



Genesis: A Revolutionary Dance

By Shingai N. Kagunda



A friend comes up to me and tries to convince me how art is unnecessary:
A luxury for First World countries, but apparently for us who are still developing,
It is only hindering
Unlike the Sciences, business studies, and engineering which are actually Doing Something
“Building”, according to him,
“The arts are simply a frivolous pastime”
And I should have known by his first line, it was already past time to shut down his lip
Damn. The whiteness runs deep
I do not understand whether it is extremely sad or deeply infuriating:
This heavily colonized way of thinking
Erasing chunks of history

Dumbing down my destiny to unnecessary

You see, I am here to tell story

And in this story, this type of thinking is my enemy, choosing to unsee my poetry

Telling me as a black African woman I should put my mind to better use

As if I do not use the tears and injustices against my people as a muse

To speak to what we could be above and beyond what we are

As if dance, poetry, song, and story are not the only balm working towards healing continental scars

As if the sky is anything but dark at night without the stars

If you come at me with art is unnecessary, more so in a developing country

Ayii yawah! May the ancestors judge you accordingly!

Because you have not done the work to know your history

And one simply has no right to dismiss art as inconsequential to the freedom fight

So today I bring you the forgotten histories

Like the griots who have come before me

From the beginning: Genesis

If God created the world with words, then creation lies on the tips of our tongues

Revolution sits in wait for a song to be sung

A poem to reiterate how freedom has now come

Genesis.

In the early 1960s, 300 years after the Dutch subjugated South Africa

A man known as apartheid's father, Hendrick Verwoerd, became prime minister

The earth wailed for this broken nation

In this period of black subjugation, oppression, degradation, and shattered dreams of emancipation

One man, Vuyisile Mini, composed one song to a silent symphony

The ground responded collectively...

Bringing in the people's harmony,

"Ndondemnyama ve Verwoerd"

And the people collected the song and started singing, "Ndondemnyama ve Verwoerd-

Watch out Verwoerd, the black man is coming! Your days are over.”

Reiterated decades later by Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela

The song became the people’s prayer:

Chanted on lips, music the tool of power whispered through chattering teeth

Vuyisile Mini was named a rebel organizer and was sentenced to death by the apartheid powers

They say he died, head held high... a martyr

Singing, “Ndonemnyama ve Verwoerd” with fire

And this is what music does for the revolution

It is power on the lips of children

Ask the sons and daughters of South Africa as they sing,

“Freedom is coming! Tomorrow!”

Song is power, “Amandla!”

Genesis.

In the early 1940s, two decades after the Harlem renaissance of the 20s

Led by black poets, jazz musicians, and writers in American society,

Leopold Senghor sat in his room writing poetry

After two years in Nazi concentration camps, captured while fighting French wars

He now armed himself with African words

Having received the highest distinction as an African in French education

This man who would become the first Senegalese president did not simply sit in his achievement

Instead he wrote poetry

Critiquing the Frenchman’s philosophy

Questioning the idea that Africans have no civilized culture or history

Mourning assimilation’s intention to eradicate the collective African memory

This one man whose civilization and history was considered crude sparked into existence the continental movement known as Negritude

Black Self-love. A whole damn mood!

Genesis.

In 1910 colonial Kenya

Lived a priestess from the people of the Kamba known as Syotuna

When she was younger, she had been a warrior

But now a widow, age had begun to catch up with her

But still within her was the spirit of a fighter, her soul burned fire

The colonial regime had driven her people out of their lands

Hiking up taxes, tying their hands

Forcing them to slave their way for some white man's pay day

Syotuna's spirit could not simply sit and wait

So she challenged her people's predetermined complacent fate

Choosing to fight for her people instead of leaving it to chance

Her weapon of choice, as unconventional as it sounds: Dance

The Kilumi dance was sacred to the Kamba women's history

Syotuna realized she could use it to weaponize her stories

So she danced, sang, and chanted her memories

Reminding her people of their past warrior glories

Spitting on the colonial regime's atrocities

Freeing her people from their mental slaveries

Soon the dance of Kilumi began to pick across the lands as children and women attempted to mimic

Syotuna's thrusting hips, so free and unbridled

The colonizers called it demonic

And the ancestors must have laughed at this fearful tactic

The more they danced, the more the Kamba rebelled

The white man's fear propelled their last move:

Syotuna was exiled

But not before the revolution of the Kilumi dance spread into the hearts and minds of the young Kamba revolutionaries left behind

Genesis.

If I were to sit around this fire and tell you the stories of all the artist revolutionaries throughout our collective history from the beginning,

Genesis.

We would spend eternity

So for now I merely greet you in the name of these and others from our ancestry.

I greet you in the name of another warrior dancer, Mekatilili.

I greet you in the name of another music freedom fighter, Fela Kuti.

I greet you in the name of Maya Angelou, Nina Simone, Micere Mugo, Thomas Mapfumo, and Bob Marley.

I greet you in the name of dance, song, story, and poetry.

I greet you in the name of revolutionary history.

I greet you in the name of Love.

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