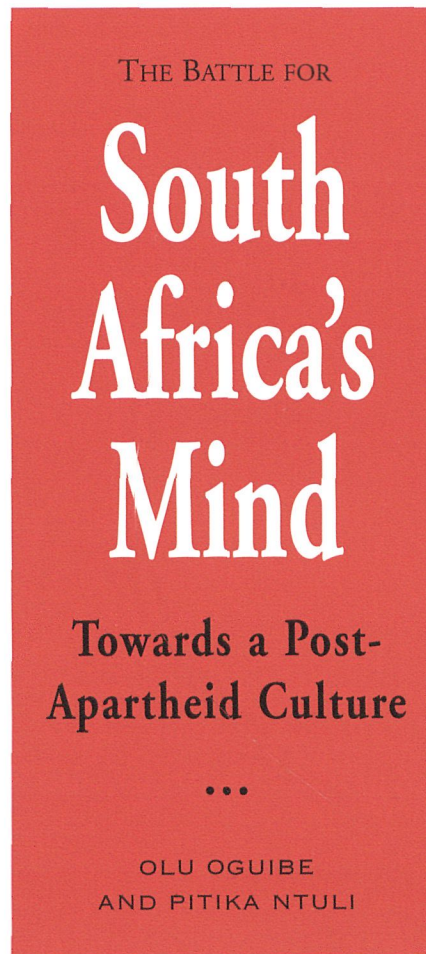


TERRITORIES

On August 28, 1994, as he prepared to return to South Africa, Pitika Ntuli recorded a conversation with Olu Oguibe in the former's home in Hackney, London, for the journal *Africa World Review*. The transcript of the conversation was first published by the journal in October 1994 under the title, "The Battle for South Africa's Mind." The following is a reproduction of the transcript courtesy of Africa Refugee Publishing Collective, with slight revisions by Mr. Ntuli and Dr. Oguibe.

OLU OGUIBE: I would like for us to look at some issues that have played on my mind lately; the essential heterogeneity of South Africa, the shift in power patterns, albeit symbolic, since it will probably take a while before an effective shift in power relations beyond mere enfranchisement of the black population takes place. It would be interesting, I believe, to attempt to figure the new South Africa within the centre-periphery, majority-minority discourse. With the change of guards, who now constitutes South Africa's centre and who its periphery? Does the minority become the periphery? Could the white population ever contemplate themselves as anything but the centre? Are we about to see a contest for the margins such as we now observe in other parts of the world? Would the South African minority join the global minority lobby alongside the indigenous populations of



Australia and the Americas, for instance?

PITIKA NTULI: What is happening in South Africa at present is a very big thing. While I was there recently there was debate over allocation of air time to the Afrikaner population, for instance. Previously Afrikaans occupied almost 50% of air time in the media. But the South African Broadcasting Corporation, under the new administration is saying, well, since Afrikaans is a minority language it does not deserve so much air space, and so, that has to be cut. That, of course, sent

shivers down many spines. The interesting thing is that some of the people who were asked to oversee this are Afrikaner. In other words they are having by themselves to come to terms with reality. However, there is a pattern of collaboration developing both in the field of culture and in business. Many whites realise that in order for them to regain credibility and have access to the new market within the black community, they have to go into partnerships with blacks, to form consortiums. One of the biggest law firms in South Africa, which is black-owned, had in the past refused to go into partnership with whites. Now I am told that they, too, have decided to do so, and would be going into real estate as well.

These kinds of practical steps: forging links, empowering African people to change their own destinies, and to build their own businesses and houses, would have a direct and positive impact on the new cultural formations. Because Apartheid had separated people physically, they were forced to experience things differently. But in the cultural field, we are beginning to see greater collaboration in the field of theatre, for instance. True, there was collaboration in the past. But under the old structures the power resided with the Fugards, rather than the Kanis. It was a power/knowledge situation. The white partners had exclusive knowledge of the

outside world, of contact and funding sources, and this they used most powerfully. That, however, is gradually beginning to change. One still sees a barrier of knowledge, of expertise, and there is no doubt that under the guise of collaboration a number of people are going to be subsumed once more. As you are aware, legally abolishing Apartheid is one thing; abolishing attitudes is another. Somehow people are going to stay with those...

OGUIBE: Structures of reference.

NTULI: Precisely. The administration within the universities is white. The infrastructures of oppression are still, in a sense, intact, and it will take time before certain things are redressed. As a prognosis, Dr. William Makhoba, who is Vice Chancellor of Wits University, published an article recently in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* on the continuing eurocentricity of African universities and how this needs to be dislodged. There is already an intention in some departments at Wits to Africanise in terms of the concepts, the guiding ideas, and to let through some of the things hitherto suppressed, face whatever is being ignored presently, and redress the cumulative power of the past and the present. For example, there are many African universities in South Africa which were actually established under Apartheid. But of all those, only one has a Fine Arts department, which is certainly not the case in white universities. There are no senior lectures,

no lecturers, no senior academics of colour in place. You see, therefore, how the cultural formations are constructed. The Fine Arts in South Africa are seen as the preserve of the *crème de la crème*, the elite, therefore Africans are not qualified to go into this area. The Fine Arts are not looked at in terms of their impact on socio-economic formations, on ideologies, on histories. These are some of the issues that need be worked out.

An interesting thing happened this year, however. The Grahamstown Art Festival that commemorates the white settlement of 1820, has been going for about 20 years with participation from mainly whites. Now, things are changing. This year people came from Nigeria, Kenya, Zaire, and the neighbouring countries. There was good media coverage, and it was almost like the Edinburgh Festival. That, in a sense, already projects what will be happening in the future, which is the prospect of more collaboration in that kind of terrain between choreographers, classical musicians, artists, and others. In other words, I do not think that people will take to Mandela's call for the creation of a Rainbow Nation, for the spirit of reconciliation. The greater issue, though, is that we need to reconcile without forgetting what is being reconciled, without losing sight of what should endlessly be there.

The task for the ministry of culture and all involved in the area is this: now that all the structures from which people were in the past excluded,

the theatres, the institutions, the spaces of integrated cultural expression, are open, how do we utilise all that was hitherto repressed? One gets the feeling that already there are tensions within the ministry. The alliances in the past between the Afrikaners and Inkatha Freedom Party will almost predictably be reflected in the choice of advisers to the ministry, given that it is headed by an Inkatha official. There has already been information in the press that Winnie Mandela, the deputy minister (1), was not consulted on a number of issues regarding the appointment of advisers, and she had questioned some of these appointments. What is heartening is that while I was there, I had a meeting with Winnie Mandela, and she struck me as a very fascinating individual. She said, "I thought I understood what culture was all about. Well, I didn't. It is now that I am in this ministry that I am beginning to learn." And she is learning fast. In her programme, for instance, she has linked culture to such social issues as homelessness. She is directing attention to the material culture of the homeless, to their place in entertainment, asking that we look into how they enjoy their lives, reiterating that culture needs to be linked to every aspect of reality within society. For her the division between the spiritual and material needs of the people needs to be abolished and these questions approached together since people's lives must be economically improved for them to enjoy living. The

structures, however, are not yet in place.

OGUIBE: It is surprising, though, that this should be a new discovery. One would have thought that South Africa already was our best example of the inextricable unity of culture and reality, given that the history of the struggle in South Africa is a cultural history, the history of a struggle of which culture was the principal instrument.

NTULI: That, of course, is blatantly, painfully true. The *Toyi-toyi* form, for instance, was a completely new form born of the struggle. Everything was done in rhythm. Everything was done creatively. No *Toyi-toyi* was the same as the other. But what happened during the new government's inauguration? Did you see those *Toyi-toyi* that brought about change? No. The absence of the *Toyi-toyi*, the very force that mobilised the people, during the celebration of the victory of that process, shows that culture is beginning to be viewed totally differently. I was told that this absence was necessary because some of the slogans would embarrass the international community, but it was those same slogans that made it possible for the international community to appear in South Africa at this moment in history.

On the other hand, you would recall that after World War II the Germans set up a committee to look into ways of purifying the German language of the obscenities of Nazism. You find, however, that today in South Africa,

while officials worry about the prospect of *Toyi-toyi* slogans embarrassing outsiders, a lot of the supremacist obscenities and insults directed at African peoples remain in use. It is issues like these that we need to work around. Apartheid operated not only on a material level but also on the psychological, the linguistic, it was all-pervading. It is for this reason that the people in power need to carefully think about these issues. There should be conferences on the question of language, for instance, on purifying the language of the past.

On a recent radio programme I suggested that we consider erecting a museum of Apartheid atrocities. Some said no, that would be contrary to the spirit of reconciliation. But my point was that the purpose of a monument to the past is not that we lynch people in return, but that indeed we do not do to others what was done to us. When the Afrikaners were defeated and humiliated by the English, they erected the Voortrekker monument which became a shrine. Two museums have recently been set up on the German holocaust. So why would it constitute an offence that we set up a symbol of remembrance? What, for instance, would be wrong if we should take the house in Brandfort where Winnie Mandela lived, a house which was bombed many more times than perhaps any other in the country's history and still bears the scars today, and declare it a national monument? Many artists are in support of this as a

starting point, for whatever anybody says about Winnie Mandela, she happens to be one of the most popular figures in the communities, one of the few with the courage to chastise the government. Unless we have structures that help people remember, our children who are being born now might have no way of knowing what happened. There is Robben Island, and the proposal to turn it into a tourist resort. One has to be careful not to betray the significance of Robben Island. Primo Levi recalls visiting Auschwitz and finding it so sanitised that the spirit of the place was compromised. This would be unacceptable with Robben Island.

OGUIBE: It is particularly important that Robben Island should reflect the level of cruelty which it now symbolises.

NTULI: I have also suggested that we take over one of the several mine-dumps in which thousands of people died, and invite artists from South Africa as well as international artists, and turn it into a national monument to those who died.

OGUIBE: There is indeed so much that can be turned into memorial landmarks, and what you mentioned earlier on about children remembering is most pertinent. For, if you take the Soviet Union or Cuba for instance, you would find that the recent waves of dissent in these countries were spearheaded by a generation too young to have any memories of the past, people who, because they were born into

relative liberalism, have come to take it for granted and thus have forgotten legacies of anarchy and cruelty out of which that liberalism arose. And this is dangerous, for only when people have a recollection of the past can they approach the present objectively, and project effectively into the future.

NTULI: The loss of memory is already happening. I showed a reference book to my nephew who is thirteen and he had no idea what it was. I had to explain how it was that our people would be stopped on the streets to produce their passes before they could walk freely, and he was amazed. This was stopped less than ten years ago and already the knowledge of that history is lost to our children. At an individual level there are people who are addressing these issues. There is a great fear of losing crucial memory.

All of these issues lead to the question: what themes do we address in our theatres, our poetry, our novels? One hopes that now more novels can be published in South Africa. In the past there were few opportunities for the novel. Very few writers could finish work on a novel without ending up in jail in the process. So, there are some new openings, but there needs to be open debate, and that is where the universities come in: to run workshops in the community, bring the people into the universities, harness their special skills. We hope in the Fine Arts we are able to create access courses for artists without formal training. All over South

Africa there are prominent artists whose works are the subjects of courses in universities, yet they would not qualify to register in the universities. Some of them are self-taught. Others are studying art by correspondence. In a place like Durban, for instance, there is a concentration of these artists waiting for access to institutions which in the past denied them access right at their own doorsteps. It is a very daunting challenge to redress that.

The University of the Witwatersrand, for instance, has the largest collection of South African beadwork in the world. But it is all locked up in vaults and boxes. I think to myself, what would it feel like to go into the townships and bring some of the people and show to them this wealth of their own material culture? Otherwise what use is it all locked up and beyond the reach of the people?

OGUIBE: That raises the question of what structures and frames of presentation are appropriate for South African culture after Apartheid. Would the universities and museums and such other elite spaces do justice to the legacy of struggle? Would this moment not require venues which grant the people greater access to their material culture, thus necessitating a different strategy of displays, a different strategy of reenactments whereby the people can engage in a constant and direct confrontation with all aspects of their reality? South Africa, it seems to me, offers a rare opportunity to initiate

things and give them proper focus.

NTULI: Part of what is happening, as you would be aware, is that there will be a Johannesburg Biennial (2). Already there is a big debate around the Biennial. I was in South Africa at the beginning of 1994 for a 2-day forum for curators, put together by the organisers. It was very interesting in that the community was involved, academics, international curators, Jean Hubert Martin, Rita Keegan, Sunil Gupta, were all there from all over the place. And what came out of the discussions was a number of these curators saying that Biennials are out of fashion because of their emphasis on nationalism which is reactionary. When I spoke to the young artists in attendance, their answer was that they had no idea whether Biennials are out of fashion or nationalism is reactionary. As far as they are concerned, they said, we are still constructing our own nation, and our nation, or the spirit of nationalism, is now irrelevant. If nationalism is out of date in Europe because Europeans can afford to travel wherever they want to, and their ordinary workers can get on package tours and go to Papua New Guinea at will, then they can get rid of it. All we have is our own nation, and we are going to hang onto this until we discover for ourselves, perhaps, that it is no longer viable.

From this one can glean a very brilliant case of strategic essentialism

because what the people are actually looking at is that nationalism is a very good mobilising force. It cannot be an end in itself.

OGUIBE: At the same time a people cannot be denied it. You cannot stampede societies into a new way of thinking which is convenient to you within your own historical context, not recognising their peculiar histories. That, essentially, is my difficulty with these international theory brokers; the manner in which they are quick to herd societies outside of theirs into new forms of thought which have little to do with them. This is not only insensitive, but equally condescending. In South Africa's case it is like fingering a sore.

NTULI: That, of course, is what colonial discourse is all about, rearranging people's concepts of themselves. It is about impoverishing other peoples spiritually, materially, culturally and otherwise. It is a question, again, of methods of translation, how they translate other culture into second-hand versions of themselves. The danger and the threat then are for people to say: here we are, if you hate what we like, sod off. Our problem is actually here and now.

OGUIBE: I would like us to look at the broader issues concerning the Biennial, which I only learnt about in Australia. I found the methods of its initiation disturbing however, and this has happened in Australia as well, which is that so-called international curators are brought in to construct the

framework for such activities. Often they bring with them entirely detached, self-serving agendas which have little to do with the issues and sensitivities on the ground. And most of these fellows are mercenaries posturing as purveyors of the new liberalism when in fact their mission is to establish a new hegemony.

NTULI: Perhaps I could put things in perspective. Here I am, a South African with quite some status in my own country. Yet, the Biennial idea caught me completely unawares. Someone at Wits University was brought in to organise a forum on it, and he thought to consult with me, upon which I requested details.

My idea was that it would be a good thing to have a platform for discussions as long as the communities are involved. This was generally accepted. But while we were there, the message that was being given was that these so-called international curators will be helping shape the forthcoming Biennial. Some of us said to these people; you cannot come from your own countries that are absolutely racist, that constantly look down on us, only to perpetuate that manner of relationship; thank you very much. And so we said, no, none of them is going to choose for us. Let them go back to their own countries and do whatever they choose.

What good came out of the forum was that we agreed upon a curatorial training programme whereby these curators would take some young people along with them. Jean Hubert Martin

would take some along to France, say, and Sunil Gupta others to Britain, so they can see what others are doing. I thought that was a novel idea. But the danger of that...

OGUIBE: I was quite anxious for us to get to the dangers.

NTULI: Yes, the danger is: what kind of orientation are these people going to have since that could be absolutely lethal.

OGUIBE: You can imagine what the results would be if someone were under the tutelage of Jean Hubert Martin whose curatorial strategies are absolutely unacceptable.

NTULI: Exactly. Now, here is a practical thing. Two of these young fellows came over to England with Gupta, and I am walking down the road when someone mentions that they ran into some South African curators. So I ring Sunil and he says to me, yeah, they are here. I ask around —black people, cultural centres, artists— whether anyone else had met these people, and no one had. That left me quite furious.

OGUIBE: This moves our discussion in a particularly significant direction. It is very important to note that while in the past South African culture was vulnerable to internal repression, today it is vulnerable to scavengers from outside in the very same way that the country's economy is ever so vulnerable to the machineries and machinations of international capital.

NTULI: What is happening is the law of inversion. Now, there were years

of cultural boycott. One positive effect of cultural boycott was that the people cultivated their native forms, original, unrepeatably. The struggles, as you so aptly put your finger on, were almost entirely cultural, they are unrepeatably. You may find corollaries of bits and pieces in South America and elsewhere, but they are so unique in their own way. Now that the opening is here, we are having to invite into South Africa people who have absolutely no business there. Because what we emphasised to the key people in South Africa during the Biennial Forum was that many of the people invited, practice racism in their own countries and would therefore not be conscious of issues affecting black people. So no one must be misled by the pretence of liberalism. In other words, there is already that orientation.

This returns us to the crucial role which the universities must play. If, for instance Wits University, which is where most of the trainee curators come from, were to take on that kind of curatorial reorientation, working in conjunction with the city of Johannesburg, then, we would bring up people who are ideologically clear and good. Otherwise we are unleashing bullets which will bounce back. We are, therefore, at the point of new beginnings, and new threats. As we open up to the rest of the world, we need to be clear as to what it is that we want.

As a projection, my idea is to organise a student exchange programme. Say, we get students from the University

of Nigeria, Nsukka to come to South Africa and work with the people there while some students go to Nigeria to see things for themselves, that would help young people immensely to come to grips with their immediate surroundings before we strike out to societies and cultures which have the least affinity to ours. In many instances, as you very well know, in order to get to Ghana or Nigeria from South Africa, you have to change at Heathrow. Relay. At present, South Africa has less to do with the rest of Africa than it has to do with America and Britain. And these are the issues that need to be worked out and changed. To think that people like Sunny Ade, Yossou N'dour and Salif Keita have never been to South Africa, yet Dire Straits and others are there permanently via American Satellite Television, and some were invited by the white South African regime when black people were not going over there. There is a whole white terrain out there, and there is need for re-Africanisation for the black people whose minds have been distorted by what was going on. However, the strength which I believe exists inside our country, and there is an irony here, is that we have actually inherited lots of powerful things that could turn into powerful negative valencies. We have inherited a country which is a military industrial complex. Roads are so wide that aeroplanes land on them, and that's actually how they were designed without obstructions. The country we have inherited is a country

which is ideal for repression. Now, we have also inherited a group of very articulate young people. Very practical, very clear, very analytical, very creative, very inventive. And a trade union movement which is a cultural platform. Where else in the world has a trade union organised the unemployed, and taught them to make posters and T-shirts, to paint and make poetry, to build music and cultural groups? The whole of that culture, where is it? Jettisoned. In favour of what?

Year One; starting point. We need to address these issues. We've seen enough repression, and we do not want that. And because we have survived — that reminds me. An old man said to me: my son, I am happy that you are back. How many times have you died? How many times have they killed you? How many times did we hear that you were dead? He said: you have fought very heroically. And I answered that it was not only us, that he fought too, in a different way. He said: but I was always afraid of politics; I actually did not fight. I asked him: did you betray your people? He answered: no. I asked: do you believe these people wanted you to live? To this, too, he said no. So, I said: the fact that you survived means we defeated them, at least, without the cost of your life. To this he said yeah.

How many artistic alternatives are we going to extract from the people? How are we going to offer these people a platform to say the things they actually want to say? You see people and they

break into spontaneous poetry. When they see you they say: oh, if only death were like this, that you could go and we mourn you and you come back alive! And I say to them: but death in other parts of Africa is actually like that. People do not actually die. They say, that's what my father used to say, and I say, that is what we want to remember.

So, at the meeting point of remembrance and forgetting, we must cultivate new memories. There are things we need to turn around and not forget, things we must hold onto. Because, if we forget, we would return to the same position where it is difficult to cultivate memories. And that we must not do. Here I recall what Mao Tse Tung said as he took power, to the effect that never, never, never again would his people kowtow to anybody. Millions of people reverberated to that pledge because they understood. That was a cultural statement.

We need to write the love poems that we could not write, for to write love poems during the struggle was viewed as bourgeois humanism and so we suppressed such things and left them aside. But they were actually the things that kept us going. We should also remember that we never waged a war out of hatred for the enemy: we waged it because we loved freedom very much. That must be placed on the agenda by the cultural authorities. We also need to restore what was destroyed in South Africa. Alongside the Toyi-toyi, there were the peace parks which the people

constructed all over the country, and the government kept scrapping them. Some people are documenting those. Some of them need to be reconstructed, not necessarily in their original form, but as a memorial so that when the children see them they may ask: who actually made these, and why? I said to the people in my township: all of you who had their doors kicked in which you did not repair, all of you who have photographs of your children who have been killed, any one of you who has anything that is a pointer to those memories, I would like for you to hang onto them because we would collect them and make them into a gallery. Imagine if you went to a township and bought a house and collected everything that reminds you of what happened in that area: little moments, jewels of memory, so that people may say, there was a day when this or that actually happened.

What would be wrong in calling people into the national stadium for a day of remembrance? People are beginning to say, we need this because whenever we are together we talk about things and we laugh that the people survived. So, there need to be archives. There needs to be research. The Ministry of Culture is to me the most crucial ministry. I can understand economics, I can understand law and order, I can understand all of that. Yesterday I found something in this five-penny book which is very pertinent to South Africa. It is by the philosopher A. N. Whitehead. The

new mentality, writes Whitehead, is more important even than a new science, a new technology. What better admonition for the Department of Culture, Science and Technology? We should get out of the old mentality into the new. CLR James said that as we move from repression to revolution, and from revolution to a new era, we need new verses, new thoughts, new ideas to set astir a new person. And that's what we need in South Africa.

EDITOR'S NOTES:

- 1) During the Spring of 1995, some months after this interview was first published by *African World Review* (London, October 1994), Winnie Mandela was fired from her position at the Department of Culture, Science and Technology
- 2) Africus' 95, the Johannesburg Biennial, took place from February to April 1995. Essays by Colin Richards and Candice Breitz published in this issue cover other aspects and issues raised by this event.

Pitika Ntuli is a recognized South African sculptor, poet and teacher. After a period in solitary confinement in Swaziland, he arrived in Britain in 1978, and quickly became the radical cultural face of the South African exile community in England. In his performances, exhibitions, and as one of the pioneers of multi-culturalist pedagogy in Britain, Ntuli held up culture as the principal theatre of democratic struggle. In 1994 he was invited home to join the faculty of the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Olu Oguibe is a Nigerian poet, artist and critic. He is co-editor of *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art* (New York), regular contributor to *Third Text* (London) and widely published in cultural periodicals. He has taught literature, art and critical theory in numerous institutions including the School of Oriental and African Studies, and Goldsmiths College, University of London. Currently, Dr. Oguibe is an Assistant Professor in the History of Art and Architecture Department, University of Illinois at Chicago.