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Third World Activists Two Women Committed To Change the World

Lelia Gonzalez



Historian C. L. R. James speaks with a rush of excitement when he talks about the role of Black women in contemporary society. "Today women represent something, are something, they *are* a future that men must know something about," he says.

Recently *Encore* interviewed two Third World women who have deeply affected that future. Musindo Mwinipembe and Lelia Gonzalez are two activists who function within different milieus to foment change. Mwinipembe is of Ugandan-Tanzanian descent and has co-produced with David Koff two extraordinary documentaries: *Blacks Britannica*, about racism in Britain, and *Black Man's Land*, a critically acclaimed film on the history of Kenya since colonialism. Gonzalez is Brazil's leading Black activist in that country's struggle against racism, and one of the leaders of a new group called the Unified Movement Against Discrimination. Under its auspices over a thousand Blacks demonstrated against the government in July 1978. Most observers feel it was a harbinger for major change in Brazil.

The two women had very different beginnings. Musindo

Mwinipembe was born in a family of influence and wealth. "My grandfather was once the mayor of Kampala," she says. "My mother had the kind of life that when she got tired, she was carried." Her recollection was not boastful but merely to make a point. "But my mother had the ability to accommodate - no, to fashion - another kind of life when it became necessary." And it did. At the age of four Musindo contracted polio. The doctors told her family that it would be necessary for her to undergo long-term treatment in Britain. "My father was already there studying. My mother, in order to stay close to me and help bring in income, resumed her training as a nurse in England. It must have been very difficult for her. English was not her first language, and she was suddenly confronted with being on a low rung of the rigid British hierarchy. But she was able to do what she had to."

Lelia Gonzalez came from different circumstances. The 17th of 18 children, she was born into poverty. Her father was a laborer. Although her skin is a dark ruddy brown, in Brazil's color-conscious society (there are 317 different designations of color, she says), Gonzalez is considered Black, as distinguished from White or Mulatto.

Gonzalez's future looked as bleak as that of most of the Blacks in Brazil who are on the bottom of the social, economic, and educational ladder in a country that boasts of being a racial democracy. But like Mwinipembe, she also had an extraordinary mother. "She was not educated, but she was very strong and courageous. We were steeped in Black history and culture." She also must have had a tremendous sense of humanity, which enabled her daughter to escape the country's ghettos. "The brother closest in age to me was born, at the same time as

Musindo Mwinipembe



a child of an Italian family in the neighborhood," she recalls. "The mother died, and my mother offered to nurse the child along with my brother. When I was born, another child was also born to the Italian family. And when it came time for the Italian child to go to nursery school, the father of the family offered to pay my way in return for my mother's generosity."

Lelia was also encouraged by another brother who became a professional soccer player. "He traveled all over the world," she says, "and he always brought me back some memento that would excite my curiosity." That well-nourished curiosity led to Gonzalez becoming one of the few Black college professors in the country.

When Musindo first saw England she was amazed. "The first thing I remember was asking what had happened to the trees! They looked so stumpy and pale compared to the ones in Africa. I also had never seen White men as laborers before, and I assumed all English people had blonde hair and blue eyes." She also found herself as the only Black child in Sussex - England's stock trader belt. The experience was the profoundest impact of her physical

impairment, she says. But in her efforts to cope with all these circumstances she also learned a lot about herself and human nature. "I realized very early that I would have to learn to do something with my head. Though I was by no means immobilized, I knew I would have to do something sedentary."

"I also discovered that people talked to me easily, and I was interested in what they had to say. In the case of Whites, particularly, they found it easy to communicate with

in England, she returned to Africa to continue her studies at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. There she met another kind of rejection. "There was always suspicion of those of us who had been abroad," she recalled. "And then people always asked me why I couldn't speak the language." Sometimes she would reply in frustration, "Haven't you ever heard about colonialism?"

Gonzalez came face to face with her reality in another way. She married a colleague, a White



From Mwinipembe's *Black Man's Land*, showing British colonial officials in a treaty session with the Chief of the Masai

me because I had a non-threatening posture. I was small, crippled, and Black." Mwinipembe began her career in radio broadcasting.

Gonzalez's self-perceptions would be understandably different in a predominantly Black society. But the racist values became evident, if not fully internalized, very early. "When you go to a classroom in Brazil," she says, "you will notice that the White children sit in the front row, the Mulatto children in the second, the darker ones in the third - and finally the Black children in the back." But as Lelia graduated into the increasingly rarified atmosphere of the educational system, she fantasied about the menacing connotations of her color. "When I looked in the mirror," she says, "I did not see a Black body. I even began to believe in reincarnation, thinking in a subliminal way that perhaps I had done something wrong in a previous life and that is why I was Black."

Mwinipembe also went through the middle passage of rejection. "For reasons I still haven't completely worked out yet, I went through a fundamental rejection of myself. For example, I stopped speaking Swahili completely." Discouraged from attending a univer-

Brazilian. "I had known my husband's family for some time," she said. "I was even close to his sister. In Brazil it is all right for a White man to have an affair with a Black woman, but marriage is something else. When they discovered that we had wed they were furious. They called me a dirty Black. That's what I had become in their eyes, despite my education, despite my position. They said that they never wanted to see their son again." It was through her marriage - her husband has since died - that she began to confront the realities of her life and the life of Blacks in Brazil.

She had to do something about it; self-realization wasn't sufficient. Gonzalez volunteered to teach a Black history course at one of the art institutes, but she too discovered that reentry into the real world would not be that easy. "The class I taught was a night course," she says. "That meant there were workers as well as intellectuals and students in the class. They used to confront me a lot. I was too theoretical, they said. The students told me to get off my Olympian mountain. The experience was very good for me." She says she became involved in the Unified Movement

because it was one which reached out to the people. Many of the others tended to expect that the people would come to them.

Mwinipembe met David Koff at the university in Kenya. She felt it was time to make a film about Africa "through African eyes." The result is extraordinary. Not only were the educated Kenyans involved in the independence struggle of Africa interviewed, but many who still live in the rural areas and who could not speak English were as well. It was the first time in this reporter's recollection that an effort was made in a major documentary to search out these people, hear their points of view, and translate their world. "You know in another film whose same people would be seen shuffling in a shantytown with a voice-over saying, 'These people share the one tap in the whole village.'"

"Well, that may be part of the story, but not all of it," says Mwinipembe. "I wanted to redress the imbalance of Africa. The imbalance of all those people who come to study, give out questionnaires, and interpret them at conventions in a jargon that very few understand. I wanted to redress the fantastic mythology that surrounds Africa to justify what was being done to it by the West. Western civilization has determined the premise, the viewpoint, the assumption about so many people in the world."

"And I also wanted to give something back to Africa. So I showed the film there so that we could start thinking where we are, what we struggle for. A society that does not respect the past is in grave danger. If we don't understand the sins of our fathers, they will be revisited on the sons, daughters, and future generations."

After a stint at WNET's *Black Journal* in the States at the height of the civil rights movement in 1969, Mwinipembe returned to England. It was then that she realized more clearly than ever the nature of racism in that country. "At the time, Enoch Powell was talking very negatively about Blacks. We were always portrayed as the problem, and all of his assumptions were taken for granted. Nothing was shown to illustrate the positive contributions Blacks made. I began to see racism, unemployment particularly of Black youth, police brutality, and so on, as a systematic thing - and it was the



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same in the Caribbean, as it was in Africa, as it was in the United Kingdom."

She soon saw that systematic suppression of the Black point of view was also a worldwide problem. She is currently filing suit against WGBH-TV in Boston, the public station that produced the film in the United States. The producers there edited the film in such a way that its impact is deflected. Scenes are switched, for example, in a way that it reinforces racist stereotypes instead of rectifying them.

Lelia Gonzalez soon discovered that teaching was not enough. The

deteriorating situation in Brazil demanded action. In May 1978 a Black laborer was tortured and died in prison. In June a youth was killed at the hands of police in Sao Paulo. In July the nation was shocked when Blacks amassed for one of the largest acts of defiance in the recent history of the nation. The very act of this affirmation was a moving one. "I cried," she says, "when I saw the people. And many of them were crying too - even the men." On her recent tour throughout the United States she says one of her most emotional experiences was meeting Black women students from Bennett

College. "When I saw all that they had accomplished, their bright futures, I could not help but think of my Black sisters in Brazil. Most of them will become servants, be exploited, have little chance for education. But we will fight it."

Recently Musindo Mwinyipembe and Lelia Gonzalez met for the first time in New York. To contemplate their lives and their experiences is to realize the confluence of their culture, their determination, their pain—but, above all, their commitment not to leave the world the way they found it.

- Paula Giddings

The Case Against Lifting Rhodesian Sanctions

Last month the United States Senate voted to call on President Carter to lift economic sanctions against Rhodesia. The Senate decision was supposedly based on the view that free and fair elections had taken place in the southern African country, and that Rhodesia's implementation of Black majority rule was acceptable and satisfactory.

Last month the National Bar Association (NBA) headed by Junius Williams and representing Black lawyers, explored the issues of the election, true majority rule, and the legal obligations of the United States toward Rhodesia. The NBA submitted its report to 12 senators who requested it. The report's findings are used here to answer some of the salient questions surrounding the Rhodesian issue.

What are the legal obligations of the United States concerning the lifting of sanctions toward Rhodesia in view of the United Nations sanctions of 1966 and 1968?

The United Nations Charter is a binding treaty that imposes upon the United States and other member states an affirmative obligation to cooperate with the enforcement actions of the United Nations Security Council, including the Rhodesian sanctions. A unilateral lifting of those sanctions by the United States would constitute, as a matter of law,



Less than "free and fair" elections