

Life and Times with Kole Omotosho - 1943 - 19 July 2023

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My teacher and friend.

A memorial was held today 8 August, 2023 in South Africa where he settled for most of the past 30 years. Kole was one of the earliest Nigerian academics to move to SA. He left Nigeria as soon as apartheid started thawing, ahead of independence.

I first met Kole as a young teen at the University of Ife where he was teaching. I can't remember the exact circumstances of our meeting now but we got quite close. I cannot even remember with any degree of certainty that my student contract with him via any courses exceeded one or two minor electives. But he certainly had a great amount of influence on a number of us, myself inclusive.

He would from time to time invite some of us to small dinner parties at his home when he had friends visiting from outside town or internationally. He lived in a part of campus that I jokingly called the West Bank. It was in a new layout in the staff quarters area, and it reminded me of pictures of Israeli West Bank settlements that I had seen in news magazines.

His West Indian wife, Aunty Mag (Margarita), an architect who was a staff in the university Works department, found that particularly interesting and insightful, pointing out that it was actually an Israeli designed layout!

They introduced me to North African Arab cuisine. Kole was an Arabic scholar & had lived a bit in

Egypt so some of their cooking was North Africa influenced. I guess it really was more Westernised Arab fare; some basic finger foods and Moroccan Couscous, which their Ghanaian cook would put together under aunty Mag's supervision.

There was an apocryphal story among students at the time about his choice of Arabic studies as specialty and how he got into it. It was said that during registration processes at Ibadan, he had found the queues at the faculty of arts unbearably long and Kole, being a bit of an impatient human, had seen another queue with just half a dozen or so people in it. He promptly joined it. By the time he got to the head of the queue he was to find out it was for registration to study Arabic. By this time, the story went, it was too late to go all the way to the back of the long queue which had by now become longer. That was how he became an Arabist, the story concluded. But it was really not anything of the sort.

Having left High School in Kings College, Lagos, he was actually admitted to the university of Ibadan to study French. After graduation, he went on to Edinburgh to study literature, & finally he did a PhD in Arabic studies and literature, at the American University in Cairo. Apart from basic Arab cuisine, Kole also taught me wine. Hardly a purist, he would say that good wine is whatever tastes good in your mouth, and it is invariably related to how deep your pocket is at any point in time!

He had a very wry sense of humour but enjoyed a hearty laugh. He could laugh at himself, and he did that a lot, telling self deprecating stories of his travel experience in out of the way places. He could also laugh at your expense if he got the chance. And oh, he relished it whenever he got such a chance.

Kole was more of a thinker than a writer in my opinion. His deep thought is reflected in his non-fiction writing. The depth and quality of his thought also enriched his story telling.

He was big, even on a personal level, on the study of contrasts. Ife faculty at the time was full of all sorts of characters. He would analyse them individually and point out their contrasting habits and ways. He would even compare himself to others. He would then ask us which of the contrasting characters appealed to us that we might like to emulate. He would point out how you most often would need to take the good with the bad in people.

It was no surprise that he later wrote a book: *Achebe or Soyinka? A Study in Contrasts*. His quality of thought is also reflected in his "Season of Migration to the South: Africa's Crises Reconsidered."

Our paths were to cross again a few years after I left Ife. I was already working in the publishing industry and we commissioned him to write a popular history of Nigeria for the company.

He chose to do it in a mixture of fact and fiction.

The history was factual but a bit of the 'atmosphere' was fiction. I was assigned as his managing editor, & functioned as his PA, purse keeper & research assistant for more than a year.

We took several road trips around Nigeria gathering material & conducting interviews. It is from that experience that I know a bit of our Nigerian landscape & history. The materials we gathered on those trips were enough to write several books. One of the dilemmas he faced was what to include in his book and what to leave out. We would often agonise over this till late whenever he visited Ibadan or I went up to ife to see him.

There was a passage in the manuscript that attracted a stern threat of litigation from a very powerful individual. Interestingly enough, it was one our lawyers had flagged. Legal advice suggested it be taken out completely & we duly did.

This was to lead to an awkward situation, with Kole being difficult even as we didn't have assertive evidential comfort.

I really didn't understand what all this was about and why Kole didn't see there was no way we could go ahead with a publication that the company had already received a 'cease and desist' letter from one of the most respected law firms in the country at the time. The company had invested a princely amount in the project in local and international travel and research advances. Therefore we weren't going to allow what seemed to us an innocuous passage to jeopardise its publication prospects.

The entire company had been excited about the publication prospects. Even the company chairman would drop in on a number of occasions to participate in our discussions on it.

The working title of the book was *Our Hands Are Tied*, a reference to the 1962 treasonable felony trial judgment, an incident which seemed symptomatic of everything that was wrong in our nation. We had all gotten used to it and it seemed to roll off the tongue nicely. Marketing materials were already being prepared when someone, (I cannot now remember who it was, but might have been a friend of Kole's) suggested that it had a negative ring and divisive tone to it. The trial itself was still a very divisive issue, even after more than 25 years. That view made unanimous sense to all involved, and so we had to go back to the drawing board.

After a lot of rumination on his part and several brainstorming sessions with the publishing team, we settled for *Just Before Dawn*. The title was a recall of the hours in which our independence took place & the ones in which most Nigerian coup d'état moves were made. Kole also added a little positive twist to it; "it's darkest just before a glorious dawn." It suggested that Nigeria's glorious morning was imminent.

The book was to become his masterpiece. But that little disagreement remained a sore point and seemed to cast a pall on things at a time that was supposed to be his moment of literary triumph. While he seemed to understand the position and arguments from the publishers point of view, he just couldn't seem to be able to accept what he saw as bullying on the part of the complainant. His sources seemed impeccable, we all knew that, but he couldn't guarantee that they'd be ready to expose themselves as witnesses in his and the company's favour.

It was shortly after, still disappointed, hurt and let down by what he probably saw as his publisher's wilful capitulation, that he left Nigeria. I have heard a version of things, that he had concerns about his safety as a result of the publication. Although the complainant was sufficiently irate, there was really nothing of the sort as far as I know.

He eventually ended up in South Africa. He taught first at the University of Western Cape. Later, he got a position as one of the earliest black professors at Stellenbosch. Kole had acted on stage on a number of occasions back home. But It was in South Africa that he got into TV acting, featuring as the 'Yebo Gogo man' in a series of TV & billboard adverts for Vodacom SA. Those adverts were a huge success and hugely popular; one of the first times in TV depiction in SA that a black, had the last laugh on a white.

Nelson Mandela was to remark later in an encounter with him, that on account of that advert campaign, Kole was one of the most photographed faces in SA after him. Kole also acted in the popular hit TV series *Jacob's Cross* in a 'godfather in winter' role as the patriarch of the Abayomi family empire.

Kole was also a philanthropist. He set up a foundation, Bayt Alhikma, through which he gave small grants to scholars doing unusually useful study. Many years ago, after Aunty Mag's sad passing after

a protracted illness we were concerned for him, considering their closeness. But he eventually apparently pulled through and soldiered on, even if something in him seemed to have gone with her.

He moved back to Nigeria for a few years to Akure, taking up a position in a nearby private uni.

But he soon had to move back to SA when his health demanded. Kole was a great guy, a really good human being. He didn't mind being called Kole by students, & a number of them did. But he was always uncle Kole to me.

I remember my final week in Ife when I had gone to his office to say my goodbyes. He asked when exactly I was leaving. It coincided with a planned trip he was making to Ibadan. He offered to give me a ride. It would be a relief from lugging my stuff in public transport. We drove in his beat up red Volkswagen Beetle. We talked all the way about so many things; the possibilities that lay ahead and dreams of the future.

He drove me right to our house. I invited him to come in to say hello to my parents, and he met my dad who was home. In my video birthday message to him on his 80th birthday in May, I recounted this story and expressed how much it meant to me at the time.

Echoing his son, Akin's words at the memorial, Kole's legacy will continue to live through his work, his three children, Akin, Pelayo and Yewande and all those whose minds he helped fertilize.

Thank you uncle Kole, for everything. Rest well, dear uncle; rest peacefully.

My condolences to Akin, Pelayo & Yewande and all who he loved and loved him.

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