

MARIA SANTANA: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT SLAVERY AND THE ANGOLAN EXPERIENCE



Maria Santana

The text of this article represents an address delivered by Maria Santana, an Angolan Freedom Fighter, at an Emancipation Rally, organised by the National Joint Action Committee in Trinidad, in August 2006.

ONANGINE! ONANGINE!
Onangine means 'ARE YOU ALL
WELL?'

I want you to repeat with me, UHURU, UHURU, UHURU! It means Freedom and that was the word that reverberated throughout the continent of Africa during the 1950s where the rebellion stood up against the British, in Kenya by the KIKUYU people who organised the MAU MAU movement. Again I want you to say with me UHURU, UHURU, UHURU. I bring you greetings from Angola.

For quite a decade and a half I have not been able to go back to my home country of Angola. I would love to tell you something about my own country, Angola and would think that you would be interested.

Angola is a country in the South West Coast of Africa. It is called Angola because the Portuguese decided to and on the basis of that all of our rulers, Kings and Queens throughout the territory of Angola, although there are diverse kingdoms and diverse nationalities in that area, all of them shared one title, the title of Angola. So Portugal decided that the land will be called Angola.

Angola means 'Blacksmith'. The techniques of met-

allurgy were well advanced by the Africans who lived in that territory. The story has it that the masters of that technique were invested with super natural powers. Metallurgy was a very important science which developed in Angola. Angola is the fourth biggest land mass in the continent of Africa. It is bigger than South Africa, it is bigger than Nigeria, and it is only smaller than the Sudan, the Congo and Algeria. Algeria is the biggest country in Africa.

Angola, for over four centuries was the land where most of the population was taken away into slavery. So many people were taken from that land, that today our population has never recovered, although we are the fourth biggest land mass, we have one of the smallest populations, that even the smallest countries in Africa have more people than we do. We have now a total population of thirteen (13) million people in Angola, so the millions that have been taken away; have been taken to all over the world.

Many were taken to Brazil, Cuba, Saint Domingue, to Guyana, to Jamaica, etc. I don't know, but the things I have seen in the culture here in Trinidad and Tobago, there must be plenty of Angolans here. Another thing about Angola, is resistance, we died so much because we fought so much. So wars in Angola never stopped, there was a period we all hear and normally, everybody knows about Queen Nzinga.

Queen Nzinga who was called Queen Nzinga Mbandi Angola, was not just the epitome of a strategist, but she was also a Stateswoman. She not only organized resistance, organized safe havens for runaway enslaved people, she ensured that in order to fight the enemy, there was need for unity, that our people needed to be united and so she excelled in her particular capacity as a diplomat. She man-



Queen Nzinga

aged to organize three cycles of coalitions against the Portuguese, against the Dutch, against the British, against the Spanish and whoever else came in that land. Nzinga lived from 1583 to 1663.

The Pungo Wan Dungo Mountains surrounded the capital of Queen Nzinga's Kingdom that is called Kabasa. In one of those mountains, there exist the foot print of Queen Nzinga. The Queen legend says that those foot prints belong to her. So strong was her determination and her resistance not to allow any foreigner to occupy her land, that her foot prints became imprinted in the mountain.

Queen Nzinga continued to fight until she was 80 years old. On December 17th 1663, this heroic African woman returned to her ancestors. She remains up to this present time the true symbol of the resistance against European colonialism in Angola in particular and Africa in general.

On this question of slavery, there are other forms of slavery. There is the slavery whereby we do not know about our own history, we do not know about our culture, we do not know about our role in history, we do not know about independence and self-determination. That is the meaning of emancipation, because to be emancipated and still be dependent in order to survive, is not emancipation.

Emancipation means to stand on your own two feet and be able to do what you need to better yourself, to better your family, to better your community, to better your

country and that means that you must have control over your resources. Without that control there will be no emancipation. No matter what you say, no matter what you celebrate, that emancipation would be taken from us in any minute, if we are not able to take control of our destiny. And that is the fundamental issue for us here in the Diaspora and for us on the African Continent.

The other thing that we normally know when we talk about enslavement and slavery was about people being taken out of the continent and shipped away to some where else. We hardly know about the other aspect of the enslavement of the African that was done right there in the continent by the Europeans. We do not know that Africa was ripe with the enslavement of our people under European rule.

The Southern part of Africa had been one point in time slave colonies where Africans were being enslaved in their own land. In the case of South Africa, there was a colony that was called Cape Colony, the Orange Free State, all of those were slave colonies, where people, the indigenous people were being enslaved. Those were the Hottentots and the Sum People.

We don't know about the history of Namibia and of the Edero people. The Edero people suffered from genocide that was committed in the continent itself. The European exterminated so many so that if you go to the Kalahari Desert there are mounds of dead bodies of our people who have been buried and those mounds can be seen from Space.

The Edero people in trying to runaway to freedom, ran into the desert, while the Germans were shooting one by one, in that desert and that was in Namibia. The very

first time the Germans instituted a concentration camp. That process was first inflicted in Africa before they went and did it to the Jews in Germany. First of all they did it in Africa to Africans. This part of our history is important to know so we can build the links and share those experiences.

Because we believe that the people who came to the Caribbean and the Americas were the ones to be enslaved, the ones who stayed behind were the ones who were free. There was no freedom on either side of the water. We were being separated with the water but most of us were in chains and those chains were the things that link us today. We did not break, although we had been separated for so long, we still very much are one people, and as I came here and I look at all of you, you can be any where in Africa, anywhere. If you go there you will be amazed to see how many people look just like you. So to say that there are differences between us is not true.

We are one people and always will be and the question whether Africans in the continent will accept you... That is not even a question, it's like asking your mum whether she is your mum or not. The question is that you belong there as Africans, but also, you have the right to claim this land where you stand now. And the very reason why you have the right to claim this land is because you earned it by sweat and by blood. So this is also your land by right, but by birth your land is Africa.

The other thing I would love to say, is the question of diversity and contention and friction that exist between different communities. Many of us do not know that the Portuguese went all the way to China and India to bring people to Angola. They were indentured labourers and work-

ers, to work on the Sugar plantations in Angola.

There were sugar plantations, coffee plantations, and cocoa plantations all over Africa. We have Indians in South Africa, as much as there are Indians in Trinidad, so there is a lot of shared common History and experiences. Because we have been exploited, enslaved, colonized by the very same master and that means our commonalities in history are so much alike.

People say that we need to go back to our traditions, to go back to wear our clothes, to speak our languages and I have to tell you that in Africa, the case of Angola for instance, we still have to struggle to get those traditions back. The thing is, because we were being enslaved we were also being stripped of our languages, from our traditions right there in the Continent.

We were forbidden to wear our clothes, we were forbidden to speak our languages. We had police officers come to our houses to check whether we were eating with the spoon or fork or eating with our hands. Whether we were sitting in a chair or whether we were sitting on the floor. Whether we had become proper Portuguese and whether we were speaking proper Portuguese without an accent.

Some people would gain a card that would say you are entitled for a good job in government and your children are entitled to go to school. If you are not assimilated, you know what happens to you and your family. You go into plantation work, so for many people, for many of my fore parents, for my grandparents that was the dilemma. That was the choice that they had to make. Either go to the plantations or assimilate.

My Grandparents decided to assimilate so much so

that it was forbidden in the house to speak our language. So I grew up without a language. I can speak many languages, as I am speaking to you in English. I learnt English, I learnt French, I understand Spanish and I speak Portuguese fluently.

Tell me, can I speak any of my own African language...no. But I can understand a few words because of convivial matters. But I cannot say that I can speak them, because I cannot. So I also lost as much as you did. So to understand this process and the significance of emancipation, we need to acknowledge that part of our history.