

## Oppression in *Antigone* and Africa

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"Tis truly sad that he who judges should misjudge," declares a mere guard while his life lies in the palm of King Creon in Sophocles' drama, *Antigone*. Writing at the height of Athens' success, Sophocles' harsh criticism of man's faults seems a harbinger of doom to a city deep in the mire of its own excesses (Sophocles 263).

So I found myself in a lecture today with Dr. Dibinga's booming and simultaneously soothing voice trying to cut through my Western complacency to drive home his most desperate point. The causes of *Afrikosis*, the crisis in Africa, are rooted in the same frailties of human nature--pride, conceit, avarice, sexism, disobedience, and the inability to heed good counsel-- that caused Antigone to take her stand against Creon. Antigone is Africa and her enemy, the capitalizing, interventionist, democratic societies of the West, is Creon.

King Creon ruled; he stepped into power and wielded this power as though it had been placed upon him by the hand of god, not as though he was a defacto ruler. The nephews of Creon, Eteocles and Polyneices, quarreled over this same rule of Thebes. Their cursed father, Oedipus, had decreed that they were to share kingship over this kingdom, but being weak, flawed humans, they slaughtered one another, blinded by power and greed. Thus, rule of the kingdom fell to their closest relative, Creon, their mother's brother (Sophocles 265). Africa and the West are no different; two brother nations cruelly fighting for command over a continent whose dominion has already been determined. The only disparity is that now, the nations of the West seek Africa for its natural resources--specifically the petroleum reserves of the Congo. The West has no right to this land, by lineage or by kinship, but only by using force can Westerners overpower the Congolese. Dr. Dibinga describes another more sinister source of power: our mission statement of democracy, which he describes as "a cover for legitimizing the plunder and exploitation of the nation of the Congo" and other third world nations with their weak and defenseless masses.

Dr. Dibinga also mentions the use of Darwin's theory of natural selection to subordinate other races. A most heinous application of Darwinian philosophy is the case of Ota Benga. Ota, a Pygmy standing only four feet five inches at the age of eighteen, was held prisoner and exhibited with the chimpanzees at the Bronx Zoo in 1906. On his cage was a plaque, which touted him as the missing link in evolutionary Darwinism. Even today the conceited West still views Africa as under evolved and economically "retarded." The West believes that Africa is in need of our intervention. We, the West, are Creon, smug and secure as we justify our teachings as righteous and moral while seeing to the systematic debasement of other nations. Africa is Antigone, fighting for her beliefs and familial honor. Antigone says to Ismene shortly before her death, "One world approved thy wisdom; another mine" (Sophocles 279). Referring to socialism and democracy, Dr. Dibinga said that they were as "two wings of the same bird." If our nations are two wings of the same bird and one wing is destroyed, can the bird still fly?

Antigone's sister, Ismene says, "We were born women, as who should not strive with men...we are ruled of the stronger so that we must obey in these things, and in things yet sorer," and no doubt, she echoes the beliefs of the entire female population of Thebes, except for Antigone (Sophocles 279). Antigone is quite an exception. She is still a child, for she is not yet of age to marry; her "hot heart" makes it impossible for her to live while her brother is dishonored. This same heart gives her the courage to die at peace once her ideals have been honored. Dibinga made us aware of the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, or the perfect path of life, which means living in the best possible state of the soul. This philosophical view exemplifies the moral perfection to which Creon believes that he subscribes. Unfortunately, his thoughts are marred and skewed by sexism and self-serving tendencies. He might be hearing Antigone's eloquent arguments; however, he

refuses to listen to them. This tragic flaw brings ruin to Creon and the members of his household, and this same ruin has been brought to Africa. The most natural source of power, the power to conceive and create, has been bestowed upon women. Ancient African tradition, according to Dr. Dibinga, places the burden of rule upon the female. God has given them the power to conceive, and this view created a matriarchal society. As it was in Antigone's era, so it is in Africa today. The natural rulers are forbidden to rule or even give counsel. According to Dr. Dibinga, those in power are placed in unique circumstances that allow for power to be dispersed discreetly. Creon states a similar view: "If any, being the supreme guide of the state, cleaves not to the best counsels, but through some fear, keeps his lips locked, I hold, and have ever held, him most base" (Sophocles 269). However, as Antigone argues her justified beliefs to Creon, blinded by foolish pride, he can only say, "I am no man; she is the man, if this victory shall rest with her, and bring no penalty!" (Sophocles 280).

Dichotomies such as these--man and woman, rich and poor, black and white, ruler and ruled, proud and humble, wisdom and ignorance--have no real solutions. Dr. Dibinga feels that many issues related to *Afrikosis* could be improved by reinstating the woman to her natural position as the ruler of family and village and removing the interventionist Western powers. The problem at the heart of this solution was highlighted when Dr. Dibinga quoted an unknown philosopher. Essentially, the philosopher hypothesized that oppressor and oppressed cannot meet, cannot debate fairly, and cannot come to any sort of conclusion as the gap between the two is too great. I agree, for even as Dr. Dibinga spoke of the forgiveness bestowed by the South Africans on their brothers, the white Afrikaaners, the memories of injustice shone in his eyes, infusing his speech with a rage that quieted the entire audience. A hurt like that cannot be so easily repaired, nor can the crisis of Africa. Those in power will not relinquish control so easily, nor are Western authorities likely to ignore lucrative African resources. Dr. Dibinga said, "Humanity must be fertilized by the ashes of the existing system." Antigone, Eteocles, and Polyneices struggled against the confines of Thebes. Their ashes fertilized the abolition of empires and monarchies and aided the creation of democracies. Still, many of the issues of their day, the human weaknesses, are exactly the same today. The quest for equality and the evolution of man will continue long after we are gone and our ashes fertilize the next struggle.

#### Works Cited

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