

The First and Only Letter to Amai

by

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*In my search to find my way I cause you endless troubles
As I ask you to hear this challenge,
Answer that inquiry
All the while expecting unconditional love from you
Yet there is no love for you
My mischief does not let you rest peacefully
But today I will try to open myself to hearing from you*

Prelude

We can only speak the truth about that which we know and even here we are limited by that which we can give voice to. Some things can never be given voice while other things take a long time to gain voice. I therefore ask you to remember that behind this story exists a world which I am not able to adequately capture and give voice to but what I have given voice to is now ours because we share it between us.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight how colonialism has inflicted spiritual and physical injury upon the Black family through imposing its memory while systematically endeavoring to annihilate and extinguish any traces of collective memory. The ultimate goal of colonialism was to create Black bodies which had no history, language, and cultural identity, because such bodies by their Blackness were marked for enslavement. It is this association that exists between Blackness and enslavement which haunts us as long as we are silent about our knowledges. I therefore hope that by sharing my specific family narratives I am able to reach out further to our larger Ubuntu (Black) community, because after all, we are all stories reaching out to each other. Hence, could my family story be just one micro example of how colonialism has fragmented Ubuntu families and governance on a macro level? For example, at the age of thirty four I came to know my Amai (mother) in ways that I had not known her before. As a way of explaining the tensions that exist between the ways I knew her as a child, and the ways I am learning to discover her as an adult, I have decided to write this paper as a letter to her. I write this letter as a way to give us strength in our effort to bring our fragmented families together, as a starting point for healing from the spiritual and physical injuries of colonialism, as a way to understand that our ancestors and our peoples did extra ordinary things in order to survive and finally as a way of honouring their survival spirit, because without them there would be no us. But my aspiration, brothers and sisters, is not to give you definitions of what we have been made into. On the contrary, my intention is to highlight the way forward for us as Ubuntu.

Introduction

This paper has been written as a letter, and it is designed to talk to the invisible spirit of Amai, who died in 2003. I want to honour you, Amai for being a fighter of colonialism. The second aim of this paper is to share specific concrete examples of how colonialism has created matrices which fragmented many Black African families, especially my family. During a discussion, Dr. Wane mentioned that the Ubuntu family is one of the basic foundational units that make up the Ubuntu governance. Hence, its health is reflective of the health of Ubuntu collective governance in a geopolitical context. My family story is of the Ubuntu reality but it does not and cannot capture the whole Ubuntu experiences with colonialism, but it will tell how colonialism has fragmented every society it showed its ugly head. By extension, it is a reflection of how colonialism has attempted to eliminate the Ubuntu governance on a macro level. As a social being, I share my political reality as a way of reaching out further to the larger Black communities' worldwide because my story is a story which reaches out to them in a sharing manner, just as it is expressed in the "Cry My Beloved Country" novel, portraying atrocities against South Africans in the apartheid era.

Ubuntu worldview theory, like other theories that seek to communicate the human experience truthfully, has at times created tension for me; between the ways I knew my parents as a child and the ways I am learning to discover them as an adult. For me, it is this experience of living in the tension of colonialism and Ubuntuism that has caused me to be reflective of how I am living in our social world. In an effort to honour and communicate with my Amai, I write this oral narrative letter to her. Our learned Zimbabwean sister Tsitsi Dangarembga (1988) has captured our conditions in the neocolonial reality as being what she calls *Nervous Conditions*. But my aspiration, brothers and sisters, is not to give you definitions of what we have been made into. On the contrary, my intention is to highlight the way forward for us as Ubuntu. Vassanji (2003) in his novel entitled, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, highlights a very viable approach for liberating and regenerating ourselves beyond the colonial mimicry which we embody for the most part. Vassanji makes the following admission through a character in his novel , who states: "I have even come upon a small revelation-and as I proceed daily to recall and reflect, and lay out on the page, it is with an increasing conviction of its truth, that if more of us told our stories to each other, where I come from, we would be a far happier and a less nervous people" (2003, p. 2). The words of Vassanji ring truth in my ears but I would also like to remind him that the telling of stories is not a new phenomenon in Africa because we have been telling stories since the dawn of time. It is just that colonialism has undermined this way of knowing and sharing knowledge. As expressed by Boaduo (2010), that colonialism has deliberately denied Africa's contribution to humanity and Africa is always seen by the colonialists as a place of conflicts, backwardness and deprivation. A derogatory adjective is "the dark Continent". The question is, who created these conflicts and deprivation and when something is dark it means you know nothing about it? This is what the colonialists did not consider.

Colonialism with its racism and biased impositions has rendered oral history as outdated and unreliable sources of knowledge when compared to modern-day Western scholarship. Thankfully, these colonial positions are being challenged by Indigenous scholars who are demonstrating the biased nature of Western scholarship (p'Bitek, 1984; Achebe, 1988; Cesaire, 2000; Okri, 2002; King, 2003; Boaduo, 2010). Amai, through this letter I struggle to speak to you because I am writing to the invisible you while reflecting on the past visible you. I am not sure this is fair but I do this in the hope of making us a happier and a less nervous people. Truthfully, Amai, I write this letter as a way of speaking to you beyond fragmentation because my objective is to make Africans put themselves together to shake off the colonialist pigmentation of our senses and thinking.

As an African male I question if I can hear my Amai from her African feminist reality and so in my effort to really hear my Amai I am trying to engage her from an African feminist position.

African Feminist Theory

“They are all slaves, including us. If their masters treat them badly, they take it out on us. The only difference is that they are given some pay for their work, instead of having been bought.” - Buchi Emecheta in, *The joys of motherhood* (1979, p. 51)

Bought like meat, my Amai (mother); it is not a thought that I have ever seriously considered but this could be because of my African male privilege. Being a male, the thought of being married off is laughable and the thought of being forced into marriage because of monetary gain is inconceivable to me. But if you speak about marrying someone in order to escape poverty, my Black male ears hear you very well. So in Amai’s silence the quote from Buchi Emecheta’s story has left me questioning, was my Amai bought against her will? Could such a happening explain her actions of allowing my maternal family to give custody of me to my Baba, especially when stories by Yvonne Vera in *Why Don’t You Carve Other Animals* communicate the following about the experience of Zimbabwean women:

“...There are so many women with no husbands but with a lot of children. I do not want to be one of them. The country is in a state of confusion. Who knows what the rules are anymore? Who knows what to do? Who knows what is really important? We only know our loss and our fear and our silence. We know we are women asked to bear children. We know that to bear children will bring us suffering. This land must be watered with the blood of our children and with the saltiness of our tears before we can call it our own. What shall I tell my child about his father who is absent?” (1992, p. 44)

My Amai, this also leaves us with the question of the “coloured people” of our continent. Who really made them and why have those people shied away from taking the responsibility of being fathers and instead branded them as coloureds? Whose colour any way? This is an aspect of the ignorance of the colonialists. But who cares?

Like Baba, other African fathers were absent from family life because the colonial White system had forced, lied and cajoled them into neo-slave jobs. All the knowledge that I gained from my formative early years was heavily influenced by my Baba’s male dominated perspective. I, therefore, knew my Amai through the memories of my Baba. I would not be exaggerating if I stated that from Baba’s stories my Amai was the calculating money stealing woman who abandoned her child and her husband with the aid of her parents when the money was gone. My Baba always said:

“What kind of woman would leave my two beautiful children –Misheck and Mary to die alone while she tried to satisfy her sweet tongue? To think her own family helped her turn into a prostitute. So they as a whole family could enjoy the things money bought them. The White man’s ways and money had taught them that materialism was more important than people.”

In the orphanage, I was also primarily raised by males. Hence, my mother-lust, my sense of abandonment and my sense of disconnection all became associated with my perception of my Amai’s inability to fulfill her role as a woman and as a mother. But could African feminist thought challenge my male position and perspectives? Could African feminist thought help me meet my Amai from a Black feminist position and perspective? Could I understand my Amai’s story if I reflected on her experiences using a discourse that is not familiar and comfortable to my Black maleness? Could I listen to her when she comes to me from the spirit world to communicate her unique contextual location? Could I know my Amai anew? These are questions that baffle my Ubuntu brothers and sisters. Any answers?

Could African feminist theories allow me to honour all the wonderful women who have mothered me, even the White ones? Dr. Njoki Wane (2000), in her work titled *Reflections on the Mutuality of Mothering: Women, Children, and Other-mothering*, talks about how other women (and men in some situations) care for children in our communities. She makes it clear that mothering is more than the biological act of creating a child and it is more than the gender roles society prescribes. Dr. Njoki Wane informs us that, “Our mothers, aunties, sisters and community mothers carried us on their backs” (2000, p. 108) and this community mothering she calls other-mothering. Meaning, we are all responsible to mother beyond our own biological children. Dr. Njoki Wane has put it thus:

“Within African communities, mothering is not necessarily based on biological ties. Established African philosophy suggests that children do not solely belong to their biological parents, but to the community at large. This philosophy and tradition inform what we refer to as “other-mothering” and “community mothering. Significantly, even in the face of Western conceptions of mothering, which often view community-mothering practice as deviant and negligent, African understandings of mothering continue to thrive. Throughout the African Diaspora, Black women care for one another and one another’s children regardless of their cultural backgrounds” (2000 p. 112)

Highlighting my experiences of being at times other-mothered across racial lines, again exemplifies the contradictions that exist in our racist contemporary Canadian society. Just when I am comfortable seeing the racism of compulsory able-bodied Whiteness, very small and at times large individual acts challenge me to have hope. Hope in what and for what? I could not answer. Albeit slowly, the racist White world is changing; my Baba reminds me that his experience of compulsory able-bodied Whiteness is not the same as mine. Baba's point has implications for mothering in the Canadian African Diaspora. Again I return us to Dr. Njoki Wane's work on other-mothering. She informs us, in the Canadian context, that:

"Although I focus on Black women who mother children and one another, such practices exist beyond gender and racial boundaries. It is not unusual to find young boys mothering their younger siblings and uncles and fathers mothering their nieces and or nephews. My mothering experiences in Toronto have also shown that women from different racial backgrounds may step in as other-mothers or community other-mothers." (2000, p. 12)

So to all the Black and White women who have other-mothered me, I say thank you for other-mothering me. What you have taught me, I will perform for my children and our community children.

This being said, for me no-one can fill my Amai's role. When I cry, Amai, I know who I am calling and it is this Amai that I want to meet. It is this Amai, the thinking and feeling person who is an African Black woman. A fallible human being who makes mistakes, who has dreams, whose desires motivate her and whose fears can freeze her or make her fight. I want to meet the real contradictory Amai who I cannot shape into my idealized African personification of perfect Amaihood. African feminist thoughts can help me move from my privileged maleness to a place of uncertainty. African feminist works such as: *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta (1979), *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga (1988) and *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* by Yvonne Vera (1992) are helping me become uncomfortable and challenged, so that I may try learning to listen and hear about Amai with an African feminist sensibility.

How can I be whole if I never interpret the world from my other half which is the feminine African self? Maleness is half of my feminine self, which I am connecting with by making myself available to learning from and by hearing the diverse stories of our Black women. Amai, from the realm of the dead may you help me reflect you so that your truth may be heard. I need your story, Amai, because it is an important part of the story that I use to heal myself. I am using our stories as medicines to fight hate, pain, isolation and the desire for revenge. But revenge for what? Is it necessary? Has it got any achievement in the African sense? Answer me Amai! This is why Shauna Singh Baldwin says in *What the Body Remembers*: "Stories are not told for the telling, stories are told for the teaching" (2000, p. 50). I may not do justice to your reality Amai but this is a challenging road that I must take to begin knowing you beyond colonialism and patriarchy.

Dear Amai (? - 2003)

*I open my mouth to speak to you but my throat is dry
My stomach is cramping up, my head is throbbing with pain
Yet my sweat is icy cold
What is this obnoxious smell that I emit?
Could it be fear?
Could it be frustration?
Could it be love?
Could it be hate?
I pick up a pen to write to you
I remember that I am dyslexic
I set up my laptop
But I cannot abandon the pen
It is the security officer of that which is in my head
So I dictate when I cannot get the brain and the pen to coordinate
But right now I cannot get to the problem because my throat hurts
My stomach is cramping up
My head is pounding away
And
My armpits are trickling with icy cold sweat
And yes, I am unsettled by my own smell
But There Is So Much To Say.
Yet I cannot start with my own words so I will start with the words of another:*

“Oh, the flesh of your flesh and the blood of your blood is yearning for you. The splinter of your bone is craving for reunion, Aayyolee. Like when I was a child, I'm hungering for the caresses of your hands and thirsting for the whispers of your love. I long for you like one in darkness longs for daylight. I crave you like a starved body craves food. I long for the sight of you like a thirsty person in the Sahara longs for the sight of an oasis. I reach out for you but this cold winter grips me harshly. And my heart bleeds. Yes, my heart bleeds, Aayyolee too! Why should this ugly hateful curtain of mist drop between us? Why should this eternal-looking darkness swallow us? When will this enveloping and choking night dissolve away? When will we rejoice in that magical togetherness and be lost in our familiar bliss once again?” (Kuwee Kumsaa, 1994, pp. 23-24)

Amai, let us thank our dear sister Kuwee Kumsaa because she has given me the motivating energy to articulate the continuation of this letter and, as you know, the start of generating the directional path of any dialogue is always the hardest part. Now that Sister Kuwee Kumsaa has opened the way, let me continue.

The earliest image that I have of you, I have learned is not of you. I was telling Maiguru (your elder sister) that I have a memory of you carrying me on your back in a shawl towel. I am looking at the back of your head and I am amazed by the beauty of your Black hair which is braided in cornrows. The contrast of the pink and White dress on your beautiful Black skin is mesmerizing. As I am telling this story, I noticed that Maiguru and Sisi (sister who is the daughter of Maiguru) exchange a knowing look. I ask if something is incorrect and Maiguru tells me that the image I have described is not of you. It is of Sisi, who cared for me as is the traditional Shona way. I am disappointed at hearing this news because it confirms that I have no memory of you. I have nothing that connects me to you in a way that is born of my memory. For the longest time I blamed you for this erasure. How was I to know that this was the insidious trickery of colonialism which fragmented our family and then pitted us against each other? And it continues to this day. My Amai how do we end this?

All this was achieved through the harshest, most pain-full and most humiliating manner to ensure that we draw less and less from our past memory. Albert Memmi asserts that the colonial reality makes it seem like we are doomed to lose our memory and he (Memmi) can advance this position because he knows that:

“Memory is not purely a mental phenomenon. Just as the memory of an individual is the fruit of his history and psychology, that of a people rests upon its institutions. Now the colonized's institutions are dead or petrified. He scarcely believes in those which continue to show some signs of life and daily confirms their ineffectiveness. He often becomes ashamed of these institutions, as of a ridiculous and overaged monument.” (Memmi, 1965, p. 103)

Amai, I hope you will forgive me for not seeing beyond the colonial facade. Baba, who is both a victim and a survivor of colonialism, could not see beyond his own suffering or was it too painful for him to face your hard truth and still go on living? So much is unknown yet so much is known.

Amai, I cried for you because I wanted you, needed you, desired your warm touch and because I was lost without your motherly wisdom. But Baba's response to my cries for you was always the same in its substantive content. Baba had one of two responses: he was either icy cold about you, which in my books qualified for the gentler side, or he erupted like a scary volcanic mountain which, in its fury of manifestation, threatened to consume me to the point of nothingness.

At times like this I only wished I had never brought up the subject of you but I could never stop myself because you are my bones, you are my flesh, you are my heart and, most importantly, you are my soul. I do not believe you could find the point which distinguishes you from me because I am of you.

Yet, Baba would say metaphorically: "You and I are like a pair of trousers and a belt. We need each other, we support each other. For how can a pair of trousers stay up without a good belt? I am the trousers and I am dependent on you the belt to keep me up" (Baba, personal communication). I wonder what Baba would have said if I had pointed out that a pair of trousers and a belt could not stay up without a body. Thus, the three (trousers, belt and body) make one and this one makes three. Regardless of the play on words, it was his inevitable next attack which always silenced me while making me the follower of his party line: "She was a whore who killed my babies but she did not do it alone. It was her parents' fault. They could not stand to be out of sugar, so they made her sell her body" (Baba, personal communication).

Amai, let me state that the telling of our stories is an important step toward our healing from colonial oppression as it allows us, the peoples who have Ubuntu knowledge and are struggling to live it because of the imposition of colonialism, to have the space to analyze these experiences and speak about them from our own philosophical and theoretical perspectives. In my writing, I directly and rightfully blame our spiritual and physical injury squarely on colonialism. I take such bold steps, Amai, because I still remember the childhood hurt of loving an absence you; I yearned for your love but the lack of observable reciprocal evidence of the love that I had for you threatened to destroy me. So, to survive your absence, I started to accept the stories that Baba bombarded me with because at the time they were easier to live with than the truth. What would I have done knowing that colonialism was responsible for the fragmentation of my family? Could Baba have believed that he was giving me the lesser of two evils? Could I have survived the truth? Dearest, dearest, dearest, Amai how did you survive this colonial nightmare? Did you direct your blame on Baba like he directed his on you? Did you see the true cause of our suffering, colonialism? Was your suffering so intense that giving it an analysis was only adding salt to an already throbbing and festering wound? No answers could surface so I kept my mute.

Amai, I can only speak for myself and cannot speak for Baba. As a child it was easier to project my suffering as being caused by you. The truth, Amai, was too ugly to face because it reflected my weakness and vulnerability. So when you remember the hateful words of scorn from Baba, please remember that anger is fear turned inside out. Now that both you and Baba are in the spirit world, you no doubt see the truth and forgive each other for the misdirected hurt you caused each other. I, for my part, write to you now acknowledging my failures and begging your forgiveness. I know I took part in humiliating you publicly so it is only fitting that I publicly apologize for my behaviour.

My mis-education started with Baba's stories of you but I took it to the next level of rejecting you when I said, "I have no Amai and I do not need one. Especially one that abandoned me and has never tried to visit me. No, I do not need such an Amai, all I need is my Baba because he is both Baba and Amai to me. No matter how hard things get I know he will never abandon me. I have never known any Amai who has done anything for me."

Now I will admit, Amai that I did not understand the implications of everything that I said but I certainly understood the shock value that it created. In most cases the outrageousness of my response stopped any further discussion or questions on the subject. I also knew that when I put on this show it made Baba very proud. When Baba was accused of disrespecting you, he would respond by saying: "If my son is to survive this hard cruel world he must learn to deal with the ugly facts that make up our reality and truths" (Baba, personal communication). Amai, if I am asked how colonialism is implicated in our spiritual and physical injury can I share this story?

I wonder if Baba ever spoke the truth about his colonial experience with you? I wonder if he ever talked about how he was emasculated by colonialism and I wonder if he ever drew links between your experience and his experience? I wonder if he was aware that he was reproducing the same oppression that he experienced at the hands of White settler society with you? Did he ever tell you why he could not send money to you, besides telling you that he could not find work? Well, I heard one of the reasons when he was trying to explain how White settler society dehumanized and humiliated him. Whenever all the neo-slaves (domestic servants) started to share their stories about colonial exploitation, Baba would share numerous stories about how he was exploited. But this story always stood out in my mind and it is only now that I'm seeing the connection that it has to your suffering and the heroic acts that you did in order for me to survive. I remember Baba saying:

"After searching the different White neighbourhoods for any kind of work, for over a year and a half, I found work as a gardener and a laundry wash boy. The promised work pay was great and, on top of that, this Madame and Bass (Boss) were providing me with food as well. This job was evidence that my ancestors were watching over me and I was sure I would now be able to put something in my family's hands. My manhood was restored and I made sure I was early for work every single day and I stayed late on the job until they sent me home. I made sure that when the Madame or Bass called I was there in less than a minute and I was especially attentive to the needs of the Madame because if she was not happy there was no possible way that I would keep my job. If the Bass likes you and the Madame dislikes you, then you lose your job. The Madame must be happy at all cost.

So when she started to put her underwear as laundry I was a little surprised because usually White women do not like Africans touching their panties. They are happy to have you wash the husband's underwear but will not allow you to touch theirs because this is like touching their womanhood. But I did not care what I did as long as I had a job. Every now and again the Madame would come and watch me do the laundry and at times she would chat with me while I did the laundry or the gardening. It was therefore not unusual or alarming when she came to talk to me while I was washing her panties. Still dressed in her bathrobe, she asked me to stop the washing and come and help her in the house. When we got into the bedroom she dropped the bathrobe and, while standing naked in front of me, commanded me to remove my clothes. As this was not the first time that this had happened to me, I simply fulfilled my male role and went back to work. Whenever the Madame had an itch, I just simply scratched it for her and went back to work. But Madame was not happy with the services rendered. She also felt that I needed to pay her my whole monthly earning as a sign of my honour and privilege for serving her. When the Bass asked why she was taking my money from me, she simply responded by saying, "I have given him a loan to build a home in his village for his family. So we have calculated that for the next four years he will have to give me all of his earnings." This of course meant that if I left her services or misbehaved she could now get the police after me. As if she needed a legitimate reason to get me arrested." (Baba, personal communication)

Baba became their slave through their governmental structures which allowed for heinous laws like "The Master and Servants Act" to exist. This law and others like it made it a criminal offence for a Black employee to disobey his/her White employer (Meredith, 1979). On the other hand, you, Amai, were forced through their colonially enforced Land Apportionment Acts to live on reserves that they had created after stealing your lands. The colonial White settler's audacity in Zimbabwe was adequately captured by Doris Lessing in her seminal novel, *The Grass Is Singing*. A quote from the book reads:

"The biggest grievance of the White farmer is that he is not allowed to strike his natives, and that if he does, they may - but seldom do - complain to the police. It made her furious to think that this black animal had the right to complain against her, against the behaviour of a White woman." (Lessing, 1950, p. 126)

Amai, as you know, colonialism gained our lands through what has been identified as possession by dispossession (Harvey, 2005). Meaning, colonial White settlers took our arable lands so they could profit off them. As for their question on how to placate the threat that the dispossessed "natives" posed, their kith and kin had developed a White workable solution in Canada.

The Canadian solution for dispossessing and disconnecting the “natives” of their lands was workable because the White settlers could identify the “natives” through their colour which differentiated them as nonwhite. This is why the solution was to put the “natives” on reserves (Cook and Lindau, 2000). The immediate benefits of this solution was that it made it easier to control the “natives” while giving the illusion that White settlers were helping the “natives” become civilized. The truth was that the reserve system ensured that we, the “natives”, were not a threat to White interest. The colonial reserve system kept us busy trying to survive its harsh conditions, as it still keeps us busy now with its neo-colonial structural adjustment programs. As we focus on colonial goals we are drained of the energy we need to work toward our own total directional Ubuntu destiny. We have suppressed the fact that we are of the whole African continent. Colonialism has limited our identity and our vision of relational bonds to colonial boundaries and, in so doing, compulsory able-bodied Whiteness has taken people who were able to sustain themselves and turned them into exploitable dependants. In this colonial carnage, Amai, you and Baba did what was necessary to survive even though the colonial system was stacked against both of you. Amai, could I share this story as evidence of how colonialism has stolen our lands, controlled our actions with its laws, enacted violence upon us, treated us as sexual objects and, in its actions of oppression, has further divided us against each other which has only advanced spiritual and physical injury upon us? Boaduo (2010) has expressed this in his article titled Classification: Colonial Attempts to Fracture Africa’s Identity and Contribution to Humanity.

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I see now that it is these oppressive practices by White settler society in Zimbabwe which led to the African uprising against the colonial system. I, who was born to you during the liberation war, now have these questions. What made you marry Baba, one of many migrants from Malawi in Zimbabwe? Did you know that these Malawian migrants who were in Zimbabwe were perceived as “Uncle Toms” (traitors to the liberation cause)?

Why did you risk being perceived as a traitor for marrying a Malawian migrant labour, who worked for less when the leadership of the Black liberation struggle was asking the Zimbabwean people to resist being exploited by colonial structures? It was clearly understood around the rural areas that death was the fitting penalty for any Zimbabwean who embraced these migrant traitors. Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, illuminates our self-destruction in the following manner:

“While the settler or the policeman has the right the livelong day to strike the native, to insult him and to make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native; for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-a-vis his brother [and in this case wife].” (1963, p. 54)

Amai, did our liberation fighters in Zimbabwe know that our Malawian parents were in Zimbabwe because colonialism was exploiting their region as well? Did anyone mention that divide and conquer was colonialism's greatest tactic? Amai, what was it like to try to raise children while a war was raging around you, having no home of your own, struggling to feed your children without any source of income? Let me say, Amai, I am ready to hear your story but I must warn you that some of the pain from the past has scarred me and I am learning to live with these scars while also learning to renew beyond these colonial scars. In a way, I am trying to understand the circumstances and motivations that guided your actions but I do this lightly because if I do it heavily I will want answers to questions like: What was behind your decision for not coming to visit me when I did everything possible for us to meet? Did you know how much I wanted and needed you? Why did you not come, why did you not come, Amai? Did you know I made Baba send you that money so you could come but you never came; why did you torture my heart? You sent your brothers and your sister when I wanted you. Did they tell you that their presence only further confused me because I did not want them, I only wanted you? Did they tell you that they could not quench my thirst because I wanted:

“.... my mother the proof, my mother who circulates within me, my mother who was in me as I was in her.... Here, in the invisible inside, I no longer know if I'm the subject of the verb in the past tense, in the present, or if today is really the day before yesterday whereas erstwhile is a part of the future....The most surprising is not that I, I will die, it is that I was born, that I am not you, and that I am me. I would like very much to know that me [which is you].” (Cixous, 1998, pp. 86-87)

Amai, did you know that my relationship with Baba was volatile from the start and as I grew older he tried every trick to mould me into a perfect Black English boy because he believed my survival was dependent on my ability to assimilate into White society? I had to learn how to be acceptable to White society. Baba used all means necessary to ensure that I embodied compulsory able-bodied Whiteness in my behaviour and I am sure that if he could have changed my pigmentation to make me White he would have done it. He would demonize all that was Ubuntu and praise all that was Christian and White. Any resistance that I put up against his efforts would result in the severest form of verbal abuse and, on a number of occasions; he beat me until I was unconscious.

Amai, I am not claiming that I was an easy child to father. I know my ancestors gave me an unbreakable spirit; I embody resilience and resistance. I am because my ancestors are me; without my ancestors there is no me and without me there are no ancestors. Our existence is one and the same. So, when I ran away from home, I was resisting being White washed and because I ran away I had to stay away as a way of preserving my life. Alone, in the middle of the night, fear would threaten me and, as terrified as I was, I knew my life was in the hands of our ancestors. Due to the imposition of Christian spiritual colonialism, there were times when I would pray to our ancestors and, for good measure, I would also pray to Jesus to do his thing because I was afraid of going to their hell. Amai, by the time I was seven years old I had learned how to sleep alone in bushes, on the streets and in waste paper bins. I ate food from the garbage bins and, when I needed to, I stole food from where ever I could find it. All this I did in order to survive.

In 1982 I was picked up after a grocery store owner had reported that I was sleeping in the shopping mall's waste paper bin. The social workers who took me off the street soon learned that I was not safe in the care of Baba because, when they took me home, Baba openly threatened to kill me. The social workers placed me at an orphanage called St. Joseph's House for Boys while they assessed my case. On April 02, 1982, the Harare Juvenile Court, using the doctrine of children's protection and adoption act (chapter 33), admitted me as a ward of the state under section 21 (1) (a) of the child in need of care. The Harare Juvenile Court named St. Joseph's House for Boys as my legal guardian. Once I was in the orphanage, which primarily cared for European and mulatto boys, I did everything possible to reduce my Black connection as I was trying to fit in with the other boys who only highlighted their White connection. The European worldview that Baba had tried so hard to make me assimilate into now became the barrier which reflected to me his neo-slave status. Baba had left the responsibility of trying to keep in touch in my hands; why, I do not know. The only thing that is clear is that we started to drift apart. Contradictorily, the more I tried to integrate into White settler society, the more it reflected to me that I could never be a part of it. Yet, the lies of colonialism still made me want acceptance from it and being in this position made me vulnerable to White sexual predators. Thus, all of us by day were the scorn of White society but by cover of night we all became potential victims of abuse and exploitation.

Amai, in the orphanage the warden, who we shall call Dianne because that is her name, taught me that I was either an usurper or I was the usurped but I also came to realize, through experience, that a good usurper must know firsthand the humiliation of being usurped because it makes you merciless in your usurpation efforts. So, let me give you the context, Amai. This particular White female warden had been brought into the orphanage because of all the forms of abuse and sexual exploitations that White male wardens had performed on the boys. Under her welfare, we were supposed to be safer. I was a 13-year-old who was disconnected from his community and family structure. Thus, the special attention that Dianne paid me made me feel wanted and special.

It all started with after dinner invitations to her apartment under the guise of discussing the structural issues of the orphanage from my view point as a boy in the orphanage. At first we did talk about orphanage structural issues but very soon Dianne was sharing her private life with me. At the time, I felt honoured with the fact that she trusted me with such intimate details about her private life. I had never had such an intimate relationship with an adult and I valued our friendship and relationship very dearly. Every Friday night she began to make me dinner and when I came back late from school she would have snacks for me in her apartment. Food was always a big deal in the orphanage as there was never enough, so I was amazed at my good fortune. I had a mother figure who was a great friend and she fed me the most amazing meals. At the time, I believed this was as close to heaven as I could ever be. Dianne even started giving me driving lessons and coming to all my rugby games. She knew all about my relationship with Baba and had assured me that, when my court review date came up, she would make sure the social workers and the court understood how important it was for me to stay in the orphanage so that I could continue to thrive to my potential. When the social worker recommended that I spend more time with Baba, Dianne told me we could just disregard this as there were not enough social workers to enforce and follow up any recommendations made about any of the boys care.

You, Amai, on the other hand, were demonized in the most severe manner possible. Dianne always informed me that if she had a son like me she would never have given me up. How strange is this, a White woman telling a Black child that she would never have given him up; yet, strangely enough, she in reality had done the very act she condemned you for. Speaking from a White privileged position, Dianne stated that her reason for leaving her son with her husband was to ensure that, through her husband's wealth, her son got every single opportunity that she was not able to provide as a single White female. Could you have given me to Baba because you believed he was in a better position than you to care for me? On this point, Dianne could not extend her White feminist thinking to you because you, as a Black woman, were not worthy of White reflection. Dianne, instead, validated her reality as real and meaningful while dismissing your reality as pointless. You were a no-body to her and, therefore, we were better off not thinking about you. But you, Amai, I now believe, sensed the danger that I was in so you made Baba bring you to the orphanage.

Did you know that this was the first time that Baba had ever visited me at the orphanage? After so many years of craving you, I had learned to live and do without you but here you were expecting me to welcome you with open arms. You wanted a relationship. You wanted to change my world again. Amai, I know this letter is divulging all but bear with me because deep down I know you are part of me and you know I am part of you. Allow me to continue, Amai.

Do you remember that, by the time you decided to connect with me, the gap between us had widened so much that I did not know you; I did not want to know you. Or did I want to know you? My world became overwhelmed with confusion and the only thing that was clear was my anger so I denounced you as my Amai (but remember, I have also said that anger is fear turned inside out). I told you that you had let too much time go between the time when I actually needed you and now, that I had learned to cope without you and I remember you cried as I spoke these harsh words to you. Your only response was: "Nothing I did was easy; I tried to raise three children with nothing" (Amai, personal communication). After this, you left and I imagine you probably felt disappointed but, unbeknown to both of us, our spiritual connection had been re-established and this shared spirit would guide us in future interactions.

Feeling distraught and confused about my encounter with you, Amai, I went to Dianne to seek comfort but she rebuffed my calls for support and understanding. In fact, she spoke more intensely about herself and her family problems. She talked incessantly about how her marriage had fallen apart because she had fallen in love with a former boy from the orphanage. She also told me that as soon as the ex-boy had found out about her pregnancy he had wanted nothing to do with her. As Dianne could still sense that my mind was on you, she shocked me into focusing on her totally by saying she was sure that she was having a miscarriage. I, wanting to help, offered to drive her to the hospital but she told me that it was too late as she could not save the child. I asked her what I could do to help her and she told me she just needed me to be a good friend and be there when things got tough. Wanting to be a good friend, I began to spend all my extra time with her and in return she made sure that if any trips or events were offered to the boys from the orphanage I was given special treatment. Meaning, I was offered all possible opportunities made available to the boys by the communities first before any other boy was considered. Unbeknown to me, I was being ambushed for sexual abuse. I have heard that to ensnare a monkey in a gourd, you need something shiny to attract it. Happily I walked into the trap. Amai, could I share this story as evidence of how colonialism has fragmented our family, undermined our memories, tricked us, humiliated us, pitted us against each other after abusing us emotionally and physically?

Amai, as part of my special treatment I was chosen as one of four boys to go on a Lions Club trip. We went to Kariba and, after being away for the whole weekend, Dianne was so excited to see me that she made a special dinner which she served with an expensive wine. As the evening was ending and I was ready to go to bed, Dianne asked me if I thought it was okay for friends to kiss. I told her of course it was okay and I went over and kissed her on the cheek. Dianne held my hand and drew me in front of her.

She then told me that she meant real passionate kissing on the mouth. I will admit that when she started kissing, I did not resist and in fact enjoyed it immensely. The only thing that was missing was that I wanted the other boys to see my experience and share with me my good fortune. I knew the other boys would never have believed that the warden had kissed me and let me fondle her everywhere. The further we went the happier I was because I knew this was the stuff that made for great stories. But as I was leaving, Dianne told me that I could never tell a soul about what had happened because she would lose her job and go to jail and I, on the other hand, would end up in reform school. Everyone in the orphanage feared reform school because there were stories about boys being beaten and raped on a daily basis. I, therefore, kept my mouth shut.

Amai, by the time I was one of the senior boys, Dianne made sure I had a room right above her apartment as this made it easy for her to call me down. She also made a copy of her apartment key so I could get in and out without being easily observed. But, needless to say, one cannot keep a secret in a home of 55 boys and 11 staff so we will just say that everyone kept their mouth shut. It seemed like I had a win-win situation. She gave me money, food, sex and brought me things from the UK as she made frequent visits to see family. My best friend in the orphanage, who made it clear that he had figured out what was going on, was given a special apartment with a self-contained kitchen so that he could entertain his guests. He also had free access to any of Dianne's three Volkswagen vehicles.

Amai, it's amazing how bribery can buy loyalty. Dianne had also told my friend that, when we graduated, she was going to buy a house in which we could all live together and we were not to worry about jobs because she was confident that through her network in White settler society she would get us jobs. When I started to see that the relationship was built on abuse and exploitation, I began to express doubt. To keep me in order, Dianne exerted pressure through intimidation which she directed at me and at my friend. After a while, she realized that intimidation and fear did not work so well on me so she went back to the old trick which had always worked on me. This was my fear of being responsible for another human being's suffering or death. Knowing this fear of mine, Dianne made me believe that, if I left her, she would kill herself or go crazy.

Not wanting to be responsible for the death of anyone but also knowing that I could not play this game anymore, I dedicated my time to finding a way out of this craziness. Even my high school headmaster had suspected that I was being sexually abused by the warden. To the headmaster's credit, he called me into his office and asked if anything was going on between her and me. I remember my headmaster saying: "If you have any problems, I can only assist you if you disclose to me what is going on; I cannot act on suspicion alone when the consequences of my actions have great ramifications" (Headmaster, personal communication). Knowing my headmaster, I knew that if I disclosed to him the truth he would take decisive action but I could not determine the outcome of his actions. Believing that if I disclosed the truth I would end up in reform school, I chose to deny that anything was going on between Dianne and me.

Amai, I therefore suffered quietly but, unbeknownst to me, the situation with Dianne was having a negative impact on my health and I only became aware of the severity of my problem when I went to see the doctor because I had tonsillitis. At this doctor's visit, it was discovered that I had high blood pressure and, after monitoring my condition without any improvement, I was started on a medication regime to control the high blood pressure. Counseling sessions were also arranged but none of these interventions could help me because I could not disclose my real problem due to fear. So out of desperation I began to track you down, Amai. Is it not interesting to notice that at the highest level of my distress I came looking for you? Amai, could I share this story as evidence of how colonialism has stolen our lands, controlled our actions with its laws, enacted violence upon us, treated us as sexual objects and, in its actions of oppression, has further divided us against each other which has only advanced spiritual and physical injury upon us?

My search for you, Amai, led me to Maiguru's home; she then connected me to the rest of my maternal family. My meeting with my Ambuya (maternal grandmother) was a bittersweet experience as I did everything possible to make her sense that I was still very angry for, what I perceived as, their abandonment of me. Before I left to find you, Ambuya told me that she would ask the ancestors to show me the way and she added that she was confident that the ancestors would do their job because was I now not standing before them. Sekuru (maternal grandfather) did not say much to me. When I arrived, Sekuru asked me to come and stand in front of him so that he could see me (even though he was blind). As I stood in front of Sekuru, I heard him say: "Is this you, Peter?" and I respond by saying: "Yes, Sekuru, it is I."

After a moment of awkward silence I noticed that Sekuru was crying and I knew that I was loved. Sekuru did not need to say anything, his tears honoured me and made me feel that no one had wanted our family to fragment but we had all done what we needed to do to survive. I will not say that everything was forgiven and forgotten but this exchange with Sekuru spoke to me on a spiritual level which allowed me to have a certain level of empathy for my maternal family. Before I left, Sekuru told me that he and Ambuya were now ready to go to their ancestors with not so heavy hearts. He also told me that time would lead to healing through the understanding that I gained with age. Amai, if I should be asked how storytelling creates healing, re-establishes familial bonds, revives memory, supports understanding, moves us beyond anger, gives us voice to fight against injustice, bears witness to our survival, brings hope to our fragmented families and ensures that an evil is not repeated by forgetting about the past, can I share this story?

Amai, after visiting with you I know that I came back to spend a night with Sekuru and Ambuya but I cannot remember that experience. I have no image or memory of it but I remember coming back. Could it be I do not remember anything because all that needed to be remembered had entered my soul already? Amai, if you can see Sekuru and Ambuya thank them for me for understanding my childish ways. I am still trying to digest the meaning of all their words and because I have written them down I find that I can worry more about meaning than trying to hold them whole in my mind.

The morning that we set out for your home, Amai, we left at four o'clock in the morning. Dark as it was, we were able to find our way because the stars were so bright. After eight hours of hard walking in the blazing sun, we arrived at your home just after noon. We were all starving and very thirsty for water. Very nervously you invited us into your hut and right away I noticed that your hut was poorly constructed using corn stocks as walls. Sitting inside your hut I could see outside very clearly. There was nothing in your hut that the poorest thief would have taken. I had never seen such poverty, never even imagined it possible. From the dryness and isolation of the land, I could not imagine where you got your drinking water from. For miles and miles around you there was not a single being because this was hushed territory and here you were alone with a baby. If I had any questions for you, Amai, the reality of your surrounding robbed me of my voice. When you gave us a water mug to share, I became acutely aware of how precious water was in this place. As I drank the water, I became aware that I was not as thirsty as I had imagined. From the single pot sitting over the fire in the middle of your hut, you spooned out a few kernels of corn and placed them in each of our hands. I knew that each kernel of corn that you gave us compromised your reserves but I could not turn down this gracious offer that you were using to re-establish our familial bonds. As we ate, I knew that there was no place for us to sleep and there was definitely not enough food to feed all of us. So when you asked when we were leaving, I knew that we had to leave right away.

Even though the full impact of that visit did not manifest itself until some years later, I believe when I went back to the orphanage I was not the same person. You had opened my eyes to a reality that you had protected me from. I am sorry that I never got my act together sooner so that I could have helped try to alleviate some of the poverty that ultimately killed you. Amai, if I should be asked how storytelling creates healing, re-establishes familial bonds, revives memory, supports understanding, moves us beyond anger, gives us voice to fight against injustice, bears witness to our survival, brings hope to our fragmented families and ensures that an evil is not repeated by forgetting about the past, can I share this story?

It seems my visit with you, Amai, made me more confident and confrontational and I knew that there was nothing colonialism and White settler society could take from me. I was even now aware of Dianne's sexually predatory nature because it became clear that I was not the only boy that she was doing this to. They say knowledge is power and the more I learned the more I was able to slowly wean myself from Dianne. But, unfortunately, from this process I had learned how to use and usurp other people. White women became my target because Dianne had taught me to use them first before they used me. This is how I came to Canada by using and usurping a White woman. For this I am sorry and I apologize.

Amai, I thank you for your fighting spirit because without you there would be no me. In retrospect, it would seem to me that I am fighting where you left off. Colonialism has fragmented us as a family, co-opted us and pitted us against each other. By undermining our memories it has undermined our ways of knowing.

While we point fingers at each other about who has transgressed what boundaries and who has undermined what family values, colonialism takes advantage of this confusion and continues to decimate all our Ubuntu governance; but we will not let this happen anymore because we are now aware of the insidious nature of colonialism and we will not let it fool us again, Amai. Our talking about colonialism's insidious nature is itself a step towards creating solidarity and bringing our families together. I thank you, Amai, with all our other ancestors who paved the path of struggle, because your efforts of liberation have taught me that we cannot use colonial structures to determine our future without reproducing colonialism (Alfred, 2005). I hope, Amai, I learned to love as deeply as you do. I know you are with me because I have felt your presence in all the great women (African, Black, Brown, Yellow, Red and White) that have been Amai to me when I needed you. May we be whole again because you are my bones, you are my flesh, you are my heart and, most importantly, you are my soul. I do not believe you could find the point which distinguishes you from me because I am of you. Dear Amai, I clap my hands as a way of welcoming and honouring your spirit. Let us be one in addressing our deep pain because this pain is fragmentized love. In a day dream you once asked me what I had to say. Well I have spoken and now I ask you, "What do you have to say, Amai?

Respectfully your son Komba

Devi Dee Mucina

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