

SOUTH AFRICA

XLVI BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

11 JUNE - 15 OCTOBER 1995



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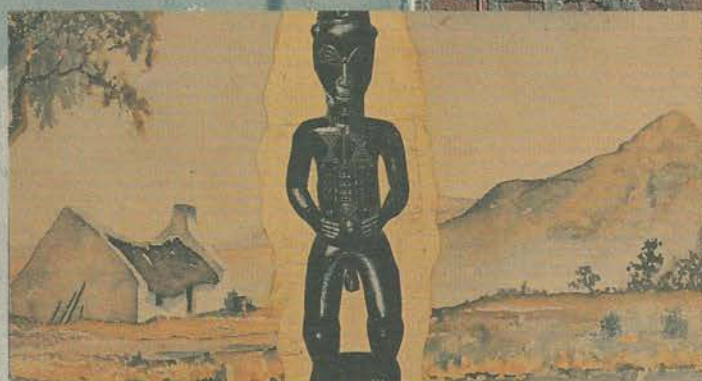
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Access to, not Ownership of Identity

Access to, not ownership of, space is our beginning. We are the link in the chain of time past and time to come. Our body is everybody and anybody. Our minds, too, are not empty: they contain our communities of languages and of dreams, our space, our time, indeed our bodies.

Let us acknowledge difference. We live in different spaces. We exist in different times. We have different bodies and minds. This is as it was, and as it is, and shall always be. The gathering of all our differences is the complementing of our being. We are the difference in others and others are the difference in us.

What depths of selfishness moved the first people who claimed exclusive ownership of identity we cannot say. But it would seem that two complementing notices fired them. They would make out of many one person. Their one would be the one for all. For the achievement of sole ownership swords were fashioned, guns designed and bombs perfected. One language would be the language of all. One belief must be the belief of all. One possibility would be the possibilities of all.

Thus continents were ravaged, countries devastated, cities razed and people maimed and buried alive. Chains of iron were forged to drag people to prison. Walls went up around those who would not give us their own identities; and roofs of steel stole the sun and the moon from their days and their nights. But these attempts at exclusive possession would flounder: the time of access was always there, in the belly of time.

Two complementing notions must surely have fired all those who wanted to destroy the identity of others. The first was vicious, but the second was worse. The first would make of all one people. The second wanted one people to be all. One language to be all. One belief to be all. The first went through France and wanted only French, went through England and insisted on only English, went through Germany and commanded only German. Life was for those who agreed, those who erased their own being and belonged to the owners. Those who objected, those who protested that life had been denied them, their harvests were burnt, their water poisoned, their tongues were cut out even as they protested their rights, their very being was denied. All must be one: our one, not your one.

But those who would make one all, were worse. Their claims were larger. They said they were the best of the creation, that all creation led up to them. They canonised themselves as the first and the only ones, claiming the right to impose their sense of pre-election on all. The instruments they used were the invariable instruments: swords, guns and bombs. Visible instruments which could be made to confront other instruments in the argument for, in the process of persuasion towards the abandonment of the ownership of identities. The instruments of those who would make one all were small instruments, as small as their minds, secret instruments, as secret as their thoughts, instruments as complicated as their totalising ambitions. But so it was that people, fleeing bondage, gladly endured others. So it was: people in search of freedom songs imposed dirges on other people.

True, these people, whether they be Nazis or Stalinists, were of the northern hemisphere. But such short-sightedness was not restricted

to them. Those below the equator were also capable of damming the movement of people towards access to rather than ownership. The curse that follows all those who dam freedom, preach ownership and the prevention of the higher possibilities of people has also destroyed the identities of multitudes in the southern hemisphere.

Those of us who are newly free call on ourselves to preach access to, not ownership of identity. Yet somehow, all other struggles for freedom have ended denying something else. "Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood" was the great cry of the French Revolution. Yet the languages and cultures of central and southern France were not free, were not equal and enjoyed no fellowship with French language and French culture. When restoration took place in England, it was the restoration of English and the culture of the English over and above those of Wales, of Scotland and of Ireland. The act of union was to unite all to be English.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". Yet, both within and without the boundaries of the United States of America, these same declarers have denied life to many, hidden many in prisons and made it impossible for many to be happy. Where are the Native Americans today? Where are the Aborigines of Australia? Where are the Caribs of the Caribbean? Can the poor be free?

"Workers of the world, Unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains". In the name of these words many have been made to lose their limbs, to lose their livelihood, to lose their very lives. We who are newly free devote ourselves to ending this parasitical nature of previous freedoms – that some are not free unless some are enslaved!

Every language, every culture is its own validity. We collectively validate every language and every culture. Only those who hanker after ownership, those who look forward to neat human packages fear the multiplicity, the sheer abundance of space and time, of nature and of being. The contemplation of the space and time, the body and mind of the ant, is a wonder not to be belittled by contrast with the contemplation of the giant of any species. The freedom of the latter must not be made conditional on the enslavement of the former. This is the enlightenment of now and of the future.

Those who wish to own demand to know about values, about the comparative value of the Beethoven symphony and a Makonde mask. It has even been said that until a Zulu can produce a theory equivalent to Einstein's let no one speak to him of random cultural valorization. Totalizers and reductionists, all these would package the wealth of existence into a match box. Who says that variety of multiplicity is not the very soul of existence? We who are newly free pledge our freedom to the freedom of all languages, of all cultures, to the relevance of all languages, of all cultures. We declare that access to, not ownership, of identity shall be the basis of ethics and morals, in our lives and art, now and in the future.

Kole Omotoso
Cape Town
30 April 1995



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