

My Friend Africa

The barbecue was well under way. Six hundred feet away from the Residence of the Vice-Chancellor of the University. Three quarters of a mile away from Lake Burley Griffin. It was the second time we had met. Abbass Kotamba Africa and myself. We met completely by chance. I was carrying five chunks of raw meat and looking for somewhere to cook them over the heaped-up coals. Africa was doing the same. So we - Africa and myself, perched beside the same fireplace.

I could still remember the first time I met Africa at the Menzies library at the Australian National University.

"Africa", he said, introducing himself with a nod. "Abbass Kotamba Africa".

"Noh", I replied briefly, holding out my hand.

"Where do you come from?"

"Kuala Lumpur".

That was as far as our conversation went. Like it or not, the concept of "silence" was inviolate in the library. Africa went off with his books. I went off with mine.

Now we met again. We laid our chunks of meat on the red coals. The fat boiled and spat like falling rain. And my adam's apple rose and fell in eager anticipation.

There were no fewer than twenty-two fireplaces scattered about the courtyard. Groups of people stood around them. The noisiest group was that closest to the Vice-Chancellor's residence. They sang a sort of broken, crazy song. Other groups swayed about and criss-crossed as they chewed like dogs on the burned meat. Half a dozen couples lay close together on the ground, kissing each other's lips and gnawing at necks and shoulders. Others affirmed their right to be an individual - stroking their Maharishi Mahesh Yogi hairstyles, laughing without cause, and tearing at the chunks of meat like barbarian Vikings. They affirmed their commitment to the concept that "The world can go to hell - who cares". They were true bohemians.

But Africa was Africa. He cared for nothing but the struggle of his upper and lower teeth with the hot pieces of meat.

"They're sick", he muttered once he had swallowed the chewed meat. "White people are sick. Everywhere. In New York, Kansas City, Canberra, Sydney, Rhodesia, London. Everywhere. No doctor can cure their sickness. Not that there is any medicine which could help them anyway".

I chewed determinedly at my meat. The choruses continued. The singing was broken and confused. The bohemians continued to be bohemians. And those stretched on the earth, lying on each other at various angles, continued biting

each other's lips. Some sighed contentedly.

It was a beautiful night. The moon hung in the sky like a crumpled cow's horn. I thought of my village. Our beautiful nights such as this, we would be carefully following the intricate steps of the *silat* (martial arts) patterns. And here I was surrounded by the deep-rooted sickness of this foreign society.

"I come from Lagos, Nigeria. My people are Hottentots. My name is not Abass Kotamba Africa. Just Abbass Kotamba. But when I arrived at this university" - I later learned that Africa was writing a Ph.D thesis in 'Black Power' - "I added the word Africa so that I would never forget Africa, so that everyone would always know that I am an African. I am proud to be African. I am proud to be black. Not white".

I continued chewing vigorously on the burned meat. Some strong feeling suddenly sent my heart beating. I could not tell what the feeling was or where it came from. But I knew I felt it. And to enjoy it to the full I clenched my teeth tightly together and tore the meat apart. I swallowed the barbequed meat down in one tremendous gulp.

Here was a black man who was proud because he was black. I was a Malay. I wanted to tell Africa that. I was a Malay. I come from the Malay homeland. And I was proud because I had been born a Malay. And my skin was more black than white. But Africa was intent on eating. The other groups continued to stagger about.

The singers changed to a different tune. Their voices were even more chaotic than before. A girl dressed in blue jeans and a skimpy cardigan danced, shaking her backside around one of the fireplaces in time to the music. The bohemians seemed more alone than ever. And the couples scattered about on the ground sighed and gasped in ecstasy.

"One day black power will be superior to white power". Africa continued, surrounded by the seriously ill society of the barbecue. "We Hamites, Semites, Bushmen, Pygmies, Bantus, Hottentots and Negroes - we are all black, whether we come from Tunisia, Algeria, Nigeria, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Malawi, Rhodesia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, or even from the alleys of Harlem in New York or from Chicago. We are all black. And one day Black Power will defeat White Power.

"Hey! Bloody Africa! Do you want to join in the somersault dance?"

The sudden cry came from one of the confused groups of chorus-singers. Just as suddenly, the girl in the blue jeans and skimpy cardigan came leaping towards us still shaking her backside. The group had surrounded us without our knowing it. Africa shyly bowed his head as though accustomed to this form of praise. He stood up without saying a word. His broad chest and confident bearing underlined the strength of his pride in being black. With thick lips effortlessly recited the beautiful words of a poem by Patrice Lumumba. With his mouth wide opened and his powerful fists thrust into the air he looked like a symbol of black power. I was moved by the sight of him. The confused group of chorus-singers clapped when Africa finished reciting the poem by the martyred African

politician.

“Up! up! Malaysia, up! Up”

I was started. Completely caught unaware. What poem should I recite. Which song should I sing? I thought of P Ramlee and tried to remember one of his tunes. My mind was a whirl. I thought of Saloma, Zain Azman, A Zainol;, Diah Iskandar. I thought of bands like the Les Purnama, The Beatniks and the Kumpulan Naposa. But none of them could help me in my time of need. confused by my own origins as the son of a whop-keeper, and surrounded by this crazy sick society, I charged into the nursery rhyme “Burong Kekatua”, a song about a cockatoo. Although I changed a few of the words here and there unconsciously, my efforts were rewarded with thunderous applause.

The group then moved on to another fireplace, to taunt other guests and make them perform too, leaving Africa and myself alone again.

“No matter where we are”, Africa said as he turned a piece of meat over on the barbeque, “we must always be prepared to display the symbols of black power”.

“I’m not a good singer”, I said earnestly.

“That isn’t important. The symbol is what matters most. I didn’t understand what you were singing but the rhythm and cadence of your song showed me the elegance of your people’s spirit. We must show that our societies are not sick - or at least, not as sick as white society. We have the confidence and pride of our nationalism. That is important. It is everything.

“But my society too is sick”, I replied, honestly.

“Sick?”

“Yes, sick”.

“As sick as white society? Do you have hippies? The Beatles? Bohemians? What sort of ‘sick’?”

The fat on my barbeque meat boiled and spat.

When the fire had done its work, Africa took a piece of meat and pressed it against his thick lips. He waved it backwards and forwards to cool it. And when the meat seemed cool enough, he stuffed the piece into his mouth and chewed it. The choir of crazy singers continued moving around the various fireplaces. There were now five bottom-shakers. The bohemian individuals continued to cling tightly to the concept of “The world can go to hell - who cares”. And the couples on the ground lay across each other life driftwood. From time to time a shrill laugh could be heard. And from among the laughter could be heard sighing and the gentle gasping of someone at the peak of their delight.

“My society is sick. It is the sickness shared by all Asia”.

Africa chuckled, quickly swallowing the meat held in his mouth.

"Asia is sick? In the same way as Africa? As the West? As the East?"
We flung more meat onto the fireplace.

I wanted to continue talking with Africa. Yes, we are sick. I wanted to tell him. Sick in our own way. And one of the reasons was the "take things easy" attitude of many of our leaders. The ones who didn't care. Who preferred to work things out in stages. Who had given up the nationalist struggle. Many of my people are not proud of their race. This was the greatest obstacle towards the achievement of genuine nationalism. As soon as I had swallowed the meat in my mouth I would tell Africa all these things straight out. Our people are well-endowed with the imperialist spirit, bureaucracy, compradorism, an irrational and reactionary intelligentsia, capitalist tendencies, bourgeoisie and counter-revolution. I chomped on the meat. I could hear the choir somewhere nearby. The moaning and sobbing of the couples on the ground. My people's struggle and the black power struggle are almost the same. We need to take deliberate steps, dare to be extremist, just as black people everywhere are doing. I thought of the crippling effects of our educational policies. Other people weren't hurting us: the fault lay with the reactionary intellectuals from among our own people. In our own economic situation. I wanted to tell Africa that. To tell him about village children with swollen stomachs, just like African children. I wanted to tell him. The whole story of our children. Our struggle was the same struggle. We both need proper universities. Our own languages. Nationalism.

Night dragged itself towards twelve o'clock. Half of the guests had gone home. But there was still a lot of meat on the table in the middle of the courtyard. We took another ten sausages and threw them on the fire. A couple stood near the fireplace.

"Ben and Rosemary", Africa said, introducing them to me. "They both support the Black Power struggle. Ben and Rosemary are in the final year of their studies in Nuclear Physics. I hope they don't make bombs to attack Asia and Africa".

Ben and Rosemary smiled, their arms wrapped around each other.

"I'm, Noh", I said. "From Malaysia".

Ben was tall. I couldn't see his face very well because he was a fan of the Maharishi's, or maybe of The Monkees. Rosemary was a dwarf - small and thin, and almost crushed under Ben's arm. Sometimes Ben's long dirty hair covered both their heads. And they breathed in its fragrance in together.

Africa ignored their behaviour, even though I was sure he included Ben and Rosemary in the sick society. I was a village boy and had never seen such behaviour before. It repulsed me somewhat, and also made me angry.

"Sick in what way?" Africa repeated his question, ignoring the symptoms standing beside us. A moan still rose from time to time. Other moans came from Rosemary. And now and then her moan mingled with a low growl. I

think the counter point came from the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

“Asia is sick. Isn’t Africa sick too?”

Ben and Rosemary loosened their grip on each other. They turned and looked at us. Ben’s nose seemed so prominent. I felt sorry for Rosemary’s face when I looked at Ben’s tall nose.

:What is this about Africa and Asia?” Ben asked, as the girl by his side rested her cheek on his shoulder. “Asia for the Asians. Africa for the Africans. And Rosemary for me, only me”. He kissed her vigorously. I listened to him gasping and moaning.

“What do you mean?” Africa asked, ignoring Ben’s treatment of Rosemary. “There are a few thorns in our flesh”, I replied, deliberately seeking to be obscure.

“I know what you mean”, Africa replied. “I do. Our sickness is the same as yours. But that is why we are fighting. Blacks must be proud of being black. We believe all blacks should be proud of being black. It is time to realise our own identity - the pride in being African, the pride of black power”.

“I support the struggles of Afro-Asia”, Ben suddenly said. I sensed that he was joking.

“So do I”, Rosemary added delicately.

And they returned to their wrestling. Briefly. Their bodies rose and fell like waves on the ocean. Ben then pushed Rosemary aside. She fell to the ground then stood up again. I heard her laugh. She soon left our fireplace. Ben came back to us.

“She is only after thrills. All girls are. She got what she wanted. So she won’t need me any more until next time. Life isn’t about truth or authenticity; it’s about getting what you want. It doesn’t matter what it is. You go after whatever makes you feel good.”

Ben snatched up a sausage from the barbecue and shoved it straight into his mouth. I saw his lips quiver as the heat hit them.

“Hey, Ben!” someone called from the distance.

Ben stood up, then patted Africa on the back before running off to whoever called him. I assumed he was intent on giving some other girl a thrill.

“The West is only interested in satisfying its own desires”, Africa continued once Ben had left us. “That is why it’s so sick. Rosemary wanted a thrill. She got what she wanted. Tomorrow she’ll want the same thing again. There is no end to selfish desires. Ben wants his own satisfaction just as much as he wants to satisfy Rosemary. He’ll never get what he wants either. And that is why the whole culture will always be sick”.

In the distance I heard a woman laughing. I thought of Ben and his idea of

satisfying one's need for thrills. The barbecue was beginning to come to an end, but it was, in fact, becoming livelier than ever. Some of the participants staggered about in a drunken stupor. They were after thrills too.

"But we want more than our own self-satisfaction", Africa continued when my gaze returned to him. "We need to cultivate our own sense of pride, our own ego. Our Nationalist egos. Africans need an African ego. There is no holding back the Black Power movement. Our struggle is both progressive and revolutionary. It is a natural and perpetual part of human history. There can be no denying our nationalism. None".

"But nationalism always degenerates into communalism", I replied, deliberately testing him. "And communalism always sooner or later surrenders to ideology".

As I picked up a piece of meat, he replied, "Ideology?"

My hand paused in mid-air.

"Do you mean 'democracy'?" African laughed disdainfully at the word. "Democracy is only for Europeans, as far as I'm concerned."

I bit into the sausage.

"Socialism? Communism? Nationalism is an ideology in its own right. It has nothing to do with communalism. Ideologies are doctrines, theories. The West creates hundreds of them but never puts any into practice. America preaches democracy - but look how she treats the black man. No ideology can ever compete against nationalism."

I could hear the chorus in the distance still singing its crazy tunes.

"And any ideology that tries to compete with nationalism ends up by becoming a component of it. So we have ideological-nationalism in the form of democratic nationalism, socialist-nationalism or communist-nationalism. Hey! our meat is burning. Come one! let's not be pessimistic about nationalism. We must be optimistic. And even our optimism must match the type of nationalism our pride chooses. There must be a Black Power nationalism which is appropriate for Africa. And a Malay Power nationalism suitable for Malays."

I still felt the night to be beautiful. The lights in the Vice-Chancellor's residence had long been extinguished. From time to time the wind blew from Lake Burley Griffin and beat against my cheeks. It was cold. The sound of an occasional car driving through Canberra carried through the night air. Tomorrow was Sunday. The inhabitants of Australia would be drunk. And together with Abbass Kotamba Africa, I was drunk with my barbecue and ideological-nationalism.

"Each person must be a fighter for his race. Each black subject must be a fighter for his black race. Whether he is a doctor, a teacher, a clerk, a diplomat, a biologist, a grave-digger, or even a writer, all must become fighters. A fighter for nationalism must put his nation's interests above his own. There must be no killing unless it is absolutely necessary. Are you a writer?"

I smiled and nodded. Before I had a chance to speak, Ben returned. Now he had his arm around another young girl. It was certainly not Rosemary.

“This is Barbara”, he said.

And before we could say anything, Ben picked Barbara up and kissed her. His victim did not struggle. On the contrary, as he attacked her neck, she threw her head back and thrust her breasts forward. Then, bending slightly under her weight, Ben disappeared with his burden.

“Still after thrills, both of them”, Africa grumbled.

I quickly swallowed the meat I had already chewed.

“Well?” I asked, not sure what I wanted to say.

“The black writer must have the attitude of a fighter. A poet is not a poet if he writes bombastic poetry, which goes round and round like a car on a racing track. A poem has to be like an ambulance on its way to cure the sick. A poem which only speaks of its author is like an empty drum. It is an act of gross vulgarity to write about women, beauty, oneself, about a man and woman heading to a hotel-room (P+M=H), while one’s nation is still in the grip of a foreign power.

“But ... our meal is burning!” I joked. The atmosphere was almost as hot as the coals of the barbecue.

“Let it!” Africa replied jokingly. “Burnt flesh is black flesh. I’m black. You have to learn to eat black flesh. This black meat can be a symbol of the strength of Afro-Asia and our determination to defeat the whites.”

“But there is no such thing as white meat”, I said, laughing.

“Yes there is!” Africa shouted, absolutely convinced. He turned towards the throbbing mass of bodies sprawled on the ground and laughed. I knew why he was laughing and I suspected Africa knew why I was laughing. It was the loudest I had laughed since arriving in Australia. The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi bohemians turned and stared at me.

“What’s so funny, Asia and Africa?” a voice suddenly asked.

A bohemian stood in front of us, with his hands on his hips, staring at us. I smiled. Strangely enough, he smiled back. It was obvious he had been joking with us. Sometimes friends can become closer through their joking. Sometimes.

I had had enough of meat. The few sausages on the grill began to char. Africa picked at the scraps between his teeth and spat them out. The chorus was slowly dying away now. And three or four of the bohemians had begun walking away from the fires.

“The time for idle chatter is over, as far as Africa and Asia are concerned”,

Africa said, interrupting my thoughts. "Every African must learn to fight in an African way. He must learn to develop his pride in being black. An African ego. A negro pride. We must learn to be able to point to ourselves and say: I am an African, I am a Malay. And we must think ourselves most fortunate not to have been born wrapped in white flesh."

My eyes were feeling heavy. I nodded once or twice.

"Are you tired?" Africa asked. I nodded again. We stood up.

Suddenly the tall frame of Ben appeared in front of us again. He had another girl clasped under his armpit. The heat stuck strangely out from its hiding-place. And I could tell she wasn't Rosemary. And she wasn't Barbara.

"This is Jacqueline", Ben said, introducing her to Africa and myself. "And I'm not Cruickshank Higgison Benedict. I'm Aristotle Socrates Onassis."

We laughed loudly. The world shook. And C.H. Benedict took Jacqueline's face and kissed her.

"They're sick", I said, remembering what Africa had said. "The whole of white society is sick. They all want thrills. Nothing else. Giving and receiving thrills. Ben, Rosemary, Barbara, Jacqueline, the whole lot."

Africa and I left. As I made my way home, I thought of what Africa had said. Of Africa and Black Power. Of Ben, giving and taking. Of Rosemary, Barbara and Jacqueline as well. And as I walked through the still busy city of Canberra, I wondered whether my people could ever come to understand Malay Power.