

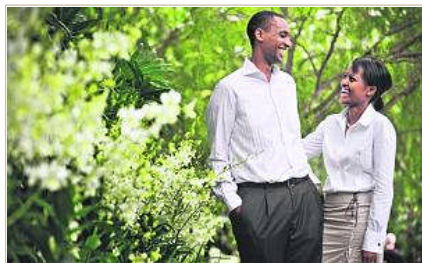
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THE NEW RWANDANS

Diplomat bonds with Asia



Rwandan diplomat Paul Kayoboke and his wife Nicole in the orchid garden at Botanic Gardens, one of their favourite spots. Like Singapore, Rwanda is famous for its orchids, of which there are about 200 species. -- ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

MANDARIN-SPEAKING Paul Kayoboke, 31, is Rwanda's charge d'affaires here. In that role, he presents the new Rwanda to Singaporeans who know about its 1994 genocide and gorillas, and very little else.

Rwanda is rising, he says. It was very different for his aristocratic parents, who left for Uganda amid the 1959 revolution.

'My parents started all over again. There's a fighting spirit in Rwanda,' says the diplomat, who was born in Uganda.

His father found success again as a businessman in Kenya and sent his children to British public schools.

Young Paul graduated with a law degree from Reading, and soon worked as a Reuters reporter in Nairobi, Kenya.

He visited Rwanda for the first time in 2000. 'I came for a visit and was blown away by the opportunity,' he says. 'You could feel it was a new beginning.'

The Rwandan Patriotic Front had ended the genocide, and hope had been reborn.

He started an entertainment paper, then a media company offering solutions and content, such as SMS banking.

'It took two weeks to register my business. Now it takes two days,' he says, adding that all sectors are open.

'There is a lot of self-push in Rwanda, and our government says: 'Do it faster'.'

He wants Singaporeans to re-imagine Rwanda. 'It's the cleanest country in Africa. It is considered politically stable. Since 1994, the government has said that its priority is security.

'Rwanda is extremely livable.'

But he is also mindful of Rwanda's constraints: It is trying to improve the skills its people, and overcome the trauma of poverty.

In Asia, he had set up an economic office in Shenzhen in 2005, before establishing the Singapore consulate last year.

He brings up the Chinese concept of yuan fen or predestined affinity. Perhaps he has a bond with Asia, a massive platform to highlight the new Rwanda.

LEE SIEW HUA

