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THE BATTLE OF THE MIND*

by

Micere Mugo

I would like to dedicate this lecture to Maina wa Kinyatti, the well-known Kenyan historian of the Mau Mau period who is being held in the notorious Kamiti prison -- eight or so miles from Nairobi on trumped up charges. Maina is the editor of Thunder From the Mountains, a volume of Mau Mau patriotic songs and author of several other significant publications on this period. At the moment he is in danger of going blind because the authorities will not allow him hospitalization to be operated upon, in spite of several appeals from his doctor. Several days ago I received a telephone call from Nairobi, asking me to internationalize the appeal to allow him hospitalization so that he can undergo the necessary surgery because his eyesight can still be saved at the moment.

This lecture is also dedicated to my former students from the University of Nairobi who are in prison on trumped up charges for opposing foreign domination in Kenya and in particular, the U.S. military bases in Mombasa and elsewhere in the country. It is also dedicated to colleagues in preventive detention without charges: Koigi wa Wamwere, Edward Oyugi, Kamoji Wachira and George Anyona.

The subject of my address to-night is "The Battle of the Mind." W.E.B. Dubois predicted that the problem of the 20th Century would be the colour line, and to an extent he was correct. Paulo Freire later argued that the predominant theme of this century and epoch is that of domination vis-à-vis the struggle for liberation from domination. I would like to support Freire in this observation and to add that the heat of the battle, the firing line, has its barrels directed at the human mind in this war between the oppressor and the oppressed.

GENIUS IN PRISON: MEDIOCRITY AT UNIVERSITY

Let me illustrate: At the moment, I am winding up a voluntary prison program at a place by the name of Ogdensburg, near the St. Lawrence seaway, only one minute away from the Canadian border. The place is in upstate New York 20 or so miles from

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St. Lawrence University where I have been Visiting Professor since September 1982. I launched this Black Studies Program as part of both my academic commitment and political activism to offer solidarity to these oppressed brothers whose ages range from 19 to 55. I had learnt that the majority of the jail population at this place was black and that there was a lot of fighting among themselves, as would of course occur when people are locked up together for days and months on end together. The men are from downtown New York and other cities in the South of New York State, transported miles away from their homes to depopulate the urban jails. For most of them, the distance of 500 miles or so is as effective as temporary exile. For their low income and at times destitute families cannot afford to visit them even once in several years. A comrade who knew the awareness and sense of self-worth as well as collective responsibility towards which these brothers and I have been working once told me: "Concentrate on these men uncompromisingly. For some of our most inventive brains are locked up in jails." This is something that George Jackson had also observed in the 60s and it remains true up to today. We have some brilliant minds in there. Some of those inmates are so deeply engaged in pursuit of an education relevant to their needs that I am more impressed with them than with many of my upper class white middle class students at SLU; but the students get angry with me when I tell them that they should exchange places with some of these inmates at Ogdensburg. My leading methodology with them is modelled on Paulo Freire's theory of dialogical education in which teacher and students are learners. We have a lot of free debate as equals. The debates take persistently ironic lines whenever we touch on the world of academia. They are not impressed with the "doctors", "masters" and as they call them "bastards" from what they refer to as the white man's universities -- men and women who are so burdened with white elephants of book volumes that they walk gazing at their toes and cannot see the ghettos around them. These men remind me of Lawino in Okot P'Bitek's Two Songs, who laments for her assimilated type husband, Ocol, whose testicles she alleges were smashed by huge books in the colonialist classrooms. In recent years I have come to feel the embarrassment of these medals in the names of "bastards", "masters" and "doctors" of Western thought. They become quite a burden, in the face of the harsh realities of economic and political/cultural deprivation facing the majority of my people and other so-called Third World peoples. These medals have often proven meaningless in the service of such people, coming as they do from either the colonialist or neo-colonialist classrooms and much more so, from the academic factories of the West in which we are but mere workers.

CHASING THE ACADEMIC RAT

Fellow scholars and colleagues, co-searchers of truth and

friends, I do not mean to insult you but rather to challenge us at this conference so that we ask ourselves what we will emerge with from these conference halls to change the oppressive reality confronting the majority of our people. Unless we can face this question fully and I think from the looks of the program here that we are meant to, we should not really go around calling ourselves African activists. The battle of the mind is on and depending on who ends up having supremacy over our intellect, we shall live or die. We have to take positions on either side of the battle front line. Let us not engage in academic polemics when our people are dying out there. Let us not be like Chinua Achebe's proverbial man who was so busy chasing a rat that was escaping house fire that he forgot to save his own belongings. Let us ask ourselves whether we are ready to engage in dialogical education with our oppressed majorities so that together we can reflect upon our reality and creatively transform it to liberate ourselves from all forms of enslavement. It is unfortunate that to date, the major role of our elites and academicians has been to highjack our peoples' revolutions, to assume power and to continue sitting on them while wining and dining with foreign collaborating forces. Those of you who have seen Sembene Ousmane's Xhala know what I am talking about, as do those of you who know the Charles Njonjos of Kenya and the Eugenia Charles' of the Dominican Republic. Only two years ago did Kamuzu Banda of Malawi launch a school in which the cream of Malawi high school students would be enrolled in a special institute, with posh facilities, of course named Banda institute: In this institute, students are to primarily learn Greek and Latin, as this will take them to the source of human civilization. In this school no Africans can be engaged as teachers. White instructors are to be imported if necessary because Africans do not have the necessary brains or skills. This is in the middle of Malawi on the African Continent. A project by the head of State himself! Can you blame those inmates at Ogdenburg for making fun of us? Did Ousmane Sembene exaggerate on the assimilated theme as he has been accused of in Xhala?

"MASTERS", "DOCTORS" OR BASTERS OF WHOSE KNOWLEDGE?

What I am trying to say can only be illustrated through an analysis of education as a political and cultural institution. I want to begin with agreeing with Freire that as the most important political and cultural institution, education is not and cannot be neutral. The political system that nurtures it into being ensures that it exists to serve its interests, to service its cultural programs. As recipients of degrees from the institutions of either our former colonizers or present-day dominators, this is a truth that we must continuously keep before our eyes. Through education, we internalize the values of a given economic-political system. Through these values we try

to unravel our surroundings to reach into ourselves and unto each other. We are using, in other words, the defined aesthetics of a specific socio-cultural background, as our point of reference and even more specifically, we are projecting the worldview and ideology of a given class. And, lest we forget it, Karl Marx had a point when he stated that the history of a given epoch is the history of the ruling class. Often, the education institutions that we are part of are nothing but mere servicing departments for the ideas and social values of the current ruling classes. It is within this context that we must continuously ask ourselves: What kind of doctors are we? Doctors and masters of what? Are we bastards? Whose knowledge have we mastered? Whose values are we doctoring? Cabral once said that only in stories is it possible to cross the river on the shoulders of the crocodile's friend. Some of us have been happily riding on the shoulders of the crocodile himself. Is it any wonder that we have not yet crossed the river to our side of the bank? In Miseducation of the Negro Woodson graphically describes the calibre of most educationists in the Africana world. The book has been correctly summarized by Wesley and Perry as follows:

Miseducation criticizes the system and explains the vicious circle that results from mis-educated individuals graduating, then proceeding to reach and miseducate others (p. vii).

In history, for instance, we date ourselves as pre-colonial or post-colonial as if colonialism was the threshold of our history. As if we never existed from the beginning of things like all other people in the world. When we teach aesthetics we go as far back as the Greeks. Greek historical records show that the Greeks learnt many of their ethics and aesthetics from the people of Africa's Nile Valley Civilization. For our models we go to Europe, the very predator who destroyed and continues to destroy the very initiative, freedom and wholeness that makes men and women human.

WHEN MACHINES DRINK PORRIDGE

Before we continue with our deliberations at this conference which is touching on issues of death and life in the Africana worlds as well as other related realities, let us seriously ask what credentials we have, to be dealing with the weighty problems before us. Do we truly represent the aspirations of these majorities? If we are not on their side, then we should leave them to deliberate on the problems and seek for solutions, for, believe me, they have the capability. I will give you a good example of this. Two and a half years ago, during one of my field researches collecting data on "Narratives of Kenyan Women Freedom Fighters." I met an elderly woman of about 85

at Chura, near Nakuru -- in the former White Highlands, now integrated highlands like Malcolm X's creamed coffee. In this area a lot of former freedom fighters have been settled on small patches of land, awaiting proper land allocation -- a whole twenty years after Kenya's independence. Awaiting land allocation, mind you, in a country where Tiny Rowland, Delmonte, Delamere, Moi, Njonjo, the Kenyattas and the rest of them own miles and miles of whole countrysides. Anyhow, this woman gave me one of the most concise, precise and incisive economic analyses I have heard for a long time on Kenya's Treasury's idea of what they call the common man's budget. I loved debating with this elder and she was a solid debator. I often found her seated outside her hut on a sack or on a stool. She has swollen legs inherited from a torture spell in colonialist cells during the Mau Mau war. This day I taunted her: "Grandmother, I see that you are smiling to-day. Is it the news of the common man's budget?" She shifted on her stool as if to sit more solidly, as was her habit, gave me one dismissive look and then said: "Will you sit down those ndigiris* of yours and listen to me again." She was on the war path. Explain the donkeys: "They say it is the common man's budget, that because we don't drive cars we will not spend money on petrol. Look at this patch of land out there. The tractor comes to turn the soil for me. Does it drink porridge? In that case I will make some and have my patch all ready for planting at very little cost. And the matatus (public vehicles) on which I risk my life every day riding between here and Nakuru to sell my products, does it drink porridge too? Go away with your common man's budget. It is your budget. When it is mine, they will increase the price of maize and beans so that I can make a profit. They will give me some land on which they grow tea, coffee and wheat which are highly priced. You hear me?" I said, "very clearly," and shut up. Believe me, we do not have to speak for these people. They know who is sitting on them, they feel the weight, they know how to throw it off: It is the power and the means of accomplishing this that they lack. We here can only speak with them, not for them. We can offer our skills to service their needs: We do not need to tell them what they need. If we can do this, that is, work in solidarity with them, then like Malcolm X said in the 60's, ours will stop being sitting down action in the classrooms, libraries and these conference rooms. We will go out there and struggle with them.

The pity of it is that only very few of us are committed to the kind of action and involvement that I have in mind. In The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin White Masks, Fanon does a ruthless analysis of what the so-called intellectual class represents among the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie. They stand for parroting and are very faithful interpreters of

*Kikuyu mock word for "degrees". (Ed. K.M.)

the "master's" intellect. Under colonialist, neo-colonialist and imperialist education we end up denying our world and what it represents. We end up craving for the very systems that dominate us. Through an analysis of language alone, as one of the weapons that this mental invasion uses to dominate oppressed peoples, Fanon shows that the very tool through which we name ourselves, our surroundings, articulate the depths of our existence -- language -- is robbed from us. We assume our conqueror's tongue, dialects, thought-patterns . . . to the level that we completely internalize the values of his system. He says:

To speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization . . . A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.

DOMESTIC NEO-COLONIAL NIGGER

This then is our dilemma. The dilemma of our assimilationist types. Malcolm X spoke of this character in terms of being a house nigger who he said ate well, in the kitchen, what master left over. This creature, Malcolm says, loved his master more than master loved himself. When Master fell sick, he would ask "What's the matter boss? We sick?" When master's house caught fire, he worked harder than master to put out the fire. And when the field nigger asked him to take flight with him and escape, he thought him crazy: "What, separate? What do you mean separate?" Slavery was domesticated in him. The field nigger was the opposite of this. When master's house caught fire, he prayed for a wind to fan it even more. He hated the master and wished him dead . . . As was the case in the sixties, to-day there are two kinds of oppressed peoples: those who condone or accept and those who fight resolutely against it. Right here among us scholars are many, condoning the physical and mental destruction through which Europe has enslaved us for centuries.

Ten days ago, on this very campus, I had a scholar take me to task for challenging Euro-centred philosophical thinking and suggesting that we needed to be African-centred in our analysis of African rural areas. He called the African philosophy that I described something like "the pre-modial state of our psyche" -- something that would not operate to-day. When I insisted that I spoke of a philosophy of life that lives to-day and that 80% of our rural masses adhere to, he took me back to Plato. By the way, Plato was a by-product of our mystery schools in the Nile Valley African Civilization of Antiquity! Now, what do you say to this kind of scholar from the so-called "Third World?" Paulo Freire describes his position brilliantly

in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. I read from the section entitled "Cultural Invasion" and at length, because the statement is important:

Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders. In their passion to dominate, to mold others to their patterns and their way of life, the invaders desire to know how those they have invaded apprehend reality -- but only so they can dominate the latter more effectively. In cultural invasion it is essential that those invaded come to see their reality with the outlook of the invaders rather than their own. For the more they mimic the invaders, the more/stable the position of the latter becomes . . . For cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. Since everything has its opposite, if those who are invaded consider themselves inferior, they must necessarily recognize the superiority of the invaders. The values of the latter thereby become the pattern of the former. The more invasion is accentuated and those invaded are alienated from the spirit of their own culture and from themselves, the more the latter want to be like the invaders: to walk like them, dress like them, talk like them.

Freire is quite right to argue that education from the oppressors' institutions can only end up controlling our thinking and actions, leading us to adjust to his world, inhibiting our creative powers, indoctrinating us to adapt to the world of oppression to the point where complete domestication of oppression makes us happily deny ourselves, accepting manipulation. I quote Freire again on this:

Manipulation, like the conquest whose objectives it serves, attempts to anesthetize the people so they will not think. For if the people join to their presence in the historical process critical thinking about that process, the threat of their emergence materializes in revolution (sic).

Ousmane Sembene gives a good example of this kind of mind which is so monitored, so dependent on the conqueror's viewpoint that to solve a problem under the nose, he/she has to go to Western books for foreign aid.

I refer to Tiémoko in God's Bits of Wood who is one of the strikers during the famous railroad workers strike. There is a debate on what is to be done to a co-worker who has crossed

the picket line and instead of creatively thinking for an opinion of his own, Tiemoko has to spend an entire day and night looking for something to say about a situation in Dakar, Senegal, from French academic authorities.

And the next day he didn't leave his house. His wife, a pretty little woman with high cheekbones and slender features told everyone who came to the door, "He spent the night with a book."

I can just visualize this Lawino-type African woman vividly and the contempt/defiance with which she must have uttered these indicting words.

I use this example to direct my address to Amilcar Cabral's theory on the need for us to return to the source of our being. By the source, I understand Cabral meaning the reality of a colonized people's history that is still very authentic. He argues that the masses of our people have always remained at the source of our history and culture and that it is the Western educated elite who needs not only to re-authenticate himself/herself, but to learn from the source. I think that to Cabral, the source he asks us to return to is not a past that will involve moving backwards in time or engaging in hind cultural motion, for this is not possible. History and culture are dynamic and they change as we count hours, days, months and years. Cabral speaks of a reality that is physically, intellectually and emotionally there. He is challenging us to know our villages, our towns, our slums, our rivers, our mountains, our climate and the rhythms that they dance to. To know our societies, ourselves, re-construct our personality. He is asking us to look around ourselves and assert our being, before looking out there. He is saying that if we seriously examine the Afrocentric world -- physically, intellectually and soulfully, we will become ourselves during this painful search. It is in this spirit that I would like to urge this conference to put the theories that we use here into relevant focus and to address our reality in our own dialects, as it were.

Let me now briefly address the Africana background that I know well to illustrate some of the sources that we could draw upon for our theories, philosophies, ideologies and models.

I would like to draw your attention to published sources that discuss the African philosophy of life, even though their analysis may have ideological biases that we might disagree with. There are many, but I will, for the present purpose refer you to Cheikh Anta Diop, The Origin of African Civilization; John Mbiti, African Philosophy and Religion and Janheinz Jahn, Muntu. They analyse the African world that has shaped a lot of our minds over history and deserve serious study even though one

may not go with the theories all the way.

ONION-LAYERED AFRO-CENTRIC PHILOSOPHY

At the risk of over-generalizing, I am prepared to say that there is a distinct Afro-centric philosophy that is practiced indigenously by most African societies, especially outside Feudalism and Capitalism. Its authenticity changes with history, African peoples' movements and with their dispersal under slavery in the Diaspora, but even among non-Continental Africana peoples, real traces of the Afro-Centric view of life persist. What do I mean by an Afro-centric philosophy? It is best exemplified by comparing it to an onion structure. The onion has many layers: Layers upon layers, with inner and outer curves which maintain perpetual contact with each other harmoniously, making one whole. If you peel off one layer, the onion does not remain the same whole. Like the onion, the African world is in interrelated layers of co-existence. There is the individual, the co-operate personality (the group). There is the family and the extended family. There is the inner world (the soul, the heart, the intellect etc.) and there is the outer world -- the physical form, physical reality, the material culture world that people create outside themselves. This African world also represents life in cyclic motions: the seasons rhythmically dance in and out of existence with planting time, harvesting time, resting time, rainy weather, dry weather and so on. It represents the rhythmic milestones of life that individuals and societies live through from birth, through second birth, initiation, marriage, elder status, into the sphere of ancestral spirits and deities. The deities, in turn, are modelled after the world that the humans wrestle with: Natural phenomena and people, as well as mysteries. They can be men or women or things. They can be benevolent or mischievous and for this reason, society will address them both reverently and cynically since they can at times be as whimsical as the human beings themselves. An individual can only be if he/she is part of the collective group. All the layers of the onion structure must harmonize or the world will step out of measured rhythm and cause chaos. Thus in some communities, when people greet one another, monosyllables are not acceptable. The greeting extends over time, going into elaborate detail to ensure that the person addressed is harmoniously wholesome with himself/herself, society and the surrounding world.

How are you? Are you well? And your own? How are your children? And your wife? How are her people? What about your mother, is she well? And your neighbor, is he still there? How are your goats? And the chickens? And the plants? etc. etc.

IDEOLOGY OF COLLECTIVITY

In this world, you become your brother's keeper. Among the Baganda people of Uganda, the ceremony of greetings can last a whole ten minutes. People seek contact, feeling, understanding, communication. They attempt to break the barriers that silences can create between one person and another. We are dealing with a world that emphasizes the ideology of collectivity, groupness, interrelatedness, interdependence and cooperation. This ideology is antithetical to individualism, isolationism, alienation and cut-throat competition. If only we could return to the source and make this philosophy/ideology work relevantly, concurrently with our dynamically changing culture! We would go a lot further than we will using Western models. But we must also remember Cabral's warning in this connection, with this proposed return. I quote him:

. . . the "return to the source" is not and cannot in itself be an act of struggle against foreign domination (colonialist and racist) and it no longer necessarily means a return to the traditions. It is the denial, by the petite bourgeoisie, of the pretended supremacy of the culture of the dominant power over that of the dominated people with which it must identify itself. The "return to the source" is therefore not a voluntary step, but the only possible reply to the demand of concrete need, historically determined, and enforced by the inescapable contradiction between the colonized society and the colonial power, the mass of the people exploited and the foreign exploitative class, a contradiction in the light of which each social stratum or indigenous class must define in position. . . the "return to the source" is of no historical importance unless it brings not only the real involvement in the struggle for independence, but also complete and absolute identification with the hopes of the mass of the people, who contest not only the foreign culture but also the foreign domination as a whole. Otherwise, "the return to the source" is noticing more than an attempt to find short-term benefits -- knowingly or unknowingly a kind of political opportunism.

I would like to close by emphasizing that this is the challenge before us to-day. We must assume sides. The battle of the mind is on and real. A few scholars have already chosen to identify with the hope of the mass of the people to contest foreign domination. I hope that some of us here to-night are in that camp and that if we are not, we truly question who and what our knowledge serves.