

## **Feelings of a Nigerian in Antananarivo**

**By**

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A smiley Joel was right there as we exited the Antananarivo local airport in the evening of January 3, 2023. He took us to the residence of our hosts. It was a 3-bedroom spacious bungalow in a very posh secure Estate. The common recreational facilities were fantastic: lawn tennis, SPA, indoor temperature adjustable swimming pool etc. Happy children were playing basketball, riding on bicycles as I sauntered round on one evening. There are competing spacious Estates in Nigeria. Malagasy elites, only accustomed to Paris, I learnt used to think that they are superior to other Africans on the availability of a better life until opportunities started exposing some of them to Cape Town, Lagos, Dakar, Abuja and Nairobi. The feeling of idyllic happiness I had in the Estate in which I stayed reminded me of how life should and could be.

I need not be told that the other side constituting the majority of the approximately 29 million Malagasy live differently. They constitute a large chunk of the disturbing statistics and figures. Madagascar's Human Development Index (HDI) ranks 173 out of 191 countries makes it one of the least developed countries in the world. Of course, Madagascar is better than conflict ridden Somalia at the bottom. Three-quarters of Madagascar's population are said to be living below extreme poverty level, that is, below \$1.90 per day. Nigeria, in spite of its blessings from nature, is not much different with its HDI ranking of 163rd position out of 191 and 63% of its population in extreme poverty.

Every year, Madagascar faces environmental problems, especially from drought, cyclones as well as flooding. At least three to four cyclones hit the Island country annually. Lives and material products are lost. Most people agree that the helplessness and failure to build resilience is one of the major reasons for poverty in Madagascar. The intimidating levels of poverty in Madagascar share a symbiotic relationship with the environmental challenges of the country for which leadership has been unable to provide answers.

France, the former colonial power in Madagascar, in spite of bumpy relations arising from colonisation and the fighting of a bitter war before the granting of "flag independence", continues to hold on to the heights of the economic life of Madagascar. French citizens, including the Karana of Indian origin, hold most of the wealth. The Karana had migrated from Gujarat state of India in the 19th Century and settled in Madagascar. Even if they want Malagasy nationality, the 18 ethnic groups making up Malagasy are not ready to accept them. This was not the case with Indonesians who came relatively earlier and have intermixed very well to the extent that their DNA is well entrenched in Malagasy.

On the Karana, I sounded a number of Malagasy people out and they are united on the Karana being "just traders" and not nationals. This sounded strange to me as a foreigner. The Karana who had collaborated with the French, privately carry French passports. More and more, capital finds it easy to move around the world. But such luxury is not granted to labour: passports and visas check and constrain free movement. The Karana are taking advantage of the Western-pressured liberalisation to invest in other African countries. Realistically, it has been shown that the Malagasy have to be tolerant of the Karana who own a

lot of wealth and actually fund competing candidates during elections so that whoever wins owes them a debt. This is a dimension of the realities of external dynamics, a major aspect of situational foundation issues that need to be addressed in addition to leadership deficit if Madagascar is to grow. These problems, (at the academic level), I had conceptualised as Situational Quadruple Nexus (SQN) which my readers in this piece need not worry about. But if there is an interest to know more, the Google search engine should be helpful.

Madagascar is reportedly a politically hierarchical society in which children of slaves are still seen as slaves as I learnt at Nosy Be. A situation that is like the Osu Caste system among some of the Igbo of Nigeria. I used to laugh at my friends describing themselves as the free-born of their respective communities. The answer, whether among the Igbo, the Indians or the Sakalava community at Nosy Be is to move to the wider world and earn freedoms by jettisoning ascriptive classifications.

I also learnt that Presidents must preferably come from a full-blooded (mother and father) Mierena community – one of the 18 ethnic groups in Madagascar. Other ethnic groups have respective political limits they can aspire to attain. Didier Ratsiraka, I understand was an exception of a sort because his mother was not Mierena and some were not pleased about that. He developed infrastructure in terms of education and hospitals but reportedly killed human capital.

The world was largely under the US-led West and Russia-led East until China came on board and India is now wanting a seat at the table. Madagascar was initially in the Western orbit with France as the Senior Tutor before it moved to the Russia-led Soviet Union's sphere in Africa. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, Madagascar moved back to the West or principally France even though like was said to be the case in Cote D'Ivoire, (as some claimed), Laurent Gbagbo was wanting to trade France for the United States of America. All masters have their respective interests and the national interests of African countries are inconsequential, although Africans have failed to take in this point. Or better still, African leaders know the truth about the conflictual nature of Africa's interests and those of foreign dominant countries, but they dare not try to stand up for their respective countries. African leaders are ready to satisfy their respective masters who help them conceal their ill-gotten wealth and protect them while in office. While Madagascar would like to be under France and/or US, however, it does not seem that the major powers see great strategic interests. French citizens already control the main aspects of the economy of Madagascar. It does not make sense to do more.

Aside from the external dimension of control, Madagascar is said to have the African disease of “no hurry in Africa”. It is locally called “mora mora”. Or put another way, “fihavanana”, implies seeking a consensus over all issues. One would have seen carrying everyone along on a developmental move as positive. But it becomes negative when it took 10 years to negotiate a loan with the European Union, for the construction of an additional road to boost commerce and movements in Antananarivo. The beautiful road has now been commissioned, reducing traffic jams.

I was driven on the new Tamatave road. This experience exposed me to the good works of Rev. Father Pedro Pablo Opeka (Pere Pedro), an Argentinian with a Slovenian mother, who came to Madagascar as a Catholic Priest who was nominated to run a rural parish in Southeast Madagascar in 1975. In 1989, he was deployed to direct a seminary in Antananarivo. Upon arriving in the city, he saw a dump site where people were rummaging in for food. He felt human beings should not live that way and he decided to do something about it. Raising funds from several sources, he began a gradual process of consulting the people to turn the dump sites into homes. He had to buy the land and began expanding using a non-governmental organisation he called “Akamasoa” meaning good friends, in Malagasy. Thus began 18 villages sustaining 30,000 persons with almost 40 schools at different levels and now with a University

that has some of the initial inhabitants as its lecturers. The sprawling property ran for at least a kilometre if not more along the stretch of the road. Almost a million people have had to stay in the villages for short periods of time for support to ameliorate different levels of stress, in some cases for weeks at the welcoming centres. Akamasoa is reportedly self-sufficient needing about 25% of support, thanks to the farms and other creative efforts led by Father Pedro to generate revenue for the community.

I wished I had enough time to sit with Father Pedro – a friend of Pope Francis who got the Pope to visit the Island country. Pope Francis also visited and blessed the inhabitants of Akamasoa. Father Pedro had been nominated for the Nobel Award for Peace a number of times. I would readily join in nominating such a selfless man, as opposed to the self-serving prosperity preachers of the Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria. They wring money out of the poor telling them they will be happy to go to paradise in heaven as the "false prophets" live comfortably in paradise on earth, fuelling and flying jets all over. They rob people of their lands as opposed to paying fair value to expand and build mega structures for praying. They use their influence to acquire general titles to land from the governments that they support as they acquiesce to the rapacious governors in my country. Corruption is not limited to those in government, it includes those in the private and social sectors and especially tax-free commercial franchises called religious organisations in much of Africa and especially Nigeria. Factories that once produced goods and reduced unemployment are now grounds for praying for employment as deceptive Pastors sell hope of great lives for the faithful in heaven.

A dedicated tour of Antananarivo was beneficial. Antananarivo has, over time, converted its undulating nature of hills and rapid descent into valley planes into a beautiful city. The highest point has the beautiful palace of yore that once had Queen Ranavalona I who was born in 1788 into the Merina Kingdom that held sway over Madagascar. She had ruled with iron hands from August 11, 1828, until she died on August 16, 1861, and her son took over as Radama II. She had been a widow of Radama I who had conquered much of the territory of Madagascar. The Queen tried to avoid European powers and built a strong force that repelled the French at the coastal town of Foulpointe. With her patriotic efforts against European moves, including repelling the growth of the London Mission Society, (the precursor of British colonisation), she got bad press that Western Historians also bequeathed. Her son became more amiable.

The colours and simplicity of walking by the presidential palace in the city centre were nice. I understand that this palace is now used as an office as a newer one existed at a place beyond the Tatamave road that we decided not to visit for fear of traffic. The current President lives in his own house but receives dignitaries at the out-of-town palace.

Taking pictures of undulating Tana was fun on its own. But this Tana nature, to my mind, represents a disaster waiting to happen in these days of climate change. A serious inundation would be a major flooding disaster. More lands are being reclaimed from marshes and the banks of the Ikopa river – the second longest river in Madagascar – that passes through Antananarivo.

Dinner with our Senegalese friends on January 6, 2023, was very pleasant. Gave the seven of us more bonding opportunities as we exchanged views on our dear West Africa and its tribulations in the hands of leaders with little or no vision to improve the lives of our people.

Hailu, the Ethiopian Airlines (ET) Country Manager for Madagascar, was very nice. We exchanged pleasantries and made him understand how proud we are of the ET brand. He was appreciative and briefed more about ET strides. Reluctantly, we had to bid farewell to our Hosts, including Joel and rush to board without stopping at the VIP lounge.

Our flights back to Nigeria, with a night at the Bole Airport Skylight hotel, were smooth until the normal Murtala Mohammed International Airport experience. Even in the smallest airports around the world, escalators worked and there were functional wi-fi. The Nigerian authorities had announced there was no need to fill out Covid-19 forms online anymore. But a queue was created to check for the forms. Without them, you now need to fill out a yellow card that I can bet no one will look at but it provides opportunities for someone to award contracts to printers. The conveyor belt was epileptic and it took us two hours to leave the airport after landing. And only Ethiopian Airlines and Rwanda Air were on the ground. What would it have been like if we had 10 flights landing within 10 minutes? In any case, we were happy to be back in the only country we can call home.

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