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On Xiconhoca* and other Vermin Feasting Today in Africa: A Note on Travels in the World’s Greatest Continent

By
Prexv Nesbitt
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...I slowly and carefully felt my entire body looking for bruises and breaks. Then, one by one, I moved every muscle I have. The young men in the front were already out as their door had not been jammed shut. I gathered my bags and threw them out of the window and then holding a smashed piece of the door, I pulled my body out of what was left of the Ford SUV. Up on the road, the bus was standing intact with hardly a scratch on it. All around it, the growing crowd, women with pots on their heads, school children in their uniforms, a goat here and there, all were peering down into the ditch to see if we were yet alive.

The accident that I miraculously survived reminds me that the continent of Africa is somehow a survivor, too. There should be no doubt and no romanticization. Africa is in a crisis: the pandemic of HIV/AIDS with its 17 million African dead (8,000 daily); the 12 million African Aids orphans; a regional GNP rate that is 10.5 percent of world per capita GNP. As poet, James Weldon Johnson, might have put it, “the pale white horse called DEATH” is stalking every footpath in the African continent.

Behind Africa’s poverty lie specific causal patterns. Contrary to the representation that seeps so pervasively into US media coverage, Africa’s poverty is not the result of genetic or “racial” constitution. (The poverty is not because Africans cannot tell time or “don’t know what watches are,” as US AID Director Andrew Natsios alleged several years ago explaining to the US Congress why anti-retroviral drug treatments couldn’t work in Africa). Rather, poverty in Africa stems from specific and historical global configurations and economic and social dynamics. One of the most critical of these has been Africa’s debt.

Salih Booker, Executive Director of Africa Action, one of the nation’s oldest advocacy groups for Africa, points out in a recent Foreign Policy Forum article, “Africa’s Debt: Who Owes Whom?”

African countries are trapped beneath a crushing debt burden of some $300 billion. Each year, they are forced to spend nearly $15 billion repaying this debt to wealthy foreign creditors. In a continent where many subsist on less than $1/day, African governments are required to divert huge portions of their national budgets away from addressing their critical domestic needs in order to line the pockets of rich Northern governments and financial institutions...The All Africa conference of Churches has called it “a new form of slavery as vicious as the slave trade.”

But there is more that must be said. The full story is not quite told. Like the ancient theological construct of the Four Horsemen, the third dastardly jockey on the grim visage of Africa today is “exploitation.” Historically, that equestrian rode various steeds, slavery and the slave trade; gold, diamond and coal.
Today it is OIL that provides the new ride across and through Africa for the grim equestrian, exploitation. Africa today is rich with petroleum and related products. The black stuff is the new gold. From Nigeria to Namibia, from Angola to Mozambique, the coast and off-shore reefs of Africa, are thick with oil deposits of a quantity and quality that may prove to surpass whatever the Middle East, Mexico and Venezuela have to offer. Natural gas fields abound. Steadily, more and more Western government officials are heralding how oil is going to lead Africa to new bonanzas and a new coziness between the West and “Emerging Africa!” Noting that US oil companies were not just sopping up the “light and sweet” West African oil fields but were contributing to Nigerian development, Sec of State Powell gave the 2003 Corporate Excellence Award to Chevron Texaco for its work in Nigeria.

A new book by a veteran Africa watcher and journalist, Howard French, states the case more strongly and in contra-distinction to Colin Powell’s extolling of corporate America. Noting that Americans are largely “inured to Africa’s great tragedies,” French observes that Americans awaken to Africa only in “fits of self-interest and outright greed.” “Africa interest us,” he says, “for its offshore oil reserves...or for rare minerals like coltan, which powers our cell phones and Play Stations. There is one new twist on our selfishness, however-an interest in Africa driven by fear, of AIDS and Ebola and emigrants.” (p.xv, A Continent for the Taking: The Tragedy and Hope of Africa, Alfred Knopf, 2004).

Other voices, especially more and more of the voices living in the midst of the growing oilfields are asking whether or not the oil wealth is worth it. Are these growing numbers of giant oil companies exploring and producing oil in their backyards, in their waterways not a “clear and present danger, to their environment, to their lives, and to generations yet unborn?” Let us look for a moment at a new study on Shell Oil in Nigeria, Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil by Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas. This very recent study says, among other things, that “the net effect of Shell’s environment-destroying operations in the Niger Delta is an ecosystem so mangled, raped and denuded that the area has been labeled the most endangered delta in the world.” P. 66. It continues on to point out the following:

Shell’s operation in Nigeria, according to Geoffrey Lean, the leading British Environmental journalist, makes the company one of the biggest contributors to global warming. The company’s gas flaring installations are like its pipelines-old, poorly constructed, and in some cases ill-maintained-and as a result they emit “far more pollution than Britain’s twenty million homes put together. Interestingly, the percentage of gas flared in the Netherlands, where Royal Dutch Shell has its international headquarters, is zero.”

I was thinking about all these aspects of the situation in Africa today as I lead a 28 person delegation of the American Friends Service Committee through Mozambique and South Africa. I tried often to put myself in the minds of those on the trip who were traveling to Africa for the first time. I tried to recall the first time that an amputee child ever approached me for some money so that she and the sister on her hip might eat something. Africa has declined since the ’60’s when I made my first trip. There is more poverty, more violence, more corruption. With so-called “development” have come greed and vultures, vermin and “xiconhocos,” drugs and crime, Condoleza and Colin.

Yet somehow, despite all this grimness, this death-dance like reaping that daily transgresses Africa, there persists a dignity and vitality in Africa that has quit the West. It is in the music, the dance the famous African sense of hospitality, especially that found in the rural areas, like Manica Province in central Mozambique where we were. It is in
the paintings of Mozambique’s world renown artist Malangatana; in the haunting sculpture of his late colleague, Alberto Chissano; in the stunning movements of the National Dance Company of Mozambique. Even the low-quality masks, capulanas, batiks, mancalas and chess sets that the poorest of hawkers are pushing contain seeds of affirmation and persistence.

* O que é O XICONHOCA?

O departamento de Informação e Propaganda da Frelimo criou uma caricatura a que chamou XICONHOCA. Esta caricatura representa todo e qualquer inimigo interno. Xiconhoca é uma palavra composta de dois nomes: Xico e Nhoca: O primeiro nome vem de Xico-Feio, um indivíduo que pertenceu à Pide-Dgs. Nhoca, em quase todos os dialectos do País, significa cobra. Bem sabemos qual é o modo de vida de uma cobra e os truques que usa quando quer atacar uma pessoa.

O Departamento de Informação e Propaganda achou necessário criar uma figura que representasse o nosso inimigo interno. Essa figura é o Xiconhoca.

Assim o Xiconhoca representa tudo aquilo que nós combatemos. Podemos dizer que ele tem uma boca de bêbado, uma orelha de boateiro, mãos de açambarcador e de especulador, olhos de racista, nariz de tribalista, dentes de regionalista, pés de confusionista. O Xiconhoca é uma figura que representa todos estes males deixados pelo colonialismo, e que o Povo moçambicano está a combater.

Xiconhocos são aqueles indivíduos que conduzem viaturas quando se encontram bêbados, originando graves acidentes; é o parasita que se recusa a trabalhar, a participar na produção colectiva.
Existem, no entanto, muitas pessoas que usam a palavra **Xiconhoca** por uma simples brincadeira. Por exemplo, vêem um pessoafalar ao telefone, e dizem que é **Xiconhoca**, não se preocupando sequer, em saber se está a falar de assuntos de serviço. Neste caso, se já fez o trabalho que tinha que realizar, não deve ser chamado de **Xiconhoca**, por estar a ler o jornal.

A população deve estar consciente que o **Xiconhoca** é um inimigo do Povo, é um indivíduo que tem o mesmo modo de vida do inimigo, do reaccionário, do inimigo da independência e soberania moçambicanas, é todo o indisciplinado, o corrupto, os bandidos, assassinos, ladrões, divisionistas, regionalistas, racistas, etc.

Sejamos, pois, honestos e sinceros naquilo que dizemos. Tratar por **Xiconhoca** um trabalhador que chega uns minutos atrasado ao serviço, é o mesmo que nós próprios sermos os **Xiconhocas**, porque o **Xiconhoca** só cria confusão.

*(FRELIMO - Departamento de Informação - Secção Jornais do Povo) (Excerto)*

*in Revista «Tempo» nº 310*
12/09/76

**What is Xiconhoca?**

During the anti-colonial liberation struggle in Mozambique (from 1960-1975), Frelimo’s department of information and propaganda created a character named **Xiconhoca**. This character represents any and all internal enemies. **Xiconhoca** is a word composed of two names: Xico and Nhoca: the first name comes from Xico-Feio, an individual who belonged to the PIDE-DGS [Salazar’s secret police]. Nhoca, in almost all the languages of the country, means snake. We all know the snake’s way of life and the tricks it uses when it wants to attack a person.

The department of information and propaganda thought it was necessary to create a figure that would represent the internal enemy. This figure is **Xiconhoca**.

**Xiconhoca** represents all that we are fighting against. We can describe him as one with the mouth of a drunk, the ear of a gossip, the hands of a miser and of a speculator, the eyes of a racist, the nose of a tribalist, the teeth of a regionalist, and the feet of a trouble maker. **Xiconhoca** is a figure that represents all these evils left by colonialism and against which the Mozambican people are fighting.

**Xiconhocas** are those individuals who drive while drunk, causing serious accidents; they are the parasites that refuse to work and to participate in collective production.
There are, nonetheless, many people who use the word *Xiconhoca* as a simple joke. For example, they see someone talking on the telephone and they say ‘it’s *Xiconhoca,*’ without bothering to find out whether the person is talking about work-related issues. In this case, if they already did the work they were responsible for, they should not be called *Xiconhoca* because they are reading the paper [or talking on the telephone].

The population should be conscious that *Xiconhoca* is the enemy of the People, an individual that has the same way of life as the enemy, as the reactionary, as the enemy of Mozambican independence and sovereignty. He is all that is lacking discipline, the corrupt, the tricksters, the assassins, the thieves, the tribalists, regionalists and racists, etc.

We must therefore be honest and sincere when we speak. If we call a worker *Xiconhoca* when he arrives a few minutes late for work we might as well call ourselves *Xiconhocos* because *Xiconhoca* only causes trouble.

(FRELIMO – Department of Information – Newspapers for the People Section) (excerpt)
In Revista “Tempo,” no. 310, 12 September 1976