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MANDELA, MOBUTU, AND ME



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LYNNE DUKE

AUTHOR & STAFF WRITER ~ THE WASHINGTON POST

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LYNNE DUKE

AUTHOR & STAFF WRITER ~ THE WASHINGTON POST

For four years as her newspaper's Johannesburg bureau chief, Lynne Duke cut a rare figure as an African American woman foreign correspondent as she raced from story to story in numerous countries of central and southern Africa. Her work ranged from the battle zones of Congo-Zaire to the quest for truth and reconciliation in South Africa; from the teeming displaced person's camps of Angola and the killing field of the Rwanda genocide to the calming Indian Ocean shores of Mozambique. She interviewed heads of state, captains of industry, activists, tribal leaders, medicine men and women, mercenaries, rebels, refugees, and ordinary, hardworking people. And it is they, the ordinary people of Africa, who fueled the hope and affection that drove Duke's reporting. The nobility of the ordinary African struggles, so often absent from accounts of the continent, is at the heart of Duke's searing story.

Mandela, Mobutu, and Me is a richly detailed, clear-eyed account of the hard realities Duke discovered, including the devastation wrought by ruthless, rapacious dictators like Mobutu Sese Seko and his successor, Laurent Kabila, in the Congo, and appalling indifference of Europeans and Americans to the legacy of their own exploitation of the continent and its people. But Duke also records with admiration the visionary leadership and personal style of Nelson Mandela in south Africa as he led his country's inspiring transition from apartheid in the twilight of his incredible life.

Ms. Duke received her undergraduate degree in political science from Columbia University in New York, where she also received a master's degree from the Graduate School of Journalism.

Mandela, Mobutu, and Me

By Lynne Duke

I'd like to thank the Honors College and the School of Journalism and Mass Communications for hosting my speech to you today. For me, one of the fringe benefits of being a journalist is the opportunity to speak to a younger generation and offer some of my experiences as food for thought.

And the timing of my visit here couldn't be better, because in a few days I'll be leaving for another assignment in South Africa. This time, the occasion is the 10th anniversary of the end of apartheid, or white-minority rule. In April 1994, South Africa held its first-ever democratic election. It was the first time that all races were allowed to vote, and they overwhelmingly chose Nelson Mandela, the freed political prisoner, as their first democratically elected president.

I have traveled to South Africa - and lived there - at various times since 1990. My career seems to be tied to that country, and also to a large portion of Africa. My posting in Africa in the 1990s became the basis of my book, which tells of the life and times of a foreign correspondent lurching between the hope of Mandela's new South Africa and the despair of Congo-Zaire, a country ravaged by the late dictator Mobutu Sese Seko.

But before I say more about Africa, I want you to know I'm also happy to be here because this is where my career began, here in South Florida. In 1985, fresh out of graduate school, I joined the Miami Herald. I worked my way through various suburban bureaus - first in a place called Tamarac, of which some of you have heard, then onto the Hollywood bureau, until I finally was transferred down to the main office in Miami.

I was, in those years, an ambitious and desperate cub reporter. I was desperate to do well, and with ambitions that at the time seemed arrogant. I had the nerve to believe I could become a foreign correspondent one day. I want to tell you today about a South African road. It is called the Golden Highway. It runs south from Johannesburg, past the mountains of slag pulled up from the earth where famous

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gold mines were dug. It skirts the well known apartheid-created race-based townships of Soweto and El Dorado Park. In the days of white rule, when I first traveled the Golden Highway, Soweto was legally decreed as all black, and El Dorado Park was legally for people of mixed-raced, called coloreds. That was the nature of apartheid. It was a system that categorized everyone by race. And for non-whites, a racial category was like a prison cell.

The racial categories determined where you could live, where you could die, how much health care you would receive, whether your children would receive an education, whether you could own property or a business or even move freely through your own country. In the worst days of apartheid, blacks needed a pass-book to even move through areas that were declared white. To defy the apartheid laws was to risk imprisonment. Your main transgression, in those days, was to be black in a country hell-bent on a kind of white supremacy that was enforced brutally, daily, and legally. That was the nature of apartheid.

The Golden Highway

I encountered the Golden Highway in 1990, on my first assignment to South Africa, and it captured my imagination. One day as I was traveling the region, my South African guide took me to a tiny settlement just off the highway. It was an abandoned orange grove where about 2,000 Africans had settled. They called the place, simply, Orange Farm. And they set up tents and shacks on the open land. Their action was a clear defiance of apartheid laws, but a bold and risky attempt to find a better life.

For those settlers, Orange Farm was as close as they could get to Johannesburg, known in Zulu as Egoli, the City of Gold, a city of skyscrapers and banks and mining corporations and universities and jobs, or so the settlers hoped. Orange Farm was a place where they could find a tiny plot of land on which to plant

some crops and raise their children and perhaps send them off into a future that seemed to hold such promise.

That year, 1990, was a watershed year in South Africa. Mandela walked free from prison after 28 years, as did several other political prisoners. In addition, Frederik W. de Klerk, the last apartheid president, presided over the repeal of some of apartheid's most venal race-based laws.

But despite those dramatic changes, there was no pot of gold to be found at places like Orange Farm and elsewhere along the Golden Highway. There was no plumbing in Orange Farm, no electricity, no roads. The squatters wanted their children to receive an education however, so they set up schoolrooms in an abandoned chicken coop and some horse stables.

The life was hard and rough. Orange Farm's residents lived in fear that apartheid authorities would forcibly evict them and send them back to the desolate rural homelands, or black reserves, that were meant to hem in the aspirations of South Africa's black majority.

Still, there was something striking and magnificent about Orange Farm. Its residents didn't have an ordinary or secure life, but they had that most precious commodity of black life under apartheid. They had a mighty thing called HOPE and a vision of a future free of repression. That dream, that vision, was their only pot of gold along the Golden Highway.

That road became a metaphor, for me, of all that South Africa represented: the aspirations of people held back in a system that the United Nations defined as a crime against humanity. It was a place of very humble dreams.

Five Years Later

So when I moved to South Africa in 1995 to become the bureau chief there for The Washington Post, I went back to Orange Farm within my first few months. And I was shocked at what I found, not only in Orange Farm but along the length

of the Golden Highway itself.

In those five years, the highway had attracted hundreds of thousands of new residents, new squatters. As you drive south, there is a hill from which you can see far to the horizon. And what I saw that day horrified me. As far as the eye could see, the land on either side of the Golden Highway was covered with shack upon shack upon shack, all of them swathed in a purplish haze of smoke from cooking fires. And when I got to Orange Farm itself, the place I remembered as a hard-scrabble but quaint settlement, had exploded to a population of roughly 250,000 people. Most lived in shacks, still with no electricity. A few proper schools had been built, and some health clinics. And a paved grid of main roads ran through the place.

But it remained a very hard place, known then as an "informal settlement," which meant it was not part of any municipal or state structure, not on the receiving end of ordinary state services. And with the advent of freedom after the 1994 election, crime had moved into Orange Farm, as well as corruption and a creeping fear among many residents that perhaps their dream of a better life would not come true at all.

During the four years I lived and worked in South Africa, I returned to Orange Farm again and again. It became a symbol, for me, and a crucible. This was the kind of place where the promise of the New South Africa would face its hardest test. Could Mandela's new government provide proper housing, jobs, education? Could it bring true prosperity to places like Orange Farm? Could it begin to erase the material effects of apartheid, meaning the deep inequalities and desperate poverty that was South Africa's inheritance from apartheid?

The Rainbow Nation of God

My reporting in those years sent me all over South Africa. To the chambers of the new multiracial parliament. To the suites of the nation's corporate barons. To the president's office and the homes of the newly elevated black elite. To the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission -- led by Nobel laureate and

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu -- where the horrors of apartheid were investigated and revealed in bone-chilling detail. To hospital wards bulging with AIDS patients and AIDS orphans. To the farms and small towns of the Afrikaners, who felt beleaguered and cast aside once their system of white rule had come to an end.

Sometimes, I'd find evidence of the Rainbow Nation itself. Archbishop Tutu coined that phrase, when he called the new South Africa and its many ethnic hues the "rainbow nation of god." And there were organizations that were inspiring examples of the way South Africans could work together, despite their past conflict, despite their present pain. The new South Africa was born of that dream - the dream that all of its people could put aside the past and move forward. The negotiated settlement of apartheid's end had been called a miracle, because the violence that preceded the dawn of democracy in 1994 largely subsided once the transition was complete.

There were so many aspects of South African life to report, to write. But always, I kept Orange Farm at the center of my journalistic universe. According to the rhetoric of Mandela's ruling party, the African National Congress, it was for people like those, the people of Orange Farm, that the liberation war had been waged. They were the "masses," the most oppressed, the poorest, the most in need of upliftment. And yet, in those early years, the poorest seemed to be the last to feel the fruits of liberation.

The South Africa story, I discovered, was far more complex than the narrative of good versus evil, of black liberation versus white dictatorship. Yes, apartheid's end was much needed. And yes, it was an evil system. But the end of apartheid and the onslaught of democracy still left much hard work, much transformation, to achieve. (And since Mandela left office in 1999, his successor, President Thabo Mbeki, has struggled with the same tough task of rolling back the effects of apartheid.)

What amazed me most about South Africa, though, was the undying and unmovable faith that people had in their futures. The struggle against apartheid had been long, bitter and bloody. Many families included someone who had been detained

without charge, tortured, even murdered. Such abuses were routine. So the very end of that system stood for progress, and ushered in a sense of hope. Despite the slow pace of change in their material circumstances, many South Africans remained loyal to and inspired by the goals of their liberation struggle and the promise represented by their country's favorite son, Nelson Mandela. (The ANC continues to win overwhelming electoral majorities, but some observers are concerned that the concentration of power in this one party is an undemocratic development that bears watching.)

During my four years in Africa, I spent my time in many other places, as well. My territory ranged throughout southern and central Africa. It included nations such as Angola, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Namibia, Congo-Zaire and Rwanda. And these latter two countries, from 1996 onwards, would become almost as prominent in my work as was South Africa.

In Congo-Zaire, I encountered a very different Africa. Zaire was the counterpoint to the hope and promise of South Africa. Where Mandela had symbolized struggle and magnanimity, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire symbolized pure venality and corruption. Mobutu epitomized the generation of African "big men" who rose to power at the end of colonialism and held on by any means necessary. Mobutu ruled for 32 years and literally robbed his mineral-rich nation blind. The copper, gold and diamond mines, the coffee plantations, the fisheries - all sectors of the economy were used as cash cows for Mobutu and his ruling elite, who siphoned off profits so extensively that the economy was hobbled.

The culture of corruption ran so deep that you'd encounter it as soon as you set foot in the country. I found this out on my first visit, in 1996, when I stepped onto the tarmac and had to immediately fend off all kind of schemes to take my cash. Men on the tarmac, who called themselves "protocol" men, swarmed arriving passengers and tried to snatch their bags and their passports - not to steal them, but to hold them ransom for payment of a cash bribe. I will never forget how I had to push and shove my way through the tarmac crowd. I was determined not to give in, not to let go of my passport or my bag, though I was scared to death. A driver from my hotel was waiting for me and rescued me from the mayhem. But the fee he required was as much a shake-down as the schemers on the tarmac.

That was Zaire. Everyone was on the take. Zairians called it, in French, a system of *debruillez-vous*, "fend for yourself," a phrase famously coined by Mobutu himself.

Political scientists call the old Zaire a "collapsed state," meaning the state had ceased to exist. Government bureaucracies barely functioned. Civil servants went for months without receiving any pay. The national budget was a fantasy, too. And the economy was strictly black market. This had been going on for decades, and finally, in the early 1990s, the international community struck back. It ostracized Mobutu. His old friend, the U.S., cut him off. He would no longer receive direct payments from the CIA, as he had during the Cold War, when he helped the U.S. supply rebels in neighboring Angola. Zaire would no longer receive credit from the international lending institutions. And Mobutu himself had become such a pariah that, for a time, he couldn't even get a visa to travel to the U.S. It was a stunning fall from grace for man once celebrated by the U.S. administrations of Ronald Reagan and the first George Bush as America's good friend in Africa.

Mobutu's dimming fortunes coincided with another startling development in the region: the 1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda. That tiny nation, on Zaire's eastern border, saw 800,000 of its people slaughtered in 100 days as the world stood by and did nothing to intervene. The tenth anniversary of that genocide will be marked next week as the modern tragedy it truly was. It decimated the population of the minority Tutsi people of Rwanda, and it had repercussions in the wider central African region that are still felt to this day.

After the 1994 genocide, the killers fled into Mobutu's Zaire. The killers were the old extremist Hutu government, plus its military and supporting militiamen. These killers were called, in French, the "genocidaires." In their flight, they forced hundreds of thousands of their fellow Hutu to flee as well. More than a million of them decamped to Zaire and were housed in a vast network of U.N. refugee camps just inside the Zairian border. And over time, those camps became military bases for attacks into Rwanda by the very same forces who had committed the genocide.

The new government of Rwanda was made up of the Tutsi rebels who had stopped the genocide. Many people in the new government were genocide survivors who lost relatives and neighbors during the cataclysm. They had little reason to believe the genocidaires would stop their attacks, and every reason to believe something had to be done. Finally, in 1996, Rwanda attacked to break up the Hutu bases inside the UN camps. And what then unfolded was a second Rwandan tragedy, this time on Zairian soil, as more than a million people were scattered through the badlands of Eastern Zaire in the midst of war and massacres and starvation.

About half of those refugees headed home to Rwanda in the first weeks of the war. Though the Hutu feared reprisals back home for the genocide, it was better, they figured, than being marooned in the midst of a war inside Zaire.

But that meant about half a million people remained inside Zaire, adrift. Yes, some of them were the killers. But the vast majority of those half million refugees were ordinary people being held hostage by the genocidaires and used as human shields during the fighting.

And they were abandoned by the international community, just as their Tutsi countrymen had been abandoned during the genocide. For several months, the UN, the US the European Union and Nato debated on the whereabouts of a half-million people and debated, also, on whether there were that many of them in the first place.

I was among the journalists on the ground in Eastern Zaire trying to prove that in fact these refugees existed and that in fact that were being killed. It was miserable work. Eastern Zaire was a war zone. And in addition to the Rwandan soldier, there were Zairian rebels who'd been thrown into the war too. And there were local tribal militias whose only loyalty was to the ground on which they stood, meaning they would kill whoever got in their way.

With several colleagues, I made it into this rough territory. We crossed rebel checkpoints, gave up our passports and only hoped we'd get them back, as promised. And we paid whatever bribes were required to move about relatively freely.

Bodies in the Hills

On one of the forays I made into the interior with two colleagues, we stumbled upon evidence of the refugees. On the main road that snaked up the western shore of a lake called Kivu, we happened upon a small band of refugees who'd broken away from a much larger column. One man stepped out from their midst and introduced himself as Jean Damoscene Baragondoza. He had been a postal worker back in Rwanda, he said, and was now leading a group of 70 people, mostly women and children, in a quest to flee the genocidaires and find their way back to Rwanda. He told of massacres, of the forced march led by the genocidaires, of the people's desire to go home.

His small group had escaped by hiding in the tall grass as the column of their fellow refugees marched onward. And now, unexpectedly, they'd encountered two foreign journalists and a driver/translator. Mr. Baragondoza pleaded with us to tell the world there were so many people who needed help in the hills, so many people sick and starving and being killed. It was chilling when he said to us, "There are many bodies in the hills." We bade him gods speed, and then we pushed forward, toward the area where he said we might find even more refugees.

A few miles onward, we entered a small village called Nyabibwe. It was nestled in the hills, in a beautiful valley of lush mountains and low-hanging clouds. It seemed as lovely as Eden, except for the bodies and the burned buildings and smouldering remains of a huge convoy of trucks, tankers, busses and cars (most marked with the insignia of the old Rwandan Hutu government). This was clearly a main "genocidaire" convoy, and this little village had born the brunt of some kind of battle. As we interviewed one of the fighters, we heard the constant report of automatic weapons fire in the surrounding hills where the refugees were on the move. What I was hearing, I would later learn, was probably one of the many massacres of that war. The UN would later document a massacre at Nyabibwe. Mr. Baragondoza had been right.

By May of 1997, the war ended, Mobutu was ousted, and the U.N. reported that roughly 200,000 of its refugees were unaccounted for, meaning they were most

likely dead. And the UN blamed Rwanda and the new government in Zaire for the massacres. The U.S. refused to assist the new Zairian government unless it allowed an investigation into the killings.

It all struck me as bitterly ironic. When those refugees could have been saved, the world refused to save them. And now that they were dead, there was much condemnation about their deaths. It was one of my many bitter lessons about global politics in Africa, about the way the world - meaning the West, especially the U.S. - too often disregards African life.

When I'd return to Johannesburg after my travels in Congo-Zaire, I was so relieved. There would be good food, fresh fruit and vegetables, electricity at the flip of a switch, and all the comforts of home. I'd get excited just to see the bright lights along the runway, since there were so many other landings in other countries when I'd grit my teeth on landing at a darkened airstrip. And I'd relish the walk through immigration and customs without anyone harassing me or hitting me up for a bribe. In South Africa, despite the crime, I felt secure.

But I don't mean to suggest that I hated being in places like Congo-Zaire. To the contrary, I often enjoyed life in its capital city, Kinshasa (when gunfire wasn't crackling). And I developed a deep respect for some of the ordinary people I met along the way. In fact, there was something almost noble about the way so many people went about their lives, whether in South Africa or Congo or Angola or wherever. Their lives were often brutally hard, but they still were gracious and giving souls. They suffered and scraped to feed their children each day, but still maintained a profound sense of dignity. They were people who had been treated with terrible inhumanity but whose own sense of humaneness was intact.

The ordinary African struggle both inspired me, humbled me, and became the moral center of my work. There was no pot of gold along the Golden Highway, I learned, only deep African hopes and mighty African dreams.

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“Honors Place is remarkable. It’s like home and everyone there is family. We work hard and play hard, driven by our friendship and common pursuit of excellence,” says Damion Dunn, Honors Place Resident. The Honors Place at Florida International University is on-campus residence living. As an Honors College student, you will have the opportunity to participate in this special campus housing program.

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The Honors College has been conducting study abroad programs since 1994 and currently offers opportunities for its students in Spain, Italy, and Jamaica. The summer programs are designed to fulfill one year (six credits) of Honors College curriculum requirement, while the Spain Fall Program offers from nine to fifteen credit hours. The Honors College Study Abroad Programs offer students the opportunity to experience immersion in another culture while pursuing a rigorous academic program integrated with the honors curriculum. Instruction is in English in all the programs.

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