

“I write what I like”: African Prison Intellectuals and the Struggle for Freedom

Dedicated to Lehlohonolo Moagi

by

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There is great unanimity among African people from all walks of life on the topic of imprisonment. Hence, carceral is considered an alien custom introduced on the African soil by Europeans, searching for human cargo to be transported to the Americas as massive forts were constructed for enslaving African peoples which evolved into prisons, especially after the colonial scramble for Africa (1880s) (Bernault). Today, while many old notorious structures, such as Robben Island, have been shut down, carceral punishment, ironically, has become an “African” way of life—at least for those who are socially displaced or who are political opponents of anti-democratic regimes.

In reviewing the futility of imprisonment, it is helpful to ascertain the meaning of political principles, such as freedom, equality and justice, from the vantage point of some of society’s most marginalized people—prisoners. Politicized prisoners often take a very dim view of the capitalist ideology of freedom and theories of desert—i.e., who ought to be deprived of their freedom of movement, of expression, etc., and they are suspicious towards using the (capitalist) justice system to press for appeals of wrongful conviction. Thus, formerly imprisoned voices on the continent, such as South Africa’s president Nelson Mandela, Egyptian activist Nawal El Saadawi and Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, use a prophetic language of liberation in thought and practice, often at the expense of their own well-being. For example, when Mandela’s autobiographical notes were discovered in the Robben Island prison yard, after he had lost the privilege of reading materials.

In this context, in studying the burgeoning prisoners' literature, by organic intellectuals from the inside, we may want to look at their analysis, not only in struggling against repressive colonial regimes, but at their contributions to the anti-prison movement. What are their conceptions of freedom, of a just society, democracy and equality? Do they, and other African political prisoners, envision a society that frees itself from the colonial grip of (mass) incarceration? What in effect can be learnt from their struggles and reproduced for other struggles against the prison industrial complex?

In this paper, prison is broadly defined as: colonial/apartheid experience; detention; house arrest; ban; and even Bantustans count as carceral structures, because as Mandela clearly noted in 1959, "The Bantustans are not intended to voice the aspirations of the African people; they are instruments of their subjection" (Mandela, 1986, 86). In the following, I wish to present prisoners' narratives on the history of prisons in Africa, traveling from Mali, to South Africa and Kenya. The prisoners, presented here, recount their experiences with prisons, its purpose and their visions for Africa and their people.

Penal Border Crossings

(1) Samba Sangaré, a former political prisoner of Mali, notes:

To the best of my knowledge, Africa did not initially know the system of prisons. We had forms of sanctions in the social schemes which were different from imprisonment. We learned imprisonment with the colonial system. The name of prison itself has been Africanized from a word which was originally French, the "cachot" which is called "kaso" in African language. Africans did not know what it was initially and since they did not speak French they called it "kaso." It did not exist traditionally. It is a new tradition that colonization introduced (interview with Samba Sangaré, August 12, 2002, Lafiabougou, Bamako-Mali).

(2) In his novel, *Petals of Blood*, Kenyan writer, and ex-political detainee, Ngugi wa Thiong'o makes explicit the colonial "carrot and stick" approach of institutions which create compliance and docility:

'We went on a journey to the city to save Ilmorog from the drought. We brought back spiritual drought from the city!' There was an element of truth in Munira's interpretation. . . An administrative office for a government chief and a police post were the first things to be set up in the area. Next had come the church built by an Alliance of Missions as part of their missionary evangelical thrust into heathenish interiors. Only that, for him, so many years later, this irony of history was just the manner in which God manifested himself" (wa Thiong'o 195; emphasis mine).

First the prison (police post) is built (for deterrence of tax evasion, etc.) and secondly, the church (for rewarding good behavior and ensuring compliance of the parishioners).

(3) In the following excerpt, the Kenyan ex-political prisoner Koigi wa Wamwere lets his grandmother speak to the important connections of enslavement and imprisonment by the British colonial regime:

Look at us today. We are prisoners in our own huts and in the white man's farm. We live enclosed like goats in pens. ... Before the white man came, we never had prisons and no one was punished before guilt was established by everyone in the community and family members. ... And when people killed, life was not paid for with life but with animals and labor. If you killed and were found guilty, you paid for the life you took with animals and not with your life. If you and your clan could not pay the animals, you took the dead person's place in his family. We knew nothing of the injustice of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth that commits the same sins it punishes other people for.

They say they came to save us from Arabs. But Arabs did not enslave us all on our own land. White people have enslaved every one of us—men, women and children—including their collaborators. ... Today the white man does what no African did to another: Takes all cattle and land, enslaves everybody and kills for pleasure (92; emphasis mine).

All these narratives emphasize that the penal regulatory system was introduced by colonialism as an instrument of social control and repression, and was justified ideologically by the mission efforts of the Christian church, as wa Thiong'o's quote poignantly illustrates. Today, the legitimating of prisons is greatly challenged in African countries and many rural and urban communities (even in the face of grave offenses, such as rape and murder) would rather bypass the (neo) colonial justice system and go back to the pre-colonial ways of rendering restitution to victims harmed (Elechi 161).

On my research trip to Mali in 2002 to study penalty and penal abolition, a judge told me the following: "I used to be very tough on crime, sentencing every offender to long prison terms. One day my son was stopped on the street and told, 'Your father is a thief! He is stealing people.' Then I had a change of heart and I am now rethinking punishment." This judge is currently head of the corrections system and is reflecting on the use of rehabilitation and demarcation. Interestingly, he attended the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA) in Toronto in 2001 to gather information from scholars and practitioners internationally on how to minimize the use of imprisonment as a corrective measure. And worthy of special note, Mali is one of the African countries that has a low incarceration rate and is deeply invested in upholding its traditional, pre-colonial restorative justice practices side by side its adherence to the French imposed criminal justice system (cf. Nagel, 2007).

Across the continent, political prisoners recollect the power of *Ubuntu*: The Zulu term “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” means that a human being (umuntu) is a human being through human beings (abantu). Furthermore, in the context of South Africa, Ubuntu is invoked essentially as hospitality towards the stranger: “Ubuntu is an ethic of human reciprocity that shows that there is no ethics that is not also against apartheid. To identify a loss of ubuntu is thus to identify the evil, the untruth even, of apartheid in all its forms” (Sanders 125). Imprisonment then is the antithesis of *Ubuntu*, a practice of separation of humanity. Being walled in a separate carceral cell is akin to being executed; thus the closest custom to such practice of separation from other humans is the ancient African custom of sending an offender into “exile,” i.e. into death.

The Meaning of Freedom

Thinking about liberty is the prerogative of all political prisoners who face the wrath of authoritarian regimes. However, some of their answers may come as surprise.

Under cross-examination at the same trial by the prosecutor, Steve Biko reveals his profession. When the security police asked him about his profession, upon detention, he answers: “freedom fighter.” (The cop laughed.) When intellectuals ask him about his profession, he often says “freedom fighter—precisely because this is what the state wants me to do, to sit at home and think about my freedom rather than be involved in creative work” (Biko 123). “Sitting at home” is of course the polite term for house arrest and banning; being forbidden to produce any letters or documents meant for dissemination for the movement and the anti apartheid forces abroad.

Koigi wa Wamwere reminisces: “Strange as it may sound, when I landed in the detention compound, I heaved a sigh of relief. The long nightmare of my life as a Kenyan MP [Member of Parliament] had come to an end. Who would have guessed when I was released from detention in December 1978 that I would be entering a more dangerous world than the one I was departing, that in Parliament, I would be less free than a detainee in prison.” (264)

Nelson Mandela thus echoes wa Wamwere’s sentiment. He mentions that his stay in the underground was much more difficult than being in jail. It meant to be separated from his family and to live “as an outlaw in my own land,” to lose his professional business and live in poverty, just as the majority of his people. Defiantly, he writes these famous words on June 26, 1961: “I will not leave South Africa, nor will I surrender. Only through hardship, sacrifice and militant action can freedom be won. The struggle is my life. I will continue fighting for freedom until the end of my days” (Mandela 121).

Yet, Ngugi wa Thiong'o goes even further with the hyperbolic notion of prison as a writers' paradise: "six weeks after the banning of *Ngaahika Ndeena* [his play]—I was in cell 16 at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison as a political detainee answering to a mere # K6, 77. Cell 16 would become for me what Virginia Woolf had called *A Room of One's Own* and which she claimed was absolutely necessary for a writer. Mine was provided free by the Kenya government" (wa Thiong'o 1986, 64).

And finally, Lehlohonolo Moagi, a freedom fighter from South Africa, notes a certain purity of thought and spirituality, which 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 (email communication, November 5, 2002).

Clearly, freedom from repressive living conditions, pass laws, and the constant fear of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time become overwhelming to the point that actual imprisonment may turn out to be the lesser evil. And some writers may actually turn the time spent in prison into a sabbatical project they have long been waiting for.

At the same time, Samba Sangaré, who survived ten years of hard labor in a veritable death camp of Taudenit in the desert of Mali, lives with daily occurrences of nightmares, even though he was released twenty years ago. Prison has a way of leaving indelible imprints, and as the saying goes "you can leave prison, but prison never leaves you." Much work needs to be done with respect to the post-traumatic stress disorder which faces all ex-prisoners, and even more so, those who faced torture in addition to the denial of liberty. Trauma centers, with an African holistic, traditional, and spiritual philosophy, ought to be established all over the continent, and not just far removed in the global North (Minneapolis, USA and Berlin, Germany, to name a few).

On Resistance (becoming a docile body)

Most of the prison intellectuals discussed here, share a deep commitment to resistance politics, whether it is the colonial or neo-colonial regime. They share an astute wisdom about social conditions of the carceral society and tend to get punished for their Cassandra callings. Outsiders may learn more profoundly about the human condition in their countries and globally by these organic intellectuals.

Analogously, to understand physical and emotional impact of chattel enslavement in the US (from a resistance perspective) one has to read the narratives of Harriet Jacobs rather than *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Beecher-Stowe) which transcribes certain racist myths in the body politic. Prison intellectuals today perform a new narrative, since the “outside” may prove to be more imprisoning than the cell itself.¹ Barbara Harlow advocates refiguring “the site of political prison as a ‘university’ for the resistance” (5). To survive in prison, means to hold dear a conviction, an ideology—and it is the political convicts who are most often not broken easily, as wa Wamwere’s memoirs *I Refuse to Die* make abundantly clear (cf. also Harlow 10). Lehlohonolo Moagi, an Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO) member, notes that Robben Island was transformed into *the* university of resistance upon the arrival of the Black Consciousness comrades in the 1970s. Thus, outwitting the oppressor is a strategy often used by political prisoners. Moagi, who was interned in Pretoria Prison, recalls:

I remember being brutally interrogated and subsequently being charged with sabotage, abduction and attempted murder. All of these charges then carried a minimum sentence of 5-10 years on Robben Island even death penalty. I got away with 5 years conviction later suspended to three years.

Robben Island has produced graduates-the university of hard knocks. . . . I also had a good read of the Bible as it was the only book we were allowed to read—the nexus of blind faith. I had these young naïve racist wardens who were told I was a terrorist. So I would engage them into private talk to bounce and test how tight the security net was around me. At times depending on my moods, I would be confrontational and cause some irritation to disrupt them from focusing on me. I would shake those prison bars so much, make so much noise that they would get mad at me, and get me out into the court yard...hahaha--sunshine, blue skies, fresh air. At times it’s a period I look back with fond and not sad memories (email communication, November 5, 2002).

What Moagi deems “the nexus of blind faith,” becomes a tool of resistance for another prisoner of conscience, and universally, it seems that the Bible has been allowed as the only book fit for solitary confinement, because it would create docile bodies, according to the jailers. Koigi wa Wamwere refused to read the Bible for a year but then he “gave in” and found out that there are plenty of passages written for political prisoners like him, he also realized later that when he cited those passages to his wife, to disguise his political disagreements with the Moi government, those letters never reached her. Laconically, he notes “The Bible had been added to the prison’s list of subversive literature” (271).

Wa Thiong'o, who ended up in detention for his popular education efforts with village women, notes that prison proved to be an epistemological break with the past, i.e. the ivory tower, being chair of the literature department at Nairobi. He returned to his native language, Gikuyu, at the prompting of the women, but then he "freely" relented because of the terms of his own incarceration. Repression creates more resistance. "There was no return to the Afro-European novel" (1986, 44).

A writer who tries to communicate the language of revolutionary unity and hope in the languages of the people becomes a subversive character. It is then that writing in African languages becomes a subversive or treasonable offence with such a writer facing possibilities of prison, exile or even death. (30).

Thus, resistance writing creates a "toilet paper culture," as pen and papers were only provided for the express purpose of writing an appeal or a confession. Toilet paper was of objectionable quality, meant to punish prisoners; but with humor, wa Thiong'o writes, "But what was bad for the body was good for the pen" (74). A warden warned him against any writing of poems; wa Thiong'o reflects, "he obviously confused novels with poems" (71). In fact this warden energized Ngugi to take up writing again!

As independent journalist and editor, Koigi wa Wamwere challenged Kenyatta's neocolonial government in several ways: he advocated the end of the oppression of women; he fought a pernicious version of the poor laws which dictated that robbers be hanged; he challenged ethnic divisions and invoking the spirit of Mandela and Biko, he wrote an article called "Tribalism is an ideology of exploitation" (wa Wamwere, p 187-88). Wa Wamwere consistently challenging neo-colonial, corrupt conditions, even to the point of endangering his family, to expose that even former detainees, such as Kenyatta, can become autocrats. For his principled stances, he received a life-on-the-installment-plan sentence; thrown into jail or given house arrest, to make him ponder the meaning of challenging the President—or, the meaning of putting his finger in the mouth of the lion. As a result of this harassment, wa Wamwere decided to seek protection or immunity by running for office. Losing due to rigged elections, he continued to speak out and was arrested, after several failed attempts on his life, and spent four years in a maximum security prison. Later in the Moi years, he spent more time in prison, at one point being kidnapped (while in exile) in Uganda and imprisoned for several years, under charges of treason. He currently serves as a Member of Parliament in the post-Moi era, ushered in with national democratically conducted elections in December 2002.

Interestingly, Koigi wa Wamwere does not dwell much on his own heroism in his autobiography, but instead emphasizes the role of the women in the struggle for liberation (running night schools during colonialism), or demanding freedom for their imprisoned sons (under Kenyatta and Moi), or in the struggle for accountable government and oversight. It is the women who dare to challenge Jomo Kenyatta, who is too baffled to put them in their place. Wa Wamwere credits women's resistance with his good fortune of having stayed alive. His wife, Ndate, too, in a way resisted the Moi regime in more incredible ways than he did from his prison cell. His family was under constant house arrest during his detention in the early 1980s all the while Moi's officials tried desperately to buy Ndate out of destitute poverty—yet; she refused any and all of his offers.

Afropessimism

When it comes to discussing prisons in Africa, it is easy to indulge in *Afropessimism*. Prisons came about with colonization and *political* imprisonment was a main staple of the conquerors' practices. In his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes how summary justice is doled out against a community's male leaders, where a Christian church was burnt to the ground; the leaders were brought into the District Commissioner under false pretenses, beaten by his guards and their heads shaved, to humiliate them into submission. In the end, the community pays the huge fine in order to see the men returned (193-97).

Prisons did not immediately disappear after the liberation movements took over. However, in countries, such as Mali, prison construction has not been expanded and several notorious prisons have been closed under democratic rule of the Konaré government. Yet, as Seth Asumah has noted, it seems indeed strange that political prisoners, such as Kenyatta, Nkrumah, Sékou Touré, and many others would use prisons to incarcerate the opposition once they rose to power and thus sought to solidify their positions (Asumah, 2007; cf. also Diawara, 1998). In Africa, the saying goes that "your jailers may become your prisoners, and your prisoners may turn into your presidents" (Agomoh, 2001).

Role of Women in a Carceral Society

In men's prison narratives, women usually get relegated to the roles of stoic, heroic mothers and wives who silently endure and support their son's or husband's endeavor to advance the cause of liberation of the people. However, all over Africa, rather than being passive bystanders, women also engaged in their own revolutionary struggles and often were imprisoned or banned for their subversive activities against the regime. Yet, few women write about their own ordeal. South African prison literature is an exception to this trend, as Fatima Meer, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Emma Mashinini, Ellen Kuzwayo, Ruth First and others engaged in autobiographical writings about their detention in women's prisons.

During apartheid, Mamphela Ramphele, a Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) activist, writes that: a) few women had leadership positions in resistance organizations; b) women subordinated their demands for women's rights to the struggle against racism; and c) women participated in terms of "extension of their role as mothers, wives and 'significant others' of their male colleagues rather than in their capacity as individual citizens." Yet, there was great respect for "tradition" and upholding the patriarchal/matrilineal and patrilocal system (224). Kogila Moodly echoes Ramphele by noting that despite the ideal of a "communalistic" Black world, prevailing sexist practices existed in the BCM, similar to that of whites. Women were considered as domestic caretakers, who were family oriented and upheld traditions, and thus the constitution of the allied Black women's Federation plays into this ideology:

1. Black women are basically responsible for the survival and maintenance of their families and largely the socialization of the youth for the transmission of the black cultural heritage.

2. The need to present a united front and redirect the status of motherhood towards the fulfillment of the black people's social, cultural, economic and political aspirations (Black Review, 1975-6:143; cited in Moodly 147-8).

It is not surprising then, given this patriarchal logic, that some women, like Ramphele, who were active in the leadership of the South African Students' Organization (SASO), were considered honorary men (Moodly 148). Therefore the marginalization of women's political contribution and women's experiences has been a deep concern for members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as they noticed that women always spoke on behalf of their husbands and sons but did not account for their own victimization. And thus, as Sanders postulates, women are complicit in their own suffering:

*In the light of such cases, where does responsibility-in-complicity lie? Advocacy is a site at which complicities are multiplied from a basic human foldedness that is also the condition of possibility for responsibility. Viewed in terms of advocacy (the word used by Said and others is representation), if he or she is not simply a more or less self-appointed advocate, the responsibility of the intellectual is typically a negotiation between various narrow senses of complicity: women who speak on behalf of men and not on behalf of themselves are complicit in their own silencing; Blacks who allow Whites to speak for them are collaborators in a racist status quo; and so on. Complicity cannot be avoided; one chooses, as Derrida writes in *Of Spirit*, in order to avoid the worst (201; emphasis added).*

And ironically, as BCM sought to dismantle the chains of apartheid, women in the movement acquiesced and did not engage in the destruction of the psychic chains of "tradition."

Visions for a Postcolonial Africa

[T]he moment when you break the chains, the heavy fetters,
the evil, cruel times will go never to come again.
A free and gallant Congo will arise from the black soil,
a free and gallant Congo—the black blossomed, the black seed.
(Patrice Lumumba, cited in Henrik Clarke 87)

Breaking the colonial chains and the concomitant psychological inferiority complex were key concerns to Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement he helped engender. Facing cross-examination by the prosecutor in the famous 1976 “Trial of Black Consciousness” (1976), Biko argues courageously for “one man, one vote,” for Black communalism, and African socialism. Asked if such a thing has worked out in other African states, Biko says that Kenya believes in African socialism but it is really a “carbon copy of the old British society, terribly capitalistic in its approach, but they say they believe in African Socialism” (Arnold 51). Biko articulates his vision for a new South Africa, where property is owned collectively. He also proposes a joint culture, which accommodates the African experience; for now, he says, Africans live in South Africa as if they were Europeans (Arnold 51-56). Unlike PAC and ANC, BPC/SASO opted for non-violence, so that they could maintain above-ground status and accept “certain legal limitations to our operations” (58).

Many African prison intellectuals argue for the abolition of the colonial regime of incarceration. Wa Thiong’o’s protagonist Karega gives a prison abolitionist speech in *Petals of Blood* with spiritual-messianic overtones: “For as long as there’s a man in prison, I am also in prison: for as long as there is a man who goes hungry and without clothes, I am also hungry and without clothes. Why then need a victim hurl insults at another victim?” (Ngugi 1977, 240) Wa Wamwere ends his book on a prophetic and mysterious note: “We still have the Mau Mau revolution to see through” (366). His book exudes a deeply humanist spirit and he seems to yearn for the day when there are no prisons, when land is returned to the people, wealth redistributed, poor people, especially women, are accorded an equal and free education, and importantly, democratic rights are assured to everyone, regardless of ethnicity, religion, race, nationality, gender—and we might add, along the South African constitutional model, sexual preference. However, facing the oppositional “Orange Revolution” politicians, Koigi wa Wamwere, as a Member of Parliament aligned with Kibaki’s government, has thus fallen prey to the familiar practice of former political prisoners who now encourage jailing of their political opponents (cf. Asumah, 2007).

Nevertheless, there is reason to hope across the continent: In Mali, notorious prisons, especially colonial prisons, has been shut down, including the death house of Taudenit, which Samba Sangaré survived; in Nigeria, human rights activist Uju Agomoh was able to get 8,000 prisoners released on human rights grounds in the late 1990s. Kenya's notorious Police Station in Nairobi, which was an underground dungeon during the Kenyatta and Moi regimes, has been converted into a museum; finally, the most notorious prison of them all, Robben Island, today hosts thousands of tourists who receive a tour by ex-prisoners. . . . Some of these sites have turned into somber memorial spaces to reflect on the meaning of evil and redemption, just as Buchenwald and Auschwitz were important markers for the German youth to reflect on the Holocaust. The question remains for us to see in what ways postcolonial Africa continues to be complicit in a prison experiment that uses a logic of revenge, and does little to restore hope or humanity. The time has come for seeking truth, and achieving reconciliation.

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¹ Cf. John Edgar Wideman's discussion new narratives of the enslaved in Mumia-Abu Jamal, *Live from Death Row*.