THE ROLE OF REGGAE MUSIC IN THE AFRICAN LIBERATION STRUGGLE

Music is the only ultimate expression of the intention. Music says exactly the same about the intention of a people. Throughout the ages, in all societies struggling for freedom and liberation music and the struggle have been synonymous. Where the struggle goes music also goes.

Before us is an opportunity to reflect on the role reggae music contributed in the African liberation struggle, with special focus on the South African liberation struggle. Where should one began? Reggae music is music that has its roots in a life of insecurity, in which a single moment of self realization, of love, light and movement, is extraordinarily more important than a whole lifetime. It expresses the fear, insecurity, desire and future hope.

Reggae music ‘s role in the African liberation struggle is not disputed but what is it that necessitate a reflection of this magnitude. My assertion is that reggae music has played a prophetic liberating role in the African liberation struggle.

The South African liberation struggle in the 1960s was facing a progression challenge at a time when, African Freedom was thought to be around the corner. The South African apartheid regime had completely crushed the compass of the liberation struggle politically, organizationally and socially. Separate discrimination and its negative consequences: oppressed and battered into submission, with no political self determination or freedom of expression were the order of the day. Political organizations were all banned, out lawed and driven underground and exile. People’s leaders were either serving long terms in prisons, getting killed or fleeing into exile for fear of their lives

It was indeed the dark days of the liberation struggle. The 1970s found the South Africans struggling to find their political footing, with fear and a system of intimidation having a field day, reggae music come into the fore as a dependable strategic struggling partner
It was like a song gently urging us to redeem ourselves from the dungeon of a brutal evil system. Telling us of our history and destiny. That as fellow Africans we must complete the race, our mission which is also their mission, of an Africa free continent. It was music telling and assuring us that ours is a temporary inconvenience which started with slavery, captivity and colonialization. It was music telling us not to despair but to daringly soldier on.

It was music which served as a constant conscious - mind - clearing - exercise for us not to loose focus on our goal despite any wrong infusions of the mind.

Yes, we might have been facing multiple oppression, poverty and discrimination, but the song was always there to whisper: remember your daring warrior soldiers forefathers who led the way for you. Don't you dare fail them.

Remember their undying noble dream of freedom in Africa and in diaspora: Marcus Garvey, Chaka, the Buffalo Soldier Patrice Lumumba, and the liberation struggles of Africa as led by the likes of Jomo Kenyatta and others.

Don't dwarf or timid yourselves into submission and despair, the music kept reminding us (like in the story of an eagle kept in captivity with chickens), but that we are descendants of a brave and proud people.

The music likened our situation to the biblical cases of the Israelites in the Egyptian and Babylonian captivity who despite the evilness and ruthlessness of the system, emerged as victors. That our believe in the overcome of evil by the good and justice should be a dream kept aflamed like a fire in our souls throughout generations until we completely destroy the Babylonian system and reach Canaan, the dream land. The song did not just stir or provoke the bee’s nest but provided revolutionary tools beyond consciousness. It instilled, provoked and drove the oppressed African people to rise against oppression and discrimination. The song kept saying to everyone claiming to be political consciousness: it is not enough to say I care (and be an arm chair revolutionary), but rather rise up and be counted by rebelling, participating actively in the revolution to change the current unacceptable oppressive governing systems in
Africa. Songs kept on saying wake up and live, get up stand up, rise up and confront the evil system.

Like Emperor Hailed Selassie addressing both the OAU and UN Session (in October 1963) declared on the question of race and discrimination: Until the philosophy which hold one race superior to another is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned ----- until that day, the African continent will not know peace. We Africans (and the diaspora) will fight, if necessary, and we know that we shall win, as we are confident of victory of good over evil.” The song resonated with Mandela’s Rivonia. Trial mitigation declaration in 1964: “it is an ideal. I hope to live for and achieve, and if need be, it is an ideal I am prepared to die”. Landing in the virgin mind of a youth the song kept reminding everyone committed to the liberation struggle to remain steadfast, committed and uncompromising. With these emboldening spirited liberating songs, we indeed saw the southern tip of Africa rising in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Young African revolutionaries picked up the modern weaponry having graduated from stones and dustbin covers as armory shields. Bullets began to flower leading to freedom in Southern Africa with South Africa coming last

The reggae song was educative but cautious not to only preach revolutionary change but was mindful of the need to prepare for a united, cohesive, just and peaceful African continent. To that extend the song supported pan africanism and the formation of the OAU, now the AU. It was because of the realization that once Babylon systems falls there will be need to sustain freedom attained and co exist with the world community

As part an important pillar of the African struggle, on the international front, the music and song campaigned for the support of the struggle in all its forms, isolating the enemy of the struggle as the heathens and hypocrites who sells out to the enemy. In all its songs the music kept on mobilizing friends of the African struggle, glorifying its leaders, wars and victories for an equitable just society

So political activists and those in the liberation struggle used the songs in their daily life as a source of inspiration and foundation of life. From the song they quenched their thirst, replenished their supplies, acquired banned and restricted knowledge. It become part of a daily diet for survival in the shanty towns, shacks, ghettos, villages, in the streets and public places. There was no way of stopping its listeners even though some songs were restricted and banned. Like a bee going all the way after the nectar the desire for the song was unstoppable.
Reggae songs were voraciously devoured, internalized, practiced and lived to the best of our ability.

The power of the rhythm and the message / lyrics was not only memorized but was analyzed and contextualized to the South African oppressive system and the African struggle. Reggae music listening parties always ended in political debates with the political matured gradually recruited into serious underground political structures.

The song afforded those in the African liberation an opportunity to have a taste of African wealth and wisdom as they continued the prosecution of the struggle for freedom in the areas of political leadership, vision and organization. It sharpened their wit and their depth of the African liberation struggle.

The song was not just about ruddy boys, youthful rebellion, protest and resistance but was grounded on century old wars of colonial dispossession and a human desire to be free in one’s indigenous country.

The song’s repertoires not only loosen our then chained and oppressed minds but greatly influenced and reinforced our culture. The song affected our attire, food and lifestyle, and indeed our religion. Dreadlocks, and the talking language, more vegetable food, ganga smoking and free life became part of positively accepting the song. In its own way the song managed to agitate intolerance to the Babylon, the evil system but simultaneously preached love for our people, discipline and the need to have humanity (ubuntu) reigning. These were values and attributes required of any willing, committed and dedicated liberation struggle combatant for an African struggle to succeed.

Looking back in retrospective I can safely and proudly attest that reggae music as led by poetic prophets / artists like Jimmy Cliff, Joseph Hill and Culture, U – Roy, Winston Rodney, The Wailers comprised of Bob Marley, Peter Macintosh and Bunny Wailer, Toots and the Maytals, the list is endless, contributed immensely to the African struggle. I can only say this : music being poetry and philosophical is subject to analysis and interpretation to suit your particular situation. For our generation it was relevant music for the right time. The music emboldened and radicalized youth to stand up to the evil
system and not fear and being intimidated. As we organized, embark on daring underground political programmes like disseminating banned literature, pamphlets, boycotts, manning roadblocks in townships and villages and gradually standing up to and against bullets on equal footing the song kept surging or pushing us on. The song kept us going, principled and steadfast as we ran away from security buttons, teargases, rubber and live bullets. As we evaded roadblocks, evade imminent arrest (by sleeping in the bushes or some safe places). The song did not leave us even when we were eventually arrested, detained and sentenced. The song kept the morale up even in exile and in military training camps. It took care of those in solitary confinement, in the death row and those incarcerated in the famous Robben Island University. Wherever the people were or found themselves struggling the song was there to keep them company whispering: Babylon system is falling keep up the momentum. Don’t give up.