

## **Francis Imbuga and the Idea of the public creative Intellectual**

***A Lecture in Memory of Prof. Francis Davis Imbuga***

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In this talk my aim is to situate Francis Davis Imbuga within the large tradition of public intellectuals in post colonial Africa. As such, it is my contention that Imbuga though, at a personal individual level, did not directly engage with public spheres such as the print media, electronic media and social media to speak truth to power, and to intervene on issues such as injustice in society, he did in fact, through his creative dramatic imaginaries and other forms of creative ventures exemplified in his cartoon strips, his acting in television dramas and film- most definitely were part of the debates that most of the other prominent and oft, quoted African intellectuals of his generation, were and have been involved in.

I think that Imbuga has not been hailed much as a public intellectual because of the medium he seems to have privileged in communicating his ideas and knowledge to his publics. Maybe because he did not act according to one of Said's definition of the public intellectual as one who "discards his academia to speak as a gifted dilettante". I argue that Imbuga like the signifying monkey decided to speak truth to power just like Jack Mapanje, the Malawian poet, through the art of concealment and defamiliarization. This is aptly and coherently articulated by one of his artist characters, who seem to act as his mouth piece, Osman, in the highly satirical play on delusions of postcolonial leadership- *Man of Kafira*- when he reminds the readers thus:

...This play has been specially written for a specific audience. Now we don't want to preach to them because other people have tried it elsewhere and failed. Our

target is the sub-conscious mind, that part of our brain that refuses to be cheated. And our primary weapons are symbols and images not swear words.  
(*Man of Kafira*, 1984:8)

In fact Osman goes further to make explicit, the role of the artist in the society, when he declares that: "...Remember that it is our responsibility as free thinking artists to be sincere in our portrayal of what we consider to be truth. And we are using the only language that we know best. Remember, he who sits on truth sits on his pride". ( ) Even the most cursory interpretation of Osman's statements, indicates Imbuga's conception of the way a Public creative intellectual should speak truth to power. According to Imbuga, as implicated in the assertions of his fictional character- Osman- the creative intellectual must be witty in his criticism and as such should not take an overtly confrontational stance. This interpretation of the role and responsibility of the intellectual who wants to speak truth to power seems to have definitely influenced the dramatic tradition that he anchors his stage dramas on. Imbuga cleverly situates himself, in what can be described aptly, as the tradition of the signifying monkey, that archetypal trickster, the very trope of figuration and signification, the master of deceit and deception, the embodiment of ambiguity and emblem of double speak. Imbuga's choice of drama to articulate his ideas as well as critique his society seems to resonate Said when he argues that: "Speaking the truth to power is no Panglossian idealism : it is carefully weighing the alternatives , picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change"(1993: 75) Locating his stage dramas in the tradition of the signifying monkey, Imbuga in a sense wittingly and cunningly collapses the boundaries of art and politics, entertainment and education, through his signature creative mode: the comedic drama. As John Ruganda has rightly noted in regards to his (Imbuga's) plays (that):

...this good entertainment, which is couched in caustic satirical barbs, is the devastatingly deceptive hall-mark of Imbuga's new dramatic vision. The humour which mollies the target victim as simultaneously condemns him is a strategy that has enabled the playwright to get away with radical implications of his political drama (1992: xv).

Imbuga is obviously in this regard is a different brand of the public intellectual. Unlike most public intellectuals, he uses his fictional characters to mask his scathing attack on political class that seems to have completely lost direction. The medium of stage drama enabled him to participate in public spheres, without necessarily having to foregrounding, his own private identity. In fact his plays assumed his identity and created for him the public visibility. Through his plays his ideas traversed a wide spectrum of the society both as literary drama and performance texts. Given that his play-texts have been in school syllabus for decades his 'publics' are wide and diverse.

Why do I consider Imbuga a public (creative) Intellectual? Like other public intellectuals, Imbuga engaged with similar ideas that other intellectuals of his time also grappled with. The only fundamental difference discerned in the mode engagement; his being mainly through the dramatic imaginary. A transaction with literature generated by most post-colonial African intellectuals reveal that Imbuga similarly grappled with those same issues in his dramatic imaginaries. What Achebe fondly refers to as the burning issues of the day. This is demonstrated with much clarity in his stage dramas as I will demonstrate shortly in this presentation. As Ruganda would once more reminds "Imbuga's stage drama has responded sensitively to, and kept pace with, the accelerating social and political changes in Kenya...His scripts are a transparently concealed literary response to the major upheavals and the teething problems of his country" (1992:viii). It is in this sense therefore that I find Imbuga and his dramatic imaginaries implicated in the project of public intellectualism. In deed each of Imbuga's dramatic imaginaries grapples with specific and very particularized issue affecting the society: *Betrayal in the City*, *Man of Kafira*, *The Successor*, *Burning of Rags*, *Aminata* and *Return of Mngofu* all which explore and represent the different experiences of their times of creation.

As a creative intellectual, Imbuga in his dramatic imaginaries, criticizes while fundamentally, transferring ideas and with the sole purpose of effecting change and transformation in the society. Imbuga recourse to the dramatic imaginary is perhaps coterminous with that of Cameroonian creative intellectual Bole Butake who avows that:

Having found the effectiveness of drama as a communication medium especially for the disadvantaged grassroots people, I have been able to continue to influence the later through the organization of numerous theatre workshops in the urban slums and villages on such diverse issues as women's rights and children's rights (including property ownership, widow, female genital mutilation, early marriages and pregnancies etc.), human rights, and democracy, minority rights, corruption in public life, environmental sustainability, good governance, conflict resolution, HIV/AIDS etc. Thus I have been able to continue with my teaching at the university while using theatre for development techniques through what I call 'People Theatre' and 'People Cinema' to influence and awaken grassroots people to problems with which they deal with on a daily basis (Butake read in Odhiambo; 2008:25).

Ala Butake, in fact reading or watching Imbuga's plays, one realizes that there is a self-conscious effort to conscientize the society and consequently effect praxis. Interestingly for me there is also a striking correspondence between Imbuga's and the Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal, he of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, who argues that theatre is indeed a rehearsal for real change. This rehearsal for real change is manifest in Imbuga's deployment of the strategies of meta-theatre. This is visibly evident in his plays: *Betrayal in the City*, *Man of Kafira* and *Aminata*. The use of the trope of rehearsal indeed reveals Imbuga's daring courage to engage with what would have obviously been taboo subject, the 'un-mentionable' and the 'unspeakable' at the time of the writing of his dramatic imaginaries.

Given the choice of his medium, Imbuga can be described in the Gramscian sense as an organic intellectual as his intellectual production seems to respond to specific conditions very similar to political activism as dramatized in his plays.

As creative intellectual Imbuga through his dramatic imaginaries acts as an interpreter for his society by using the possibilities of the dramatic mode to make accessible such abstract concepts as nationalism, corruption, nepotism, gender equality and equity, paranoia, injustice, democracy, impunity etc.

In the play, *Betrayal in the City*, like other intellectuals of his time, Imbuga explores the problems of post-independence Africa nation-states. *Betrayal in the City* dramatizes how the new leaders betrayed their people leading to the state of disillusionment expressed by Moses:

That is why I don't believe in such crap as the last be first, and blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven! For years we waited for the Kingdom, then they said it had come. Our Kingdom had come at last, but no. It was all an illusion...It was better while we waited. Now we have nothing to look forward to. We have killed our past and are busy killing the future (Imbuga, 1976:31-2).

Moses' tone resonates with that of a number of African writers such as Ayi Kwei Armah in the *Beautyfuls Are Not Yet Born*, Chinua Achebe in *A man of the People*, Wole Soyinka in *Kongi's Harvest*, Ngugi and Micere Mugo *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. In *Betrayal in the City* Imbuga like most intellectuals of the time, demonstrates how the ideals nation that had been imagined at the dawn of independence had been radically vacated by the new leaders. In this play he dramatizes how the project of nation building and nation-ness was undermined through the inversion of policies such as nationalization and Africanization. He also lays bare how corruption (the privileging of Tumbo philosophy: our time to eat ala Michella Wrong), nepotism (selective breeding), dictatorship, injustice, mediocrity and impunity, suppression of intellectualism and culture of silence and inefficiency largely obfuscated the project of nation building and nation-ness. Thus the play seems to project the deferment of the nationalists' dreams in a manner similar to the Yoruba belief of "Abiku", that stubborn child that is born and dies and visits the mother's womb to be born again and to die. Unlike the Mobius strip the process continues.

In *Man of Kafira*, Imbuga satirizes post-colonial African leaders. He explores the futility of political change in post colonial Africa. Through Boss we are presented with the paranoia of African leaders. These leaders behave as if they have title titles of their nation-states. This is why Boss is obsessed with desire to go back home, deluded that the people are longing for his return. He declares that:

Shaka the great warrior of the South! Of course I am Shaka... And back in Kafira? That I promise them. I shall be back in Kafira. And it maybe sooner than most people think. I can promise them that. But what about the majority? The ones who that I am still here in Abiara. What do they say? (*Man of Kafira*, 28).

The paranoia that seems to define most African leaders is a subject that has been explored by a number of African intellectuals and in fact I remember a paper I was read that was entitled “paramoia” to emphasize how the former President Moi had become a paranoid and looked at everyone as a threat. However, Imbuga uses the power of imagination to bring out this state of paranoia that afflicts the African leaders so vividly and convincingly. Because drama is about showing, Imbuga manages to bring to animate, through fictional characters these paranoid leaders better than any essay would ever capture. By engaging Imbuga’s construction of the Boss, one clearly gets to understand the psychology of these leaders. As Osman the artistic director of the play within play and who they presume is Imbuga’s alter ego proclaims:

The point is that you are wearing a uniform. And remember that the cup that is clean on the outside and dirty inside is the most dangerous of drinking cups. This drama penetrates through man’s external camouflage right into the remotest corner of his conscience. It is the human soul with all the possibilities of its rottenness that we are now putting to test.

I would want to argue that *Man of Kafira* is an illuminating inspection of Post-colonial African dictators.

Again Imbuga, like most intellectuals in post-colonial Africa such as Thandika Mkandawire, Ali Mazurui, Mahmood Mamdani, Chinua Achebe, Paul Tiyamba Zeleza, Amina Mama, Peter Anyang Nyong’o Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Wole Soyinka, is also concerned with the problem of leadership in Post-colonial Africa.

As I had mentioned initially, Imbuga participated in intellectual debates of his epoch. In the Play *Aminata*, he makes some of the most daring statements about gender parity and equity, which in the 80s when the play was written and performed would out rightly be deemed as taboo subjects. A few examples will suffice my illustration here:

- i) Ngoya : ....Our mission here is , as has been demonstrated by my brother, the Right Reverend Abu-Steiner, is as clear as the rain water that falls freely from the skies. God meant us for life. We must therefore walk into the future with the only those children that will make our tomorrow worth looking to. I agree with Reverend Abu-Steiner that every fourth child in every family should be seen as an extra mouth. (*Aminata*;19)
- ii) Ngoya: Then why is it a taboo for you to eat from the same bowl from which your menfolk eat?.. The truth my dear sisters, is that your menfolk have been fooling you over the years...To break away or stay still rooted to the same spot? That is why today, the church is pleased to offer you the symbol of all that has been denied you to this day, chicken.(*Aminata*, 21)

Through his fictional characters, Imbuga participated in the gender debate, debunking cultural myths which patriarchal oriented systems and ideologies had cleverly deployed to marginalize women in societies. In this play, Imbuga uses *Aminata*, Pastor Ngoya and Mulemi to show that given equally opportunities, women can engage meaningfully and significantly in the project of nation-building. Imbuga addresses a number of sensitive issues that even at the moment are problematic. For instance, he explicitly confronts the question of reproductive health and family planning as key pillars in the project of nation building. But more importantly he transfers the burden of family planning from the bodies of women to that of man.

In the play a number of myths that marginalize women are deconstructed. The myth about eating gizzards; the myth that women can not hold positions of leadership; the myth that women can not perform certain roles; and the myth that women can not inherit land from their parents.

The advantage that Imbuga has, as a creative intellectual, especially as a dramatist, is that he can use various dramatic techniques to say and show what other intellectuals can not dare to do. For instance he uses the joker as a technique to confront taboo and sensitive issues; he also uses play-within-a play technique to rehearse what is

perceived as unspeakable. For instances, the coup in *Betrayal in the City* is framed as a rehearsal and the transfer of the land in *Aminata* is also framed as such. This resonates well with Augusto Boal's ideas that drama/theatre is indeed a rehearsal for real change. Interestingly enough a number of Imbuga's rehearsals have been prophetic. There have been a numerous coups in Africa; the new Constitution promulgated in 2010 has vindicated Imbuga about the place of women in the society. The women can now indeed inherit land. Imbuga also uses dream as a technique to lay bare the hidden fears, desires and wishes of his characters; the subjugated memories deep in the subconscious mind

Having scrutinized Imbuga's work that makes me to hail him as public creative intellectual, I want to follow Edward Said when he describes an intellectual:

... as an individual endowed with the faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and can not be played with out a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be some one who can not be easily co-opted by governments and corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug (read in Jane Poyner, 2006:22).

Similar sentiments are expressed by Thandika Mkandawire when he reminds us that: "Intellectual work is quintessentially the labour of mind and soul. Not surprisingly intellectuals have played a major role in shaping passions, ideologies and societal visions". (2005:1)

Therefore it is in this regard that I celebrate Imbuga, through his dramatic imaginaries, as an intellectual, who in the tradition of the trickster dared the public space to intervene and transform the society.



