

Naeesa Aziz

is a versatile writer and journalist. Here are some samples of her work.

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Nelson Mandela Dies at 95

South Africa's president says Madiba has died.

By Naeesa Aziz

Posted: 12/05/2013 04:45 PM EST

Former South African president and activist Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela died on Thursday after battling a recurring lung infection. He was 95.

Mandela had recently been hospitalized in Pretoria for more than a month. The Mandela family, his second wife Winnie Mandela, and other close friends visited with the former leader upon his arrival, demonstrating the severity of the situation to South Africans and the global community. Throughout his hospital stay, conflicting reports on Mandela's condition circulated the media, ranging from stable to unresponsive. A Mandela family feud regarding preparations for his passing and his burial also briefly surfaced.

Despite South Africans' gradually coming to terms with the imminent passing of Madiba, the revered icon lived to see his 95th birthday, which coincided with the internationally-celebrated Mandela Day. Community service celebrations took place around the world, in cities like Rome, Bolivia and the Philippines. With the holiday's overarching aim of inspiring individuals to change the world for the better, Mandela Day 2013 helped to place a firm emphasis on the former leader's tolerance and reinforce his renowned legacy.

Born in Transkei, South Africa, on July 18, 1918, Mandela was the son of Chief Henry Mandela of the Tembu Tribe. He later became the first member of his family to attend school; enrolling at the University College of Fort Hare and the University of Witwatersrand and qualifying in law in 1942.

Just two years later, in 1944, Mandela joined the African National Congress and began his ascent into the world of anti-apartheid activism. He also founded a law firm with friend and colleague Oliver Tambo, which offered free and low-cost legal counsel to Blacks.

For nearly the next twenty years, Mandela would devote his energies to non-violent struggle against the country's repressive apartheid regime, earning him a treason charge of which he was eventually acquitted. However, the arrival of the early sixties brought a new Mandela with new ideas. In 1961, Mandela began to advocate for armed struggle as the most effective way to make changes to the racially oppressive system. With his newfound ideas, he founded the ANC splinter group Umkhonto we Sizwe and organized a three-day workers strike for which he was tried twice and eventually sentenced to life in prison.

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The image is a screenshot of the BET website's news page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with categories like 'Shows', 'Celebs', 'Music', and 'News'. Below this is a search bar and a 'Global' section header. The main article is titled 'Nelson Mandela Dies at 95' with a sub-headline 'South Africa's president says Madiba has died.' The article includes a large photo of Nelson Mandela and several paragraphs of text. To the right of the article is a sidebar with various news snippets, including 'Nine Scholarships Black Students Need to Apply to ASAP', 'The Ups and Downs of Alex Rodriguez', and 'BET Wire: Americans Want Unemployment Insurance Extended'. At the bottom, there are sections for 'Videos You May Like' and 'Articles You May Like', along with social media links for Facebook and Twitter.

Nelson Mandela Dies at 95 (cont.)

Mandela served 27 years in prison and was released in 1990 after president Frederik Willem de Klerk took office and heeded calls from an international campaign launched in Mandela's favor. After South Africa formally ended apartheid in 1994, Mandela became the first Black president of the country after garnering a majority of votes in the first ever fair, democratic elections.

Although Mandela left office in June 1999, he continued to be an internationally recognized personality until his death.

In 1993, he received a Nobel Peace Prize alongside apartheid-era South African president de Klerk for "their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa." In 1998, the U.S. government bestowed the Congressional Medal of Honor upon Mandela, and in 2009, his birthday was declared as an international day devoted to public service. People around the world have been asked to mark the occasion by giving 67 minutes of their time to work in their local community — one minute for every year of Mandela's public service.

Mandela is survived by his wife Graça Machel, three daughters Makaziwe, Zenani and Zindzi, four step-children, seventeen grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren.

The image is a screenshot of a BET News website page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with categories like 'Shows', 'Celebs', 'Music', and 'News'. Below this is a search bar and a 'Global' section header. The main article is titled 'Nelson Mandela Dies at 95' with a sub-headline 'South Africa's president says Mandela has died.' The article includes a large photo of Nelson Mandela and several paragraphs of text detailing his life, his role in ending apartheid, and his international recognition. To the right of the article is a sidebar with various news snippets and a 'More Recommended' section. At the bottom, there are sections for 'Videos You May Like' and 'Articles You May Like'. The page also features social media sharing options and a 'Follow BET' section.

African Gay Rights Activist Rewrites the Story of a Struggle

LGBTI activist Spectra tells how the West gets it all wrong when it comes to gay rights in Africa.

By Naeesa Aziz
Posted: 10/15/2012 12:00 PM EDT

Believe it or not, it's good to be gay in Africa.

With the spread of technology and social media, today's African LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) communities have greater access to resources and their greatest asset to speak of: each other.

However, given the mainstream news coverage of Africa's many LGBTI communities that exploits the narrative of a sad, shameful Africa, it's hard to imagine that anything other than repression and brutal violence is happening. Nigerian LGBTI activist Spectra says that although Africa has its issues, gay rights activists on the continent are seeing success in their movement for equality.

"We're constantly hearing about people being murdered, constantly hearing about women being raped," Spectra told BET.com. "It's the very, very reductive, very simplistic narrative, and what's missing is everything else quite honestly."

She isn't exaggerating either. Last year, when Ugandan teacher and activist David Kato was killed after his sexuality was put on blast in a local newspaper, Western media began voraciously grasping to uncover similar tragedies, sparking a wave of interest in gay rights in Uganda and other African countries.

The inquiries weren't wholly unfounded, with Uganda's infamous "Kill the Gays" bill floating around parliament and Nobel Peace Prize winner and Liberian resident Ellen Johnson Sirleaf publicly refusing to decriminalize homosexuality. Still, Spectra says the reporting is all negative and doesn't begin to tell the entire story about Africa's gay communities.

"It creates a very reductive narrative, a very reducible portrayal of LGBTI people. And when we're talking about Africa, it's even more heightened by the already terrible victimization of the continent," she said.

Through the use of social media, Spectra facilitates collaboration between LGBTI activists from across the continent, including countries such as South Africa, Namibia, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Senegal.

Amid all the reports of despair, Spectra says her only concern for Africa's gay communities is that their true story is not being told.

"There's lots that's happening that is really positive, really powerful, and we have to frame it as a concern, then my concern is that people are not knowing about what is powerful coming from LGBTI African people."

Spectra says the media fails to highlight and mention organizations such as Nigeria's Women's Health and Equal Rights (WHER), South Africa's queer human rights visual media organization Iranti-Org and the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya. Her mission as an activist is to help these organizations produce their own media so that authentic stories can reach the public.

"My engagement is more about, as an African woman, as an African feminist, reaching other Africans on the continent on LGBTI issues because I don't think there's been enough engagement there," she said.



What It's Like to Be Black In: Amsterdam

A Philly native appreciates the laidback lifestyle and work and home balance offered in The Netherlands, but living in her dream city means navigating the realities of European racism.

By Naeesa Aziz

Posted: 04/23/2012 03:24 PM EDT

For Philadelphia native Dana Saxon, her love affair with the city of Amsterdam happened at first sight.

“I was there for a layover for just a few hours and I fell in love with the city. I stepped off the train and just felt like, ‘I could totally see myself living here,’” she said.

So, after growing frustrated with both her nonprofit job and New York City, Saxon, 33, decided to go back to school to get a master’s in sociology. And when it was time to choose a school, she followed the feelings she had on that layover in 2008 and chose to study at University of Amsterdam in The Netherlands.

Although Saxon says she will forever have love for Amsterdam, her idyllic dream life abroad has not come without some hiccups. Issues of race, she says, have consumed much of her time in the country, and although she is a self-proclaimed “race-obsessed” person, the Dutch don’t seem to make it any easier for Dana to let down her guard.

“Race comes up for me all the time,” Saxon said. “In the Netherlands they say, ‘There’s no such thing as race here. We don’t make those types of distinctions. If you see what you call racism, that’s your issue.’”

The message that, as a society, the Dutch do not “see” race is a common narrative in many of the more liberal European countries. However, as Saxon suggests and as many Black people from nations in Africa and the Caribbean who have immigrated to The Netherlands can attest, the Dutch refusal to recognize race issues hardly mean they do not exist.

This December, Saxon was most shocked by the country’s handling of race when she encountered the beloved Black Pete (known as Zwarte Piet in Dutch), a fictional blackface character that is known as a helper of Sinterklaas, a skinnier version of Santa Claus, and who is celebrated with parades and public adulation ahead of the traditional Christmas holiday.

Although Sinterklaas is the namesake of the celebratory time, Black Pete is the star of the show. Saxon says that in addition to the huge parade held in his honor every year when residents dress in blackface, images of Black Pete flood the city of Amsterdam around Sinterklaas time and can be found on everything from food packaging to billboards.

(cont.)



What It's Like to Be Black In: Amsterdam (cont.)

“It was everywhere. You couldn’t walk two feet without seeing it ... it felt intolerable,” Saxon said about constantly being confronted with the character.

Saxon said the Dutch public refuses to accept that blackface is derogatory.

“Its not just the tradition, I think that the tradition is more of a reflection of the mindset of Dutch people. [They feel] it’s their right to make fun of whoever they want,” Saxon said. “[Like], ‘We’re Dutch, this is our country, we can do whatever we want.’”

This past year, Saxon cooperated with other members of Amsterdam’s Black community and worked to raise awareness about how the tradition offends Blacks in the Netherlands. She was also in Amsterdam for the Jackie magazine controversy, when the Dutch glossy published an article calling Rihanna a “N----aB---h.”

Although the magazine apologized for the gaffe, she said the response from the Dutch public was the same as always regarding racial issues.

“You guys are being too sensitive,” she said, mocking the sentiment that Dutch people displayed following the fallout. “N---a seems to be used so causally, we thought we could use it. We’re not being racist.”

Ignorance aside, Saxon says the country’s lifestyle is why she plans to make the country her permanent home.

“I love the lifestyle. Its far more laid back, and they really value the balance between work and life,” she said. “They have ample vacation time and maternity leave. Everyone has healthcare ... Things like that make it feel like it’s easier to live there.”

And despite the blackface holidays and the unwillingness to acknowledge racism, Saxon says she feels more optimistic about race relations in The Netherlands than in the U.S.

“I feel more hopeful there,” she said. “Dutch people need to just make some significant changes in their practices that will make life more tolerable there for Black people.”



Ghana's King Peggy Brings a Woman's Touch to a Man's Role

King Peggienle "Peggy" Bartels says she is on a mission to ensure a better life for her people.

By Naeesa Aziz

Posted: 03/22/2012 03:43 PM EDT

Forget about working overtime. As ruler of the Ghanaian town of Otum, King Peggienle "Peggy" Bartels is responsible for the welfare of a population of nearly 7,000 — and that's not even her day job.

King Peggy became the unlikely West African king who went from secretary to royalty overnight when, in 2008, she got a call at 4 A.M. with the news that the traditional leadership in her hometown decided she would be the next to rule their people, and the first female king ever. Although startled at first, King Peggy took her appointment in stride and now relishes the opportunity she has to make a difference in the lives of so many. She now splits her time between Washington, D.C., where she still works as a secretary in Ghana's U.S. Embassy, and Otum, Ghana. Her ascent to the throne and accomplishments as king are chronicled in her new co-authored, eponymous book, *King Peggy*.

King Peggy chatted with BET.com recently and told us how she enjoys the responsibility of royalty, why she is not a queen and how a woman's strength is like no other.

Q. How has being king changed your life?

It has really changed me to a point where I'm happy that I'm able to use my energy to connect with my people back home. Before, it was just me coming home from work, and sitting down in my living room and chill out with my little glass of wine and watching the news and talking to my friends, but now all these things have changed because the least amount of time that I get for myself, I have to think of what progress I want to have for my town. I have to talk to them, and I have to think fast how I want to achieve all these goals.

Q. Why aren't you called Queen Peggy?

Queen is in charge of the children's welfare, while the king is in charge of all the executive work, so the queen normally goes and collects data about the children's welfare and discusses it with the king. So, knowing myself with my strong personality and how I do my things, if they had chosen me as a queen, I wouldn't be a good queen. I would be a lousy queen because, for instance, [the queen] collects data for the king and [if] the king doesn't act on it, I'd be so furious and I'd be arguing with the king. So, I think it's a good thing that they choose me as a king.

(cont.)

The image is a screenshot of the BET.com website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with categories like 'Shows', 'Celebs', 'Music', and 'News'. Below this is a search bar and a 'Global' section. The main content area features the article title 'Ghana's King Peggy Brings a Woman's Touch to a Man's Role' with a sub-headline 'King Peggienle "Peggy" Bartels says she is on a mission to ensure a better life for her people.' There is a photo of King Peggy in a red dress. Below the photo is a quote from her: 'I have to think of what progress I want to have for my town. I have to talk to them, and I have to think fast how I want to achieve all these goals.' The article continues with several Q&A sections, including 'Why aren't you called Queen Peggy?' and 'What advice would you give other women who are stepping into a role that's traditionally dominated by men?'. On the right side of the page, there are several 'Recommended' articles and a 'Videos You May Like' section. At the bottom, there is a 'Follow BET' section with social media icons for Facebook and Twitter, and a 'From Our Partners' section.

Ghana's King Peggy Brings a Woman's Touch to a Man's Role (cont.)

Q. What are your long-term goals for Otum?

My long-term goal is to make sure that they have a good hospital with good medicine, and also an ambulance in case somebody is sick and they can't cure the person in the town. Also to bring about a secondary school and to make sure that the town becomes a modern town and at the same time to be able to preserve the culture but not to deviate from the culture if it becomes a modern town.

Q. What advice would you give other women who are stepping into a role that's traditionally dominated by men?

I would advise them to be strong, believe in themselves and have strong faith and pray because woman has the strength. I'm a childless woman, I haven't had a child, but I understand it is a very painful thing that women endure when they are going to deliver. So, if we can deliver babies, and we can make a change in people's lives, especially through me [in Otum], they can see I'm making a lot of changes in people's lives. Women have always succeeded where men have failed us. So I urge them to be very strong and believe in what they do and be honest and humble and they will succeed.

Q. It's Women's History Month, so as a woman who is now a historical figure, how do you want to be remembered?

I want to be remembered that here is a woman who came on a mission and was able to empower the women of her town and brought about changes to her people and also helped her people to lead a better life.

The image is a screenshot of a news article on the BET.com website. The article is titled "Ghana's King Peggy Brings a Woman's Touch to a Man's Role" and is dated 10/12/2015. The main text describes how King Peggy, a Ghanaian woman, has taken on the role of a traditional male leader in her hometown of Otum, Ghana. She is responsible for the welfare of a population of nearly 7,000 people. The article mentions that she became the unofficial West African king who went from secretary to royalty overnight when, in 2008, she got a call at 4 A.M. with the news that the traditional leadership in her hometown decided she would be the next to rule their people, and the first female king ever. Although she initially hesitated, she eventually accepted the role and has since worked to improve the town's infrastructure, including building a secondary school and a hospital. The article also notes that she has been featured in various media outlets, including BET.com, and has been recognized as a role model for women in leadership. The screenshot shows the article's layout, including the title, a photo of King Peggy, the main text, and several related articles on the right side of the page. The BET.com logo and navigation menu are visible at the top and bottom of the page.