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Angola is Part of All of Us

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The grieved lands of Africa
in the tearful woes of ancient and modern slave
...........
The grieved lands of Africa
in the dream soon undone in jinglings of gaolers' keys
...........
The grieved lands of Africa
Alive
in themselves and with us alive...

In a 1976 speech radiant with its perception and profundity Walter Rodney offered the following insight about the 1975-76 period in Angola, known as Angola's "Second War of Liberation":

"Now all of these things (Angola's internal political struggles, Cuba's history of internationalism, Cuba's long ties to Angola) have been ignored, obfuscated, in this analysis which starts with this generalization about what they perceive the international world to be - and there has been no attempt whatsoever at a serious analysis of the internal forces operating within Angola - and consequently of the types of alliances which arose out of the confrontation between these internal forces.

And therefore, I admit that we need to enter into a period of very serious self-criticism. We need to understand that what is happening in Zimbabwe, what is happening in the Republic of South Africa and Namibia, may evoke from us a similarly confused reaction if we are not serious about trying to raise the level of our analysis concerning the African continent, which means concerning the international Third World, and ultimately, concerning what is going on at home."
In the talk Rodney became even more specific when he talked in great detail about the attraction which UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) held for many black Americans in the late 1960s and early 70s. He pointed out the extent to which the UNITA appeal with its emphasis on the mystique of blackness and its attacks upon the so-called mulatto leadership of MPLA coincided perfectly with the tremendous thrust in our communities in the late 60s to disassociate ourselves from the hegemony of the white cultural mainstream. He further pointed out the MPLA had never sought to reach black Americans or the American people generally - this, partly because of the experiences Agostinho Neto had lobbying in the United States as early as 1962, but largely due to the political orientation of the MPLA which felt only the socialist world could provide true solidarity.

Continuing his clarion call for an analysis which begins and ends with the Angolan social reality, Rodney went on in his 1976 talk to "get down" to what I would call the core of many black Americans' confusion about or rejection of the MPLA. Speaking, as always, in his quiet, low-keyed manner, he said:

We need to examine firstly, whether the reality in Angola, was the reality as portrayed by UNITA. We need to go further and ask, whether the historical experience of Angola, could be so easily assimilated into the historical experience of Black people in the U.S. that Afro-Americans should run to make a judgement on Angola on the basis of some knowledge that they had that so-and-so was married to a white. Or that so-and-so was a mulatto in the process of power... What is called "race" in the U.S. is not the same thing that might be called race in Angola. In fact in this country, those who are all called Black, or used to be called
Negro, if they went to Angola, they would be distinguished many as Mulattos ... The historical experience is different. The categories are different. And therefore if we want to understand Angola and the complex of relationships (there) between social strata and race, etc., we must then understand Angola. We cannot sit in Washington or in Detroit, and imagine that what we are seeing around the block is Angolan society."

Why do I begin this article with this long discussion of Walter Rodney's? It is not my purpose to raise these questions as an introduction to discussing my own trip to Angola during July of 1979. It is not my intent in these few brief pages to share with you my own insights into the profound mosaic of colors which is the Angolan people. I could discuss for pages how I saw Angolans of all skin tones, hair grades and body builds doing all types of work in both rural and urban Angola. I saw Angolans of all colors hoeing fields, I saw Angolans of all colors working in offices. I could cite that the black-skinned leadership I met with was more numerous than the brown or yellow-skinned leadership. I could present reams of material speaking to Angola's drive to create a society for all Angolans, an Angola "red with coffee, white with cotton, green with maize." I could quote at length the incredible 7 February 1974 lecture by the late President of Angola, Agostinho Neto, where he laid out his political philosophy in a talk called "Who is the Enemy? What is our Objective?" It was in that talk, only weeks before the Sixth Pan Africanist Congress, that President Neto demonstrated that profoundly historical and internationalist grasp of social and political change that has characterized so many national liberation movement leaders. He said at one point:

"What I am saying should not be taken as criticism of our brave black American brothers, who know better than anyone how to orient their struggle, how to envisage the transformation of American
society so that man will be free there. But allow me also to reject any idea on the transformation of the national liberation struggle in Angola into a racial struggle.

I would say that in Angola the struggle also assumes racial aspects since discrimination is a fact. The black man is exploited there. But it is fundamentally a struggle against the colonial system and its chief ally, imperialism (Italics mine) ... in Africa there are Arab peoples... there are some areas which are not black. The problem cannot be purely racial. So long as there is imperialism, it will be possible to continue colonialism. And as I have said, for us they are the enemies."

I do not go into these questions to merely write an article on how Angola is mazing beyond skin color. The race, ethnic groups question in Angola is a secondary one. And increasingly it is being used to veil the more fundamental forces which have been let loose in Angola. These forces, hinged upon South Africa's continuing war against Angola, have three central objectives: A) to destabilize Angola; B) sabotage its support for other national liberation movements (i.e., its support for the African National Congress at South Africa, the A.N.C.; and for the South West African People's Organization, S.W.A.P.O. of Namibia) and; C) to destroy the MPLA-Workers Party now presided over by Comrade José Eduardo Dos Santos.

The relevance of Rodney's lecture is that it can assist us in moving through the morass of media mirages, various CIA press drops, half-truths, and obsessions and pre-occupations which characterize much of the reporting done about Angola. Some of this verbiage is patently transparent in its intent but is riding the anti-Soviet, anti-Cuba hysteria currently being systemically whipped up in the United States following the recent events in Iran, Nicaragua, the Caribbean and Afghanistan. Providing a more blatant example, the Daily Telegraph of
London, in a February 1980 article by Robert Moss (a well-seasoned proponent of maintaining white settler regimes) entitled "Angola: Chance for the West", openly called for money and arms to be given to "the Angolan resistance (FNLA and UNITA) as part of a 'land reclamation' policy of the third world countries that have fallen victim to Soviet expansion over the last half-decade". Even some sympathetic journals seemingly are not able to move beyond the mulatto leadership "bogey" which characterizes and stymies analysis of the Angolan situation all too often. 7

Beneath the code words and phrases like "order", "moderation", "land reclamation" and "stemming the Soviet advance" is a more fundamental imperative at work with regard to Angola, i.e., the replacement of the present MPLA leadership in Angola with another more prepared to accommodate to South African regional hegemony, more prepared to accept continued Western corporate exploitation of Southern Africa as an inevitable destiny.

During my trip to Angola in 1979 I saw some of the howitzer shells which were used by the South Africans in the period of March '76 to June '79, during which 1,383 Angolan, South African, Zimbabwean and Namibian patriots, the bulk of them women and children, were killed. During January and February this year 21 people have been killed by some 50 armed invasions by South African troops and/or their allied UNITA/FNLA bandits empowered through South African logistical and supply assistance.

Now the greater significance of Rodney's call for thorough analysis begins to bloom as it becomes clear that those shells were/are part of a much bigger scheme whereby a company called Space Research Corporation,
based in Vermont and Canada, partially owned by the South African Government, economically linked to the Arthur D. Little Company (the Boston firm hired by black American preacher, Leon Sullivan of the Sullivan Principles Song and Dance, you know the one with the cadillac on General Motors Board of Directors) shipped 53,000 howitzer shells to South Africa in the 77-78 period and repeatedly sent company personnel to South Africa to train and assist the South African military in developing a new and unique piece of weaponry now revealed as the 'Nuclear Bullet'. Moreover, it has been found that at least both the US Navy and the CIA knew about, condoned and probably collaborated in the entire operation. 8

Thinking about Space Research Corporation, I recalled the single raid on Cassinga in May '78, three hours with repeated air and artillery rounds killing ultimately over 600 Namibian refugees. Thinking about Space Research and the period of the spring of 1978 made me recall as well an article in a May issue of the New Yorker magazine where Drew Pearson in the context of interviewing Zbignew Brezinski pointed out how he had requested of Carter permission to militarily invade Angola so as to "stabilize" the Southern African region.

Recently, the small Washington D.C.-based liberation support organization, the Southern Africa News Collective in an excellent newsletter called "Angola: The Struggle for Socialist Reconstruction" pointed out that "the process of transformation from colonialism to socialism is a long and difficult process." I thought immediately of Agostinho Neto's having said a similar thing as he opened the first session of the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Luanda in July 1979. I recall him now as having been a little gaunt-looking, tired-looking undoubtedly acutely
feeling the cancerous leukemia surging through his body. He mentioned that night that Angola yet faced many difficulties, as he called them "unfavourable conditions". But what he did not mention but no doubt knew, as do all in Angola, was that another obstacle was the fact of the continuing war being waged by the US Government and its various actors against the People's Republic of Angola, a war waged through: refusing diplomatic recognition to the Angolan Government; not allowing bilateral US aid to Angola; undermining multi-lateral organizations providing aid; hosting and secretly meeting anti-government forces such as the South African constructed UNITA puppets; tacitly arming South Africa so as to launch continuous offensives against Angola, and; not providing adequate protection to Angola's representatives at the UN, note the March 13 bombing of the Angolan Mission to the UN, allegedly by the anti-Castro, Cuban, CIA-trained, hit men Omega 7 (Africa News March 17, 1980).

Africa faces serious struggles in the decade of the 1980s. The "grieved lands" as the Neto poem says faces the jinglings of various forms of modern slavey's bondage. New independent Zimbabwe is, like the author, "with us alive". But the struggle ahead in Namibia, and South Africa, the struggles for parity and the right to eat in independent Africa (witness Ghana, Liberia, Zaire, Central African Republic) are all going to pose situations demanding a more serious level of understanding and commitment. The once a year solidarity show is not going to "cut bait" much longer.

A white South African journalist working from the UN in New York recently wrote in an article headlined 'Florence quits to help Savimbi', the following:
"Black American links (Italics mine) with UNITA date back to about 1972 and the height of activities of the African Liberation Support Committee, which sent a team to Angola and returned impressed with Dr. Savimbi's stress on black nationalism". (Rand Daily Mail, 26 January 1980)

It is so useable the whole idea of black Americans being allied to South Africa-backed, mercenary-trained, CIA- (and other Western intelligence agencies) backed UNITA/FNLA. Savimbi's whole notion of a black socialist Republic of Angola, his rooster on his head, his charismatic style, it all appeals to some of the best intentioned instincts which we have.

But the basic fact is that lots of us simply do not know. We learn of the myths but not the history. We hear a great deal about the Cubans being behind every bush: that the Cubans, acting on behalf of the Russians, brought the MPLA to power; that now the Cubans are taking the Angolan children into slavery in Cuba. These and other myths, besides devastating our own ignorance, perhaps underscore our own dependency and continued slavery to the American myth. We hear about these myths. What we don't hear about are facts like Angola's being almost utterly depopulated during the slave trade between 1482 and 1658 losing nine million slaves to Brazil alone! Or facts like Angola losing 22,000 of its total of 28,000 trucks between independence by the Portuguese either taking them or wrecking them!

Years ago Paul Robeson, Garvey, DuBois, Hinton, recently, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, George Jackson, Fred Hampton, all reminded us that it was our duty to help defend Africa. Part of that defense I
suggest is our arming ourselves with specific knowledge about a real, not romanticized Africa. No single episode in modern African history is as revealing about the problems and struggles of the whole African continent as are the events around Angola in the 1975-76 period (or the present). Colonialism, imperialism, covert and overt intervention, the role of multi-national corporations, the role of the US Congress in limiting US covert wars, the nature of guerrilla wars, race, class, the 'national question', ethnic questions, the struggle of women for full participation, modes of popular mobilization, the role of the party, the geographical factor, all are playing themselves out in the ongoing Angolan saga. As Rodney pointed out, there always was far more at stake in Angola than our showing solidarity with Africa. More is included than the fact that as we support the MPLA-led People's Republic of Angola we strike a blow at racist South Africa. Angola's struggle is linked to our transforming society on our side of the Atlantic, too.

It is worth noting, perhaps that...

At the time of writing there is no longer a single active MPLA or Angola Support Solidarity group in the country. The question is does this reflect the somewhat ephemeral nature of our political understandings or does it demonstrate our inability to see how important Angola is in the entire Southern African picture?
NOTES


3. Much more needs to be said about the experience of the MPLA in the United States, especially these early years. In several meetings I have had with Angolan officials they have repeatedly admitted that they erred in not devoting more attention to stating their case to the people in the United States, as did both FRELIMO and PAIGC. I don't think it is merely a question of MPLA having more presence in the West. The whole subject of the historical development of US support, both governmental and non-governmental (churches, unions, liberal organizations) for first FNLA and then UNITA, rather than MPLA needs critical examination. It is touched on, however, in two recent studies: John Marcum's The Angolan Revolution II, 1978, MIT Press (see pp 14-15 and footnotes) and Laurence Henderson's Angola: Five Centuries of Conflict, Cornell University Press 1979 (pp 231-34). The scope of the UNITA/FNLA propaganda war and its linkages to such funding sources as the CIA and South African Government funding - a campaign which I would remind the reader is ongoing. Witness Savimbi's recent staff addition, black publicist Florence Tate and his quiet meetings arranged by Congressman Biggs - is a story which remains to be fully told.

4. This approach characterizes so much of the thinking and writing of African liberation leaders. Recall Amilcar Cabral's oft-quoted theme 'do not confuse the reality you live in with the ideas you have in your head.' On this see the excellent new collection of Cabral's writings: Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings of Amilcar Cabral, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979.

5. The full text is reproduced in Marcum, John, The Angolan Revolution, II, op. cit.

6. I do not, however, mean to take away from the importance of this question, the question of who is the enemy. In fact, I think our own ability to transform the present US situation will be linked to the extent to which we more sharply define and define the 'enemy' in our own particular circumstances of the United States.

7. See our recent issues of Africa News (e.g. 24 March 1980) which, while acknowledging the inadequacy of the simple mulatto "bogey" explanation, continued to suggest it publicly. Often, very often it has been questions of the class orientation and habits that has led to changes in leadership of various party and government positions replacing petty bourgeois persons with peasants or workers.