

Second National Institute for Economic Policy (NIEP) Oliver Tambo Lecture Delivered By The President of The Republic Of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki

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OU SONT' ILS, EN CE MOMENT - WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

In Shakespeare's "The Tempest", Prospero takes time to explain to his daughter, Miranda, how he, the Duke of Milan, lost his dukedom as a result of the machinations of a perfidious brother, and she, her identity.

Prospero speaks of his brother as one:

"Who having, unto truth, by telling of it,
Made such a sinner of his memory,
To credit his own lie,-he did believe
He was indeed the duke; out of the
substitution,
And executing the outward face of royalty,
With all prerogative: - Hence his ambition,
Growing,- ...
To have no screen between this part he play'd
And him he play'd it for, he needs will be
Absolute Milan:..."
(William Shakespeare. "The Tempest": Act 1, Scene 2.)

So startling, dramatic and heart-rending is the story she hears, that Miranda cries out:

"Your tale, sir, would cure deafness."
(William Shakespeare. op cit.)

I believe that what I will try to talk about during this Second Oliver Tambo Lecture, dedicated to the memory of a noble African, should, because of its drama and pathos, evoke among all people of conscience, a Miranda-response, sufficient to cure deafness itself.

Recently, a leading white South African politician spoke his mind either honestly or, alternatively, seemingly without inhibition. As with Prospero's brother, circumstance had created the apparent necessity that he needs must be absolute Milan.

Just over a fortnight ago, one of our newspapers reported that this white politician had said that the President of our Republic had damaged the reputation of the government.

According to the newspaper, the white politician accused the President of suffering from a "near obsession" with finding African solutions to every problem, even if, for instance, this meant flouting scientific facts about AIDS, in favour of "snake-oil cures and quackery."
(*Business Day*: July 26, 2000.)

Our own absolute Milan, the white politician, makes bold to speak openly of his disdain and contempt for African solutions to the challenges that face the peoples of our Continent.

According to him - who is a politician who practices his craft on the African Continent - these solutions, because they are African, could not but consist of the pagan, savage, superstitious and unscientific

responses typical of the African people, described by the white politician as resort to 'snake-oil cures and quackery'.

By his statements, our own absolute Milan, the white politician, demonstrates that he is willing to enunciate an entrenched white racism that is a millennium old.

This racism has defined us who are African and black as primitive, pagan, slaves to the most irrational superstitions and inherently prone to brute violence. It has left us with the legacy that compels us to fight, in a continuing and difficult struggle, for the transformation of ours into a non-racial society.

Such crimes against humanity as slavery, colonialism and apartheid would never have occurred unless those who perpetrated them, knew it as a matter of fact that their victims were not as human as they.

Our white politician would not have made the statements he reportedly made, unless he knew it as a matter of fact that African solutions amounted to no more than snake-oil cures and quackery.

The Martinique revolutionary, Frantz Fanon, has written:

"Colonialism, which has not bothered to put too fine a point on its efforts, has never ceased to maintain that the Negro is a savage; and for the colonist, the Negro was neither an Angolan nor a Nigerian, for he simply spoke of 'the Negro'. For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighted down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals - in short, the Negro's country."

(*African Intellectual Heritage*: Molefi Kete Asante & Abu S. Abarry, eds: Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1996. p. 238.)

It is not the arrogance of the racism of those who have convinced themselves that they are superior, the colonialists, that we seek to talk about today.

What we wish to address is the response of the victims of that arrogance, to the arrogance of those who believe themselves to be superior - the arrogant certainty of those who would be our absolute Milan.

At the end of the 19th Century, that great African-American, W.E.B. du Bois, wrote:

" Between me and the other (white) world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of framing it...How does it feel to be a problem?"

(W.E.B. du Bois, *Biography of a Race*: by David Levering Lewis, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., New York: 1993; p. 279)

Du Bois explains the quandary of 'the other world' by explaining how much this world prided itself for being a leading democracy, and, as he puts it, "the Supreme Adventure in the last Great Battle of the West, for the human freedom which would release the human spirit from lower lust for mere meat, and set it free to dream and sing."

(Asante & Abarry op.cit. p. 590.)

Du Bois then makes the poignant observation:

" And then some unjust god leaned, laughing, over the ramparts of heaven and dropped a black man in their midst."

(Asante & Abarry op. cit. p. 590.)

Thus the problem of the other world!

The African-American, Malcolm X, returned to this issue almost seventy years later when he said:

" We all agree tonight, all of the speakers have agreed, that America has a very serious problem. Not only does America have a very serious problem, but our people have a very serious problem. America's problem is us. We are her problem. The only reason she has a problem is she doesn't want us here. And every time you look at yourself, be you black, brown, red or yellow, a so-called Negro, you represent a person who poses such a serious problem for America because you are not wanted."

(Asante & Abarry, eds; op cit, p. 721.)

How, then, do we respond to this reality that those who occupy many dominant positions in the society to which we belong, define us as a problem and behave towards us as to a problem, as the unwanted!

Partly because Oliver Tambo was part of our black intelligentsia and a member of our black petite bourgeoisie, as I am, the "we" I would like to talk about today is our black intelligentsia and petite bourgeoisie.

We occupy the same positions that Prospero and Miranda occupy in "The Tempest". We, too, have lost our country and our identity, because of the perfidious actions of those who would be our absolute Milan.

These have discarded the screen that separates the image of themselves that they project to themselves, from the image of themselves that they project to those they have robbed of their country and identity.

The outstanding African patriot and revolutionary, Amilcar Cabral has written:

" In the course of two or three generations of colonisation, a social class arises, made up of civil servants, people who are employed in various branches of the economy, especially commerce, professional people, and a few urban and agricultural landowners. This indigenous petite bourgeoisie which emerged out of foreign domination and is indispensable to the system of colonial exploitation, stands midway between the masses of the working class in town and country and the small number of local representatives of the foreign ruling class. Although they might have quite strong links with the masses and the traditional chiefs, generally speaking, they aspire to a way of life which is similar if not identical with that of the foreign minority. At the same time while they restrict their dealings with the masses, they try to become integrated in this minority, often at the cost of family or ethnic ties and always at great personal cost. Yet despite the apparent exceptions, they do not succeed in getting past the barriers thrown up by the system. They are prisoners of the cultural and social contradictions of their lives. They cannot escape from their role as a marginal class, or a marginalised' class."

(Asante & Abarry: op cit, pp. 245-6.)

What, then, of our own "petite bourgeoisie which emerged out of foreign domination" and which "aspire(s) to a way of life which is similar if not identical with that of the foreign minority"!

Amilcar Cabral was, of course, referring to a general African experience, characteristic of the majority of African countries.

We have our own specific, national experience, which differs in some important respects from the experience on which Cabral relied for his conclusions.

In our progressive literature this has been described as colonialism of a special type. Some specific features of this particular manifestation of colonialism are that our own 'oppressor nation' and 'ruling class' ceased to be foreign. They became part of a multi-racial and multi-cultural South African population.

Their numbers became far larger than "the small number of local representatives of the foreign ruling class" of which Cabral spoke.

Accordingly, as we all know, the process of colonisation had a far larger, and perhaps qualitatively different, impact on the indigenous African society in our country than it did in other African countries.

The most thorough-going land dispossession, the transformation of the African majority into a proletariat, the destruction of traditional society, the suppression of African culture and the systematic diminution of the indigenous languages and the sustained entrenchment of a foreign religion and other ideas - all these combined to produce a degree of social alienation and loss of identity perhaps with no equivalent anywhere else, except among the slave population in the United States.

Steve Biko was referring to this tale which 'would cure deafness' when he wrote:

" Our culture, our history and indeed all aspects of the black man's life have been battered nearly out of shape in the great collision between the indigenous values and the Anglo-Boer culture."

(From Protest to Challenge, Vol 5, by Thomas G. Karis & Gail M. Gerhart: Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1997. p. 133.)

It is perhaps not surprising, given Kenya's history of colonialism, that a Kenyan intellectual, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, should address this question with great vigour. He writes:

" The effect of (the) cultural bomb (dropped by imperialism), is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, their languages, their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own...(The constant refrain) 'Theft is holy', (which the colonially dependant learn from the plundering imperialists), sums up the new creed of the neo-colonial bourgeoisie in many independent' African states."

(Decolonising the Mind by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: James Currey, London, 1986. p.3.)

Oliver Tambo sought to explain the systematic effort at the depersonalisation and dehumanisation of the African by those who would be our absolute Milan, when he told the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid in 1964, referring to the Bantu Laws Amendment Bill, then before the apartheid parliament:

" The arrogant collection of power-drunk, race maniacs (who maintain themselves in power over Africans), have now produced an apartheid measure which deals with the African on the basis that he is purely and simply a thing - a chattel in the control and service of the white man. He is a labour unit, not a living human being with personal and civil rights...To these men...the African is at best a slave in all but name. They own and possess him, and have now evolved a scheme for selling him."

(Oliver Tambo Speaks, compiled by Adelaide Tambo: Heinemann, London, 1987. p. 51.)

Our black intelligentsia and petite bourgeoisie emerge out of this situation in which the Africans suffer the fate of "The Tempest's" Prospero and Miranda.

Writing of this black intelligentsia, Frantz Fanon has said:

" It is true that the attitude of the native intellectual sometimes takes on the aspect of a cult or a religion. But if we really wish to analyse this attitude correctly, we will come to see that it is symptomatic of the intellectual's realisation of the danger that he is running of cutting his last moorings and of breaking adrift from his people...In order to ensure his salvation and to escape from the supremacy of the white man's culture, the native feels the need to turn backward toward his unknown roots and to lose himself at whatever cost in his own barbarous people...The tearing away, painful and difficult though it may be, is however necessary. If it is not accomplished there will be serious psycho-affective injuries and the result will be individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless - a race of angels."

(Asante & Abarry op. cit. p. 241.)

Of the African petite bourgeoisie in general, Cabral, like Fanon, argues that its marginalisation by the 'foreign ruling class' forces it to "return to the source", the native masses. He then writes:

" One must point out that the 'return to the source', apparent or real, does not develop at one time and in the same way in the heart of the indigenous petite bourgeoisie. It is a slow process, broken up and uneven, whose development depends on the degree of acculturation of each individual, of the material circumstances of his life, on the forming of his ideas and on his experience as a social being. This unevenness is the basis of the split of the indigenous petite bourgeoisie into three groups when confronted with the liberation movement:

a) a minority, which, even if it wants an end to foreign domination, clings to the dominant colonialist class and openly opposes the movement, to protect its social position; b) a majority of people who are hesitant and indecisive; (and,) c) another minority of people who share in the building and leadership of the liberation movement.

" But the latter group, which plays a decisive role in the development of the pre-independence movement, does not truly identify with the mass of the people (with their culture and hopes) except through struggle, the scale of this identification depending on the kind or methods of struggle, on the ideological basis of the movement and on the level of moral and political awareness of each individual."

(Asante & Abarry op. cit. p. 247.)

I believe that our own experience as we struggled for the defeat of the apartheid system would show that what Cabral said of the divided response of the native intelligentsia and petite bourgeoisie to the liberation struggle holds true for us as well.

It is because of the fact that Oliver Tambo was part of the third group, the minority of people who share in the building and the leadership of the liberation movement, which Cabral spoke of, that we meet here to celebrate his contribution to our liberty.

We can be truly proud of the fact that many among our intelligentsia and petite bourgeoisie willingly joined this third group and played an outstanding role in our struggle for liberation.

During the 20th century, these stretch from Pixley ka Seme, John Dube, Charlotte Maxeke and Sol Plaatje at the beginning of the century, to Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Duma Nokwe, Robert Sobukwe, Chris Hani and Steve Biko, at its end.

The Guyanese political-economist, Walter Rodney, has written:

" Following in the wake of the great pageant of the regaining of political independence, there has come the recognition on the part of many that the struggle of the African people has intensified rather than abated, and that it is being expressed not merely as a contradiction between African producers and European capitalists but also as a conflict...between the majority of the black working masses and a small African possessing class...It would be unhistorical to deny the progressive character of the African petty bourgeoisie at a particular moment in time...But the petty bourgeoisie were reformers and not revolutionaries. Their class limitations were stamped upon the character of the independence which they negotiated with the colonial master...Our conclusions at this point are that the African petty bourgeois leadership since independence has been an obstacle to the further development of the African revolution."

(Asante & Abarry op. cit. pp. 729, 731 & 735.)

Our own intelligentsia faces the challenge, perhaps to overcome the class limitations which Rodney speaks of, and ensure that it does not become an obstacle to the further development of our own revolution.

Immanent in the specific comments on the native intelligentsia and petite bourgeoisie we have cited from the writings of Fanon, Cabral and Rodney, is the recognition that these social strata are identified both by their national interest and their class interests.

Both Fanon and Cabral argue that while the class interests of these strata drive them to seek an accommodation with the colonial power, and therefore the bourgeoisie of the 'mother country', the fact of their marginalisation as part of the nationally dominated, compels them to seek an alliance with the 'native masses.'

They also make the point that, among other things, the degree of acculturation of the members of these strata, will help to determine how far they go in either direction.

We can argue, relying both on these theoretical propositions and on empirical evidence, that in many instances, the struggle of these strata for national liberation will be national in its form but of a class nature in its ultimate objectives.

It is from this reality that it comes about that these strata were 'progressive at a particular moment in time', and 'an obstacle to the further development of the African revolution' at another, to use Rodney's words.

Not so long ago, in historical time, the late Duma Nokwe could not practise as an advocate from chambers in central Johannesburg used by other advocates. The reason for this, of course, was that he was black.

Professionally equal to his white colleagues, he was treated as inferior, in keeping with the system of white minority domination and the oppression of the black majority.

Duma Nokwe was unequivocally committed to the genuine emancipation of the masses of our people.

Take the situation, however, of another lawyer-intellectual, such as those described by Cabral as 'hesitant and indecisive'.

What we might then have is a situation in which, to remove the obstacle to the achievement of his or her equal professional status, the lawyer-intellectual had to join with 'the native masses', to end national oppression.

Unlike what Duma Nokwe would have done had he lived, we could then have the situation in which, once our political liberation was achieved, our lawyer-intellectual would disappear from the continuing struggle.

The comrade lawyer would then focus exclusively on building his or her practice, charging the going fees to all comers, even where the imperatives of social transformation dictated otherwise.

Of course, there would be nothing wrong with this behaviour. What it would illustrate however is that, in reality, the comrade lawyer was involved in a struggle for equality - his or her equality with the white peers advantaged by the system of apartheid.

Once this equality is achieved, thus addressing the class interests of this member of the petite bourgeoisie, his or her struggle for social transformation would have achieved its purposes. It is this that would define this comrade intellectual as a 'reformer' rather than a 'revolutionary', to use Rodney's categories.

Hence the title we have given to this lecture: "Ou sont' ils, en ce moment? - Where are they now?"

Where is the black intelligentsia now, given that the victory over white minority domination, scored through their joint action with the native masses, has created the conditions for them to pursue their class interests, without let or hindrance!

According to what we have said about the relationship between national and class interests, the most natural instinct of the black intelligentsia, as part of our national petite bourgeoisie, would be for it to abandon all pretence that it is concerned to use its skills to advance the national interest.

All that the pursuit of its class interests would require, would be that each of its members merely focuses on the promotion of his or her personal interests, resulting in greater personal wealth and an ever-more comfortable life and an opulent life-style.

That some of this private wealth could be accumulated as a result of the desperate situation of the 'native masses' who were allies of the now liberated petite bourgeoisie, would be adequately explained away as a fault of our social system, for which the petite bourgeois is not responsible.

In our situation, because of the colonialism of a special type, the victory of the national liberation struggle did not result in the departure of the foreign ruling class.

Accordingly, the newly emancipated petite bourgeoisie, including the native intelligentsia in its midst, must, theoretically, act as a class 'for itself' and thus join forces in millions of ways, especially with the dominant bourgeoisie of the former 'oppressor nation'.

Because, by definition, it is weak and needs the support of others to succeed, this native petite bourgeoisie will naturally fall under the influence and leadership of its erstwhile enemy, those who marginalised it because of the system of colonial and racist oppression.

At the same time, it will not hesitate to make its claims on the new democratic state, which it will argue, justifiably, that it helped to bring about. The permanent question on its lips will be - what has our government done for us, being very ready to proclaim very loudly, that nothing has changed!

The doing it expects is that the democratic government will create the necessary conditions and supply the means, as a result of which the personal comfort and wealth of members of the petite bourgeoisie will improve continuously.

We are a capitalist society. The bulk of productive wealth is therefore in private hands.

Any honest person will also understand that in six years of national emancipation, it is impossible to wipe out a legacy of over 300 years of colonial domination and to transform ours into a truly non-racial country.

Accordingly, many things critical to the functioning of any society, including capital, intellectual and other skills, the capacity to generate and propagate ideas and the creation of opportunities for 'upward mobility', remain in the hands of those determined by three centuries of white minority domination as those designated, exclusively, to exercise power in all these areas of social activity.

In these circumstances, it is inevitable that the native petite bourgeoisie must, once more, in pursuit of its class interests, seek an accommodation with the dominant bourgeoisie, whom it was obliged to oppose as it fought as part of the motive forces of the movement for national liberation.

Take this together with what we have said about the deculturation and the acculturation of the 'native population', then the scene is set for the stage entry of yet another character in "The Tempest", Caliban.

The Chilean writer, Ariel Dorfman, says that Caliban is distinguished by:

" (his) crass materialism...dedicated to profit, positivism, utilitarian to a fault, worshipping the 'fervent pursuit of well-being that has no object beyond itself'."

(Heading South, Looking North by Ariel Dorfman: Sceptre, London. 1998. p. 159.)

As early as in his second dialogue in "The Tempest", Caliban says:

" I must eat my dinner."

Later, he says of Stephano:

" That's a brave god, and bears celestial liquor: I will kneel to him... I'll kiss thy foot; I'll swear myself thy subject... ..I, thy Caliban, For aye thy foot-licker."

(William Shakespeare op. cit.)

Part of our continuing struggle must surely be that we fight against the birth of a Caliban native petite bourgeoisie, with the native intelligentsia in its midst, that, in pursuit of well-being that has no object beyond itself, commits itself to be the foot-lickers of those that will secure the personal well-being of its members.

The phenomenon of the projection of black faces to secure government contracts, hiding the reality of white owned bidding companies, is a case in point.

In his introduction to Paulo Freire's celebrated work, the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Richard Schull says that Freire:

" incarnates a rediscovery of the humanising vocation of the intellectual, and demonstrates the power of thought to negate accepted limits and open the way to a new future.

" This world to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a given reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather it is a problem to be worked on and solved. It is the material used by man to create history, a task which he performs as he overcomes that which is dehumanising at any particular time and place and dares to create the qualitatively new."

(Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire: Penguin Books, London, 1970. p.14.)

This is the black intellectual that our country needs, one who approaches the world we inherit as the material used by human beings to create history and the qualitatively new, and overcome that which is dehumanising at any particular time and place, and not the Caliban-intellectual.

Accordingly, what are some of the tasks that this intelligentsia faces!

To help overcome that which continues to be dehumanising to the majority of our people and create the qualitatively new, it is important that our intelligentsia should work on the issue of the restoration of the pride, the identity and the self-confidence of the African majority.

This has many implications for the society we are trying to build, including the restoration and entrenchment of a value system that respects life, the inviolability of the person, the dignity of women, the vulnerability of the child and the central importance of human solidarity.

This intelligentsia must engage with vigour the critical issues of the transformation of ours into a non-racial and non-sexist society, understanding that the realisation of these goals will be a defining feature of fundamental social transformation of our country to which many of us claim to be committed.

Without the attainment of these objectives, our protestations that we are committed to the building of a human rights culture within our society, assume a hollow ring.

Similarly, that human rights culture has limited meaning in a society such as ours, that is characterised by widespread, centuries-old and deeply entrenched poverty and its associated ills such as disease and ignorance. It is therefore vital that our intelligentsia focus on this issue, posing the question - what is it that we need to do, daring to create the qualitatively new, prosperity for all our people!

In this struggle, we will have to overcome the self-serving pretence that the mere provision of poverty relief funds from public revenues is sufficient to deal with the very deep structural fault in our economy represented by poverty and underdevelopment.

As Africans we are vitally interested in the achievement in the age-old dream of all the peoples of our continent for an African Renaissance, which would restore the dignity and pride of all Africans, establishing their place as equal with all other human beings.

The difficult struggle to accomplish this goal must also pre-occupy our intelligentsia, joining hands with their counterparts throughout Africa and the African diaspora. After all, we are, to some, simply the Negro, as Frantz Fanon said.

We have to build on the encouraging first steps that have already been taken with the establishment of the African Renaissance Institute.

The concept and the phenomenon of globalisation occupy pride of place in today's international dialogue. It is clear that indeed, the process of the all-round integration of the global community is proceeding at great pace. This encompasses our country and continent as a well, but not necessarily as equal partners in or beneficiaries of this process.

It is urgent that our intelligentsia should help our country and people to respond to the challenges and opportunities thrown up by the process of globalisation. We must approach this work, bearing in mind that this process is itself characterised by rapid change and the emergence of new issues relating to the organisation of human society.

It may be that it is the fashion of the day to define the height of intellectual creativity as the passion and consistency with which the modern South African intellectual criticises the government.

Paulo Freire and Oliver Tambo, both pedagogues of the oppressed, would have disagreed with such fashion.

Oliver Tambo was a fierce critic of injustice, oppression and the ideas of reaction. With no trace of selfishness or arrogance, he saw himself as an ordinary foot soldier, the unsung infantryman in the army of ordinary working people of our country, of Africa and the world whom he loved.

He had the power of vision to understand the historic privilege granted to those charged with the defeat of the apartheid crime against humanity, and the equally historic privilege given to the generations charged with the responsibility to build a South Africa that truly belongs to all who live in it.

He was quintessentially a renaissance intellectual, eminently proficient in mathematics, the natural sciences, the law, pedagogy and music.

Gifted with learning, a passion for learning and a logical mind as well as a deeply-entrenched humanism, he knew that his task as an intellectual and an African was to destroy the old and to build the new, to overcome that which is dehumanising and to dare to create the qualitatively new.

He knew that those who had created and benefited from racism, sexism, oppression and injustice would neither applaud him nor be his admirers. He would have known that something was wrong if these had sung his praises.

He would have known why those who benefited and benefit from racism are the first to advise that we should not discuss racism, that we should not refer to the legacy of apartheid, and that we should suppress the telling of the truth that we are a country of two nations.

He would have understood this too that old habits die hard. He would therefore not have been surprised that the beneficiaries of racism consider it their duty to discourage the victims of racism from reflecting and acting on the pain they feel.

We say today that Oliver Tambo lives both because he opposed apartheid and because his ideas and his example have been and are part of the supreme effort in which we are involved, to create a just and humane society.

Even though he is physically not with us, yet we do not ask the question - where is he now!

We do not ask this question because it could never be that so great an architect of our future could cease to be.

For Prospero to regain his dukedom and Miranda her identity, they were blessed in that Prospero had the gift of supernatural powers to end their misfortune.

As Oliver Tambo demonstrated to all of us, our own blessing is our capacity to think and to act, to understand our reality and to change it.

The question our intelligentsia will have to answer, practically, is whether they have learnt anything at all from what this pedagogue of the oppressed has taught us.

The fault will not be in our stars but in ourselves if we remain underlings.

Thank you.

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