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Ubuntu and African Prison Intellectuals

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Abstract:

In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx famously quipped:

“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”

And yet, I wonder, does this aphorism make sense to a prisoner, especially to an African prison intellectual? Rather than wishing death upon philosophizing, some incarcerated men and women turn to the art of philosophizing with a passion, which they may not have pursued outside the prison walls. This paper focuses on the philosophical reflections of South African anti-apartheid freedom fighters and Kenyan intellectuals who found themselves at odds with the neocolonial Moi regime. Furthermore, the African principle of Ubuntu (connoting communalism and dignity) will be explored.

I. The Uses of Philosophy

I wish to begin with Marianna Papastephanou's framing statements:

"The worthwhile and beautiful risk for the sake of justice" (Socrates)

"Philosophy as consolation, solace and treatise on happiness, transcendence and worldliness" (Boethius)

"The solitude of the revolutionary subject and internal freedom" (Toni Negri)

Prison writing often incorporates an aesthetic/ascetic commitment from Boethius or Negri, with a dose of Socrates's righteousness. This is no less true of writings by political prisoners on the African continent, where imprisonment—the practice of condemning persons to "doing time"—was introduced with colonialism, and not surprisingly, old slave forts were refashioned into prison dungeons for this purpose of instilling terror into the indigenous population. In a sociocentric world, being taken away by strangers from one's loved ones is extremely traumatic. Colonial imprisonment can be likened to the (rare) indigenous practice of exile, which condemned a person to social and often physical death.¹

Let's begin with *asceticism*. When asked whether their struggle (against colonialism, apartheid, or neocolonial tyranny) has been worth the prize of torture, isolation, long-term imprisonment, invariably the stoic African authorial voice will affirm that every minute in the dungeon was well spent. African prison intellectuals, namely those organic intellectuals (in Gramsci's sense) who reflect on the condition of their

incarceration and on macroscopic social justice issues, emphasize in their post-prison writings that they either got special (positive) treatment but denied themselves any privileges, especially if they were internationally recognized political prisoners (e.g. Fatima Meer) or that they got special (negative) treatment for being rebels with a cause, and therefore, subject to extreme conditions including isolation or standing in water for days or continuous interrogations coupled with sleep deprivation to out others in the movement.²U.S. political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal notes that typically political prisoners face the worst form of wrath by the authorities –more so than Black, Muslim and other prisoners who are not viewed as threats to the state’s *raison d’être*.³Who can withstand such intense pressure, let alone find the strength to philosophize about their situation and connect it to world events or macroscopic perspective on oppression?

Toni Negri’s focus on the *solitude* of the political prisoner resonates so much with political prisoners. Puerto Rican Independentista José Solís Jordan writes that his guards observed at one point that he hadn’t moved for hours in his solitary cell. He countered stoically that since they wouldn’t let him go outside, he just went inside. A long spell of meditation was his only solace under the severe sensory deprivation courtesy of solitary confinement.⁴Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ Wa Th’iongo writes novels and treatises criticizing neo-colonial corruption and muses on the veritable toilet paper culture that he participated in to get his points across.⁵ Even Martin Luther King’s famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” smuggled out of the jail cell was written on toilet paper, as well as on newspaper margins and scrap paper.⁶

Following Boethius’s mode of resistance and sadly his fate—house arrest before state execution—Steve Biko continued writing which was smuggled out of his home by

well-wishers. Biko also jokingly gave as his profession “freedom fighter” to the inquiring police officer—since that’s exactly what the apartheid security force wanted him to do, namely, to sit at home and think deeply about the meaning of freedom. Of course, he wasn’t allowed to communicate and send off letters to the movement.⁷

Thirdly, Boethius’s notion of the *via contemplativa* relates to imprisoned thinkers, who on the one hand find prison a terrifying—and unAfrican—experience and on the other hand, find that enforced solitude creates a condition of possibility to retrieve a particular thinking that would have been impossible on the busy streets of Johannesburg or within the noisy family compound. It is exemplified by Lehlohonolo Moagi, an anti-apartheid activist with AZAPO from South Africa, who pensively notes that a certain purity of thought and spirituality may be cultivated in isolation:

The mind is at its peak behind bars. Solitary confinement unearths some pure depth of thought, hidden beneath layers of vague existential contradictions. In jail you develop faith in reason, human knowledge and wisdom becomes a religion. Time is at your disposal. You interrogate appalling fallacies of modern thought. I remember during one of my preventative detention in Pretoria Central Police Station, I was so preoccupied with Descartes. I was not convinced that you could acquire knowledge of reality from a priori sources, by deductive reasoning.⁸

The audacity of an African activist to be ensconced in Cartesian Meditations! Moagi hid books, including Western classics, in the chicken coop of his mother’s township house since the South African police and intelligence officers routinely raided his place. He was a participant in the 1976 Soweto youth uprising against the hated Afrikaans as language

of instruction as an Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO) activist, he and his comrades were always in extreme danger for their lives and for the risk of being tortured when captured to give names to the apartheid regime of other members in the underground organization. AZAPO grew out of the 1960-70s Black Consciousness Movement and to date advocates a Biko-inspired philosophy of African socialism future for Azania, the African name for the Republic of South Africa.

While philosophy may provide metaphysical comfort within stark prison cells—echoes of monastic cells, to be sure—being known as a philosopher to prison or political authorities may have serious repercussions. In coup-prone nation-states, philosophy professors tend to be the first to be fired or worse, imprisoned, for the age-old charge of corrupting the youth with African socialist ideas or simple democratic ideals. When I visited a men's prison in Mali, the warden all of the sudden shut down when I shared with him that I was a philosophy professor. I didn't know at the time that my profession turns out to be a liability or threat (in a total institution). Steve Biko's fondness as "freedom fighter" had tragic consequences for him. He so loved his freedom that he skipped town and house arrest to visit comrades, only to be recognized and tortured so severely that he died on the way to detention. The Hollywood film *Cry Freedom* dramatizes his political life and death, which spelled international embarrassment for the repressive regime and propelled a worldwide boycott of South Africa, beginning with student-led divestment campaigns in universities the world over.⁹

Now shifting gears from ancient and modern persecuted thinkers, let's turn to an African principle that circumscribes a worldview, an attitude and ethical

comportment. Afterwards, in section III, I will investigate whether imprisoned intellectuals from the African continent can shed light on this ethic of Ubuntu precisely because of their experience of imprisonment.

II Ubuntu

As chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) theologian Desmond Tutu popularized Ubuntu and has written about it extensively. It resonates with aspects of virtue ethics and an ethic of alterity—my humanness is nothing without the other, even if it is the one who oppresses me.

[Ubuntu] is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanise them.¹⁰

Often, Ubuntu is linked to the famous saying by Kenyan theologian and philosopher John Mbiti: “I am because we are and because we are, I am.”¹¹ With this statement of solidarity and interconnectedness, Mbiti turns the metaphysical *Anspruch* of “I think, therefore I am” on its head and turns decidedly against the egocentric, monological Western world view. Mbiti, by contrast, shows that the African religious and philosophical framework is sociocentric and dialogical, even though he concedes that modern urbanization brings about a decay of traditional values and a solitude that is not life-affirming:

when he gets bad news from his relatives in the countryside, he cries alone even if hundreds of other people rub shoulders with him in the factory or bus.... Almost at every turn of his life the individual in the city and under modern change discovers constantly that he is alone or even lonely in the midst of large masses of people.¹²

Mbiti wonders what to do with those who are “unwanted children, orphans, criminals, delinquents and prisoners, all of whom need special social care to be brought up or integrated into their communities” (p. 219). Social inequity breeds discontent and the sacred values of solidarity and ethic of care towards strangers are seriously imperiled.

III Ubuntu and its Uses by African Political Prisoners

In the 4th book of *The Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius writes that injustice does not make the victim but rather the transgressor sick. Instead of hating the perpetrator, it is opportune, following Plato and Socrates, to treat him therapeutically, as if he had a mental disease.¹³ This sentiment fits with the spirit of Ubuntu, and Tutu would certainly be sympathetic to this treatment and humane comportment regarding those whose path may have been errant. To what extent are prisoners on the African continent capable of

taking the risk of love for their jailers, in the way that Socrates risked his life for the sake of justice? President Mandela's comportment towards his former jailer is of course legendary and worthy of conspicuous consumption.¹⁴ Sympathetically put, it speaks to the Ubuntu concept of interconnection and shared humanity, which is true literally, insofar as the jailer is also incarcerated along with his charge, some eight hours a day.

Nelson Mandela may be the rare kind of former prisoner who has left the prison cell behind. Many suffer PTSD and thus are either haunted by the prison experience through recurrent nightmares or have internalized the celling that they wish it onto their political opponents. Samba Sangaré is a case in point of the former, surviving ten years of a death camp where few of his compatriots came home alive (in Mali), and he impersonates a man of great compassion and forgiveness.¹⁵ Africa has its share of former prisoners, tortured and maligned for their political beliefs by the former colonial powers, notably British, yet once freed, they imposed harsh imprisonment upon their new political enemies: Kenyatta and Nkrumah come to mind.¹⁶ Even Koigi Wa Wamwere, who suffered torture, called for harsh prison sentences as Member of Parliament and sadly followed the logic of "negative ethnicity" by endorsing a kind of tribal thinking; this is all the more disturbing since he condemned this logic before his ascent as politician.¹⁷

Perhaps it would be opportune to review *gendered* dimensions of leadership and Ubuntu. African nation-states have been slow to elect women leaders as heads of states or as ministers. One of the notable women intellectuals who have been incarcerated and faced public scrutiny for her compromised behavior in the anti-apartheid struggle has been

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. From her perspective and those sympathetic to her, her husband who was able to forgive state actors' political crimes against humanity and even share a Nobel Peace Prize with de Clerk would not forgive her for her transgressions including having affairs during his 27-year long sentence.¹⁸ When it comes to personal and intimate matters, perhaps it is more challenging to adhere to Ubuntu ethics, notably forgiveness. Matters concerning "the private sphere" seem to be the least thematized in studies of Ubuntu, perhaps because most of the writers on Ubuntu are men and might have gendered blindspots.

Fatima Meer, the first person of color to be a professor in a university reserved for whites during apartheid, a key member of Women in Black and having to endure segregation in prison and assassination attempts, was elected to parliament in the New South Africa, but declined to serve. Recipient of international academic prizes and other recognition, she served as respected judge and took at times unpopular and controversial stances, for instance supporting Palestinians and opposing the U.S./NATO war on Afghanistan. She died in 2010¹⁹

Wangari Maathai, the first East African woman to earn a PhD (in Biology), endured a public beating by security personnel, short imprisonment during the Moi regime and served as Deputy Minister of the Environment—she was never promoted to Minister, even after winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Unlike her fellow Kenyan Wa Wamwere, Maathai spoke out against the post-election violence which was ethnically inflamed by government officials, and she was defeated by her ethnic group as an overt sign of

punishing her for not engaging in negative ethnicity. Until her untimely death in 2011, Maathai worked incessantly on behalf of women, the Green Belt Movement which she founded, and was intrepid in the face of injustice.²⁰

Ubuntu ethics can be recognized across the world by imprisoned intellectuals. We see kernels of Ubuntu in the ancient and medieval Western discourses to contemporary African political prisoners, some of the latter being tasked with nation building in the postcolonial era. There's no question that the path is an arduous one, but it is helpful to shine light on those who make it against the odds, of not succumbing to the logic of modern prisons as crime schools but rather follow core principles of Ubuntu ethics—and importantly, for not continuing out of spite or vengeance to call for the imprisonment of their political opponents. Having accomplished that might just exemplify an aspect of Ubuntu.

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¹ Mechthild Nagel, "Women's Rights behind Walls," in *Colonial Systems of Control: Criminal Justice in Nigeria*, ed. Viviane Saleh-Hanna (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2008), 223-44, and Mechthild Nagel. "'I write what I like': African Prison Intellectuals and the Struggle for Freedom," *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2(3) (2008): 68-80.

²Fatima Meer, *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days 1976*. Kwela Books, 2001); Koigi Wa Wamwere, *I Refuse to Die. My Journey to Freedom*(New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002).

³ Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Jailhouse Lawyers*(San Francisco: City Light Books, 2009).

⁴José SolísJordan, "This is Enough! In *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, ed. Joy James, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

⁵ Ngugi Wa Th'iongo, *Devil on the Cross*(London: Heinemann, 1987).

⁶*TIME Magazine*, Nation: Letter from Birmingham Jail (Jan.3, 1964).

⁷ Steven Biko, *I Write What I Like* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁸ Email communication with Lehlohonolo Moagi, November 5, 2002.

⁹ Richard Attenborough, Dir., *Cry Freedom* (Universal Pictures, 1987).

¹⁰Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday,1999), pp. 34-35).

¹¹ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990).

¹² See Mbiti, *Ibid*, pp. 219-20.

¹³Boethius. (1897/2004). *The Consolation of Philosophy* (H.R.James, trans.).

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm>

¹⁴ Billie August, Dir, *The Color of Freedom* (Paramount Classics, 2007).

¹⁵Samba Sangaré, *Dix Ans au Bagne-Mouroir de Tauoudenit* (Bamako: Librairie Traore, 2001).

¹⁶ Seth Asumah, “Development Crisis, Predatory Regimes, and Prisons in Africa: An Impedance-Facilitation Perspective,” in *Prisons and Punishment: Reconsidering Global Penalty*, ed. Mechthild Nagel and Seth Asumah (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Koigi Wa Wamwere, Koigi, *Negative Ethnicity: From Bias to Genocide* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Nadira Naipaul, “How Nelson Mandela Betrayed Us, Says Ex-Wife Winnie,” *London Evening Standard* (8 March, 2010).

¹⁹ Fatima Meer. ULWAZI blog, “Tribute to Fatima Meer: Champion of the Underclass,” wiki.ulwazi.org (2010); *South African History Online*, “Fatima Meer.” N.d. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/fatima-meer>.

²⁰Mechthild Nagel, “Environmental Justice and Women’s Rights: A Tribute to Wangari Maathai,” *Wagadu 2*, (2005), web.cortland.edu/wagadu.