

A South African activist at home in Nigeria

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Perspective of a Nigerian-American



FOLLOWING Olusegun Obasanjo's inauguration in May, 1999, for the first time in history the two giants of Sub-Saharan Africa – Nigeria and South Africa – were simultaneously under the leadership of democratically elected governments. When Nigeria achieved independence in 1960, South Africa was in the midst of a tightening apartheid grasp. Over the next three decades, the fight against apartheid was a central focus of Nigeria's foreign policy, earning her much praise from South Africans leading their own struggle.

When Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first democratically elected president in 1994, it appeared as if Africa was about to enter a new era. Unfortunately, Nigeria was then under the grip of Sani Abacha and the tables would soon turn as South Africa aided the struggle to free Nigeria. After several lost years, Abacha's death opened the way for improved relations between the two countries. Now the dream of many has been realized: the two most powerful countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are now both democratic and are solidly allied towards the positive progress of the African continent.

However, there is a slight complication. Even though officially their governments are now working closely together, relations between the people of South Africa and Nigeria have become surprisingly sour, especially from the South African perspective.

Since the end of white minority rule in South Africa, the promise of economic improvement for the average Black South African has remained largely unrealized. While they remain unemployed in large numbers, skilled Africans from other countries, including Nigeria, are descending on South Africa because of its comparatively strong economy. Black South Africans now see these other Africans as competitors and treat them with xenophobic (racist) attitudes.

Because of the aggressive nature and often high qualifications of Nigerians, they are among the most hated of nationalities in South Africa. They are treated poorly and are blamed for many of the nation's woes, including the drug problem.

From the Nigerian side, South Africans are often perceived as obnoxious upstarts, citizens of a country that is trying to replace Nigeria as the 'giant of Africa' in diplomacy, economics, and sports. The negative attitudes from both sides was observed quite openly during the posturing before the Nigeria – South Africa match in the Nations' Cup 2000 Semifinal. Nigeria may have won on that occasion, but it did not mean the competition was over.

As the experience of Solomon 'Solly' Setlhodi exhibits, however, there is no reason why Nigerians and South Africans cannot get along and cannot understand each other. Solly was one of the many young Black South Africans in the 1980s who, frustrated by the apartheid system, and in danger of prosecution for his participation in the struggle, fled the country to seek freedom and education abroad. By doing so, he fulfilled what was the dream of many of the young South African revolutionaries – to join the government in exile and be a part of the African National Congress (ANC), "the people's liberation movement." This began a journey that would eventually take him to Nigeria, an experience that is described below in Solly's own words:

"I was working as a dispatch clerk in the regional stores in Tanzania when an opportunity came after Nelson Mandela's release. He had toured Africa and one of the opportunities he created was for thousands of South Africans who were in refugee camps to have opportunities to acquire skills. Nigeria's involvement cannot be overemphasised in its contribution to the liberation of the people of South



•Mandela

Africa. A contingent of four hundred young men and women flew into Nigeria from various camps of the ANC to study in different institutions throughout the country.

"I must say in Nigeria I found a second home because then we were not even sure if we would go back home sooner or later. I learned to speak pidgin English and Hausa, eat eba,

amala and pounded yam with okra, even ogbono soup which I enjoyed so much. I made friends with some Fulani in the north part of Nigeria who accepted me because I was from 'Mandela's People'.

"I made so many great friends during my time at the Kontagora College of Education and on my travels around Nigeria. Some of those I miss the most are

Josephine Usman, Eustace Chidi Njaka, Ifyenwa Enwerem, Eunice Nhlumanze, and of course Raynold "yeye boy" Osakwe. I lost contact with them and many dear school-mates and lecturers when Nigeria and South Africa got into conflict and we had to leave.

"Nigeria is a country that is rich culturally and economically. There are many positive things South Africans could learn from Nigerians. I think one of them is to be assertive and confident. Regarding the rivalry that exists between Nigerians and South Africans, I know that when the President of South Africa Thabo Mbeki talks about the "African Renaissance" he is not excluding any of the countries in Africa. He is talking about the rebirth of the entire continent. We need to stop looking at each other as "Magrigamba" – "makwerekwere" (a derogatory word for aliens or foreigners).

"Equally, South Africa has recently contributed to the political changes taking place in Nigeria. South Africa stands as model for reconciliation as a peaceful solution towards unity. As President Mbeki puts it "having ended our dark days as a pariah country, we can rightly say that, today,

the nations of our common universe are confident that out of South Africa will emerge a thing of value that will contribute to the building of a humane world."

"Indeed it is my hope that the rivalries, hostilities, and animosities that exist between Africans shall be buried and forgotten one day. We must learn to accept each other as human beings created in the image of God with one purpose of restoring peace and love throughout the world. "Each one teach one."

After reading Solly's story, of a young man from South Africa who found friendship and hospitality in Nigeria, we can have hope that the rivalries between South Africans and Nigerians will one day soon be a thing of the past. What is needed more than anything else is for people from the two countries to interact and learn from each other, because without that, the dream of the two countries working together for a better Africa will never be realized, no matter what the two governments say.

NB: Solly would love to get back in touch with his dear friends from his Nigeria days. He is presently in Oxford, England, and can be reached at setlhodi@hotmail.com

Problems of the Police

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tional logistics and materials like papers and the policeman started invading the privacy of the ordinary man who was the complainant. If you must go and make complaints, you must be the one to buy charge sheets and so on. In the process, with the graft and public looting of the country by the military leaders which had a sort of ripple effect on all other people, corruption became institutionalised.

I am not defending the police; I am just analysing the root cause of the situation we found ourselves in. If you put a rotten orange among other oranges in a basket, what would happen to them? The disease on the rotten orange would spread to the other ones. That was how the whole thing started.

Because the successive military governments did not behave responsibly by funding the police properly and checking these absurd things, private individuals now started to build police stations and donate vehicles, which was a wrong thing to do. It is wrong because the moment you begin to do that, you put the people you are doing these things to at your own beck and call. Hence you have people being escorted by the policemen around the place and it became a status symbol.

These are the problems with the police; these are the things which government wants to redress, cumulative damage which span over three decades. You cannot do it in two years. And that is the problem of Obasanjo and Jemibewon. They have good intentions but Nigerians have been denied



•IG, Musiliu Smith

basic security needs by the police for a long time. So, there is a conflict of sort. For one, those who have suffered for a long time under the police ineptitude may not be willing to be tolerable again. On the other hand, the police cannot be

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