

# Thinking about passports and travelling as a **human right**



NELSON MANDELA SQUARE - DAY OF RECONCILIATION - SANDTON CITY,  
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On 19 February 1990, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela at the age of 72 years was issued with his first passport after being incarcerated in Robben Island for 27 years.

By Mzukona Mantshontsho

A passport is a document issued by a national government, which certifies, for the purpose of international travel, the identity and nationality of its holder. The elements of identity are name, date of birth, sex, and place of birth.

A passport allows one to see the world, learn about other nations, their cultures and the way they do things. Hopefully a passport also allows one to gain knowledge and expand one's horizons and remove stereotypes one might have about other nations and people groups.

Lillian Ngoyi was known as "the mother of the black resistance" in South Africa. She served as President of the Women's league of the African National Congress (ANC). The South African government declared her a "banned person" in the mid-1960s. This meant that her movements and contacts were restricted and she could not be quoted in the press. Ngoyi lived under the banning order for 16 years.

In the 1970s Professor Julia Wells, a historian at Rhodes University in South Africa, interviewed Ngoyi about when she was invited to Europe to attend an international women's conference in 1955, but because of apartheid law, she battled to get a passport to attend.

"Being unable to get a passport seriously jeopardised her chances. So she and the ANC leaders tried to overcome this by every means possible. She finally travelled on an airplane, using a very official-looking document produced by Oliver Tambo's legal offices in lieu of a passport," recounted Wells.

"Amazingly, this took her everywhere including the Soviet Union, China, England, and Germany. This journey was the highlight of her life as she often made reference to the things that she had learnt and seen from it. When she arrived back in South Africa, she rolled her tummy on the ground in sheer joy to be back home. This gives an indication of how much a passport, or the denial of it, might have meant in those days. Without it, African people were literally prisoners within the country. With it, the whole world opened to them and they could hear first-hand information of what conditions were like in South Africa. So I have no doubt it was quite an emotional moment for Nelson Mandela to get his passport".



The Bill of Rights (Chapter 2, section 21) states clearly that freedom of movement and association is a right of everyone in South Africa: "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement. Everyone has the right to leave the Republic. Every citizen has the right to enter, to remain in and to reside anywhere in, the Republic. Every citizen has the right to a passport".

To me this is one of the fundamental basic human rights and should be respected and upheld at all times without fear, favour, discrimination and or prejudice. Otherwise human beings will be prisoners in their own countries.

Ronald Kwenda, a Zimbabwean national living in South Africa for four years, recalls how at first it was so difficult for him to even open a bank account as he did not have 'proper identity'. He had to be paid in cash every month. With the help of a letter from his employer stating that he was a permanent staff member, he was able to eventually get a work permit and an official passport to travel freely in and out of South Africa.

"All I had prior to coming to South Africa was a visa document that expired every six months, requiring me to go back home (Zimbabwe) and justify my intentions to stay in South Africa, and these visas took days and months to get. I am happy to say that I do not have trouble traveling now and staying in the country (South Africa) and working hard for my family and child. I absolutely have no trouble now renewing my passport and visa documentation to stay in the country. I can safely say now that having proper documentation to stay in a particular country is extremely vital. I can also encourage other Zimbabwean nationals in South Africa to follow in my example to approach their places of employment and be honest about the troubles they face and how they can be solved, so that they can work effectively without worries of lack of 'proper documentation,'" said Kwenda.

Noliza Ndabandaba, who is originally from Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape, stayed in Swaziland from the early 1960s into the 1990s with her exiled parents from the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC). As a family, they used a temporary residence permit that covered the parents and all minor children and needed to be renewed every three years, at a price.

Perhaps all Africans who can, ought to apply for passports and visit other African countries and the rest of the world and see the conditions in those countries as a way of understanding some of the challenges in the rest of the world, so that we could avoid some of the Xenophobic abuses and name calling. This could go a long way in helping us have a unified African continent, and the world.

"I could not have access to a passport then as I was regarded as being 'state-less' as we were in Swaziland as political asylum seekers, regardless of our children being born there [Swaziland]. The fact that our parents were asylum seekers was enough to exclude us as children to get any travel documents."

"All of this became very painful when I needed to go overseas to do my Master's degree in Education in Canada in the year 1988. Through rigorous negotiations between the government of Swaziland, the PAC representatives and the United Nations (UN) office in Swaziland, I was given a UN document, that could allow me to go and study for the two-year period and return to Swaziland immediately after that. This UN document was boldly written that I was indeed state-less. As much as I accepted the document, I broke down and cried because I was called state-less, that was extremely painful." The experience back then, did and still does remind of the effects of apartheid and the displacement of people from their countries and being treated as 'non-human'," says Ndabandaba.

Perhaps all Africans who can, ought to apply for passports and visit other African countries and the rest of the world and see the conditions in those countries as a way of understanding some of the challenges in the rest of the world, so that we could avoid some of the xenophobic abuses and name calling. This could go a long way in helping us have a unified African continent, and the world.

I got my first passport at the age of 16 with no trouble. I went into Home Affairs with the necessary documentation, filled in the relevant application forms and paid the fee and exactly six weeks later, was back at Home Affairs to collect. I have been to four countries in Southern Africa to play sport, visiting friends and just having fun. I am hoping to use it to do my MBA in the United Kingdom in 2015.

The freedom to travel that was given to Nelson Mandela in February 1990, should be given to all individuals and communities on the African continent.

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