

# The Irony of Freedom

An Essay  
By Steve Scafati

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*it is a dry white season  
dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out  
and with a broken heart they dive down gently headed  
for the earth  
not even bleeding.  
it is a dry white season brother,  
only the trees know the pain as they stand erect  
dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,  
indeed, it is a dry white season  
but seasons come to pass.*

Mongane Wally Serote

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Africa, for me, was a dazzling potpourri of old world culture, contrasted with new technologies and concepts from the west, a circus of sights, sounds, spices in the open markets, people with happy faces, colorful fabrics and traditional dress. But then it was also a place of unnerving contradiction and, I use to say, the land where hypocrisy was born. I will recount in this essay one aspect of my practical experience in Africa.

I was already teaching in the Furniture Construction program, when Naude Godson who is pivotal to this story, came to the International Opportunities Industrialization Center (IOIC) to become a trainee. Naude blended easily into the social landscape, I did not. Just by sight I was a curiosity to the locals, and perhaps sometimes a real commodity. But, like me, Naude was also new to West Africa.

My primary Responsibility was to work as an advisor and assist my counterpart with classes and practical training of about forty students. I had prior experience as a vocational trainer, and my skills matched their needs. But, I suppose I carried with me some extra baggage that may or may not have had any bearing on my volunteer service to the Center or even to African society as a whole. But, I guess my social conscious did have a purpose and it coincided very well, or clashed, with this environment of which I suddenly found myself. Only after almost a year in country did I really arrive.

The Center founded by the Rev. Leon L. Sullivan was originally operating in the United States as OIC, to assist at risk youth. Eventually the organization expanded internationally. The campus and facilities were spacious; the average ages of trainees were 18 to 26. This particular

center was in large part funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The center offered a variety of practical studies to both females and males in the Industrial Trades: Mechanics, Hotel and Catering, Building Construction, related academic studies, etcetera. Naude chose Furniture Construction, a simple enough choice yes, but how it was that he ended up here, at this school is another side of this story.

Naude Godson, 29 years old and a descendent of Zulu Nobility, before escaping to West Africa, was working as a forth-class employee in the coal mines of South Africa, his native homeland, where the minority not the majority ruled. The social conditions and unrest were nothing new, but things were getting worse. The Human atrocities committed, by the South African Government, on its black population were reported on a daily basis and televised around the world. The Civil War In South Africa was alive and well.

The ratio of 1 million whites to 10 million blacks in South Africa was an anomaly, a reversal of majority and minority roles in the Social and Political structure of South Africa. And as illogical as the imbalance of power was in South Africa, and regardless of the International Sanctions imposed, the South African government continued to ignore the obvious.

In 1989 Naude finally would flee South Africa. As a stowaway, on a Scandinavian shipping vessel, he concealed himself for the 3500-mile voyage. The ships crew found him out as the ship was approaching Douala Seaport somewhere on the coast of West Africa. Naude was arrested; he felt the doom and gloom set in, would he be sent back? Or maybe thrown in jail! Whatever, it

was going to be Naude's first experience abroad, and South Africa, his native homeland, was a long way off.

When they finally got into port, Naude was whisked ashore and immediately turned over to immigration. After the authorities confirmed Naude's story, serious faces suddenly turned happy and joyful, and Naude was given a heroes welcome. United Nations officials granted Naude refugee status and issued him a U.N. passport. Naude was a free man in a free country. Or at least that's what his immediate perception was...

In a short time Naude discovered Buea, the Anglophone province, and former capital of Cameroon. He enrolled into IOIC. Naude was a very popular student, right from the get go. After all, Naude the brother from South Africa, was a genuine refugee, he was a hero. The school was happy to have him. He was envied by all but unfortunately he would ultimately be resented by all.

Naude did well in his class and like most instructors I too had my favorites, but I never played my favorites, I always gave fair shares of attention and respect to everyone around me. Naude was an older student and we became friends outside of school. We would have great laughing fits, I was happy with abandon like I was 12 years old again. We characterized everybody, the whole campus became a laughing stock for us, and we had similar philosophies, so after school hours we would always have plenty to gossip about. We developed a reputation as a pair and became, in the eyes of everybody at the school, more impudent by the day, but the more so, the more we both reveled in our own specialness.

Before I would leave Cameroon Naude would confide to me that the whole African brother thing, and Cameroon in general was a disappointment for him. It was not long before Naude could see right thru these people: local Africans seemingly in charge and managing organizations with their lavish protocol and proper etiquette, and learned manners, and being impeccably dressed was of the utmost importance. What Naude saw, was pure mimicry, a big white man would always be there behind the scenes, pulling the strings, whom without, they would all be back on the farm digging up root crops. I concurred. Naude's philosophy was "a government without opposition is not a government". He talked about freedom of expression, and social justice, and individualism. He really never outwardly pressed anyone on these issues but it was his aura, it shone right thru. All that was pure heresy to everyone at the school.

Naude recounted many personal experiences he had in South Africa. I was always fascinated to hear this history and his first hand accounts. He remembered the Bi-Standard Education in South Africa and his cousin Johnathan with him in secondary school. Although their school was substandard, his cousin Jonathan was always very keen in social studies. Naude learned a lot from his cousin, and what their school might have lacked in educational resources, their teachers made up in dedication and hard work.

He told me how Soweto became famous around the world, even though the average person would have been, and may even still be, hard pressed to find the place on a map. He told me about the revolt that took place in Soweto in 1976. Naude would never forget. The Soweto Massacres left Naude bitter. He will always despise the "ruling party"; they murdered his Uncle

Gordon Ngubene, and his entire family. He told me about his Uncle's employer, Ben Du Toit, who was also a schoolteacher. He said I reminded him of Mr. Ben who became a good friend to his family. It was a paradox that Mr. Ben was also a victim of the Soweto Massacres, betrayed by his own community, he was an outcast and on the wrong side.

Eventually as time went by my contract was up and I was preparing to return to the States, the students were on break so I had some free time before leaving Africa. I did not see Naude for a couple of weeks. The rumor was that he was not coming back to the school to finish the training program. I finally caught up with him and he told me that everyone at the school including the students seemed to be ostracizing him, he felt isolated. And to boot, I myself was going back to the States, in effect leaving him behind. I felt guilty. Naude was ready, not only, to give up Cameroon but also he was actually thinking about escaping "back into" South Africa. I commiserated with him, and encouraged him to keep fit. I told him no matter how bad you may think your situation is, there is always someone, somewhere, in a worse situation, and that I would be disappointed personally if he was to just give up, and then I told him that there was hardly enough freedom fighters, in the world, as it is.

Months later, back in the States, I was frustrated. Traffic jams, hockey fanatics, nerve-racking radio personalities, billboard ads trying to sell you a car, and overall mass frenzy. Upon my return from Africa I was so busy I really did not have any time for at least a year, to reflect on my experiences, then suddenly I heard the newsflash that Nelson Mandela, after nearly 30 years locked up behind bars, punished for "defending" human rights, was now free, released

from prison. My mind shot right back to Cameroon. I thought wow! Naude must be celebrating this great development.

I was never able to reconnect with Naude. I tried to contact him via the school, and also I tried a couple of temporary mailing addresses. I was not sure if he was in Cameroon anymore, I suspect he was long gone. I remember Naude had said to me, even when South Africa was still in a state of apartheid and civil war, and it's government still had Nelson Mandela locked up in prison, he said, referring to the locals "These damn fools would be better off if they were in South Africa!"

The End

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