



One Zambia, Many Nations

By Zukiswa Wanner



Within 30 minutes of meeting two different groups of people, Zambian rapper Pilato's satire of Donald Glover's *This is America*, becomes a topic. Pilato, to those who don't know him, is to Zambia what Bobi Wine is to Uganda. A musician and an activist. Except that Pilato, real name Fumba Chama, failed to get a seat in Zambia's August house in the last elections. But he, like Bobi Wine, has been arrested for protesting against and criticizing the current administration. To one of my well-heeled friends, Pilato's *This is Zambia* is a poorly executed, poor reflection of the nation because 'there is so much more to Zambia than the Chinese doing business here.' He should decide, my friend says, on whether he wants to be a musician or a politician because, at the moment, he is not doing either of the two well. To our cab driver Mich and his friend, it's an honest reflection of the country. 'Pilato talks the truth in that song,' Mich says. 'We shall soon be asking the Chinese for permission to live in our country because they own so much of us. And, we are also so desperate that we want quick solutions through these alleged prophets.' Mich knows what he is talking about regarding the latter. When he hears that our next stop is Zimbabwe, he laughs and tells us how he did a spiritual journey to Prophet Magaya in the neighbouring country. 'It was a waste of money. I sowed a seed from my savings and years later, nothing has come of it.'

The evening Mich picks us up from the Inter-City Bus Stop on Dedan Kimathi Rd is our first night in Zambia since 2016. Back then, the current President Edgar Lungu was preparing to be elected for the first time after having taken over the reins of power on the late President Michael Sata's unexpected demise. This time, the only election that was on the cards was for the Mayor of Lusaka.

Mich, a University of Zambia graduate who has been relegated to driving his mother's car as a cab to earn an income and a strong supporter of the opposition, had already pronounced that whatever he wished, the candidate for the governing PF would win. 'He is getting an endorsement from the President but even if he wasn't winning, they would find a way for him to win.' On this occasion, we are in Zambia for one night only. I shall return two weeks later for a writing workshop. The next time around, I will be in Zambia's second largest city, Kitwe, in the Copperbelt Province. For now though as we depart for Harare, everyone in our party notices that the roads from Lusaka towards the border with Zimbabwe seem to be much better than those we have had to deal with from the Nakonde border with Tanzania. The reason is simple. Zambia and Zimbabwe do a lot of trade with each other and their capitals are a mere eight hours away from each other.

We take a little longer than we should at the border because Zimbabwe Customs want us to take all our luggage out and pay for any goods beyond a speculated number. The luggage goes through the X-Ray scanner after which we still have to stand by our luggage while a specially trained sniffer dog passes by each of our luggage. This is how my 13-year-old son ends up with four pieces of hair braids in his baggage. A woman who was seated next to us asked us whether we could please carry her braid pieces as she had eight and the maximum one can carry are four. It seemed a tad ridiculous, to say the least. The only other border where there is such curious attention to detail on what one brings in is at Beit Bridge border post as one enters or exits South Africa. When I return, I will notice that our bus just drives right through into Zambia after passports are stamped. It's a great feeling.

I spend the night of my return in Lusaka with a Zambian writer friend before flying out. There seem to be many literary groupings in Zambia but so few books coming out which are competitive worldwide or even continentally. When I ask her why that is, she speculates that it's because writing doesn't pay but having the writer title is considered prestigious. So when people can have a little money on the side, they will write manuscripts and self-publish then have an author among their title while they continue with the daily grind of selling tomatoes or going to the office. I become apprehensive. What will I encounter at the writing workshop I am about to have over the weekend in Kitwe?

There are no flights from Lusaka to Kitwe so I fly to Ndola, hometown to Edgar Lungu and an hour away from Kitwe. I am on a small plane where we are not more than ten passengers. Flight time is a mere 45 minutes and this new airline manages to offer a snack and a drink on this short flight. On arrival, our flight attendant announces, 'Welcome to Ndola Airport. We kindly ask passengers that they remain seated until Honourable blah blah has disembarked.' Yet again I can't help thinking how I absolutely abhor what I call a *Mheshimiwa* Complex that seems to be all over this continent. As I am leaving I ask the flight attendant, 'Tell me. Why did you want us to wait for the Minister to disembark? Is he not a public servant and therefore should be waiting for the public first?' The flight attendant is taken aback. He laughs. 'You are not from here, are you?' I answer that as a matter of fact I am. Baggage claim, in these sort of encounters, is the great equalizer. And so I take small delight in taking my bag before he does. However, as I am getting into a cab, I notice that the driver who came to pick up *Mhesh* from the airport is carrying his briefcase and his bag. Sigh. I arrive at my lodging in Kitwe an hour later.

In the morning, I shall meet the participants for the two day writing workshop. There are six writers in the workshop. I am particularly impressed by one young writer whose imagination, if he continues to write, would be perfect for the Arthur C. Clarke international science fiction award. The other writers are pretty impressive too and I understand why they may have been selected for the workshop. Only one writer worries me, although I say nothing about how I feel loudly. As I am giving them some different writing prompts, his pieces almost always conclude with a *rebirth in Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. It's fascinating to watch the interaction between he and the sci-fi writer, a

young man who could be his son and who is taking a gap year before starting university next year. I do not know whether the young man is too much for him, but he does not return on the final day.

In conversation with the writers who all seem to be from families that are not rich but fairly comfortable, there is a sense of uncertainty about their futures. As I listen to them during our breaks, I can't help but notice that I have seen these youngsters in many countries on the continent. I have seen them in Kenya, in Zimbabwe, in Botswana, in Ghana and in Nigeria. Those who are employed, are doing some contractual work for some NGOs and they hope they can be there for a long time, donor funding permitting. A couple do not work but are university graduates still staying at home praying for something, anything, to come up. The gap year young man is the only one who seems to still have some hope that through sheer hard work, he can make it. For his sake, I hope Zambia sorts itself out before he graduates. Unfortunately, the manager of our establishment makes me lose a bit of that hope. On a drive into town, she tells me of the debt that the country now owes our friends in the East. In Kitwe, as in Ndola, I spot a large Bank of China. 'Is this a big thing here, I have seen it in Ndola too.' She tells me that Bank of China is not for the locals but for the Chinese investors. 'If any of us are using it, it's because we are in partnership with Chinese companies.'

When I return to Lusaka, I shall be with my well-heeled friends. It's a day before a public holiday so people are ordering beers in pitchers at Keg and Lion, a pub in Eastpark, one of Lusaka's malls. Perhaps there is uncertainty here but it's not as visible as it was among the writers in Kitwe or in conversation with Mich and his friends. The patrons are well-dressed and talk casually of whether the best parties are in Lagos, New York or Joburg. They talk of international airlines they will no longer fly because of profiling and have a relative or two in London who they have bought groceries for while visiting. When they get ill, my well-heeled friends in Keg & Lion will be stabilized then fly out of the country to mend, just like the two Presidents of Zambia who died in office. It's a different face of Zambia, a face with so few of the country's population but unfortunately for Pilato and his fans, this too is Zambia. The connected Zambia that matters and is worth paying attention to - according to those who govern the land - except just before elections. In this way, Zambia duplicates many other African nations.

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