

When Blacks turn Against Blacks

Stan Chu Ilo

Notwithstanding the debate in Quebec and some of the debate during the Ontario election campaign, I first of all think immigrants come to this country to belong to this country...I also think that the Canadian approach to this, which is a mixture of integration and accommodation, for a lack of a better term, is the right approach.

-Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper speaking on Canadian immigration policy, December 23, 2007.

Many people who have followed post-apartheid South African society will not be surprised at present and ongoing uprising of South African Blacks against Black migrants in Alexandra, Johannesburg. This was a crisis in the making. There are three fault lines that have developed since the end of apartheid and the introduction of Black majority rule in South Africa: The first is the internal crisis and conflict of identity among the Black South Africans themselves. Many young Black South Africans, especially those who were born in the late 60's and early 70's, never had an opportunity to develop their skills or attain any level of educational or professional competence. Most of them were sired in the revolutionary anti-apartheid movement of the 70's characterized by militancy and rebellion. With the end of apartheid, these young men were left in the broken lower rungs of social progress, stifled as persons in the choking economic dungeons of poverty and existential insouciance. The victorious elites of the ruling party, the ANC, who took the reins of power at all levels failed to address the needs of these young people and the burgeoning Black families who were waking up from the long night of depersonalization and cultural asphyxiation. Their concerns were blithely papered over as temporary social problems that will disappear as the gains of Black majority rule begin to trickle down. Unfortunately, close to two decades after the end of apartheid, the challenges of these lost generations of South Africans have not been addressed. The post-Mandela ANC has continued to lose legitimacy as South African Blacks move from the euphoria of freedom to the stark reality of Black social apartheid that is widening the economic divide between the White South Africans and the Blacks, and among the Blacks themselves and other colored but marginalized citizens of South Africa. The ruling party has not seriously addressed the needs of the lost generation as well as the Black community as a whole as poverty continues to spread like wild fire among young Blacks and their families, and the number of the unemployed and unemployable Black South Africans continues to increase

exponentially; while HIV/AIDS continues to eat away the vibrant portion of a palpably restive Black community.

This situation has given rise to the second fault line in South Africa. There is real anger among young Black South Africans. In the early days of the post-apartheid era, the anger among the lost generation was directed against fellow South Africans, fueled by the unrepentant stand of the Inkatha Freedom Party which felt that the ANC under Mandela has sold out to the White settlers. The Black South Africans turned against themselves in those early days in what many thought would play into the false White bifurcated vision of the Black personality as vaunting, aggressive, violent, and resistant to order and good governance. It was a mini-apocalypse as young Black South Africans turned against each other in an orgy of violence and blood-letting. Their passion and hope for a new and prosperous country was not balanced with a delayed gratification that demanded the necessary sacrifice and enduring the inevitable pain that come with moving from hope to achievement.

Another reality that prepared the grounds for the present crisis is the violence in South Africa as a whole. South Africa is a very violent country, indeed the most violent country in Africa and second to Brazil in the rate of violent crime globally. Almost everyone has access to guns, machetes, or the *panga*. These weapons are easily made by the many blacksmiths and local manufacturers who in the immediate past, secretly produced and armed Black South Africans in the liberation battle against the White supremacists. Thus, with a low self-esteem, lacking any education, fueled by crumbling social structures, deprived of any sense of purpose, and with no clear signs of progress or self or group transcendence over the mounting social and economic challenges of the day, the young Black South African of today is understandably angry. A biting absolute poverty always leads to violence, but poverty does not legitimize violence. But the logic of peace and reconciliation which is being promoted in the various youth camps run by the Tutu Peace foundation in many provinces in South Africa is not being bought by young South Africans who are uneducated, sick, hungry, angry, and whose hopes are fading as they see the receding horizons of hope and meaning. These angry but vibrant young South Africans reveal a thin tipping point of the searing tinder box on which the Rainbow nation has been sitting for a long time.

The violence of Black South Africans against the over 3 million Black migrants from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Rwanda, Mozambique, Kenya, Malawi etc is the symptom of a deeper social and economic malaise in South Africa. A country that is internally at war with herself cannot produce citizens who are at peace with foreigners. In the past, the native Black South Africans saw the White settlers take over their land with its wealth and fortune, and subsequently subjected Blacks to internal slavery for more than a century and half. Today, the Black South Africans faced with a shattered social system and decaying economic structures, and wallowing in the filthy squalor of want in the midst of wealth, see in the new 'settler migrants' a new threat to their survival. The hostility of the native South Africans to fellow Blacks is another reflection of the lack of integration within the South African society. It also points to the many wounded hearts and heads that need a more realistic social engineering and an organic healing of memory beyond the highly publicized truth and reconciliation commission. There are millions of Black South Africans who are losing hope in the new reality ushered in by Black majority rule. These are the ones who killed Lucky Dube, they are the ones who see Tabo Mbeki as elitist and will love to see his back. These are the ones who are rooting for Zuma because he appears to be one with them even if he carries a moral albatross. These Blacks find new forms of expression through violence against fellow Blacks in Pretoria, Diepsloot, and Alexandra and through uncontrollable violent crimes and drugs.

The streets will soon be cleaned of the burnt corpses and damaged cars, houses and stalls, but something deeper is burning in South Africa that needs to be recovered: Hope is burning in South Africa. A new narrative is needed in South Africa that should seek the reconciliation of the Black South Africans with themselves. The typical Black South African is homeless not in a physical sense of the absence of houses, but at a deeper existential level. They are suffering from an absence of the inner fulfillment and self-contentment that arise spontaneously from one's general condition of being at peace with oneself, with one's culture, one's nation and with other people and the world of nature and the supernatural. This is a task which Mandela began but which Mbeki has ignored to the peril of his country and the entire Black race. Reconciliation in South Africa can only be real when the feuding ethnic Black nationalities come to terms with themselves and the new identity and reality that today's South Africa presents. This demands a commitment to distributive,

commutative, and social justice, which reweaves the licking nets of economic and social equilibrium in South Africa. South Africa should be home to all Africans because when the dignity of the Black person was insulted and abused by apartheid, Africans everywhere felt humiliated and degraded. The conquest of freedom in South Africa was the result of the cumulative anger and activism by Africans everywhere supported by men and women of goodwill all over the world. But today the freedom that is lacking in South Africa and the rest of the continent is the freedom every citizen should have to pursue their ordered ends and attain a measure of human and cultural fulfillment.

The condition of South Africa today is clear and simple: This is a nation in dire need of reconciliation and wrenching in the heat of historical injustice. Until this is done, no one is safe in that troubled land, especially Black South Africans and Blacks from outside South Africa. This reality should remind Africans of another truth which we often ignore: Africans from the African continent need reconciliation with who they are and with their fellow Africans. It amazes me how many of us Africans living in Western countries assume that rights and privileges, equality and fair treatment from foreign countries are simply ours to claim, if we cannot have them in our respective countries. How many of us who complain when we suffer racism abroad can say that we have overcome racial and ethnic blinkers? We expect White people in the Western world to accept us, grant us residence permit, citizenship, jobs, and other claims and prerogatives. We expect to prosper on foreign soils, as long as we work hard or as long as we play the game. Indeed, many of us leave Nigeria and live abroad because we expect better life abroad and to find a true and peaceful home in the Western world. We cannot find a home abroad if we cannot find it 'at home.'

Unfortunately, many of us Nigerians in spite of our education and famed religious grandstanding still carry a heavy baggage of bias and prejudice based on ethnic groupings. We are thus held internally captive because of acquired or inherited untested time-crusted categorizations and platitudes about people outside our visible cultural or ethnic or class identities. Even among the same ethnic group, there are bias, prejudices, profiling, and hatred based on clannish considerations and state of origin. How integrated is Nigerian society? Nigeria like most other African countries is in dire need of integration.

The Pan-Africanists of the early 20th century had as their motto, a “Back to Africa” campaign. They were driven by an uncritical innocent idealism that Africa is home to all Africans. It should be true then and should be true even in our times. How wrong the Pan-Africanists were to think that the diasporic movement to far flung territories by people of African descent could be resolved through a return to Mother Africa, our true home. Is it not a tragedy that Africa is no longer a home for Africans except when they flee abroad or when they fly to the small and shrinking safety of their small ethnic nationalities or nationally defined ethnic identities? Is it not a shame that Blacks are killing fellow Blacks in African land, replicating the cycle of violence and decay that are so often the case in the Black neighborhoods of Toronto, Chicago, Houston, New York, Paris, Marseille and Brescia? Cry beloved ancestors!

Stan Chu Ilo, is a Catholic priest, writer, and social critic. Author of *The Face of Africa: Looking Beyond the Shadows* (Spectrum Books Ibadan), and the forthcoming book, *Living in Hope: An Afro-Centric Christian Vision for Today*. He lives in Hastings, Ontario, Canada.