

No Seat for Walter on the Diplomatic Fence

Those who were present at the actual confrontation will undoubtedly contribute more riveting details of the infamous stand-off between Ambassador Carrington and the Nigerian Dictator, Sani Abacha, more commonly known as the Butcher of Abuja and perhaps the most compulsive kleptomaniac that the Nigerian nation has ever known.

Repression was brutal. This general aimed no lower than to transform himself into a President for Life. The democratic opposition had been driven underground, but not completely. They continued to meet and organize in makeshift arenas and private homes. Walter Carrington's tenure was coming to an end. To mark a people's gratitude for his role in that struggle, the uncompromising statements and activities that constantly catapulted him, of his own accord, off the diplomatic fence, a reception had been arranged in his honour. Sani Abacha's goons were ordered to prevent that event at all cost. The venue was kept hidden, steered through last-moment changes, but Abacha's wide net kept up the pace, ringed each decoy rendez-vous with armoured trucks and bristling guns. Finally however, the Security forces were out-manouvered and the reception began.

Walter Carrington arrived. Lo and behold, Abacha's goons had again leveled up. They laid siege to the venue, ordered the guests to leave the premises. Carrington was physically assaulted, never mind that this was a private home and that this guest of honour was entitled to diplomatic immunity. Walter stood his ground, unburdened himself of a stern 'diplomatic' censure of this violation of rights. It was a measure of the valuation of his contribution to that struggle that the opposition went to such lengths to honour him, convinced that the struggle itself would be dishonoured if it failed in this quite modest gesture. It was a prolonged saga of defiance, crowned by the conferment on him of the name 'Omowale', a name that celebrates, translated literally, the Homecoming of the Child.

Walter has remained both comrade and friend, a true *omowale* in a relationship that endured till this inevitable departure. He and his brave, supportive wife, Arese, attended all three of the Cohen lectures I delivered in Cambridge three years ago, participated in the discussions. He continued to share the pains, anxieties and

frustrations of a nation that was a second home to him – and not simply because he took a Nigerian wife. After the exit of the dictatorship, we shared a podium at the funeral of a former opposition leader and personal friend, Bola Ige, the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice who became a victim of political assassination. At my last visit to Cambridge, we discussed plans for a very different, jubilant return. My university would invite him to deliver a lecture and we would use the occasion to launch pad for Arese's new book. It was an excuse to fete the couple yet again as they re-visited the charged scenes of uncertain days, and renewed old friendships. I had looked forward to hosting them sumptuously in my forest home in Abeokuta. The usual intervening delays, postponements.....the regrets that come with a personal and a share in collective loss.

Summatively, Walter *Omowale* Carrington was of that breed that provokes the time-honoured, nostalgic sentiment, a cliché that is however grounded in unvarnished truth: "They don't make them like that any more".

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