

You Will Get Your Visa After Six Months, Sir

Nuruiddin Farah

*Africa's colonial boundaries are remnants of history that the continent would rather forget given that they are a cause of bloody conflicts besides being impediments to the free movement of people and goods in the continent. A personal experience by celebrated author **Nuruiddin Farah** captures this absurdity.*

Some 38 years after his death, Ghanaians have finally decided to honour the memory of their first President, Kwame Nkrumah with a national holiday on September 21 this year, which incidentally would have marked the 100th anniversary of his birthday. The day has been declared a public holiday and aptly named Founder's Day.

A larger than life figure, Nkrumah is credited with leading Ghana to independence from the British and championing a United States of Africa besides being a founder president of the Organisation of African Unity, now African Union. The Africa Nkrumah envisaged is far from being a reality as the experience of writer Nuruiddin Farah shows.

Below we run, in his own words, an account of his frustration with Africa's artificial borders which, in Nkrumah's vision, stood in the way of continental unity. Nuruiddin Farah writes: "In 2007, I telephoned the Consulate of Botswana in Cape Town on a Wednesday to inquire about a weekend visa to Gaborone as I meant to attend the wedding of a close friend's daughter there. In reply to his question about my status and place of residence, I said that I was a permanent resident of South Africa and that I held three African passports and named these and the governments, which issued them.

He asked why I had not applied for a visa earlier, and I responded that I had just got back from a book promotion tour that had taken me to the USA, Canada, and Europe. He said I would have to wait for four to six weeks to get a visa issued on any of the three passports I held. I was tempted to stress my disappointment by asking why his consulate was giving me a hard time about a weekend visa, while the British, the French, the US, the Swiss and

Canadian embassies would not hesitate to issue me with five-to-ten-year duration visas within a few hours and while I waited. However, I thought better of it, maybe because I doubted he was the kind of reader that might enjoy my writings.

I got in touch with my friend whose daughter was getting married and a professor friend of mine who was expecting me to give a lecture at the University of Botswana to let them know that I was cancelling my trip. The professor suggested that his department apply on my behalf and recruit someone higher up in the government to intervene. That way, the consulate would issue the visa and I would attend the wedding and later in the week speak to the students and staff of the English Department. I said that the idea of going that route did not appeal to my sense of self-honour, and insisted that I would cancel my visit.

Six months or so later, I was a guest of the Federal President of Germany together with several African Heads of State among them the President of Botswana. On the second day, during coffee break, the President of Botswana asked if I had ever been to his country, given that I lived so close to it, in South Africa. I replied that I had not; he wondered why not. I related to him what happened when I applied for a visa several months earlier whereupon he called his assistant, a lady, whom he instructed to take down my details and to make sure that I received a visa and a letter of invitation. He wanted me to promise that I would call on him once I got to Gaborone.

I declined to offer my details to the assistant. After all, my intentions were lofty, not personal, and I wanted him to see the absurdity of his government's visa policies and to consider changing them, as it affected other Africans. In effect, I was pointing to him the set of circumstances that had led to my needing his facilitation, when Europeans, Americans, and many other nationalities from outside Africa could enter Botswana without requiring visas.

Given the opportunity, I might have referred to the to the arbitrary carving up of the continent at a meeting in Berlin, in which European colonial powers established borders within it, dividing our peoples into entities bearing hyphenated identities – British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, Ethiopian-held Somaliland, Kenyan Somaliland and French Somaliland – and creating never-ending conflicts.

Perhaps implicit in my refusal to accept the President's offer was this unspoken assertion: that the borders in Africa are stakes driven through our peoples' hearts. In the Horn of Africa alone, border disputes have caused so much havoc, accounting for several all-out wars as well as the continued war of attrition between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

When I think back on my encounters over the years with sundry consular and immigration officials from various African countries, I cannot help wondering what might have become of Africa if Europeans had not imposed on our continent the maps we have today.

It follows, too, that Africa would occupy a more honourable place in the world if millions of our able-bodied men and women had not been removed to other continents as slaves, and if the savageries of Euro-greed in the insatiable shape of, to give an infamous example, King Leopold of Belgium had not been visited on the Congo. It has always been my contention that had Europe not interfered with our history and had we pursued its natural course, then we too would have developed in the same way as other continents.

Colonial subjugation and the mapping of the continent did contribute to the deceleration of our organic development as people. The mapping of Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century tethers us to a history littered with impediments. The borders are but one of the numerous obstacle courses standing in the way of our economic and social well-being.

Indeed, the ephemeral nature of borders inspires me with guarded cynicism; their impermanence animates a caginess of the kind that produces optimism within me. Those of us who have known the two sides of Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall, for instance, will remember two of the most absurd borders between the two German entities - the one, a line of yellow buoys the height of a human above the water to mark the border in the sea between the then GDR and West Germany.

The other was a road bridge at Domitz, built halfway across the River Elbe and, because uncompleted, left suspended in midair. With the fall of The Wall and the reunification of the two Germanys, the borders no longer existing point to their status of impermanence.

Sadly, this is not so in Africa. Because in 1963, our continent's Heads of State endorsed the borders bequeathed to us by the colonial powers at the inaugural meeting of the Organisation of African Unity, one felt profound sorrow at the decision, wrongfully catapulting us into everlasting political and economical disaffection, something the recent formations of regional groupings, dividing the continent into four main trading blocs, will not be able to eradicate as long we continue to endorse the border regime established in 1884 at the Berlin summit.

Borders are an anathema, which we must discard if we wish our continent to develop culturally, scientifically and economically as a single unit – and organically at that.”

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http://www.monitor.co.ug/artman/publish/insights/You_will_get_your_visa_after_six_months_sir_90823.shtml

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