



BBC goes to BLOEMFONTEIN

Nigerian-born Elizabeth Ohene visited the Zoology Department of the University of the Orange Free State recently to interview for the BBC an interesting sub-species: young Afrikaners caught up in change. She was flabbergasted sometimes by what she found, and so were the students.

ABOUT a third of the way on the main N1 freeway that links Johannesburg with Cape Town is Bloemfontein. Bloemfontein is the judicial capital of South Africa, with the reputation of being a bit of a dump, a back-water town. Most people make jokes about it all the time. A bit unfair, I think, because it's a pretty little town with lots of historical and emotional significance, especially for the Afrikaners.

It's also the capital of the Orange Free State, one of the two original Boer Republics, and home of the University of the Orange Free State. This is where, I was told, true Afrikaners send their children to be educated.

If change is indeed to come to South Africa, and the relationship between whites and blacks were ever to become amicable, then much of that change will have to be on the part of people like the students of this university.

So I went to the campus to talk with the students, to try to get some insight into their thinking. I spoke with a group of students in the zoology department about how they saw their country and the changes, fears and hopes and how they saw the rest of Africa.

There was Agnes Snyman: "I've no problems with blacks."

There was Alvin Hugo: "The problem was, we were isolated as whites, isolated from the blacks. The blacks were isolated from the whites."

Then there was Lisl Sinne: "What do Africa know about South Africa?"

And Jaco van Wyk: "I would like to travel to Zimbabwe, Kenya; let the rest of Africa, let the rest of the world realise that we are hungry to go to their places, and we are hungry for them to come to us . . ."

We chatted in a small tutorial office over cups of coffee . . . What should the way forward be for them in their country. Jaco van Wyk started the conversation.

VAN WYK: I say let's negotiate with the black people, I would love to see this country in peace because I want to give my grandchildren a safe place to live in and I don't want to take them to Australia, America or Britain or any place. I want them to be South Africans.

OHENE: You know, to the outside world, much of black Africa, the Afrikaner comes across as racist, as closed mind. Is that how you see yourselves?

MALE STUDENT: Racist is a funny term. Say if the black man was governing, right, and wouldn't give anything, right, so what would it make of the black man? A racist!

The word racist has been thrown in our faces for so long . . . look at Australia. I mean the aborigine . . . gee whizz.

I've heard about somebody who talked about their blacks as "boongs". Now, is that racist or what? I mean, we use the word kaffir, okay. All right, we used it, all right now it's a very big swear word, okay.

But look at Australia, "boongs", that's racist.

I say it again, we were all brought up in a time where you thought about black people as the lesser man and you didn't give to him. He worked for you, on a very low salary, and maybe boarding, especially on the farms now.

I can see a lot of white South Africans integrating with the blacks. But then you get the black, say 10 percent of the black people, that doesn't want to have any whites in this country, and then you get say the 10 percent white people that doesn't want to see a black man in the street . . . and that situation should stop, and it can stop with the progress, the changes that has been made. It can be worked out.

But then you will have to, the people will have to, negotiate. When I say the people, I mean, uh, the ANC with their Freedom Charter and everything. If you look at the Freedom Charter you see, "The people will govern; the people shall own the land".

Now, I don't know maybe if you will differ from me and a lot of people will, but I see that the people, I don't see them as . . .

OHENE: You don't think "the people" includes the whites . . .





Elizabeth Ohene . . . incredulous.

MALE STUDENT: I don't think "the people" includes all the blacks, "the people" includes the top part that's going to govern the land like a long time in Russia.

OHENE: We're talking theory. On a personal basis: Do you have any black friends?

FEMALE STUDENT: No. Not my friends who I am visiting now. No.

OHENE: Well, why not?

FEMALE STUDENT: Well, why not? It's got a lot to do at school since I didn't know anyone. The first one who sits next to me is when I come to university.

OHENE: How did you find him?

FEMALE STUDENT: I don't have any problems with blacks. Blacks can live together with me, next to me, but then you must pay the same price I pay. I have no problem.

OHENE: But if you do not have any black friends, on a person to person basis, then we will keep on talking about ANC, government, organisations . . . We have to deal on a person to person basis.

So how, as a country, are you going to get rid of a racist basis . . . it's all theory. Unless you have one person, or two that you know, individuals that you deal with but you all don't seem to have anybody like that.

FEMALE STUDENT: How many blacks really have a white friend and really knows what's going on with whites? You can say the same.

MALE STUDENT: The problem was in our upbringing. The problem was that we were isolated as whites, we were isolated from the blacks, the blacks were isolated from the whites. There was never . . .

OHENE: But you are young people! And it's up to you to make friends. Why are you depending on your parents?

FEMALE STUDENT: Where do we make friends? Then where do you go with your black friends. There's no place you can go with your black friends.

OHENE: To a cafe, to have a cup of coffee . . . Or the cinema?

MALE STUDENT: I must disagree. In the Free State you can't go into a restaurant with a black. Take Joburg for instance . . . I'll go any place any time with black friends. It's not going to happen overnight.

But I work in a restaurant and I can see already that a lot of people that goes black and white people, much more than say five years back . . . We mustn't think it's going to happen overnight.

MALE STUDENT: We don't want pressure on that. Then I say again: we've been isolated so long.

You say we are young people, true; I'm already 26.

True, I don't have any contact with any blacks, except the blacks that's with me in classes . . . I say I maybe won't have a friend now, but my younger brother he's first year now, he's doing architecture. I'm sure he will have, in say the next three years, a black family visiting him. He's relating better. I don't know.

The architects are like the art students, they are a bit weird . . . Not that I say that having a black friend is weird, that's not what I'm trying to say. I know a lot of older people, maybe my dad's age, that do have personally black friends. That's in the Free State as well, that's in Bethlehem — that's even worse than Bloemfontein — so I say give us a chance, give us a chance with the governing of this land. And I would like to see that happening with the black leaders as well, they should change a bit, become a bit less, what you call it, radical, try to say, don't worry, things are going to get better. Let's go and sit and draw a plan to make it better.

OHENE: What do you know about the rest of Africa?

FEMALE STUDENT: We don't see it on television. The only thing we see on television is like when there's a coup or there's a war. But I think it's the media must change. The media must bring the rest of Africa to us. The common people want to know about Africa because we're from Africa. We actually don't know what's going on in the other lands in Africa. I think the media must start doing something. The people want to listen about the rest of Africa but they don't have the chance.

FEMALE STUDENT: Can I ask you a question?

OHENE: Yes. Ask me a question.

FEMALE STUDENT: What do Africa know about South Africa? The ordinary people, not high up, the man on the street. What do they know about South Africa?

OHENE: Surprisingly, much more than you know about the rest of Africa. It may also very well be it's also not as detailed, is not very as it is. It's more in terms of apartheid.

MALE STUDENT: I say they are keeping us out. Like the rest of the world is keeping us out of their countries.

OHENE: Do you mind? Do you mind that you are kept out?

MALE STUDENT: I would like to travel. I would like to travel to Zimbabwe, to Botswana. Okay, Botswana isn't bad. To Kenya. Mozambique is right across our border, next to us. You can't go there because of the war, the Renamo, Frelimo, and there, the people there aren't accepting us South Africans because they say, no, the white South Africans are racists. And that's not true.

OHENE (Incredulous): But that is true! It is true that there is discrimination here?

MALE STUDENT: I'm not saying there's no discrimination here. I will even go so far as to say there are a, er, 10 percent of whites who, maybe a bit more, who are very racist. But I'm not part of them and I don't see them as part of South Africa. They're not governing me. Can't influence me. I'm taking my own decisions. And that's why I say let the rest of Africa, let the rest of the world, realise that we are hungry to go to their places and we are hungry for them to come to us.

OHENE: Are you hungry for the rest of Africa to come and see South Africa?

MALE STUDENT: For sure. So they can see what is going on. And so they can open their gates to us and they can see it's not that bad . . .

OHENE: How do you people entertain yourselves? What do you do when you are not at lectures?

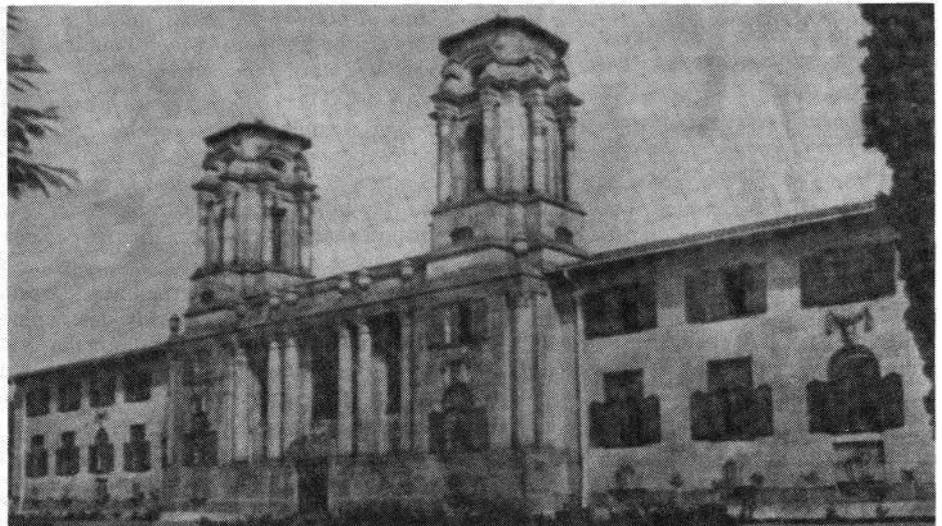
FEMALE STUDENT: Well. Go to the movies. Well, braaivleis, parties, listen to music, read books.

OHENE: In the Free State here — this is the heart of the Afrikanerdom — what is the sport?

MALE STUDENT: Rugby. Cricket is getting big attention now. Love to go to cricket games, Friday nights, because then you can take your beers (laughter) . . .

OHENE: You don't look big. My image of the Afrikaner, really huge, big neck . . .

MALE STUDENT: You mustn't look at us here now. You must go into the hostels and look at all the guys there. Rugby players. Huge. Big boys. But then the perception that the outside world has on South Africans are maybe this big Boer . . . rifles across their shoulders. I believe, if you think about the people in London, Paris, I think I put too much of a country on them.



Bloemfontein City Hall . . . not really such a dump.

*“The future is far away.
There won't be a
new future tomorrow . . . ”*



From Page Eighteen

OHENE: How would you like to be seen? You've told me that the image that the outside world has of the Free State is not correct. What do you think is the reality of the Free State? How would you want the outside world to see you? What do you think the reality is?

MALE STUDENT: The reality is there is no such thing as Boers, uhm, going about on their horses and, where, that's where I actually, there are a lot of intellectual minded people in the Free State, lot of open-minded people, in general we are not the gun-slingers.

OHENE: Do you ever see the time will come — would you like to put a time frame on it — when you might have a black family living next to you?

FEMALE STUDENT: I think it will happen in the future. Actually, I live on a farm and there are many blacks. We have two farms. On the one the blacks, I won't mind; the blacks, they could live with us. But the other farm, they actually get the same salary and so on, they have the same, but every weekend they are drunk and so on. But on our farm, they go to church then each weekend, and they are very . . . and they have gardens. Um, actually in their homes . . . we went there. They made food and so . . . They even sell to other people . . .

OHENE: You went to their homes? Did you eat their food?

FEMALE STUDENT: Yes, they made like, vetkoeks, I don't know what you call it. They make it very nice. We enjoyed it, but they are more like our people are.

But the others. They are also blacks. But they don't care about their babies, like we took one to hospital because they didn't clean him enough and so on. They drink every weekend. They cut his head open with an axe and so on. They're not the same standard, like I say, in South Africa there are blacks could mix with us, but there are others that I don't know.

OHENE: You personally, would you have a black family living next to you?

FEMALE STUDENT: I think when they're on the same standard I wouldn't mind.

OHENE: How are you going to judge? Who's going to judge if they are the same standard?

MALE STUDENT: First of all you have to realise that a lot of farmers, their closest neighbour are the blacks that are working on the farm. And I say the same, they can come and live next door to me any time but then I would like them to take me into consideration.

OHENE: I imagine if whites were living next to you you would expect them to take you into consideration.

MALE STUDENT: But then I say there's a lot of white people I wouldn't want to live next door to. If I say a black family can come and live next door to me, first of all I would like them that — I don't want to say the same standard — but I want them to take me into consideration. And, if I can't mix with them, I don't want them to think I'm a racist because I'm not mixing with them.

OHENE: Would you have your children play with their children?

MALE STUDENT: I grew up on a farm and my friends were the black people that were living on the farm. But when you are in a soft bed you're not going to start questioning, ask who's lying hard on the ground. And that's the way it happened. I think that's a very nice explanation.

OHENE: I think I rather like that explanation. If you're on the soft bed, you're not going to ask who's lying on the hard one.

FEMALE STUDENT: Ja. Probably.

MALE STUDENT: Now I think that's changing because we are realising that our beds can't stay soft for much longer . . . because there's a lot of growth . . . I think in the year 2040 they have to cope with 80 million people in South Africa. There's not even enough water for 80 million people . . .

I think the people are realising that the only way out is all the people to reach a level where they can sustain themselves . . . I mean that the people can reach out, get what they want in life, have the money to have a good housing, have a good schooling for their children . . . I would like to say that the changes that are taking place in South Africa right now isn't because of pressure by the outside world or by the black community, it's because the people are realising, black and white, there must be some, some force that will make everybody equal.

I think that the people are starting to realise that a good schooling is the basis for good economic wealth in the future.

FEMALE STUDENT: How do the standard of the lives, the black especially, compare with the standards in the rest of Africa? We heard in the rest of Africa where there's no food sometimes, and all these things, we actually just hear the bad things. I just want to know how do the blacks compare with those blacks. Are it actually as bad? Or what is it like?

OHENE: It varies. It varies. There are countries where the level of poverty is much lower than it is among blacks here.

I'll tell you what somebody told me in Soweto. She said she went to Swaziland the

other day, and it is the way they were walking, it was the way they were walking how I knew they were free. She said it wasn't the clothes they were wearing or the cars they were driving, but they just looked free. I don't know if you . . . if that makes sense?

FEMALE STUDENT: In the hostel, I had to be in at 10 o'clock, and I didn't feel free . . . Living on my own, I could go in the evenings, but still I didn't go out. I felt free. I think it's the thing. But with food and such, the black people are not in such a bad position in South Africa. I think it's that feeling for freedom they are looking for.

MALE STUDENT: Do you think that the black people are that much oppressed? I believe there are problems. But I don't think that they really are that oppressed to turn radical.

OHENE: Are you optimistic?

MALE STUDENT: Optimistic in the sense that we can work together. But now there are some negative factors like, for instance, I want to come back to Mr Mandela . . . I'm not optimistic about him. He's got the same fixed ideas as old uh, uh, PW Botha had, and Verwoerd, and if . . . the same fixed ideas. He doesn't want to move.

OHENE: Is there any black leader about whom you feel optimistic?

MALE STUDENT: Buthelezi is the only option, visible option, at this stage. Not because he's doing the white man a favour or he's trying to (what you call it) give more of the black people to the whites. He's not going to sell his people short. He's going to negotiate for everything that are reasonable. But he will trade off.

OHENE (to another student): Do you feel positive about the future?

FEMALE STUDENT: Yes, positive. But it's a very far future. It won't be tomorrow, a new future.

OHENE (to another woman student): What about you?

FEMALE STUDENT: Before you can give cake to people, you must have a cake. Before you can give money and do things, you must have money.

First our economy is the most important thing.

Before, the rest of the world don't help us and these sanctions and all these things . . . if they go on like this, I think South Africa don't have a future because you can't do anything without money. You must first get the economy right and then, if the economy's right, then I think there would be a future in South Africa, but that isn't going to change. I don't know. We aren't sure about the future.