

# The dour rhetoric and the don'ts of nation-building and the hungry eye of the poet revolutionaries

By Ntone Edjabe

*"The impossible attracts me because everything possible has been done and the world didn't change" – Sun Ra, 1970.*

We have been told all growth is a result of freedom. The story of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's shift from a populist Afro-funk master to a revolutionary artist – in the Fanonian sense – has been told so many times in writing, documentary filmmaking and cultural studies courses across the global afrobeat community, that it has become a kind of common sense. It usually begins with Fela's boycott of Festac<sup>1</sup> in 1977, quickly followed by the Kalakuta Massacre a few months later – General Obasanjo's apocalyptic attack at Fela's Lagos compound – and the subsequent defection of key band members, including keeper of rhythm, drummer Tony Allen, during the Berlin tour of 1979. The anger, the weapon in the music, is generally traced back to Fela's months as a migrant worker in the US a decade earlier and his introduction, there, to Black Power politics.

This tidy narrative consistently skips the role of the Nigerian moral police, chiefly the mainstream media, in demonising the artist, incarcerating him in the post-independence jail of unpatriotism reserved for voices of dissent. From such prisons, there is but one escape: the refusal to be *relevant*, to play by the rules of those who guard the gates of the nation's "best interest".

Much like Nigeria two decades after independence (part of which was exhausted in a bitter civil war), South Africa is a very "new country". In a 1963 essay titled "Do Magazine Culture", Rajat Neogy, founder of the pioneering pan-African magazine *Transition*, describes the puritanism in some of Africa's newly independent countries as a culture of *don'ts*, "where the *don'ts* are spelled out in large capitals and where a government or a society is vigorously insistent on the things that cannot or must not be done." In such a society, the dull enterprise of nation-building takes on a mystical inevitability, with its dour rhetoric saturating the arts and culture.

The stakes here, we are told, are too high; artists and creators must be given direction and shown how to mobilise their activity to social good – to the country's good, that is, or, better still, the party's good. There are a number of things you should not

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and often cannot do – perform a song titled "Not Yet Uhuru" say, or stage a play critical of your country's bid to host the world cup. Failure to play by the rules, crossing the long line of unwritten but nonetheless stringent *don'ts*, is punishable by official disapproval or withdrawal of resources.

Such cultures are of course distinct from other *don't* cultures, generally found in older countries, England or even the US, more intent on preserving national "tradition". Both varieties, however, stem from a sense of insecurity on the part of the powers that be. During what poet and sociologist Ari Sitas terms the "Mandela Decade" in South Africa, both were present and, at times, reared their ugly heads in chorus. Let there be no mistake, mind: these words are not motivated by nostalgia for "good times" past. What is meant, here, is a critique of past and present both.

*"When the clouds clear/we shall know the colour of the sky" – Keorapetse Kgotsisile.*

A *don't* culture is not a permanent state of affairs, but one indicating in which the last term of reference has been exhausted: a new vocabulary has to be invented and the boundaries of meaning extended. Knowing the colour of the sky is far more important than counting clouds: the most radical art (whatever the medium) isn't "protest art" but work that envisions a different way of seeing, of feeling, of being. Of *fighting*. What historian Robin DG Kelley calls "freedom dreams". In his book of the same title, Kelley argues that "the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us".<sup>2</sup> Saturn's child, Sun Ra, concurs: *Space is the Place*. Yet there is little space – daily oppressions, temporary pleasures, putting fires out and keeping the home fires burning – for the necessary radicalism to *imagine* the colour of the sky, to dream freedom dreams. It is bleeding to death at the altar of pragmatic "development". Be pragmatic. Be practical. Be realistic. Build the Nation.

This is not new. Before the nation, there was the struggle. Still... I *never* thought Mzwakhe Mbuli was a great poet. I *always* thought Brenda Fassie was a great singer. Before *and* after.







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*"Ten years ago, I'd write serious books that were like weapons – one dimensional books about people wanting to be free. Now I'm just telling stories"* – poet and novelist Chris van Wyk.

Should culture be a weapon, an AK trained on the downpressors? There is little doubt about which of the many (recorded) views on this question has reached dominant status in South Africa today. When history finally does wake from its slumber, a tree shall be planted in the names of Albie Sachs and Njabulo Ndebele (no more monuments please!), whose ever-so-fine critiques of art-that-counts-the-clouds, in the new dispensation's retelling, have been reduced to mere advocacy of an "everyday" stripped of political content; de-fanged, their words have been appropriated by the free market, cretin-creature ever on the prowl, to advertise "new subjectivities for the new nation".

Under such weather conditions, radicalism is dismissed as mere "struggle art" – "one dimensional", "passé"; trivia is popularised ostensibly on the grounds of its being imaginative and liberatory, whereas the kind of searching for the "everyday" that is political, revolutionary, gets sidelined. Radical creators who turn to foreign support risk facing accusations of producing "Euro-assimilationist-junk".<sup>3</sup> Many buy in, to stay *relevant*.

Predictably, academia, commerce and the media collide to mainstream the newly-legitimised ideology, defining who gets funded and who not, who reviewed and who not: academic *seeks* the voice of the "youth"; cellphone company *gives* voice to the "youth" in ad; newspaper *finds* the voice of the "youth" in cellphone company's ad; academic writes book about the new found voice; newspaper carries ad and book review and a silent photograph of the "youth"; voiceless "youth" consumes ad, cellphone prepaid package, book review and sometimes the book; academic wonders (out loud, at a conference on voices, say) whether *all* youth have found a voice, and declares findings: "youth" have voices (plural), not a singular voice; cellphone company sponsors

newspaper's nationwide search for previously unheard "youth" with a voice; academic, now a voice expert, sits on panel to judge the loudest previously voiceless "youth" – results to be announced on June 16...

Poetry, under these clouds, and whatever the medium – not merely what we recognise as the "poem", but in Aimé Césaire's words, "a scream in the night, an emancipation of language and old ways of thinking" – continues to remind us the eye must always be hungrier than the stomach.

In the realm of literature, while prose attracts the most commentary in academia and the media, it is poetry, increasingly marginalised, generally, that carries the "burden of an intellectually questioning, emotionally dense and formally experimental impetus". As Kelwyn Sole argues in his essay "The Witness of Poetry": "[I]t is the poets who have continued to stress most insistently the roles of social responsibility, of political commentary, and to demonstrate these in practice. Among many poets there is a refusal to downplay their political role in a post-liberation scenario. They are less forgiving of the vagaries of the political and business establishment (both old and new) and less reconciled with the anodyne discourses and superficial promises emanating from official quarters."

This continued isolation of poetry as space that is free – some would say "carefree" – independent and alternative, incidentally, is what makes the place attractive to radical people. It is in their attempts to speak, to say, in the words of others like-minded, and without succumbing to the charm of dissident careerism, that we witness the birth, the growth of what, for want of a better term, we call an alternative voice – and alternative media – in post-liberation South Africa.

Thelonious Monk, one of the last century's greatest poets in the jazz medium, said: "It is always night, otherwise we wouldn't need light." We, along with other alternative spaces, hope to contribute to the light. To strike a match.

<sup>1</sup> Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, an opportunistic move by the Obasanjo regime (initiated by his predecessor, General Murtala Mohammed) to assert Nigeria's economic and cultural leadership of black Africa. Fela staged an alternative Festac and released "Zombie", an anti-military song. The army responded by destroying the Kalakuta Republic as Fela's commune was known, after beating and raping some band members. Three (including Fela's mother) died as a result of their injuries.

<sup>2</sup> In Kelley's view, progressive social movements are more than producers of statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones, he argues, do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, most importantly, enable us to imagine a new society.

<sup>3</sup> Many postcolonial critics and so-called "individualists", from Bessie Head and Yambo Ouologuem to Dambudzo Marechera and Ayi Kwei Armah suffered the insult. Chinweizu, who coined the term, describes it as "the equivalent [in African literature] of the phenomenon in Afro-American music where black artists cross over to white audiences by adjusting their musical style, style and stage manners to suit the prejudices of white audiences."