Prisons Do Not Disappear Problems, They Disappear Human Beings

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Abstract: Nicholas Mwangi explores how our generation has been forcefully torn apart from the true history of our land by hegemonies around knowledge and learning. He reminds us that though the neoliberal education system continues to depoliticise young people, we must dare to dream of a better society, educate ourselves politically, and organise towards a system that takes care of the majority and not a few in society, as Maina wa Kinyatti did.

Former Black Panther party member, feminist, philosopher and political activist Angela Davis asserts that; “Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages.”

Angela Davis’s critique on prisons best describes what the Moi government attempted to do with the radical Prof Maina wa Kinyatti in 1982, when they arrested and charged him with possession of what they termed seditious material. Maina wa Kinyatti was sent to disappear in solitary confinement. With his arrest, proponents of imperialism and capitalism had hoped to momentarily suspend discourse on homelessness and unemployment among other failures of capitalism and the emerging contradictions of a neo-colonial state which he was exposing to his students at Kenyatta University.

Prison writings, wherever they come from in the world, reveal that the idea behind the imprisonment of the writers is to separate, isolate, dehumanize and alienate people, revolutionaries, political activists and their ideas from the masses as in the cases of Italian Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, Gakaara Wa Wanjau, Mumia Abu Jamal, George Jackson, Abdullah Ocalan and Bhagat Singh to name a few.

Published 25 years ago, Kenya: A Prison Notebook not only reveals the dark side of prisons and torture chambers at the time but also analyzes the system and the ground it stands on. The Prison system in a capitalist society is a state machinery used to oppress and lock up the poor and those who dare question. It is a dehumanizing and intimidating system whose intent is to serve capitalism and maintain the prevailing social order by diverting society from the real problems engendered by capitalism.

Maina Wa Kinyatti suffered in the hands of his brutal captors for six and a half years, most of which he spent in solitary confinement. Aside from beatings, he was tortured by vermin, untreated diseases, hunger and loneliness. But he remained defiant, his courage and spirit unbroken. A true testament of a revolutionary.
In one of the passages in the book, as he awaits trial, Maina Wa Kinyatti says:

Tomorrow is the judgement day, but I am not worried, I am not frightened, for I am not the first Kenyan to be incarcerated for truth: Makhan Singh, Jesse Kariuki, Joseph Kangethe, Pio Gama Pinto, Dominic, Gatu, Bildad Kaggia, Abdilatif Abdallah and Ngugi Wa Thion’o, just to mention a few, spent years in prison because of their political beliefs. I am proud to add my name to this list of patriots.

A Chance Interaction

There are three books that have inspired, changed and awakened my political consciousness:

I. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* by Walter Rodney
II. *Decolonizing the Mind* by Ngugi Wa Thion’o
III. *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* by Maina Wa Kinyatti

While all these titles are among the best in Africa, *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* touched me most differently and fired me up by revealing the power of the state and its ruthless machinery. Coming from a generation that only grew up hearing stories of the atrocities committed by Moi’s government in the 80s, reading Maina wa Kinyatti’s book provided firsthand information on the cruelty of the regime towards innocent citizens and political critics. Readers of this book will bear testimony that you are never the same once you read it.

I first read *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* in 2018 while a student at the University of Nairobi. I developed a habit of reading poetry during breaks from study. One day, while completing an assignment at the main campus library, I took one of these usual breaks and was walking around the bookshelves searching for poetry when I came across Maina’s book. I mistook it for poems about prisons rather than a detailed history and writings of Maina Wa Kinyatti in prison, and began going through it with my usual intent of reading a single page or poem and resuming my studies. However, the first pages immediately made me aware of my ignorance and I remained in the library for several hours that day reading the book. I promptly borrowed it and read it for the next three days.

What surprised me was that this was the first time I was hearing of Professor Maina Wa Kinyatti. It was also the first time I was reading his writing. I later learnt that he had written several other crucial titles such as the *History of Resistance in Kenya, Mau Mau: A Revolution Betrayed, Dedan Kimathi sSeaks*, and *Mwakenya: The Unfinished Revolution* among others. How could a scholar who had written so widely on the beautiful history of resistance in Kenya and Mau Mau be shunned?

The answer lies in the motive behind his arrest in 1982 on the basis of producing and
possessing seditious literature. At Maina Wa Kinyatti’s house, the police confiscated 29 files of his research work on the Mau Mau movement and 23 books, including the works of Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin and Che Guevara. These were the materials considered seditious by proponents of capitalism. The government then only allowed the teaching of one theory - capitalism. The Moi regime had declared war against proponents of socialism, who included political activists, students and scholars. Spies were embedded in universities to monitor teaching and to remove any literature on Marxism, socialism and communism. With the removal of such progressive books, the government had succeeded in setting up an education system that would consistently produce ignorant graduates and diehards of capitalism. Capitalism was presented as a natural God given system with no alternative to it.

This was eye opening for me with regard to how capitalism became so comfortable and even seemed to have found a home in Kenya. After the MWAKENYA MOVEMENT, which Maina wa Kinyatti was part of, there has not been serious and sustained opposition to capitalism and neo colonialism in Kenya as compared to other parts of Africa. Neo-liberal intellectuals still use education to continually depoliticize young people in institutions of learning. The likes of Maina Wa Kinyatti and others dared to dream of a different ideology and of a system that took care of the majority and not the few in society, a system that prioritized quality healthcare, education and livelihood for everyone. During one of the interrogations, one officer warns Prof Maina:

Maina, we know that you have been using Marxism in the university to sabotage Nyayo philosophy. We also know that your research on the Mau Mau Movement is a political strategy to
organize the people of central Kenya against the Moi government. Let me (be) clear: Nyayoism is a state ideology, therefore those who oppose it are enemies of the president and the ruling party, KANU. Our job, therefore, is to hunt them down, imprison or kill them. We crushed ngoroko conspirators and disorganized the GEMA economic saboteurs; we are determined to flush out the Marxist conspiracy.

My generation was raised in a society that had gone to great lengths to demonize socialism and communism. Neo-liberal literature now fills libraries in every institution at the expense of progressive materials and teaching. *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* provides us with an example of a scholar who unapologetically disdains capitalism and imperialism, and who is willing to pay the highest price for their obliteration. Maina Wa Kinyatti could have chosen a comfortable life in academia and joined the ranks of reactionary scholars, but instead used his genius for the liberation of the working and wretched masses.

25 years after its publication, *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* remains as relevant as when it first appeared in 1996. It is a critical handbook for political education and organizing.