

The Big Read: Don't leave us to ourselves

Apr 17, 2015 | Jonathan Jansen

Dear Foreign National Student



MADE WELCOME: A picture from the book 'Education in Exile: Somafco, the ANC School in Tanzania, 1978-1992', written by Brown Maaba, Sean Morrow and Loyiso Pulumani, published by the HSRC Press.

"When a poor school has high marks in maths or physical science, invariably the teacher is from another African country"

Today I once again hang my head in shame as we continue to threaten, harass and even kill you and your family members and friends on the streets of South Africa. I am ashamed not only because our leaders are silent on this atrocity but because some of them seem to provoke such violence in their speech while others are in open denial as they scramble to find substitute words for this evil with an inflammable name, xenophobia.

Yet this week many of you will stride across graduation stages in South African universities to obtain your degrees. One of you, a student at my university, wrote to tell me that you will achieve the award for top student in economics even though you came here from Zimbabwe without a cent in your pocket.

More of you from other African countries are beginning to obtain PhDs, the highest qualification in a university, than black South Africans coming through the academy. You are not wealthy, privileged or loud; you simply keep your head down and you work hard despite the difficulties of survival in a foreign country. I am incredibly proud of you.

I think what is happening in our country is that we are envious of you. You do better than us. You do not fall into the trap of victimhood and seek others to blame for your hardships. You know that the only exit from poverty is a solid education and a higher degree. You come here from poorer countries with much better quality education in mathematics and science. That is why you triumph in degrees that require those disciplines.

By your very success you show us up, and rather than admire you for your success, we make your life here difficult.

My heart broke last week when, in a debate among students from Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe on the subject of statues, monuments and memorials, one of you told the assembled crowd that you did not experience any racism on campus but that you did encounter xenophobia. I went over to you and, with a lump in my throat, asked for your forgiveness for our intolerance.

You will also have to forgive us South Africans for our short memories. I did my doctoral field work in Chinhoyi in Zimbabwe as an overseas student and I noticed how you cared for South Africans living in exile when many of our compatriots fled the apartheid regime to take refuge in the frontline states, as we called your countries then.

The exiles were generally treated with compassion and enjoyed access to the subsidised food at the campus cafeteria of the University of Zimbabwe; there was no discrimination. We slept in your homes without fear of being attacked with an axe or set on fire in your townships. You were gentle with us over those many years, and this is how we repay you on the streets of Durban right now.

Many of you foreign nationals work hard as teachers in the townships of South Africa, and guess what - when a poor school has very high marks in mathematics or physical science, invariably the teacher is from another African country.

In one of the most dysfunctional schools of Cape Town, you gave me a student with a near 100% mark in Grade 12 history and as he finishes his teaching degree in - surprise - history, young Sinxolo Sem worships the ground you walk on. Poor Sinxolo was in great distress recently as the Department of Home Affairs kept you stranded in your country because of these complex new visa rules.

Please do not leave. Whether as traders in the townships or teachers in schools, we need you here. We need you as role models teaching us how to work really hard and succeed in a stagnant economy.

We need you to teach the next generation of young South African leaders so that we, too, can graduate in great numbers in those fields such as accounting and auditing where black citizens are still under-represented.

It will not surprise you to know that some of our universities do not like hiring you because you do not "count" in the employment equity numbers we are supposed to achieve in our reporting requirements to the Department of Labour.

We need you, in other words, to make us more fully human.

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