Introduction to these Reflections on Maina wa Kinyatti’s 
*Kenya: A Prison Notebook*

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Every society and generations within it are inspired and influenced by similar, yet very distinctive characteristics. They relate within a particular context of struggle. In every generation, there are primary and secondary tasks to be accomplished. Frantz Fanon has consistently reminded us, that: “Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it” – words that we have held precious within the frameworks of our liberation struggles. They keep reminding us of the revolutionary tasks that history has accorded our generation.

In the recent past, we have witnessed myriad uprisings all over the world, drawing from the fall of dictatorships, crumbling monarchs and economic breakdowns leading to massive political action among the working class masses. This in context gives us hope that the oppressed person must in their relation with the means of production advance together with the advancement of society. The awakening is an impression that “man” has been in a consistent struggle with the development of nature, hijacked by a greedy and inhumane ruling class – that man has been in a consistent process of aggression waging what is now the class struggle. From our texts and study, the oppressor must be harassed until his last doom. Various philosophers, have, in their contributions articulated that, “*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.*” Throughout history we see the oppressor and oppressed in constant opposition to each other. Antonio Gramsci has expounded that the cultural hegemony within society is the idea that the dominant ideology of the society – the beliefs, values and morals – reflects that of the ruling class. This can be equated to the contributions by Huey Newton, the chief defense minister of the Black Panther Party who said that:

> Laws and rules have always been made to serve people. Rules of society are set up by people so that they will be able to function in a harmonious way. In other words, in order to promote the general welfare of society rules and laws are established by men. Rules should serve men and not men serve rules. The man is greater than the rules or laws that he constructs. Much of the time the laws and rules which officials attempt to inflict upon poor people are non-functional in relation to the status of the poor in society.

Whenever there is an establishment of the ruling class, against the oppressed, the bourgeoisie emerges in capitalism, a society based on production for profits, which produces unnecessarily. It creates an organ from without, as a product of the irreconcilable class antagonisms, to protect
private property, and hence, exists as a state, a bourgeois state, as an instrument of oppression by the ruling class, a body of armed men with monopoly instruments of violence. The colonial system around the state successfully re-established itself in ‘Independent’ Kenya, and continues in place through the recycling style inherited across successive regimes. This includes the current state, which arrests, commit murders in extra-judicial circumstances, and generally profiles the poor. They even boast of a clause which stipulates that they protect human life and property. But whose property? It should be clear that it is the life and property of the rich, of the bourgeoisie, the ruling class who either did not fight for freedom, or betrayed freedom at one moment, to ascertain that they were never revolutionaries at any moment.

In history, Marxism has proved to be a science of transformation of the society. In decisive moments in history, it has acted as a guide to resolve major contradictions in the political, social and economic dimensions of development of the society. We have witnessed the continued vilifying of scientific socialism by major world powers and especially the West. In extreme, worst case conditions we have read and witnessed heinous attempts to persecute, murder and put Marxists on trial. We have witnessed the arrests, and detention of Antonio Gramsci, the tragic murder of comrade Walter Rodney in a bomb planted on a “walkie-talkie”, the political assassination of Pio Gama Pinto, Kenyan Marxist journalist and principled politician, the broad detention without trial and torture of the ‘second liberation’ heroes, characterized by the arrests of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Edward Oyugi and Prof. Ngotho wa Kariuki, and including 53 political prisoners, the likes of: Tito Adungosi, Karimi Nduthu, Tirop Kitur, Kangethe and Waruiru Mungai’s, Koigi wa Wamwere, Kamoji wa Waciira, Rumba Kinuthia, Kamonye Manje, Njeru Gathangu, Wafula Buke, Apiny Adhiambo and an endless list, some of whom died in prison. Walter Rodney says in “Marxism and African Revolution”:

A people’s consciousness is heightened by knowledge of the dignity and determination of their fore parents. Indeed, the African world-view regarding ancestors as an integral part of the living community makes it so much easier to identify a given generation with the struggles of an earlier generation.

It is from these footsteps that our struggle is inspired. Kenya witnessed and suffered political suppression and political unrest emanating from the consolidation of a dictatorship in the 1980’s. When KANU (Kenya African National Union) was the de facto one party, led by the infamous Moi, with his Nyayo philosophy. The economy broke down, public services collapsed and he ruled with a fist for twenty four years. This, then eventually led to a reorganization in political tactics. Social and political movements were hence established, and adopted various strategies to battle against the dictatorship. They ranged from overt organizing, to a covert tactics with most political activities underground. They engaged in revolutionary study through the formation of cells, and
political practice through distribution of leaflets: *pambana* (Swahili for struggle) and other forms of recruitment.

It is within these activities that Prof. Maina wa Kinyatti, a Kenyan historian at Kenyatta University was arrested and detained at several prisons in Kenya, and charged with possession of seditious material. Being a Marxist, the authorities treated him with absolute disgust and callous treatment. Beatings, hunger, exposure to unhygienic environment, starvation, solitary confinement and being locked away from the reality of the world. He nearly suffered from a mental breakdown, but never despair or even the slightest shying away from Marxism and its principles. He received overwhelming solidarity from comrades and progressive organizations all over the world. Moi, the dictator, tried to bring him to his knees to apologize, but Prof. Maina held on to his political stance: “I will not apologize to a dictator, I have committed no crime.” In this moment he was a projection of all revolutionaries blazing trails as unstoppable comrades. A projection that Marxism is principles, but it is also practice.

These horrific, yet encouraging scenes to our generation are documented in *Kenya: A Prison Notebook*, one of the great contributions in Kenyan history, published by Vita books and Mau Mau Research Center, in 1996. It is among the most inspiring prison notebooks drafted and scribbled in prison by some of the most inspiring public intellectuals, like Antonio Gramsci. It was in fact the thought of Antonio Gramsci, closely integrated with the contributions of Walter Rodney, that inspired the formulation and adoption of the political and organizational establishment of the Organic Intellectuals Network, linked with major political and social organizations in Kenya. It is comprised of public intellectuals who have continuously devoted their time and lives to the course of revolutionary organizing, in both theory and practice.

The reflections we have collected here on Kinyatti’s book are written after a collective study by a section of the Organic Intellectuals Network who felt the urge, the contemporary need of linking the intergenerational struggles for a common purpose. The book inspires a great battalion of young revolutionaries. It contains the contributions of Maina wa Kinyatti, theoretically, but a general feeling of the struggles in the 80’s of many comrades who participated in the struggle then. Very few materials exist about the nature and characteristics of the struggles then, which is why this study is important and our collective worked on it together.

References


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