

DSS Boss, The Media and The Masks

BY FUNKE EGBEMODE

“The only way for this marriage to stay on the happily-ever-after lane is mutual respect and understanding of what each party brings to the table. I can still see the D-G, DSS in his impeccable suit as he told us to stop shaking the table. We'll try, sir, but shaking the table is what we do”.

One bright afternoon, some years ago, I decided to make a quick stop at my favourite shoes-and-bags shop on Allen Avenue, Ikeja, Lagos. As I approached the shop, I noticed an armed guard at the entrance. He was carrying a familiar gun – the intimidating but innocent-looking big thing only a certain agency in Nigeria bears. Oh, a DSS (Department of Security Services) personnel was on the premises. A DSS guy shopping for his lady or a DSS lady taking time off to buy high heels and a nice clutch? I stepped in and lo and behold, testing a nice blue pair of eye-popper heels, was a DSS lady of note and record. Go on, guess all you want. I ain't helping or telling.

Is this a story about high-heeled shoes? Nah. It's a story about DSS, DSS guns, DSS and the Nigerian media and their tough marriage. So at this year's conference of the International Press Institute (IPI), Nigeria's chapter, I was looking forward to seeing dozens of the DSS 'designer guns on display. Maybe I'd even get to touch one, I thought. And why not? The DSS chief, yeah, the Director-General of the DSS, Adeola Oluwatosin Ajayi was going to deliver a paper and I was on the panel that would discuss that paper. So I got to the venue early. Didn't want those hard poker-faced- dudes getting there before me. But there was no gun in sight. What the heck? Was he standing us up, sending a rep? He came himself and when he did, the guns were still missing. Nobody was wearing a black shirt or an overall with bold DSS inscribed on it. What's going on here? When Mr Ajayi finally got on the podium (he, himself, looking like a bank CEO), he explained why the guns were out of sight. It was a long counselling session, the kind a wife gets even when she's the one who woke the husband up with “Honey, we need to talk”. His topic was 'Dissecting the frosty relationship between the Nigerian Media and Security Agencies. He read from no notes, speaking directly from his heart. His message was clear, delivered in stern terms and tone. There's no frosty relationship (I added 'Honey' in my head). The DSS is the DSS. It's a security agency. It's a secret police.



DSS protects its information. The media looks for information. Breaking news can break security. The choice of words the media uses can damage things. The media throw 'it' out there. The DSS keeps it away from getting out. So, how do these two people who are brought up differently, trained differently to live lovingly in their federally and nationally arranged marriage? even the Bible says two cannot work together except they agree. Wait, maybe that's the key to the resolution. Agreement. For this marriage to work, the Media and DSS will have to agree on their differences and how to live with them.

Even if the DSS Chief insisted that there is no such thing as a frosty relationship between the newsroom and security, this couple still need to sit down and agree on the knotty issues. If a wife says it is not well and the husband says it is well, then we need to find out what's in the well. If a husband says it is full and the wife says it is empty, we need to check the cup and look at why the two are seeing different things.

First, can the DSS be more open, and . . .em . . . em perhaps un-scrap the scrapped office of the DSS spokesperson. Wha-a-t? Tosin Ajayi almost blew something. A secret police with a spokesperson? How does that add up? The DSS is like a sacred masquerade or 'Oro'. It does not talk anyhow everywhere. The DSS is like a circumspect Yoruba Oba, he must not eat in public. Ok, those are my words, my understanding of the seriousness of the situation. The media want answers, voices in their stories, operating within deadlines that must be met. How do we deliver our stories when DSS doesn't want to be seen? Tosin Ajayi said all of that can be arranged without the office of the spokesman of DSS. Seriously? What changed? Well, I learnt that this new Sheriff is a thoroughbred secret cop who rose through the ranks, not a politician or political appointee who got lucky.

No, Ajayi started as a rookie, and after three decades-plus of service, he's here determined to restore the dignity of the service. The mask must stay on and the masquerade must stay in the grove unless there is reason for it to visit the people.

Do you see why this relationship is rocky, if not frosty? Journalists are excited by masks. They want to know who is behind the mask. What's the mask made of and indeed what goes on in the grove? Why does the masquerade speak in a guttural voice? Does it have a cold or it just want to confuse the populace? Secrets and secret hunters can hardly ever be on the same page. That is why the innocent-looking DSS guns are out of sight and the bold DSS labels are now covered by long cloaks. Tosin Ajayi doesn't want his men in our faces even when they are all over us. A masquerade who goes to the village market every day will soon lose his mask to little boys who would think he's one of them and not a spirit. That was why they were all dressed like bankers at the IPI Conference. But we, yes editors knew they were not one of us. I know they also knew we were not one of them. They did their thing and we did ours. Come to think of it wasn't that what the new DSS Chief's presentation was about?

Seriously, the media and the DSS both want the same thing, safe environment, safe nation. The two just use different routes to the market. Different trainings, different ways of life for two different professionals expected to work together. Tough but doable. The boss at the Yellow House comes across as a man who came into this job prepared. He knew the service he joined more than 30 years ago and he didn't like the turn it took somewhere along the way. He's a man on a mission, determined to keep the Secret in the State Service while maintaining a smart and smooth relationship with the newsroom. The only way for this marriage to stay on the happily-ever-after lane is mutual respect and understanding of what each party brings to the table. I can still see the D-G, DSS in his impeccable suit as he told us to stop shaking the table. We'll try, sir, but shaking the table is what we do. We'll just try to do it within the ambits of the law, respect the space of the sacred grove and the New Sheriff's masquerade.

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