Preface: Framing the Neo-Colonial Era

“We are strong, because you are strong,” echo the words from one of the secret letters that Maina wa Kinyatti received from his comrades during his incarceration.

1982, the year of Maina’s arrest, begins in the backdrop of a sustained assault on the African left over the preceding two decades; a period which saw organizations systematically brought to their knees and their leadership plucked from the people through coups, brutal assassinations, jail, torture and exile. This backdrop was not unique to Africa, it was being replicated across the world; in Latin-America, Asia and other territories.

In Kenya, the Moi regime was leading an attack against the Left as part of this global assault that drew ideological leadership and material support from the capitalist-imperialist center - the USA, Britain and their allies, including institutions in the North that helped prop up repressive and despotic regimes in the Global South so long as these regimes allowed for the exploitation of our people and plunder of our resources.

In a recent conversation organized by Mwamko and Ukombozi Library titled “Where is the African Revolution?: Finding the Left in Our Times,” Comrade Alieu Bah observed that “the Left, in this epoch (1960’s to 1980’s), suffered a setback that it is yet to recover from to date.” This statement holds true for Kenya, as it does for many other African countries.

In February 1965, Pio Pinto was assassinated in Nairobi, only four days after Malcolm X was brutally shot down in New York. In 1966, the first President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup, as Jaramogi Oginga Odinga was simultaneously pushed out of the vice-presidency in Kenya by Jomo Kenyatta and his comprador-regime. Nkrumah would spend the rest of his life in Conakry, Guinea, succumbing to cancer of the throat in 1972 – while Jaramogi and his allies like Bildad Kaggia would spend the remainder of their lives mostly isolated through detentions and other repressive measures, including the backward 1982 constitutional amendment making Kenya a *de-facto* one-party state.

At Nkrumah’s funeral in Conakry, Cabral famously lamented, “Let no one tell us that Nkrumah died of a cancer to the throat or some other disease; Nkrumah was killed by the cancer of betrayal.” Cabral himself would only live a year longer, falling under a hail of bullets in 1973 by a member of his own organization, remote-controlled by the Portuguese colonial security services. In this same epoch, the Black Panthers were facing persecution and annihilation in America. Africa would lose many more of her children this same way, including Walter Rodney, the historian and revolutionary-intellectual from Guyana, who was assassinated in 1981.

In Kenya, both the Kenyatta and Moi regimes were, at that particular moment in history, playing comprador roles; serving the interests of capitalism-imperialism. The material condition of our people were dire, and the *disease, ignorance and poverty* that KANU (Kenya African National Union) had promised to eradicate at independence only seemed to be taking firmer roots in society after two decades of misrule, colonial patterns of economics marked by primitive accumulation of
the ruling class, and a sustained suppression of dissenting voices.

“It is not right that our people – workers and peasants should toil to the last drops of their blood, to the last ounce of their energies, whilst those who betrayed national independence live in dreadful luxury,” lamented Maina. Neocolonialism had “eaten the tissues of the brains” of the comprador, rendering them into stones incapable of seeing the deprivation and suffering around them.

1982 onwards revealed an intensification of the Moi/KANU repression and a crackdown on dissenting voices – marked by jailing or exiling of those people whose politics were in opposition to the Moi dictatorship. Patriots of the time like Maina wa Kinyatti, Willy Mutunga, Edward Oyugi, Onyango Oloo, Kamoji Waciira, Al-Amin Mazrui, Njeru Kathangu, Wafula Buke, Karimi Nduthu, Tirop Kitur, Wang’ondu wa Kariuki and many others found themselves behind bars. Across Africa, many other patriots found themselves facing persecution – jailed, killed, tortured or on the run, seeking refuge in countries other than their own.

The repression, assassinations and detentions created, in the case of Kenya, an organizational vacuum, especially in the universities, hitherto a site of struggle. This vacuum still exists in many of our countries, whilst there has concurrently also been a re-emergence of liberated zones in the urban terrain, like Ukombozi Library in Nairobi.

The dire and degrading prison conditions that Maina wa Kinyatti endured for over six years are powerfully captured in his prison notes and poetry, later published in 1996 as *Kenya: A Prison Notebook*. He endured a system of decaying and half-cooked food, beatings, strip-searches, and a *language of coercion and violence* – conditions designed to degrade and humiliate.

“The prison runs light industries that are staffed by prisoners. Most of the prisoners work in these industries from sunup to sundown. Those who don’t finish their work are beaten and denied food for that day.” This barbarism is reflected in our towns, cities and villages, manifesting in the lives of our people who have been reduced to wage-slavery in the open-air prison that is the neocolonial world.

Like in the urban settlements spread across most of the third world, there also was no running water and filthy sanitation in prison, conditions that combined to create a thriving environment for diseases including malaria, typhus and a horde of other bacterial infections, all of which were ‘treated’ with aspirin and paracetamol - the only medicines available at the prison dispensary. Prisoners were and still are denied medical care, making “disease a tool of torture”.

These conditions, and the prisons within which Maina was incarcerated, are designed to break a person. The so-called ‘First-World’ is not exempted from these tactics of torture that Maina endured, for they were invented there. Most of us will recall the case of Black Panther Mumia Abu Jamal who was on repeated occasions denied access to healthcare by the American prison-industrial complex, again reinforcing the use of disease and health conditions as a tool of torture.
The Neo-Colonial State is Created in the Image of the Colonial State

The tactics above had, three decades earlier, been used by the British colonialists in their attempt to break down the resolve of the men and women of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (MauMau) that Maina’s research focused on. Suspected members of the MauMau were channeled through the ‘pipeline’, a notorious prison system where freedom fighters underwent incarceration, forced labour, torture, killings and indescribable barbarisms in a bid to ‘rehabilitate’ them. Upon detention at Nairobi Remand Prison in June 1982, Maina found writings that had been scratched on the walls a few decades earlier by jailed patriots of Kenya’s war of independence.

“We are MauMau Freedom Fighters; we shall never retreat or surrender… This is our country.”

It therefore is not a coincidence that three decades later, the prison authorities used the same colonial tactics and instruments of torture on Maina wa Kinyatti and other Mwakenya members in a bid to ‘rehabilitate’ them. But Maina never broke. Or succumbed. He never sold out. He endured torture, humiliation, loneliness and forced labour in the prison industry, but still found ways to keep his sanity by reading, writing and maintaining a militant discipline. Maina writes:

Oh, General Kariba
You taught us to face
Life with dry eyes
To face our oppressor
With fearless courage
And to die for our conviction
If necessary
We are proud of you

Maina drew even more strength from his Ideological conviction to the struggle for a just society, the words of his dear wife Mumbi, friends, comrades and organizations across the world. On one occasion, having learnt of his looming secret transfer to Naivasha prison, Maina draws strength from the struggle of the Angolan people, and their organization, the MPLA: “A revolution is not just a matter of blood and bullets. It is basically a question of restructuring society, removing the exploiting class or nation from power and substituting the rule of the working class and oppressed peoples, transferring ownership of the means of production from the exploiters to the exploited, led by their vanguard parties and liberation organizations.”

Maina’s rare combination of courage and clarity enabled him to write and smuggle out of prison bits and pieces of Kenya: A Prison Notebook over the course of the next six and a half years, most of which he spent in solitary confinement – inking his place in the annals of history as a
revolutionary-intellectual. While courage helps our cadres engage in struggle against the forces of oppression, it is ideological clarity that can direct, channel and mould that courage into an organized revolutionary force.

In November 1982, Maina chronicles how the prison condition has hardened his resolve:

I am experiencing what most Kenyan intellectuals have never experienced and my life’s pattern is changing to accommodate the insights, the knowledge, and the sobering experience of the man I have been forced to become. Now I understand why revolutionary intellectuals all over the world sacrifice their lives, jobs and families for social justice. Now I understand why Castro and Che went to the mountains to organize revolution. Now I know the true meaning of Kimaathi’s famous statement: ‘It is better to die on our feet than to live on our knees.’

In 2022, we again re-affirm Amilcar Cabral’s words that the people are our mountains. We recognise the masses as the fuel and water of revolution. In the midst of global war, deprivation and suffering, we reiterate that one of our main roles as organizers and revolutionaries is to facilitate political education that focuses our people’s instinctive reaction to oppression and its righteous anger into an informed and organized force capable of shifting the balance of power and over-turning the system.

Parts of Maina’s powerful writing and the ideas they espouse are captured in this collection of reflections by the Organic Intellectuals Network. The Organic Intellectuals Network, which came into being in 2021, is a broad-based collective of writer-activists and researchers from different organizations and movements in Kenya.

Its members say this network of organic intellectuals is an idea inspired by the thoughts of Antonio Gramsci regarding the concept of the intellectual. All intellectual activity arises from specific socioeconomic circumstances. In fact, each sector of society yields its own variety of organizers, creators, mediators, and contemplators whom Gramsci calls “organic intellectuals”. The Network aims to generate writers and thinkers inside the movement advocating for social justice as well as other spaces and organizations to provide ideological direction for the fight for social justice.

In an era where information is manufactured in newsrooms, public relations firms, propaganda organizations among many other information factories that dot the information landscape, it is refreshing to see comrades from our movements and organizations combine both theory and practice in organizing. These comrades recognize that ideas should be nurtured, negotiated, and birthed into being through the nexus of theory and practice. Indeed, our practice builds theory, as our theory reinforces practice.

This particular round of Reflections was inspired by a conversation at Ukombozi Library.
between Gacheke Gachiri, Nicholas Mwangi, and Brayan Mathenge, and this edition in *Groundings: Development, Pan-Africanism, Critical Theory* is its second, expanded iteration. They constitute the first round of reflections by the Network, and the essays contained here powerfully use Maina’s writing to carry out an analysis of Kenya, by extension Africa. I must say a special thank you to Bryan Mathenge for the consistent work he undertook to enable the publication of this edition; including initiating connections between the Organic Intellectuals Network and the Walter Rodney Foundation, in particular Jesse Benjamin with whom this new addition first emerged – all in addition to writing a powerful new introduction for this edition.

“Find me in the whirlwind, find me in the whirlwind,” wails my generation. We, like Garvey’s generation, are caught in a web of oppression based on class, race and gender that informs our wretched conditions from the slums of Nairobi, to the ghettos of New York, to the favelas of Brazil and onwards to many other corners of the world. We are at a juncture where oppression breeds resistance, and resistance becomes a mode of existence, creating the subjective conditions through which the economic, political and cultural dimensions of our popular struggles become the only guarantee of our collective existence as a people through their mass-based dimensions.

**We Stand On Their Shoulders**

These essays are a reminder that we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. They are the anchors to a past that the capitalist-imperialist system has continually attempted to alienate us from. By alienating our people from their lands, languages, histories and ways of being, this system has continually and consistently tried to break them down. Today, the lived realities and material conditions of many of our people on the continent and abroad are beyond saddening. They are depressing. The juncture we find ourselves in, as Ghassan Kanafani once reminded us, is a conversation between the neck and the sword. The neck can only save itself through intense and protracted struggle. And so this generation, like Maina wa Kinyatti and George Jackson before him, must not allow itself to be broken. We must continually strive to learn from those who came before us, and adapt those learnings to the concrete context and conditions that inform our struggle today.

Our people come from a rich history of struggle and resistance. Their anger is righteous, and our struggle today righteous by extension – for it is a struggle against the capitalist-imperialist system and its manifestations in our lived realities and material conditions in this section of the periphery called Kenya. This section that continues to be one of the many fronts of the African struggle that challenged the British in the forests of Nyandarua, defeated the Boers (and their allies) in Tete, routed the Italians in Adwa, and created Pan-Africana Liberated Zones in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde.

Our history as African people, as proven by foremost historians including Walter Rodney and Cheikh Anta Diop, clearly predates slavery and colonialism. It predates revisionist western history of non-recognition and erasure. It is a history that remembers and recognizes our heroes
through the ages. From Nzingha to Shaka, from Mekatilili to Kimathi, from Nkrumah to Nyerere, and from Chris Hani to Amilcar Cabral, not forgetting Maina wa Kinyatti and the many patriots who were part of Mwakenya. Nyinyi ni mashujaa, mwongozo na mwangoza.

This collection of reflections affirms them as anchors to our great history of struggle and resistance. We shall win the fight, because history is on our side.

Find us in the whirlwind, find them in the whirlwind.

Sungu Oyoo.

Kajulu village, Kisumu – August 2022.