

You Lazy (Intellectual) African Scum!

By Field Ruwe

Field Ruwe is a US-based Zambian media practitioner and author. He is a PhD candidate with a B.A. in Mass Communication and Journalism, and an M.A. in History.

They call the Third World the lazy man's purview; the sluggishly slothful and languorous prefecture. In this realm people are sleepy, dreamy, torpid, lethargic, and therefore indigent—totally penniless, needy, destitute, poverty-stricken, disfavored, and impoverished. In this demesne, as they call it, there are hardly any discoveries, inventions, and innovations. Africa is the trailblazer. Some still call it "the dark continent" for the light that flickers under the tunnel is not that of hope, but an approaching train. And because countless keep waiting in the way of the train, millions die and many more remain decapitated by the day.

"It's amazing how you all sit there and watch yourselves die," the man next to me said. "Get up and do something about it."

Brawny, fully bald-headed, with intense, steely eyes, he was as cold as they come. When I first discovered I was going to spend my New Year's Eve next to him on a non-stop JetBlue flight from Los Angeles to Boston I was angst-ridden. I associate marble-shaven Caucasians with iconoclastic skin-heads, most of who are racist.

"My name is Walter," he extended his hand as soon as I settled in my seat.

I told him mine with a precautious smile.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Zambia."

"Zambia!" he exclaimed, "Kaunda's country."

"Yes," I said, "Now Sata's."

"But of course," he responded. "You just elected King Cobra as your president."

My face lit up at the mention of Sata's moniker. Walter smiled, and in those cold eyes I saw an amenable fellow, one of those American highbrows who shuttle between Africa and the U.S.

"I spent three years in Zambia in the 1980s," he continued. "I wine and dined with Luke Mwananshiku, Willa Mungomba, Dr. Siteke Mwale, and many other highly intelligent

Zambians.” He lowered his voice. “I was part of the IMF group that came to rip you guys off.” He smirked. “Your government put me in a million dollar mansion overlooking a shanty called Kalingalinga. From my patio I saw it all—the rich and the poor, the ailing, the dead, and the healthy.”

“Are you still with the IMF?” I asked.

“I have since moved to yet another group with similar intentions. In the next few months my colleagues and I will be in Lusaka to hypnotize the cobra. I work for the broker that has acquired a chunk of your debt. Your government owes not the World Bank, but us millions of dollars. We’ll be in Lusaka to offer your president a couple of millions and fly back with a check twenty times greater.”

“No, you won’t,” I said. “King Cobra is incorruptible. He is ...”

He was laughing. “Says who? Give me an African president, just one, who has not fallen for the carrot and stick.”

Quett Masire’s name popped up.

“Oh, him, well, we never got to him because he turned down the IMF and the World Bank. It was perhaps the smartest thing for him to do.”

At midnight we were airborne. The captain wished us a happy 2012 and urged us to watch the fireworks across Los Angeles.

“Isn’t that beautiful,” Walter said looking down.

From my middle seat, I took a glance and nodded admirably.

“That’s white man’s country,” he said. “We came here on Mayflower and turned Indian land into a paradise and now the most powerful nation on earth. We discovered the bulb, and built this aircraft to fly us to pleasure resorts like Lake Zambia.”

I grinned. “There is no Lake Zambia.”

He curled his lips into a smug smile. “That’s what we call your country. You guys are as stagnant as the water in the lake. We come in with our large boats and fish your minerals and your wildlife and leave morsels—crumbs. That’s your staple food, crumbs. That corn-meal you eat, that’s crumbs, the small Tilapia fish you call Kapenta is crumbs. We the Bwanas (whites) take the cat fish. I am the Bwana and you are the Muntu. I get what I want and you get what you deserve, crumbs. That’s what lazy people get—Zambians, Africans, the entire Third World.”

The smile vanished from my face.

"I see you are getting pissed off," Walter said and lowered his voice. "You are thinking this Bwana is a racist. That's how most Zambians respond when I tell them the truth. They go ballistic. Okay. Let's for a moment put our skin pigmentations, this black and white crap, aside. Tell me, my friend, what is the difference between you and me?"

"There's no difference."

"Absolutely none," he exclaimed. "Scientists in the Human Genome Project have proved that. It took them thirteen years to determine the complete sequence of the three billion DNA subunits. After they

were all done it was clear that 99.9% nucleotide bases were exactly the same in you and me. We are the same people. All white, Asian, Latino, and black people on this aircraft are the same."

I gladly nodded.

"And yet I feel superior," he smiled fatalistically. "Every white person on this plane feels superior to a black person. The white guy who picks up garbage, the homeless white trash on drugs, feels superior to you no matter his status or education. I can pick up a nincompoop from the New York streets, clean him up, and take him to Lusaka and you all be crowding around him chanting muzungu, muzungu and yet he's a riffraff. Tell me why my angry friend."

For a moment I was wordless.

"Please don't blame it on slavery like the African Americans do, or colonialism, or some psychological impact or some kind of stigmatization. And don't give me the brainwash poppycock. Give me a better answer."

I was thinking.

He continued. "Excuse what I am about to say. Please do not take offense."

I felt a slap of blood rush to my head and prepared for the worst.

"You my friend flying with me and all your kind are lazy," he said. "When you rest your head on the pillow you don't dream big. You and other so-called African intellectuals are damn lazy, each one of you. It is you, and not those poor starving people, who is the reason Africa is in such a deplorable state."

"That's not a nice thing to say," I protested.

He was implacable. "Oh yes it is and I will say it again, you are lazy. Poor and uneducated Africans are the most hardworking people on earth. I saw them in the Lusaka markets and on the street selling merchandise. I saw them in villages toiling

away. I saw women on Kafue Road crushing stones for sell and I wept. I said to myself where are the Zambian intellectuals? Are the Zambian engineers so imperceptive they cannot invent a simple stone crusher, or a simple water filter to purify well water for those poor villagers? Are you telling me that after thirty-seven years of independence your university school of engineering has not produced a scientist or an engineer who can make simple small machines for mass use? What is the school there for?"

I held my breath.

"Do you know where I found your intellectuals? They were in bars quaffing. They were at the Lusaka Golf Club, Lusaka Central Club, Lusaka Playhouse, and Lusaka Flying Club. I saw with my own eyes a bunch of alcoholic graduates. Zambian intellectuals work from eight to five and spend the evening drinking. We don't. We reserve the evening for brainstorming."

He looked me in the eye.

"And you flying to Boston and all of you Zambians in the Diaspora are just as lazy and apathetic to your country. You don't care about your country and yet your very own parents, brothers and sisters are in Mtendere, Chawama, and in villages, all of them living in squalor. Many have died or are dying of neglect by you. They are dying of AIDS because you cannot come up with your own cure. You are here calling yourselves graduates, researchers and scientists and are fast at articulating your credentials once asked—oh, I have a PhD in this and that—PhD my foot!"

I was deflated.

"Wake up you all!" he exclaimed, attracting the attention of nearby passengers. "You should be busy lifting ideas, formulae, recipes, and diagrams from American manufacturing factories and sending them to your own factories. All those research findings and dissertation papers you compile should be your country's treasure. Why do you think the Asians are a force to reckon with? They stole our ideas and turned them into their own. Look at Japan, China, India, just look at them."

He paused. "The Bwana has spoken," he said and grinned. "As long as you are dependent on my plane, I shall feel superior and you my friend shall remain inferior, how about that? The Chinese, Japanese, Indians, even Latinos are a notch better. You Africans are at the bottom of the totem pole."

He tempered his voice. "Get over this white skin syndrome and begin to feel confident. Become innovative and make your own stuff for god's sake."

At 8 a.m. the plane touched down at Boston's Logan International Airport. Walter reached for my hand.

“I know I was too strong, but I don’t give it a damn. I have been to Zambia and have seen too much poverty.” He pulled out a piece of paper and scribbled something. “Here, read this. It was written by a friend.”

He had written only the title: “Lords of Poverty.”

Thunderstruck, I had a sinking feeling. I watched Walter walk through the airport doors to a waiting car. He had left a huge dust devil twirling in my mind, stirring up sad memories of home. I could see Zambia’s literati—the cognoscente, intelligentsia, academics, highbrows, and scholars in the places he had mentioned guzzling and talking irrelevancies. I remembered some who have since passed—how they got the highest grades in mathematics and the sciences and attained the highest education on the planet. They had been to Harvard, Oxford, Yale, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), only to leave us with not a single invention or discovery. I knew some by name and drunk with them at the Lusaka Playhouse and Central Sports.

Walter is right. It is true that since independence we have failed to nurture creativity and collective orientations. We as a nation lack a workhorse mentality and behave like 13 million civil servants dependent on a government pay cheque. We believe that development is generated 8-to-5 behind a desk wearing a tie with our degrees hanging on the wall. Such a working environment does not offer the opportunity for fellowship, the excitement of competition, and the spectacle of innovative rituals.

But the intelligentsia is not solely, or even mainly, to blame. The larger failure is due to political circumstances over which they have had little control. The past governments failed to create an environment of possibility that fosters camaraderie, rewards innovative ideas and encourages resilience. KK, Chiluba, Mwanawasa, and Banda embraced orthodox ideas and therefore failed to offer many opportunities for drawing outside the line.

I believe King Cobra’s reset has been cast in the same faculties as those of his predecessors. If today I told him that we can build our own car, he would throw me out.

“Naupena? Fuma apa.” (Are you mad? Get out of here)

Knowing well that King Cobra will not embody innovation at Walter’s level let’s begin to look for a technologically active-positive leader who can succeed him after a term or two. That way we can make our own stone crushers, water filters, water pumps, razor blades, and harvesters. Let’s dream big and make tractors, cars, and planes, or, like Walter said, forever remain inferior.

A fundamental transformation of our country from what is essentially non-innovative to a strategic superior African country requires a bold risk-taking educated leader with a triumphalist attitude and we have one in YOU. Don’t be highly strung and feel insulted by Walter. Take a moment and think about our country. Our journey from 1964 has been marked by tears. It has been an emotionally overwhelming experience. Each one

of us has lost a loved one to poverty, hunger, and disease. The number of graves is catching up with the population. It's time to change our political culture. It's time for Zambian intellectuals to cultivate an active-positive progressive movement that will change our lives forever. Don't be afraid or dispirited, rise to the challenge and salvage the remaining few of your beloved ones.