting and someone walks up to me and they say, did you leave the institution? By then I was in the military and we had gone somewhere for military training and they say, come straight to my face in a very aggressive way. I'm told you left the base. And I'm like, how do you know I left the base? And then he says to me, because I was told a black girl was seen. So I look at him and I said, do I like black to you?

So, I mean, it's been this very thing that I think, like I said, we were not brought up without consideration. But for me, realizing that I have to manoeuvre in this life given that I consider myself to be a very outgoing and collaborative person out in the international space, that I have to be conscious of the fact that although I don't see myself as first a black or African person, everyone else seems to. And apparently I should care, but I don't. This is the problem. I don't care. It's not my priority, but it is their priority. They want to see me move like somebody who appreciates and understands that I am black, that I am African. But my self-esteem won't allow. Like I don't have a frame of reference for that. I understand intellectually the colonial history of my country and how there is even the existence of the neo-colonial framework in my country. Like I understand that the worship of whiteness is present. I understand it's for me now coming to see for what it is, it's a trauma response. That's what I'll call it. Because where we are as Kenyans historically, if the white man did not feel respected enough, worshiped enough, needed enough, the African would be punished for that. They would suffer for that. So the idea of playing small is actually a survival tactic, right?

So what happens in my case where I don't need to survive. I don't need to respect, I don't need to worship, I don't need to do all these things that the generations before me did in order to feel safe and secure. What if I don't? And it's a problem, right? Because what I've realized is that the world looking at Africa has been socialized the exact same way. Again, the storytelling dark continent uncivilized people, so many things. And then I move through life and I say, my God, you're the people calling us uncivilized, you have to be kidding. So there is a lot of that, whether it is in hygiene, whether it is in food and nutrition, whether it is in upbringing, whether it is in medicine, whether it is in wellness, and whether it is even defense, whether it is insecurity, all those things. And now we are coming to a point where people are beginning to question what is the origin of this? So we see it, yes, but what is the origin of this? And then when people listen to the origin of it and they're like, wait, I've had this story before. It has been told when I was growing up. It's part of our fables. It's part of our mythology. It's part of our traditions and practices and all of that. And coming to the question therefore for me for like, what am I actually doing? Like, am I trying to fit into a space that was created without my input, without my consent, without my inclusion? Why am I trying to fit into that kind of space? Which I think is what you started this conversation by saying. Like, if I was really meant to be part of that space, then there should have been inclusion. There should have been, what do you think about this? There should have been, how do you think we can improve this? There should have been, what would you like to see in this?



Challenging Western Approaches to Mental Health. What is Normal?

Tonnie: And how do you start such a process?

Lucy: Yes. So for me, this is the thing that is now even guiding me in my work, because I think we're in 2025. 2022 marked 20 years since I started practicing psychology and that's why it was significant. So in any profession, if you have a 20 year experience, surely you have your own idea about the work if you've been doing it. So having that, I also started asking a lot of questions about even psychology and the training that we get from a Western perspective and stuff like that. And looking at even the laws that we have surrounding mental health, looking at the policies, looking at how the society understands it, going back and uncovering what these things mean. Do you know, I was so desperate in my inquiry, because I didn't find it in any of the books, I went to ask a tree. I kid you not. I went to ask a tree. I said, I had this tree and I'm like, how does abnormality show up in trees? Like, how do you guys cope? Like, what do you do when you have a tree that is bizarre or abnormal or what do you do?

Right? And I was struggling with this because I remember my first psychology class. There was the definition of abnormality that was being given and it was said that if majority of the people do it, it's normal. But if less than the majority are doing it, it's abnormal. And I always had a problem with that definition, right? Because it just didn't seem good enough because what if the majority of the people, what if the majority of the people saying white people are better than black people. What if the majority of the people are saying black people are subject to, you know, like that is the thing that's gone my mind, you know? And I was like, I have a problem with that definition. But I also went further and I was like, we were told that mental illness exists between the ears of a person. It is caused by genetics. This person might engage in drugs.

Like it was made to seem like almost a person chooses not to be well. I also used to have a big, big problem with that. But now to be able to say, hang on. But if you've created a world where there's a hard economy, if you've created a world where you prioritize other people based on gender, race, sexuality, marital status, above somebody who has been doing the work. If you visit violence on people, want on violence repeatedly, consistently. If people exist in a realm and a vacuum where they never knew safety, if there is no willingness to take leadership as the opportunity to transform people's lives and instead, this is just corruption. How can people not be expected to be unwell? If children are being brought up in families with these violence, how can we expect those kids to grow up and be okay? If we are neglecting pregnant women.

Someone told me a story the other day of how a lady was made to stand in front of the church and apologize for being pregnant. And I said, what is this? What is this? Because where's the man? Where's the man then? Where's the man? But I think also the idea that once you criticize this patriarchal, religious fanaticism of doing things, you're the one who is targeted as immoral as all those things endure. You're excluded, you're excommunicated, you know. But I'm like...

I don't know. think that for me, what I've concluded is that the thing that makes people feel is not an experience they're going through inside their heads, but I think it's their ability to see the cognitive dissonance, the duplicity and the hypocrisy around us. I think that's what makes people ill, if you're to ask me. And I'll use the example of that lady again, because she stands up in church and she is told you have to apologize for getting pregnant without being married, right? But the man is not there. How about the only reason you know, she's pregnant is because her belly



became big. You know, what if every time men impregnated women, their bells would swell and they would have to walk like they're waddling, you know, would they be made to stand in front of church and apologize for impregnating a woman? It would never happen. Because we live in a society where we've accepted that it is the women who should bear the shame, the punishment and responsibility of engagements with men. But men should be able to do whatever they want without repercussions. And then we turn around and we say, I believe the children are a future. Really? Do you? Because if this woman didn't want to stand up in the church and apologize for being pregnant and not married, she would have aborted that child. But then again, you guys don't want her to abort the child. You say abortion is a sin. So what do you want? And you realize this is not about wanting anything, it's about... there is no care for the woman. There is no concern for we care about the children. Then the child is born. There is no plan for the child. There is no immunization. Mother maternal care now is no longer free in my country. Initially it was. but we value children. And then how do you expect such a person to not fall into, for example, postpartum depression. Are they abnormal or normal? For me, I say they are normal. I think we should worry if the person does not suffer as a consequence of that sort of existence, which again, for me, I think brings me back to how are we really understanding who we are? If we are confusing what is normal, a normal outcome from an abnormal situation, for an abnormal outcome in a normal situation. Like this is where for me, my head just doesn't work.

Identity and Mutuality

But then I look at where is this dissonance coming from? And I realize, I think it just comes from a lack of identity. You know, we were talking earlier about our mothers and all, and I'm like, our mothers are everybody's mothers. So that means those are the mothers of the world. And I don't know, I move around and I realize women irrespective of race are sort of having the same experience everywhere you go. it's only women of different races who think that women of other races are having a different experience from them. But women irrespective of their race are going through the same experience. And I wish this would be seen by women as an opportunity for camaraderie, to come together in solidarity. Because even when we are talking about, and I swear it's a very bizarre thing. I went for a meetup the other day. And so one of the things I liked about Southeast Asia is that No one ever stared at me. No one ever looked at me like, wow, what is this black person doing here? No one ever came to me and said, does this come out? Like what other people, other black people go through? No one ever, you know, there was just one Chinese man. I was in a Chinese temple and I was roaming around outside and one Chinese guy, old man with a big camera comes up to me and says, my God, where are you from? And I said, I'm from Kenya. And he says, can I take a picture of you? And I said, can I take a picture of you? And then he says, fine. And he was cheerful. And I said, okay, fine. We can take photos of each other. That's fine. And that's okay. So, so I understand that idea coming from them. I'm exposed to it, but you see his energy was also not like what species are you? What creature are you? I'm so cute. You know, there was nothing like that. It was just like, genuine curiosity of a person with good energy. And so the ability of not being stared at or asked questions like this, or can I touch your hair? know, like those. So I walk into this meetup and I'm happy because from the little I've seen, like I said, there was no process of integration. It was just smooth.

Microaggressions

So I walk into this space and there's one white woman and immediately I walked in and people turn their attention to me and I say hi to everyone and we sit. I just noticed a shift of energy. And



you know, let me tell you the problem with being able to explain to people microaggressions that are racially charged. It's that you can never really say somebody said this to me or they pushed me or they shoved me or no. Sometimes it's just the way the person will cut their eyes at you. It's the way the person will look at you and their face will just and their lips will perk together and you're like, whoo, that person doesn't like me. And you're like, you know very well, you know it and they know it, that it has nothing to do with the content of the person of who you are. It's just that, your color.

Understanding Socialization and Cultural Inclusivity

Tonnie: What I'm struggling with is how to start the process. You said it's all about identity and it's not only about color or race or whatever, it's about realizing who you are. How to start a process with people to become more aware, better understanding of their own identity and others. Because then you have like the standard lines, okay, you have to invite diversity to your conference and without knowing it you are repeating the pattern. That you're not intending to repeat that pattern of I invite you, I am the one who invites diversity, but you have to do it together. And what I'm wondering, how do you do it in a respectful, compassionate way? What's your experience? Do you have maybe an example that you had? Okay, that was a good example of really situation where I felt recognized and in equity with others.

Lucy: I'm thinking about your question. And I'm asking myself, have I ever genuinely ever had that experience? Yeah, I believe so. And this was not just from a participatory experience, but from an organization experience as well. So like I said before, I am aware, right that I don't care about the fact that I'm Black. But I am also aware that people outside of my race, especially, let me just say outside of my race, this is all based on experience, outside of my race, do look at me or people like me and say, that's a Black person. That's a Black woman, and form ideas and expectations about how I should behave, how I should conduct myself and how they should treat me. So I think the first thing is for me having that knowledge, how it helps me is that I'm never surprised, right? But I also don't think it's my job to be able to help somebody who has that kind of thinking stop having that kind of thinking, right? When I take part in, for example, the organization part of it, I will say, because I understand the world that we live in, we need to include one, two, three, four things. Right? And that is able to redirect and sieve those who will come into this space with that kind of notion. So I leave it entirely up to them to decide whether they will uptake the new knowledge that they are finding, the new learnings and change their minds, change their behavior. Or they may choose not to, but it's not my business to do it for them or to bring it to their attention or... a reaction if they don't. Mine is to ensure that I have, from an organizational point of view, included information that will bring that awareness and sensitivity. Now, from a participatory point of view, it's for me to be comfortable to say what has just happened is not okay. What you've just said would be interpreted as to mean like to speak up and to not necessarily talk about how it makes me feel, but to talk about what has happened. I think that I have found to be very useful, right? And I'm tying this in with what you said in the beginning. Sometimes you don't know because it's how you've been socialized.

So for me, think as a psychologist, I understand the socialization bit of it because, we were talking earlier about how, the socialization of how to be women, to be mothers, to be wives. And even in the world we are today, you know, you go somewhere, you're not married, you don't have children. And you have people in miserable marriages saying to you, how come you're not married. Again, because it's a socialization, like it's a battery that is tuned in and the alarm goes off



and you know, people so for me, I feel it's the same even with race, you know, people have been socialized in a certain way. And all I know is that if someone is to ask me why you're not married, and then I turn to them and I say, my god, but you have such a horrible marriage, why would you wish that to me? It wouldn't change what they think about marriage. They would still go to the next person who is not married and say to them, how come you're not married? You know? But then if I just looked at them in the eye and I said, because I choose not to be married, that would blow their minds because they'll be like, what? You mean there's a choice? Because, know, the socialization is you must get married. What do you mean? Know, so.

So to be able to just have a sort of a, it's so important this issue that for me what I've learned is I have to have an emotional detachment from it. It's that important. It's that important because sometimes I feel like their approach is even meant to provoke, you know, like to provoke so that you can prove your point and say, see, these Africans, they're not civilized. What did I tell you? You see, you see. So I'm like, it's so important. I have to be emotionally detached. Can you do it? I've done it. Like I told you, when someone walked up to me, up to my face like this, their crotch was in my face because I was sitting there was standing, their crotch was in my face. And they say, I had you left the base. And I say, what? would remember right here. Why are you saying that? I'm told a black girl was seen. And I'm like, am I black to you? So let's start with the facts. But deep in my heart, I was boiling. I was boiling because black seemed to be the anchoring factor to the aggression and not the fact that I was literally seated in front of him. So there's no way I was outside the base, you know, so it even makes it makes people lose common sense. So it's very important, too important for any emotional attachment to the ego when it comes to this issue of race, of misogyny, because if you're black, if you're a woman, if you're an African, you're a woman, those things go together. They go together. So there's that global phenomenon of women, but if you're black, if you're African, that is another layer to it all together. Like no one can see you any differently. And there's an expectation attached to that. There'll be a provocation attached to that. And the most important thing, like I said, is just to be emotionally detached.

The Essence of Humanity, Finding our Centre

Tonnie: What I take from your story, if it would be possible in our education, to broaden socialization, to look at your identity in a broader way, you're not only a woman, you're not only black, you're not only a specific age, or maybe start some process to get a better understanding of the complexity of identity. Would that be possible?

Lucy: I think that's what should happen. But at like a personal capacity for me, I would say it doesn't matter how much of that I will do if there is not a process happening across the aisle. Does that make sense? Can you? Cause you see again, yeah. Cause it's again, I'll repeat for me, my race, my gender, my ethnicity, my nationality is not a concern for me right now. My focus is actually connecting more with the cosmos and with nature. I want to be more in that's where my focus is But I understand when I go to these spaces, their focus is my color, my race, my gender. It's their focus. So I could decide, laughing because people have done this, and then they've said they've asked but what have I not done. Let me give you the best example you're in a marriage your husband is cheating and then the existing women are told you're not praying hard enough go into your closet remove all your clothes make it your they call it a war room go there and pray and sweat and fast and you know, and do all those things so that whatever it is about you that is making your man go outside of your marriage can stop, you know? Like, so I feel like it's the same thing. So me, I'm not going into any war room and...



Tonnie: So who is responsible? Yeah, that makes me wonder. When we have a beautiful project like co-creating a world that works for all, and we want to invite diversity, better understanding both sides of the ocean, black and white people or whatever, what can I do as a facilitator? It's not your responsibility to change the views of white people. I understand. But somehow I feel a little bit frustrated or ignorant even of how to work with it.

Lucy: The thing is... There some detachment is also required from you in that when I say to you your conference is so white. Your conference doesn't have diversity. Your conference doesn't have alternate voices. Emotionally detach from that and accept it as feedback. You see, that's another way that can be helpful on your end. You have to have a willingness to accept positive criticism if you might want to call it that, or you might want to call it feedback. So that now, the next time you're doing that, you will say, do I have alternative voices? Do I have different races? Do I have different ethnicities? Have I invited people from places I've never been to? Maybe it's even the first time I'm hearing about it. That's how you do it. So for the genuine people on the opposite end who want to make a difference, feedback is data. So...

Like I've been to places, I'll be honest. I went to this place once where a friend of mine and she said to this lady, because the lady came and said, my God, look at the way you guys did this thing. I wish you had told me earlier, I would have helped you. And she looks at her and she says, this is a function for black people. We organized it the way we wanted it to look like. If it doesn't meet your standard of expectation, it's because it wasn't meant for you. And I was like, that is the best feedback she ever received. But she didn't take it like that, of course. But there is no day you would have sat with the lady who told her that and said to her, now tell me how to make, tell me how to better support you. That's not what you would have told her. Maybe they would have talked for an hour and a half and talked about nothing. But that time when she said, this was a function for black people, we organized it in the way we wanted it to look like. The fact that it didn't meet your standard or expectations means it wasn't meant for you. I was like, beautiful, this is beautiful. This is so beautiful. It's about purpose,

Tonnie: Yes, exactly. It's good to remember. Yes. But I remember the conference you attended in Noordwijk and you were the only person, only black person. And for me, it didn't matter, but you stood out.

Lucy: I did. And I was telling you, I was aware. But it wasn't like a problem I needed to solve. And so for me, until someone shows me they have a problem with me, it's not my problem. And I have to be honest, I did not have a, I think the people who attended that conference are the people who now I'm talking about, the people who are willing to actually open up themselves to the idea of how do we then transform this conversation? How do we transform our world? I didn't have a problem with them. But I have been in spaces where, like I told you, when I went for that meetup and I could feel that energy of hostility from this white woman, you know, and it felt like all this time, these people were listening to her. I walked in and now people are like, you know, my God, where do you come from? tell us something about your country. And then everyone now was listening to me and she was enraged. And I was like, you know what? This is not my problem.

This is, you will have to, you know, but if you look at it contextually, like even just again, I'll go to marriages because that's what people can relate to the most. The health, the longevity, the existence of marriages really have been the burden of women. Like here in Kenya, women will be told, you can bring down your family with your tongue. Yeah, it's not the fact that the man is



cheating, not providing, being violent, a drunkard. no, no, no, no. Those things will not bring down the family. It is the woman with your tongue, the wife. And what is the tongue saying? The tongue is saying you're a no good son of a bitch and you need to style up. my God, you have broken your marriage. You have broken your home. It's the same thing. So, it's that's the way it has been like it's the responsibility of black people to train white people how to be more inclusive, less racist and get out of their white savior mentality. It's not. And for me, I think if there's something I want Africans, black people to know, it is that it's not your job. Your job is to exist, to be beautiful.

Tonnie: Thank you. Okay, thank you for sharing your stories. There's much wisdom in it. And maybe as a checkout, is there something you want to add or say as a closure?

Lucy: I mean, there's a lot to say, but I think we... w'e just have to find our center, which is humanity. We have to find our center, which is just at the end of the day. The rest is noise. I don't know if I've ever shared with you why it was so important for me to go to visit the Turkana boy. He's known as the Turkana boy. And you know, people are always saying, Africa is the cradle of mankind. I don't know why they don't say woman kind, but Africa is the cradle of humanity. Let's call it that of human beings. Not just human beings, but for me, I dare say humanity. And I'm a grown person. And I was trying to again, who am I, my identity? And I ended up planning a trip to go and sit with Turkana boy, which is basically a monument where the remains, they were carbon dated. It was 1.6 million. It's older than even the one that's called Lucy in Ethiopia. And it's weird because people know the Lucy of Ethiopia more than they know the Turkana boy in Nariyatome in Turkana, whose carbon dating is actually 1.6 million years.

And you get to that monument and it's desolate. And I was like, I think it's just a reminder that at the end of the day, like if you don't advocate for yourself, you'll remain alone because the monument is there and it's just covered with sand and heat, because that place goes for like 40 degrees Celsius to 45. Every day it's really hot and dry. And I sat there and there are all these placards that have been put up by Richard Likki, who of course is the world renowned archaeologist. And it pays homage also to the Kenyan he was with when they discovered this, because again, Richard Licky is a white man. So a white man can't come to Kenya, discover the origin of the first man, and he did it by himself. That's crap. So now even when we are talking about inclusivity, it is a job they did together. Right? This Kime'u man, that was his name, he died two years ago, I believe. He was not an archaeologist, but he was able to understand origins. He was able to understand anthropology. And on that placard, it is written that all the people of the world, you know, I crammed it, all the people of the world agree that this is where humanity started from. And the only reason, Tonnie, why your hair is that color, your eyes are that color, your skin is that color, is only because you moved away from the equator. The people, the people before your people, your people before those people moved away from the equator. That is all. So there is no God that said, I'm going to create this race to be more superior than others. You only moved away from the equator. If you're to move closer to the equator by five generations, your kids, kids, the kids of your kids, they'll be back to you. So that's all that it is. Distance from the equator, diet and nutrition, access to sunlight, adaptation. That is all, survival.

So thank you. All about humanity. Thank you, Lucy, for sharing your stories.