

CULTURE AND RESISTANCE SYMPOSIUM - GABORONE 1982

CULTURE AND RESISTANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA - Keorapetse Kgositse

A few years ago a fellow South African writer asked me to explain to him how people like la Guma and I could be in the Movement but still manage to write novels and poems. And I replied, with a bit of acid on my tongue, that I had always wondered how a South African writer could be outside the Movement but hope to write anything of value or significance. It seemed to me that, perhaps my friend believed that in the Liberation Movement there was no room for the literary artist to create; that possibly some frustrated thug with itchy fingers, and too cowardly to confront the boer fascists, spends his time dictating lines of whatever non-literary garbage to the supposed poet at gunpoint like some foul-mouthed Hollywood movie gangster. It is that preposterous and ignorant presumption that put acid on my tongue. But Arthur Nortje had already written:

and let no amnesia
 attack at fire hour:
 for some of us must storm the castles
 some define the happening.

I hope that in discussing "Culture and Resistance in South Africa", I will make a contribution towards clarifying a few things about what time this is in our life; what tasks are facing us; what writers and other artists worth their salt are doing in living up to their responsibilities.

On January 8th this year the African National Congress turned seventy; seventy years of organized resistance against national oppression and

economic exploitation; seventy years of rich experience in fighting many freedom battles, including civil disobedience, strikes, boycotts, marches, passive resistance and many more. But the successive racist regimes took no heed of the people's grievances, as we all know; instead, they continued to rule our country by brute force, increasing the size of their army, of their navy, of their air force, of their police, and arming their racist white civilians. Finally, in the face of this neo-nazi barbarism, the ANC established its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, to meet the unbridled violence of those fascist maniacs with revolutionary people's violence to liberate South Africa.

In fighting for the seizure of power, the freedom that the struggle is for are clearly defined and incorporated in the Freedom Charter, adopted at the Congress of the People in Kliptown on June 26, 1955. Briefly, these are that the people shall govern; all national groups shall have equal rights; the people shall share in the country's wealth; the land shall be shared among those who work it; all shall be equal before the law, all shall enjoy equal human rights; there shall be work and security; the doors of learning and of culture shall be opened; there shall be houses, security and comfort; there shall be peace and freedom. In declaring 1982 the Year of Unity in Action, the year in which to move forward to a democratic South Africa, we must act in unity and unite in action, Comrade O.R. Rambo, President of the ANC, points out that:

The comradeship that we have formed in the trenches of freedom, transcending the barriers that the enemy sought to create, is a guarantee and a precondition for our victory. But we need still to build on this

achievement. All of us - workers, peasants, students, priests, chiefs, traders, teachers, civil servants, poets, writers, men, women and youth, black and white - must take our common destiny in our own hands.

Based on experiences from some other gatherings of this nature, I suspect that there are some people here who will probably accuse me of being partisan. They can save their energy and put their minds to something else hopefully more purposeful; I am, like many of my colleagues and comrades, unapologetically partisan. Others might even wonder as to what most of what I have said so far has to do with culture and the arts. And I will so, Everything, because what happens in life and social consciousness finds expression in artistic creativity. Everything in society results from human activity, interaction and interests. This applies as much to the creation of literary arts as it does to mobilizing workers to go on strike or to pick up arms against their oppressors and exploiters. In clarifying the relationship between literature and life, Alex Guma, himself a cultural activist and a leading cadre of the Movement, says:

When I write in a book that somewhere in South Africa poor people who have no water must buy it by the bucketful from some local exploiter, then I also entertain the secret hope that when somebody reads it he will be moved to do something about these robbers who have turned my country into a material and cultural wasteland for the majority of the inhabitants.

In other words, literature is a site of struggle; it must serve the interests of the people in their fight against a culture which insists that they should be robbed.

Writers and other artists, along with all the other groups in society referred to in Comrade Tambo's statement quoted earlier, are joined together by their understanding and hatred of imperialism, capitalist exploitation, racism and their aspiration for, and determination to bring about, peace, progress and happiness. Not in the hustler-preacher's sense, doping us into believing that the more we suffer on this earth we walk everyday the better our chances for everlasting bliss inside the pearly gates of heaven. These issues are clearly political and may seem, to some among us, not to have anything to do with literature and the arts. However, let it be stated very simply and clearly that there can be no literature or any other art of value without them.

What about the personal, then? After all, have poets not written personal love lyrics and so forth? In our view there is no intrinsic contradiction between the personal and the social in the sensibility of an integrated, whole personality - whether the person is an artist or not. Love, even the love between a man and a woman, parent and child, friend and friend, is a unifying factor in the wholeness we seek. Fulfilment is the quest of our lives. In any society, group, community or class, where this does not exist there is no peace, there is only misery and suffering; there is no life, only death. And Dennis Brutus, who knows 'the shriek of nerves in pain' when there is 'thunder at the door' following the sounds of 'the sinner in the night', appeals to us:

To those who persuade us
to purchase despair
we must say No:

Let us cherish our humanity
which they seek to devour:
from our seed
the liberated world must grow.

It is time for action:
enough of craft and cunning
and calculating wisdom;

.....

And we say Mayihlome!, because this speaks directly to our lives even in our personal terrors when we individually hear that "thunder at the door" and know what kind of perverse, two-legged bloodhound is out there ready to break that door down. The poem is carved out of the realities of our lives. Life is itself the major creative activity. And what is truly creative in art is a reflection and an affirmation of life in moving images. We are not interested in how it is to be an artist, if the artist is finally interested in fooling around with paints and brushes or in peverse juggling with words, while he contemplates his next royalty cheque or how he is going to mesmerize his liberal patrons at the next exhibition or beach party; we are interested in how it is to be alive. And what or how is it to be alive today? Fascist tyranny and barbarism is a reality that even the mostlimpinded need not be reminded of. To be fired with the spirit of freedom, to be determined to fight and destroy that tyranny, to usher a new chapter of life where there is peace, progress and happiness - this we see as our mission, our duty; our ultimate responsibility. Lindiwe Mubuzza, who uses language admirably as a weapon in our struggle for life, expresses this

spirit in her Epitaph of Love (In memory of Solomon Mahlangu):

Didn't you hear him today

Even right now

Sing his poem of love

Write an epitaph of love

with LIFE

'My blood will nourish the tree

Which will bear the fruits of freedom'...

Yes for him too with LIFE

We must reach freedom's rich estates...

Marching

To the unbroken rhythm

Of surging dancing spears

This determination and commitment to life reflected in the arts, that is, in cultural resistance, is not a new development in South Africa as some, even among the artists, erroneously think. There is a body of literature, oral and written, in practically all the languages in Southern Africa, which is an important part of our heritage of cultural resistance. The highwater mark was the nineteenth century epic, when the African people put up resistance against the invaders, fought many heroic battles; and, in spite of the inferiority of arms, won some of them. This heroism is part of our living history and inspires the artists of today as much as it inspired our predecessors. In 1979 we celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Isandhlwana at which the British were thoroughly whipped. Bheki Langa, a contemporary young poet, in a poem titled Isandhlwana Incarnate, comments:

the struggle is food
age-old rule of bloodhounds
gives birth to revolt
the sharp teeth of class struggle
chew off whole epochs

we have travelled a long way
in soweto
we were matadors
tricking bullnosed war tanks
and learned
how much a brick
can bleed a bullet to death

Note how the poet's sensibility sees the heroism of our ancestors reflected and re-enacted in the youth in their 1976 resistance against 'the rule of bloodhounds'. He takes us, with consummate skill in clear visual images, from Soweto to Sandhswana. It has been a long road and our journey on it has not been a pleasant one; our blood has sunk into the 'greedy soil' of our own land; there are many casualties on it, even 'hearts torn from souls', brains, dry intestines and much more. The enemy still had fire power while all we had were knobkieries, stones and bricks. But we fight on courageously and mobilize until there is:

a shower of hope
from the AK for the MK
when we take aim
we salute not dead stone
but living spirit and blood

sandhlwana incarnate

This long way we have travelled is sung by another poet, Victor Matlou, in The Long Road, The Tunnel. It also ends with a commitment to, and an affirmation of, life:

and women give birth here
a choice in anguish
binding a generation to this road
my past is on the pulse of this road
there is light down there at the end of the tunnel
to grope on to touch to carve hopes
breathe songs into hearts of martyrs
to dry tears to summon the dead
to life

The poets from whose work I have quoted a little, are not exceptions; they are exemplary of many other artists in theatre, music, painting, sculpture, song and dance and so on. Our artists have over the years struggled along with the people, sensitized to and expressing the feelings, sufferings, hopes, failures and achievements in our struggle for national liberation. The past few years have seen attempts by the artists, both at home and in exile, to organise themselves into collectives, identifying themselves with the struggle and fashioning ways of making their talents functional in their communities and to the struggling masses of the people as a whole. Mayibuye, Amandla! are examples of such cultural collectives.

The task facing these artists is formidable. There are a number of charlatans, pimps and prostitutes running around the world masquerading as artists; talking about how sensitive they are;

how they cannot be involved in social issues; how art is for its own sake and a lot of other nonsense. Their hideous masks must be yanked off by the artists with a sense of duty and a clear social vision. Creative energy is not locked up in any tower, ivory or black, inside a typewriter, a musical instrument or a can of paint. Recently at Wits there was a benefit concert in aid of detainees and their families. Popular groups like Juluka, Sakhile and Malopoets performed. By participating in a fund-raising concert of that nature, they identified themselves with the detainees and their families; they performed a task that could best be handled by artists in the community; they made their art functional in the needs and interests of the people. This is part of the struggle for national liberation and in it there is no such creature as a revolutionary soloist. We are all involved. The artist is both a participant and imaginative explorer in life. Outside of social life there is no culture, there is no art; and that is one of the major differences between man and beast.

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