

"Those unfortunate South Americans"



The decorated
walls of a palace
in Zaria in the Northern
Province of Nigeria

I HAD BEEN AWAY in London for over a year, and when I returned to Northern Nigeria last October, I paid the traditional courtesy call to the District Head soon after my arrival, as was expected of me. As the Emir's personal representative, the District Head is by far the most important person in that large and populous part of the region; but we know each other well, and the formal call

SUZANNE CRONJE is married to a former agricultural officer in Northern Nigeria where she edited a monthly magazine. She now lives in London.

Nigeria and Apartheid

SUZANNE CRONJE

broadened into a personal visit. He asked me what plans I had made for my stay, and I told him about the Mandela record the A.N.C. in London had asked me to present to Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Northern Premier. Anything concerning Sir Ahmadu is of almost passionate interest to Northern dignitaries whose office depends very often on palace politics: the District Head wanted to know more about this gift. I explained about Mandela and the trial, and how his defence speech had moved people in London so that they had a recording made of it, with a famous British actor to speak Mandela's words; the A.N.C. wanted Sir Ahmadu to have a copy because they were hoping for his support — for the support of the whole of Northern Nigeria.

The District Head nodded. "Sir Ahmadu will do what he can for these unfortunate South Americans," he said.

"Africans," I almost screeched. "South Africans."

"I must have heard you wrongly, *heard* you wrongly," said the District Head, frowning a little at my vehemence. "And didn't you say something about a *white* government? In Africa? Still?"

I SUPPOSE I SHOULD HAVE explained the situation there and then, but the response had plunged me into a sea of despondency. I let it pass. Later, when the District Head was out of the room for a few minutes, I discovered a magazine with one of my articles on South Africa in a stack of periodicals in his office. I would have been less shocked, perhaps not even surprised, if he had been illiterate and ignorant — a survival from the feudal past; but he is not. He is a scholar of classical Arabic, but he has had Western education; he speaks English fluently, has travelled widely and is an exceptionally able administrator. As District Head he is in charge of all local government in his territory; the previously corrupt and stagnating administration has improved considerably since his appointment. He likes to talk about modernization, but the neat filing cabinets along the walls of his office are perhaps just a little deceptive.

I snapped back to reality, to the remote, self-intent atmosphere of the Moslem North, as soon as I stepped out of it into the courtyard of his sprawling provincial palace with its high mud walls. I turned to say good-bye. Out there the fact that the District Head apparently failed to take any interest in the foreign news pages of the local paper no longer seemed such a tragedy. Before I went, however, the District Head said, "This misunderstanding about South Africa or America has disturbed you — so it is important? Yes. So you must come back soon and explain."

I SAID I WOULD, but I have yet to keep my promise. The truth is that I do not know how to explain. Quite apart from the Northern Nigerian preoccupation with its own affairs, which isolates it from world events, West Africans were never exposed to white settler rule, and they tend to refer to their own colonial experience in order to arrive at a meaningful picture of white oppression. They know, of course, that the situation in South Africa is infinitely worse, but to them it is more a matter of degree: an expansion of what they suffered. Dr. Nkrumah, for example, writes in *Africa Must Unite*,



Some there are who make fine distinctions between one brand of colonialism and another, who declare that the British are 'better' masters than the French, or the French 'better' than the Belgian, or the Portuguese or the white settlers of South Africa, as though there is virtue in the degree to which slavery is enforced. Such specious differentiations come from those who have never experienced the miseries and degradation of colonialist suppression and exploitation. More frequently they are apologists for the colonialism of their own country, anxious out of jingoistic patriotism to make a case for it. The colonial subject, the true bearer of the 'white man's burden,' can have no such philosophical approach. He is therefore unable to judge the delicate difference between having to pass through a door marked 'natives' in any part of the world and one so marked in Johannesburg, simply because the latter would often be in a separate segregated area.

The difference between British rule in West Africa and apartheid in South Africa — Dr. Nkrumah notwithstanding — is a difference of kind. West Africans were, of course, exploited by colonial greed, patronised and insulted by colonial arrogance, but they were not dispossessed; no degrading limits were set to their humanity and manhood; they were never compelled to endure without hope. The difficulties of putting this across are enormous, more so in Nigeria than in Ghana, particularly in Northern Nigeria, which differs from the other three regions in cultural background and political outlook. It is intent upon itself, proud of its history and Islamic traditions, and a good way behind the others in modern education and development.

The District Head's ignorance about South Africa was unusual for the modern elite, but there is probably only a handful of Northerners who are really well informed on foreign affairs — among them, fortunately, the Chief Information Officer in Kaduna, who shepherded the Mandela record through to presentation. Many people in Kaduna doubted whether Sir Ahmadu would give the fighters against apartheid his public support; British business was very actively exerting its influence to combat the danger of sanctions, and Northern Nigeria's connections with British interests are very strong. At the United Nations, Nigeria has been very half-hearted on South African issues — moderate to the point of obstruction — and since Northern Nigeria dominates the federal government, I felt that the public stand taken by the region's premier would be of great interest and importance.

THE FACT THAT SIR AHMADU ACCEPTED the Mandela record and donated £500 to the A.N.C. to "help the liberation fighters" augurs well for the future. The matter was reported in all the newspapers in Nigeria; it was taken up over the local broadcasting system, which translated excerpts of the Mandela speech, and the story of apartheid reached many whose lack of English keeps them out of touch with world events. The interest aroused was considerable, bringing in numerous enquiries about where the record could be obtained. It is a sad reflection on the efficiency of all of us who are concerned with enlisting world opinion against apartheid that the record was not available in Northern Nigeria at that time.

IT IS POSSIBLY SIGNIFICANT that the organiser of a political party

in the South, opposing Sir Ahmadu's Northern Peoples Congress, commented on the £500 donation in a surprisingly derogatory tone. Whilst he recognised that it had been made in a worthy cause, he held the expenditure to be inappropriate as long as Sir Ahmadu's Northern subjects themselves were "starving"; in any case, he said, the gesture should have been left for President Azikiwe to make. Although an election campaign was then in full swing, the petty objection indicates that the liberation of South Africa is not rated of such overriding importance as is sometimes thought, even in the politically conscious South.

However, despite these disappointing reactions, the attitude towards South Africa has changed radically in the 10 years since I first came to West Africa. Then, even the Universities showed a lack of concern and information which was not far removed from that displayed by my District Head. Today, most literate Nigerians are at least aware that something is radically wrong in South Africa, even if they cannot say precisely what.

NELSON MANDELA

No Easy Walk to Freedom

Nelson Mandela's closing speech in defence of himself and the other accused in the Rivonia trial in 1964 is now regarded as one of the most important, and moving, political statements of our times. More than anything else that has been said or written about apartheid and the South African tragedy, it exposes the horrors of racial hatred and the inhumanity of apartheid

This book is a collection of his leading speeches and articles between 1953 and 1964, edited by the South African journalist Ruth First. They include accounts (and transcripts) of the three major trials in which Mandela was the chief accused, and his speeches and papers from underground and abroad when the 'Black Pimpernel' was, for a time, free. He is now serving a life sentence on Robben Island.

Nelson Mandela emerges as a major politician of vision and humanity.

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