



The Routes of the Thoughts and The Thoughts of the Routes

“Culture is simultaneously the fruit and a determinant of a people’s history by the positive or negative influence it exerts on the evolution of relationships between (human beings) and their environment and (among human beings) within society as well as among different societies.” Amilcar Cabral

By Mongane Wally Serote

Wherever there are AFRICANS there are underground routes. They began as routes away from home, and also, they are from somewhere to home. Because all human beings, whether white as clouds, or black as clouds of thunder, bear the instinct for survival. That we seek the routes which lead us home is not instinct only, it is the fact of our being an integral part of the universe, of nature. The need for identity, for all human beings, is the same as the need to eat and the need for belonging and the need to reproduce ourselves. These needs spin within cycles and systems of rebirth and regeneration, as if for eternity, as do all the processes of nature.

It was Arabs, Europeans, Americans and some African collaborators who created the routes and bases for the selection, capturing and consignment of human beings to the Slave Trade. It was Africans who created escape routes from Slavery from everywhere.

Everywhere that the slave trade evolved into a significant commercial enterprise, it relied on a variety of institutions geared toward the accumulation of captives: coastal settlements where African brokers collected captives for sale to Europeans; and the shore based and floating factories (trade forts and coasting slave ships) where Europeans assembled purchased captives into human cargoes. Various sites of incarceration, therefore, became a regular feature of the African coastal landscape from the second half of the seventeenth century on. Stephanie E. Smallwood *Saltwater Slavery*

It was either civil rights movements, some of which, working together with others, formed liberation movements throughout the length and breadth of the continent, or fledgling political parties created against the greatest odds, like that of Patrice Lumumba in the sixties in the Congo, or in other parts of the continent, as in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Algeria, Zimbabwe and in South Africa, which created the underground routes.

These transported fighters, arms and messages which took the cultural, political, economic and social struggles

to the masses of countless countries, to fight against the imperialist, colonialist, neo-colonialist, apartheid and racist enclaves. In America, the African diaspora through the Civil Rights Movement, led by Martin Luther King, created the route to Washington DC.

The strategic objective of all these Movements, we dare not forget as Africans and also, we dare not let humanity forget, was to dislodge oppression, exploitation, violence, discrimination and injustice by all means necessary and therefore let emerge a culture which "is simultaneously the fruit and a determinant of a people's history... by the... positive influence it exerts on the evolution of relationships between human being and their environment... and within society."

The African landscape is traversed by two-way underground highways,

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which need to be walked again in the twenty-first century by Africans from wherever they are, to home and away from home, because a dialogue is desperately needed. We must nurture a reference point among all human beings, which will declare, for all ears of the human race to hear, that a mighty, mighty crime was committed against African people. This was called the Slave Trade, and neither the United Nations, nor any other nation has held any hearing to ask what really happened and what must really be done.

The question is really: what must Africans do? The history, the long, long history of African enslavement, imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, apartheid and racism is an issue for Africans, whether they are on

African soil or not.

It manifests itself spiritually, mentally, psychologically and physically now and in that long distant history, and into the future. The basic question some parts of the world consistently ask of us, in ever so many ways, is: you are not white: what do you want here? I can hear even now as I state this, being asked a question: what do you mean by that? That cannot and must not be the important question.

The history which defines why slavery had to be abolished, is most eloquently articulated by the bones which are deep in the Atlantic ocean, bones of Africans who were thrown in there either because they were sick or they revolted, or rather than be slaves, they threw themselves into the deep waters.

In Mauritius hundreds of men and women, old and young, including children, threw themselves from the top of the mountain, rather than be in the hands of the French or the British. Even now as I say this, many will still ask the question: but why did they do that?

Who must answer that question?

Mauritius has done so in Le Morne, at the foot of the mountain where Africans, rather than be slaves, jumped from the highest point of the mountain there, to fall crushed at its foot. There is a memorial there to the humanity of those who rather than be slaves, chose death. Their humanity has been reclaimed.

There are still many, many Africans, the world over, who perform that last ritual, however grim it is, to tear themselves away from the possibility of being slaves and embrace death. Not so long ago, in South Africa, in 1976, children in Soweto threw their lives against showers of bullets rather than be enslaved like their parents, by the apartheid system. "I did not know that..." another South African voice still says as I say this. The democratic Government in South Africa took the decision to remember, as Nelson Mandela stated: *The day should not be far off, when we have a people's shrine, a freedom park, where we shall honour with all the dignity they deserve, those who endured pain so we should experience the joy of freedom.*

That decision is one among many, many reclamations, which more and more Africans must express, engage and act upon. We have to rebirth ourselves, regenerate our being, and reawaken our consciousness to the fact that what we do, we do as human beings.

The whole world must know that, as Madiba said: *Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long, must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud.* Madiba was of course referring to the apartheid system, which humanity declared 'a crime against humanity'. It is not until all of humanity, all, accept, recognise and acknowledge that the Slave Trade, 'an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long' happened, and that it is necessary for the human race to get rid of this scourge from the universe, before any human being will know anything about Freedom.

If we are asked then, why are you waiting, why are you not doing something about it? We must reply: we are doing something about it. There are many museums, memorials, heritage sites, on the continent, all over the world – which have been created to speak to this 'extraordinary human disaster which lasted too long'. We must now do the audit of these sites and structures: where are they, what are they saying, are they communicating with those nations where they are, are they communicating with other human beings elsewhere and how more effective can we make that voice to reach all of humanity?

Let us do the audit, and let us join the dots between all of those sites and structures, then also do something else: let us create the routes, the two routes, the slave routes and the liberation routes across the world, where these sites are, where slaves built civilizations, not only with sweat, but with great pain and with blood. And then we must still do something else: once a year, we must walk the routes and visit the sites, us, Africans and ask our fellow human beings to join us. Let us link the slave routes to the liberation routes which the descendants of slaves throughout the world wherever they are can reclaim, and so regenerate, rebirth, recreate, reawaken and reconfirm our

being and our oneness with the human race.

Through these conscious actions we will rekindle that flame which everything had been done to extinguish. As human beings all of us, we must come to accept that there are many civilizations which in their multi expressions, confirm, and will forever reconfirm, that the human race in its variety and diversity, expresses the beauty of creation.

Fortunately, we have shrines, monuments, memorials, statues, graves and even tombstones, which are creations of human beings, from time immemorial, across continents, within all cultures. They emerge as symbols and footprints of the human race, almost to claim immortality, and to immortalise their hopes, wishes and intentions, but also as a means to

“Human beings, generation after generation, will walk those routes; so that the memory of what happened when humanity founded slavery will never ever be erased from the annals of human history.”

declare their story and history to those who will come after them.

A recent entry into the collective of shrines of the world, which reclaims and regenerates the African and human spirituality and being is in South Africa: The Freedom Park, which is situated in the capital of the country, Pretoria, in close proximity to the Voortrekker Monument, which is both a vow and a celebration of and by the Boers, for having defeated AmaZulu at "The Battle of Blood River". The Freedom Park stands on a hill, almost in the centre of the City, prominent for everyone to see, from whatever direction one approaches Pretoria. The Memorial has four main features: Isivivane, S'khumbuto, Wall of Names

and //Hapo.

The Park, as President Mbeki said at its launch, "is one of the most ambitious projects of the democratic dispensation." Before the soil, any stone, grass or tree was touched on that hill where it is built, broad, wide and deep consultations were conducted throughout the length and breadth of our country as the book: "Freedom Park: a place of emancipation", attests. Among many issues which were raised, some for and some against, the ones which were outstanding were those which called for unity, reconciliation, recognition of those who sacrificed for freedom and those who worked tirelessly to build our country. It is also as a result of these consultations that it was decided that the Voortrekker Monument, which is a symbol of a vow and a celebration of the defeat of AmaZulu at blood river, must remain standing, symbolising part of the history of our country. The main reason for the creation of the Freedom Park, was to transform South Africa into a liveable country all of whose people have quality of life.

The Freedom Park stands there today, on the hill, Salvokop, together with the Voortrekker monument, in a precinct speaking to the totality of South African history, both positive and negative. A tombstone which links the two parts of the precinct, states that 'guinea fowls always walk together because they eat together', which is a xiTsonga saying. The search for unity and reconciliation is also expressed on the Wall of Names, which bears the names of those who fought in the eight wars which tempered our nation: Pre-colonial, genocide, slavery, resistance, the South African war, the First and the Second World Wars and the Liberation Struggle.

The wall of names contains the names of 2001 Cuban combatants and internationalist who gave their lives to defend, protect and promote Angola's independence against the apartheid military machine and might. The inclusion of the names of the Cuban combatants is most significant. They fought in the Angolan war without any self-interest. This was a strong and unique statement against the Slave Trade, which was the foundation of

imperialism and racism, but also a forceful negation of imperialism itself. It must not be forgotten that millions of Angolans were captured and transported abroad to the Americas including Cuba.

Although the process for the emergence of the Park has been completed, there still remain many issues of history, culture and heritage, which must be engaged to bring closer, at all times, the unity of South Africans, our reconciliation, and the recognition of those who sacrificed for freedom and those who worked tirelessly to build our country.

The issue here is: what must be done to let a united South African Nation to emerge? Yet also history admonishes us not to seek superficial solutions for now, which in the future will threaten the very ideals we thought we had achieved.

The issues raised here imply that it is most important for the young people of our country to be armed with a deep understanding of the history of our country. They are the leaders of a future South Africa, which comes from a most complex history; all of us South Africans must, in the present and in the future, know that no one can be above our Constitution. So we have no choice but walk to the round table and talk about how to shape the future of our country.

In addition to the Wall of Names in Freedom Park there are three other important sites. Isivivane is a shrine which emerged from the processes and work around Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) which took nearly three years to complete.

The land is soaked in human blood of freedom fighters who fought and laid down their lives for the freedom of all South Africans; and there are many living people, who walk the streets of this land, carrying deep, and at times, un-healing wounds in their bodies and limbs, which were inflicted upon them by the apartheid system. All of that will be acknowledged, recognised, portrayed by this national symbol of freedom. Stakeholders, especially, the Faith Based Organisations, and the guardians and custodians of spirituality in our country, supported the concept of Cleansing, Healing and the Return

of Spirits of freedom fighters, from wherever they had fallen. A symbolic cleansing of the land and people was carried out throughout the country, and in some nearby countries like Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Tanzania and Zambia, as well as the United States, and the spirits of the fallen freedom fighters were returned to South Africa.

Isivivane, as an IKS concept and project, is circular, is built of boulders, stone, soil and plants, most of which were brought from the provinces and countries where fighters fell. The architectural design of this element borrowed heavily from IKS concepts and was based on African Belief systems, concepts of spirituality and the harmony between human beings and their environment. It is a Msamo We Sizwe national shrine. It is the final resting place of Freedom Fighters.

S'khumbuto is linked to Isivivane

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through the wall of names. Within the precinct of the wall, there are other elements like the Sanctuary, a space of rest and discussions which is a garden of remembrance. There is the Eternal Flame, to remind us that many people were murdered and we do not know all their names or burial places. There is the Gallery of Leaders, consisting of outstanding leaders who stood firm in defence of freedom, justice, peace and security in their countries and in the world. There is an amphitheatre for bigger cultural and political events, and there is Moshate, a place for discussions and negotiations to be held in tranquillity.

The fourth feature is //Hapo. There is a Khoisan saying that: a *dream is not a dream until it is a dream of a community*. //Hapo means a dream. This element was inspired by the Sanusi of South Africa, Credo Mutwa.

It is simulated as being built as if it were encircled by massive boulders. The boulders are made of copper, to remind the nation about the miners of our country and the most negative impact of the mining industry against African families, communities, culture, heritage and history. President Mbeki said, in his speech to launch the Freedom Park in 2002, on 16 June, which is youth Day in South Africa:

Freedom Park should therefore make us walk the entire South African history. When we have done this, we should then appreciate our country, its people, their diversity and their determination to build a united nation with a common vision, aspirations and goals.

This is a gentle nudge to both organic and conventional African intellectuals, to take history by the scruff of its neck and claim the humanity of Africans and of the human race. Honour those millions of human beings, men and women, young and old, children who were not only forcefully removed forever from their birth place, but also millions perished, as they tried to escape from being enslaved; as they were famished by hunger and the long journeys to where they did not know; as they rebelled against being enslaved; as they were murdered; as they were thrown into the oceans; as they perished in dungeons and the far-flung fields which they had to till.

They built empires through their sweat and blood, from which they earned nothing. They contributed to the building of countries which otherwise would have been some of the poorest in the world. But after they contributed they were dehumanised and despised. They turned the enslaving, imperial countries into power houses, contributing to their becoming so powerful that they conquered and colonised the countries of origin of the enslaved. Moreover other countries all over the world were pillaged with impunity. The natural resources of those countries further enriched and made the mother countries of colonisers into empires which have since dominated the entire world. This has resulted in a most cruel and vicious cycle of death and destruction, of theft and the impoverishment of nations and

continents.

That is one part of the history of our continent. The other part of the history of this most beautiful continent, is that its people, the Africans, are still alive and well; they are still the most valuable resource the continent can ever have; they have rebirthed themselves in the 21st Century to become the youngest continent in the world.

The first question Young Africans ask of elders is: what happened and why? The answer to those two questions is two tongued. It is two tongued because it must outline the key question of history: What is to be done? But also, it must be clearly understood, once and for all, what really happened. The other question which must be answered succinctly is, Why did things happen that way? In other words, where were the people when that happened and why did it happen in their presence, what did they do when it happened? How I wish Nkrumah, Nyerere, Cabral, Lumumba, Sankara, Machel, Modibo Keita, Tambo and Mandela could come back and answer those questions! But they are not here to answer. We have to answer those life and death questions ourselves.

What treasures might now be transported on these highways, on the slave and liberation routes by Africans to humanity? How must the African spirit, mind and body reveal itself as a consciousness of being African in the global village, in the past as slaves, in the present as freedom fighters in an endless search for freedom; and in the near future from the past and the present with gifts for humanity – for all to state as Martin Luther stated: “Free at last, free at last, God almighty, Free at last!”

This ‘freedom’ is, of course, “the determinant of the history” of nations, where Africans live, even in Cuba. I say even in Cuba, because there is a great hope that that almost permanent trauma of the Slave Trade may be made not permanent, if, besides the systems which are put in place to find the meaning of human rights and freedom for all Cubans, there will no longer be an embargo against that Island Nation, by the world power! The Cubans accept, unlike in many other areas, including the US, that Blacks who are

there arrived on slave ships, and that that history must be engaged. We must never ever forget that the Slave Trade, a human cruel irony, a violent paradox, left a legacy for the human race, which resists time.

The content of the networks of the underground of the slave routes, those highways from Africa to wherever; and the content of those underground networks of the liberation Movements on the continent and elsewhere in the world, must converge on the African continent to become the story of the human race once more, once more and forever.

This infrastructure of underground highway networks can be pregnant with both African and human consciousness, expression and actions, which must set the human spirit free. We must engage

“ What must be done to mobilise the broadest participation of the masses on the continent, to oppose imperialism and neo-colonialism and to execute the renaissance of Africans in their diversity? ”

the AU and the UN and say so. Let Africa prime the consciousness, expressions and acts of the reconstruction and redevelopment of the human soul, to set the spirit, the mind and the body of the human race free!

Can the human race accept that the protracted and deep processes which eventually express themselves as evidence which the eye cannot see, nor the ear can hear, which are embedded in the human spirit, heavy like lead, need the equal amount of effort, energy, time and experience, to taste, to smell, to touch, to see and to hear – so that that trauma of a life-time can be healed? The heavy laden spirit, human spirit, which absorbed the immeasurable trauma, and its memory

and its nightmare which built resistance against all that was made to cure it, can it be cured? What can cure it? If after that whole ordeal, is this the ordeal of the victim only or is it a human ordeal?

For centuries after that grave ‘crime against humanity’, besides having to prove that there is something called racism, but also that those who express it, and execute it, never knew and may never ever know that they do so? If the human race accepts this, takes this responsibility, what must follow then? If the human race, as it seems, is unable to engage this responsibility what then must happen? Why must this issue be put on the human agenda? As we speak now, what is human about the most wealthy West and the most poverty stricken Africa? Is this an issue of the 21st century? How must it be addressed, to be extricated from the words which describe it currently, to be made naked so that it must be known for what it is by how it articulates itself?

A declaration that it is a crime against humanity to practise slavery, could become, if we are not careful, a manner, not deliberate or conscious perhaps, but still, a manner to ghettoise the issue of slavery. Humanity, it could be assumed, has dealt with the issue once and for all, if the UN declares it to be a crime. How has humanity claimed the humanness of the millions who were dislodged, who were extricated, who were consciously dehumanised, who experienced, through their journey to being nothing, and actually being nothing, that they were nothing because whatever they were after being slaves, until death, was to fight with everything possible to be something? The answers to these questions can be found nowhere else but on the African continent. The answers are an African response to what is being human, if, still, in the 21st Century, to be human is to define oneself by not being African?

It is most possible that all the routes which were used to transport the millions of Africans from the myriad of villages, of Africa to all over the world can be marked. Africans collaborated in creating them. We must now identify them. Two millions of slaves captured from Angola, Gabon, the Congo, including Congo Brazzaville, which became the gateway to an eternal

human blank. Africans collaborated, created institutions to capture their peers and hand them over to slave masters. Those institutions are and must be indelible, in those four or five central African states. Besides creating the sites about us which must heal us and empower us to enter the world space, empowered because now we understand what Culture is. We must now as a continent, ask: what is an African discourse? Must there be an African discourse, must there be multiplicity in the human state? Must that multiplicity, in order not to be mere quantity be quality? What is it that defines the difference and what is that difference made of, what does it consist of, and how do we discern that so that that difference is void of fear within the human experience?

Horror was when some among us betrayed us and turned against us and turned us into human cargo, to be loaded on dungeons of ships, handed over into the hands of absolute strangers, with "our hands, legs, in short or long or both shackles," one after another, to journey to far flung places we had never heard of, left alone seen. We have never really returned to where we came from. How must we remember where we have been, how must we make indelible, as at The Slave Lodge in Cape Town, the routes, the places, the dungeons, the fields we tilled, the graves which embody the different deaths we died in the hands of the most cruel fellow human beings?

How many and where are those dungeons, fields, graves from where we were taken to where we were taken?

How must we link the dots to create the routes, which we must for ever travel, the routes to remind us, generation after generation together with others, our fellow human beings, so that we never ever forget what Madiba once said:

Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.

Let freedom reign.

The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement.

While it is true that those routes will

seem as if they have scarred the different continents upon which the spirit of the slaves walked in their shackles, like the Wall of China, surely, human beings, generation after generation, will walk those routes; and those routes, again like the Wall of China will be seen even by passengers of spaceships, so that the memory of what happened when humanity founded slavery will never ever be erased from the annals of human history. Where are the designers, where the architects, where are constructors who will volunteer to tackle this noble act?

These routes must also be criss-crossed on the African Continent by the liberation routes. The Liberation Routes must also be constructed so that they can be walked, by Africans and by fellow human beings. These routes complement the slave escape routes,

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the maroon slave routes – they are routes of rebellion against other forms of slavery: imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, apartheid and racism. Are the resources for this not the feet, legs, hips, shoulders and necks of Africans?

While all of these projects must be AU projects, they must be implemented through national, regional and continental processes and programmes. Is this not the challenge of challenges for institutions of higher learning of the continent, to volunteer to initiate the nurturing and the creation of the African discourse, through our understanding of culture, as Cabral has defined it, through African heritage and history, through the probing of indigenous knowledge systems, and the engagement of organic intellectuals?

We must also ask, given that there are a myriad of centres of higher education on the continent and wherever Africans are, how do we create African Centres of Higher Education? I do imply here that they are not there. Is there an African State and an African Government? Where, from where must an African discourse emerge? That discourse resides with the masses of the continent, the real fighters against colonialism, coups, killings of revolutionary leaders, the bearers of unenviable legacies of our continent, the unrelenting fight against neo-colonialism and imperialism. Can the conventional and the organic intellectuals of the continent partner, dialogue, find each other? Can African Governments spearhead these potentials? Can Governments, African Governments, facilitate this possibility, resource these possibilities? Is it not correct to say that all African states are in a developmental stage in terms of finding what is best for their people and learning how to listen to what the people say?

We must not romanticise the people. It is from among the people that collaborators who facilitated this most cruel betrayal of the human spirit emerged; what is the deep bottom reason of this occurrence? Is it greed, fear, envy, ambition, ignorance? The imperialists, and colonialists, including racists, have, throughout the world, used divide and rule tactics to conquer, subjugate, oppress and exploit the far flung countries which they regarded as sources of wealth for their own countries. For this to happen, their weapon has been to exploit tribal differences, language, cultural differences, as well as using fire power. What must be done to mobilise the broadest participation of the masses on the continent, to oppose imperialism and neo-colonialism and to execute the renaissance of Africans in their diversity to emancipate the African continent, contribute to the freedom of the African diaspora and be part of the human experience which sharply contradicts racism, oppression, the exploitation of other human beings and the protection of the ecosystem for the quality of human and other forms of life? ■