

KURT APRIL  
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## Stories of diversity from around the world\*

### *Idries Kahaar: 'What it means to be Muslim in South Africa'*

I grew up in a coloured township (Gelvandale) in Port Elizabeth in the 1970s and 1980s. I grew up during the final part of the 'official' Apartheid era of our country's history. I mention 'official' since racism is still rife in South Africa, even though formal Apartheid has been dismantled since 1994. I attended the local public primary and secondary schools. I am Muslim. I grew up in a household with an emotionally abusive father and a submissive mother. My dad was mostly an angry person and I believe that his upbringing during Apartheid was one of the primary contributors towards his repressed anger.

I am the eldest of four children. My dad owns a corner-shop café in a very poor coloured township in Port Elizabeth, called Katanga by its inhabitants. This is where I spent 90 per cent of my childhood, i.e. working in the shop. My life experiences as a coloured Muslim in South Africa and growing up in the household that I developed in, have largely shaped me into who I am today. By the time I was 18 years old, I had an immense amount of repressed anger towards many people, including my parents. This was a very confusing time in my life. Attending my first year at the University of Cape Town compounded the anger and confusion, and brought Apartheid alive for me in a way that I did not know before leaving home for Cape Town. It was during 1989 that I realised, for the first time, the degree of social engineering that was achieved by the Apartheid regime and the impact that Apartheid had on all South Africans (black and white), especially me. I began to understand why I had such an immense 'inferiority complex' and why my dad was so angry (even though he tried to hide this from us). I began to understand that Apartheid was a significant contributor towards the judgements I held of others, especially people of other races and religions.

Until that year, I had led a very protected life and, in one year, my view of the world was changed radically. All these experiences shaped and still do shape my reality, i.e. my ever-evolving mental models are the result of my values, assumptions, beliefs and expectations. I inherited my father's stubbornness (and anger) and my mother's 'always pleasing everybody' approach. I made these traits my own. My traits are not exactly like those of my parents, i.e.

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\*Professor Kurt April (University of Cape Town) and Professor Jawad Syed (Lahore University of Management Sciences) collected these stories and lightly edited them without changing their essence as mini case studies for class discussion rather than to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management. These have been adapted from: April, K., & Syed, J. (2015). Race and ethnicity at work. In Syed, J., & Özbilgin, M. (eds.), *Managing diversity and inclusion*, pp. 134-176. London: Sage. © Copyright: South Asian Academy of Management. To order copies or request permission to reproduce materials, email: [info@southasianaom.org](mailto:info@southasianaom.org) OR call (+92) 3291009981. This publication may not be digitized, photocopied, or otherwise reproduced, posted, used or transmitted, without the permission of South Asian Academy of Management.

they are a little more subtle in the way that I display them to the world around me. This was how I subconsciously learnt the art of controlling and manipulating those around me so that I could create a perfect world where nobody, especially I, would get into trouble. I subconsciously carried this desire to want to please people throughout my life – I had become a people pleaser. The thing with always pleasing other people is that I ended up confused about who I was as an individual because I, quite often, used to contradict how I felt in favour of another's wishes ... or so I thought at the time, i.e. I was putting myself second and was resenting those people that I believed were responsible for my predicament. The other side-effect of pleasing was indecisiveness. I took extra-long to make decisions, because I was always trying to please everybody but myself. The other thing with my indecisiveness was that, deep down, I was afraid of disappointing others, I was afraid of making mistakes. As a result, I became a procrastinator. My inner conflict kept on growing.

One morning (about six years ago now) I woke up and I was unusually aware that my life was characterised by an immense amount of indecisiveness and resentment. I was married and now living in Cape Town. I am not sure what awoke me from my life-long slumber but I became aware of how very frustrating my life had become, and how much repressed anger I had bottled up inside of me. Until that point, I often blamed others, especially those closest to me, for my inability to deal with the challenges in my life. Decisions at home (including the social arrangements) were taken by my wife and decisions at work were spread amongst my colleagues. I was so afraid of making mistakes, of dealing with the consequences of making mistakes that I refined my ability to manipulate and became a master at manipulating others so that they would be held accountable instead of me. I took my wife, my family, my friends and my career for granted. I realised, for the first time, that my reaction to the world was somehow linked to my past experiences as well as my religion, my race, my schooling, my home environment, my social circles, my family, my culture and my ever-changing circumstances. I became aware of my mental models, and the role that social networks have played in shaping me into the person that I am today. Somehow, I was restricting reality through my structure of interpretation (a term borrowed from the coaching world), i.e. my mental models resulted in me only seeing what I wanted to see in every experience. It seemed as if my personality was the result of my mental models and that my social networks contributed towards the shaping of my mental model. I was not as in control as I believed I was.

At work, I was perceived as being in control of my life. Deep down inside, I really felt like a passenger in life and not in control. I felt that I was a victim. At the time, I had a very strong, but subconscious, external locus of control. I unconsciously believed that the events in my life were attributable to actions/forces beyond my control. I did not feel good about myself and about my abilities. I suffered from a very low self-esteem. I wanted approval from people, I wanted recognition and I wanted to belong. This proved to be a very frustrating and confusing time in my life. The manipulation/pretending was not working in the way I had planned and, as a result, people were constantly disappointing me, i.e. the expectations I had of others were not being met. Something was terribly wrong and I was unable to put my finger on it.

From my experiences at work I noticed that effective communication is something that is key in understanding myself as well as understanding others, and that I had to do some learning in this area. I realised that poor communication at work was resulting in inefficiencies and that this was one of the main contributors to many of my colleagues' frustrations (including myself). These frustrations were often due to the poor management of ambiguity

that is perpetuated by poor communication, i.e. management had one idea of what the problem was and the workforce had another, and we were talking past one another. Adding uncertainty to the recipe did not help either, i.e. where management displayed a lack of communication in certain matters, and this often resulted in alienation between workers and management. I was caught somewhere in between all of this and I realised, even more, the importance of clear effective communication. I came to realise that the more I learn, the less uncertainty there is in my life and the more empowered I feel. I also realised that there was a connection between 'low self-esteem' and 'uncertainty', i.e. the more uncertainty I experienced the lower the self-esteem I had. The reality is that life means uncertainty – a crystal ball does not exist that can accurately predict the future. I have come to realise the importance of self-awareness in dealing with uncertainty. The more empowered I am, the better I am able to deal with new situations.

The challenge, for me, is thus to spark the growth of self-awareness in every individual I encounter, i.e. to become conscious 'change-agents' for personal and societal evolution. In order to water the seeds of self-awareness, I consciously decided that coaching would be, and is today, a major part of how I lead my life. I have found that the more I pursue my purpose the more I automatically express my purpose in my daily life, i.e. the more I begin to live my purpose.

This means that I would need to choose a career that would allow me to live my purpose and a career that would foster my self-awareness. Being spiritual would also serve to be a core enabler of my growth. For me, spirituality is not the same as organised religion. The experience of spirituality is different for every person. Also, in my view, spirituality is something that you cannot separate out from work, it is there whether you consciously choose to express it or not, i.e. kindness, compassion, gratitude, friendship, sharing, smiling, laughing, crying, consoling, helping, doing your job, etc., are all forms of expressing your spirituality at work and at home. For me, attempting to define and therefore confine spirituality is the same as trying to define the concept of 'love', the altruistic type. Our country was (and still is) divided for many decades through the social engineering of Apartheid. Most South Africans grew up in a world that encouraged separateness and that emphasised the power of individuality. I believe that our past has been a blessing in disguise since it has made us stronger and more resilient, and made us appreciate our common humanity so much more than before. Our country and much of the world is still divided by a host of different discrimination criteria. Our recent past has shown us what we are not. It is up to us, as the future leaders, to either follow the status quo or consciously decide to collectively work together towards a better, more inclusive, society for all of humanity. It is nobody else's responsibility other than our own, and that responsibility starts with me.

**Questions:**

1. To what extent does racial and ethnic discrimination in society affect racial and ethnic discrimination in the workplace?
2. What are the personal effects of racial and ethnic discrimination on individuals, such as Idries?
3. How can individuals from racially or ethnically marginalised groups cope with the challenge of racism they face in the course of employment?
4. To what extent is the eradication of workplace racism the responsibility of individuals?
5. What can organisations do to eradicate racism from the workplace?

6. What can individuals from economic and other dominant groups do to alleviate racism in organisations?
7. 'Racism is a thing of the past. Now there are robust laws and organisational policies in place, thus issues of racial or ethnic discrimination no longer exist.' Comment.

***Jyot Chadha: 'Will I ever be fully accepted in India?'***

"Your insecurity seems self-inflicted and you come across as immensely biased with little or no faith in India's democracy ... do take a trip abroad and if you like it there better than here, please exercise your right to choose where you live."

Many minutes went by as I typed and deleted responses to this Facebook posting, unable to decide if I wanted to retaliate or make light of this attack. In the end, my fear won. I typed out measured responses that questioned my friend, but did not reveal my stance. With the country embroiled in a nasty, polarising election, I knew my post on Facebook would open me up to snarky remarks. But I was unprepared for the ferocity of this statement on my wall. My brain raced as I tried to deal with a roar of conflicting emotions: How dare he judge the validity of my fears! What if my other friends like his comment? I refuse to be bullied! Since when are people with a different opinion unwelcome in this country? Am I crazy? Am I alone in my opinion?

My parents, brother, and I moved back to India from Singapore when I was six. We lived in Delhi with my paternal grandparents. We are Sikhs. I remember waking up to find my mother and grandmother crying on the first day of my summer vacations when I was about ten. A suicide bomber had killed our former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi. That day, the elders in the house were tense. There were hushed conversations that stopped when I entered the room. My parents' whispers scared me more than their anger. It was years before I understood their reaction that day. In November 1984, anti-Sikh riots had rocked India. The then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, had been fatally shot by her Sikh bodyguards. Thousands of Sikhs were pulled out of their homes and massacred. Men were made to drink kerosene and set light to. Women were tortured and killed, children brutally murdered. My family lived with the knowledge that our security was fragile.

I once asked my father what my family had done in 1984. My maternal grandparents hid in a hotel room for three days while my paternal grandparents found an alternate escape route after being refused shelter by their neighbours. There were stories of uncles caught by mobs and of families that cut their hair to pass as Hindu. After the riots, some cousins left India, unable to look their colleagues in the eye. Most kept their head down and tried to manufacture a new peace with their neighbours. Growing up in India a decade after the anti-Sikh riots was disorienting for me. My family was adamant that we would not hide and would visibly present ourselves as Sikhs (for example, I was not allowed to cut my hair). But there was pressure from my friends, both Sikh and Hindu, to blend in. I was acutely aware of Bollywood's portrayal of the Sikh man as the idiotic but loyal bumpkin. Never the star, the Sikh man made people laugh and defended the heroine's honour. Sikh women were portrayed as beautiful and big hearted.

As I grew older, I vacillated between rebelling against these stereotypes, which the other kids found boring ('you're too sensitive'), and propagating it by reciting jokes about Sardars. I became good at gauging the right amount of 'Sikh-ness' that was appropriate in different groups. But I was deeply unhappy in my final years in school. I became withdrawn and focused all my attention on leaving India to go to college in the United States. At the time,

I attributed my depression solely to the sexual abuse I had faced as a child at the hands of a relative. But as I realised years later, the weight of constantly wearing masks was exhausting. At 18 years old, my mind felt empty of any desire, excitement or ambition, other than to get out of the country.

Leaving India was a breath of fresh air. When I returned six years later, I found it difficult to remain quiet in the face of blatant and subtle bullying of religious minorities. When the newspapers glossed over yet another Sikh widow denied justice for the 1984 riots, I brought it up at dinner parties. I spoke up when people at work portrayed Sikhs and Punjabi-Hindus as being the same people. I voiced my deep discomfort at Muslims being portrayed as the 'other'. But I paid the price of being seen as volatile, radical, or even a bore, in work and social circles. I had a deep desire to be accepted by my country as from a religious minority with differing opinions, traditions and values. I did not want to be whitewashed as an extension of the majority in order to make me valid.

Fast-forward to 2014. The leading contender in the Prime Ministerial race has spurred an acrimonious debate as to what we stand for as a nation. Charged (and acquitted) for inciting and condoning the anti-Muslim riots of 2002, this candidate is receiving majority support based on a perceived ability to revive the economy and refusal to 'appease minorities'. The very definition of secularism is being changed by a savvy political campaign. To be secular now is to be elite and intellectual at best, or not welcome in this new India at worst. Until last year, I felt safe speaking my mind and not forcing myself to blend into the majority. This is the first time that I have truly felt like a minority in this country. I am aware of censoring myself again. I am cautious when people ask whom I will vote for. I do not engage in political discussions. I am unable to feel comfortable or close to colleagues. At times, I wonder if I am wrong, if I am blinded by the minority 'fear-mongering' media. I feel unsure of myself and worried for my parents who still speak their minds.

#### **Questions:**

1. How do historical representations of groups of people affect individual sense of belonging?
2. Are there aspects of your own identity, which you feel are not fully accepted by others? Comment.
3. Would you be willing to shed or hide aspects of your identity if you were being discriminated against? Why?
4. Why do some people ferociously defend their own perspectives on reality, and why are they unable to entertain challenge or criticism of that reality?
5. What stereotypes have you perpetuated or not objected to in conversations, or interactions, with friends, family or work colleagues?

#### ***Hanafi Talib: 'When all hell breaks loose in Iraq'***

Managing stakeholders from different nationalities, with different sets of beliefs and cultures is very challenging for any leader. For example, when I was a Country Head for PETRONAS in Uzbekistan, the challenges were more around the language and leadership styles. So, some of the diversity challenges were a result of the locals using the Russian language as their medium for business, instead of English. And, one had to really make genuine efforts to truly understand the diversity of cultures between the indigenous/

traditional Uzbekistanis and the more modern Russian influence (as Uzbekistan is part of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) of former Soviet Republics). Other challenges included how to handle high-level meetings between yourself, as the senior representative of your company, and the country's Ministers who are very autocratic. But the essence of any business is still about having good relationships with others. As a result of my many years of work experience and expat life in multiple countries away from my home country of Malaysia, I have developed a guiding principle: 'Understand the locals and respect their cultures, to deliver!'

This guiding principle has served me well for nearly all of my years of working, particularly when encountering other cultures and customs in foreign countries – however, while working in Iraq, I was to be reminded how important cultural practices and symbols are to particular groups of people (and how they can lead to serious misunderstanding and wrong perceptions). The incident occurred at our Garraf Asset Operations (GAO), in the District of Rifa'l in Iraq. On 29 November 2012, we nearly got all of our Malaysian expats (approximately 300 of them) slaughtered by the locals, when they stormed our camp.

Some of the background

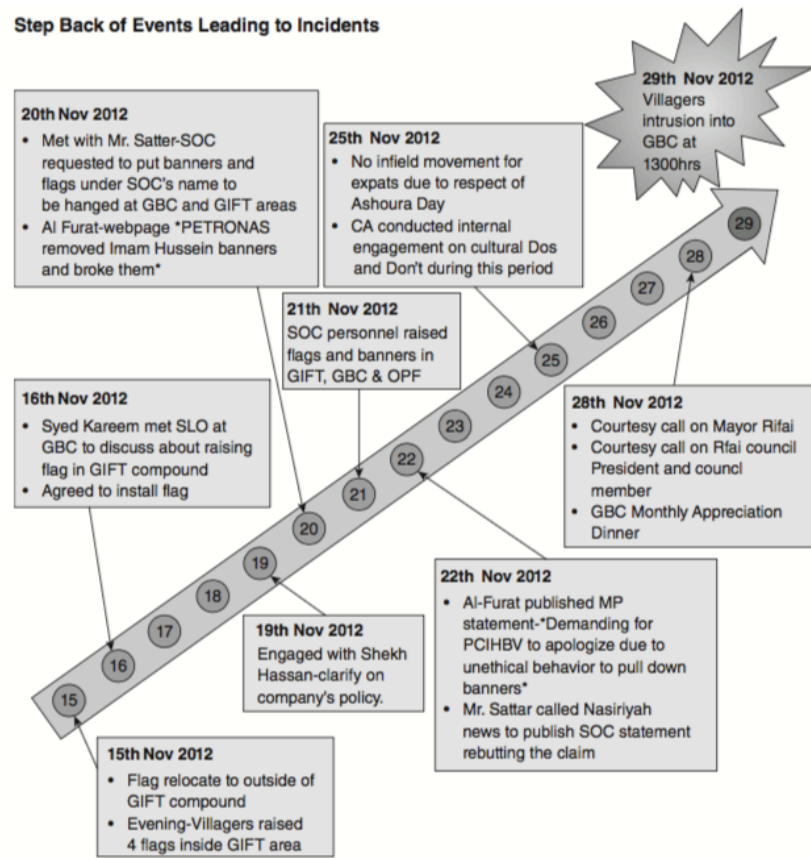
PETRONAS entered into a Development Production Sharing Contract (DPSC) with the Iraqi government in 2009 to develop the Garraf oil fields. Garraf is situated between Baghdad and Basra, in the province of Thi Qar. PETRONAS built a camp to house all of their employees and some of the contractors in Garraf Contract Area (GCA), and named it Garraf Base Camp (GBC). The camp can accommodate approximately 500 people easily at any one time, and the tenants came from all over the world. However, the majority were Malaysian expats. Private security companies provide protection for us – these companies have mostly Westerners in their organisations, including South Africans, and they were all well trained as military men before arriving in Iraq. We also have Iraqi local hired staff in the camp, but mainly in the service areas, i.e. they work as gardeners, kitchen helpers, housekeepers, drivers and general clerks. Only a few of the Iraqis are hired at junior business/technical levels. The Garraf Contract Area is generally flat with sandy/clay silts, shrubs and low vegetation, and the local villagers are poor, mainly due to wars.

Here is an overview of the incident. The Shia Muslims represent the second largest denomination of Islam and constitute the majority sect in Iraq. The adherents of Shia Islam are called Shias or the Shi'a as a collective (in English, we use the term Shi'ites). During the Arba'een (a religious observance that occurs forty days after the martyrdom anniversary of Imam Husayn (or Imam Hussain), the grandson of the Islamic prophet Muhammad), all in the land were expected to observe this ceremony by not having parties or celebrations during the period. Due to either ignorance of our food service providers' sensitivities or naivety, we continued our monthly birthday celebrations inside the camp. We put up balloons and held a celebratory birthday session as usual. The local staff informed the villagers about this, and we were attacked. Figure 1 shows the timeline leading up to the incident.

The hanging of balloons on the day of mourning was seen as disrespectful. GCA staff then removed the balloons. Some locals misinterpreted what we were doing through the spread of rumours, and we were accused of celebrating the 'death of Imam Husayn'. The attackers were initially asked to disperse. However, the crowd grew, and this ultimately led to the damage and destruction of buildings and infrastructure (structures dented, windows broken, doors smashed, broken surveillance cameras, broken blinds, broken fans, smashed TVs, damaged wash basins, damaged air conditioner units, damaged fire extinguishers, destroyed signage, smashed lights – street lights and internal to the buildings), damage to

rental and staff cars (dents, broken windows, broken mirrors) and, regrettably, injuries to staff/personnel (body and head injuries, with a need for hospitalisation).

Figure 1. Timeline of events leading to the incident



**Questions:**

1. Who do you think has been discriminated against in this case study? Comment.
2. Is the truth always relevant in cases of discrimination?
3. In which circumstances is violence a potential channel for reaching a solution? Discuss.
4. How important are symbols and rituals in establishing and maintaining the identity of groups of people? How important are they to you? Name some of them, and discuss.
5. Is ignorance of the cultural practices in the regions in which you live or work a justifiable excuse for contravening local customs?
6. Can you think of any customs, rituals, or even symbols, which you may be offended by? Or ones which you have contravened or offended? What are the consequences?
7. What information needs to be shared with expat employees before they go off on assignments? What services or processes need to be put in place in order to secure their safety, well-being and extraction?
8. If you were in place of Hanafi Talib – leading this site – what would be your next steps for re-establishing trust between your various employee groups, as well as between the company and locals?
9. Are there other stakeholders to consider in re-establishing engagement? What would you do to achieve such engagement?

### **Biographical notes**

*Idries Kahaar started in IT in 1994 at Telkom's Regional Information Services. Since then, his career focus has shifted from being a technical expert to that of being a facilitator, business leader, manager, architect, coach and mentor. Today, he works at Cornastone Enterprise Management Systems (an IT service provider) as the Chief Operations Officer. Idries also serves as an independent board member at Apollo Brick, a national manufacturing concern, where he represents the Apollo Brick Employee Trust at board level. He holds an MBA from the Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town, Certificates in Coaching from the South African College of Applied Psychology and the University of Cape Town, a Bachelor of Science Degree in Mathematics and Computer Science from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and a Diploma in electrical engineering from Port Elizabeth Technikon. Additionally, he was a Sainsbury Management Fellow at the University of Cambridge in the UK.*

*Jyot Chadha has a keen interest in how access and mobility positively impact economic enhancement, thus enabling poverty reduction at a large scale. She works with EMBARQ to identify business models for the private sector to invest in infrastructure that solves urban India's mobility problems. In addition, Jyot is exploring the possibility of launching a transport-focused seed fund and incubator in India. Prior to EMBARQ, Jyot co-founded a US\$0.5 million incubation fund to invest in businesses run by young people living in Delhi slums. She started her career with Langham Capital, an investment bank focused on cross-border mergers and acquisitions, and RogersCasey, an investment consulting firm. Jyot has an MBA from the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford (UK). She is an Associate Fellow with the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and a Shell Foundation Fellow. Jyot is a member of the External Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Council for Novartis International.*

*Hanafi Talib has a keen interest in unleashing the potential of people from various countries and cultures wherever he works. Currently, he is working with a national oil company (PETRONAS) in Iraq, leading approximately 500 workers of various nationalities. Previously, he was in both Pakistan (as General Manager) and Uzbekistan (as Country Head) where he was involved in tough negotiations with the host authorities and government agencies. He started his career with an international oil company (ExxonMobil), where he acquired technical skills and insight into the oil and gas business. Hanafi has an engineering degree from Monash University, Australia, and Management Certificates from both Melbourne University and Duke Corporate Education, UK. He is also a motivational speaker for University Technology Mara (UiTM) and a member of the Malaysian Institute of Engineers.*