

Dear Samir Amin, You will Remain Alive!

Dear Samir Amin,

I write this as if you were still here amongst us, for an individual such as yourself who has lived for a continent, remains alive well after their death. You will not be lost in histories past, you will not be deemed irrelevant by futures to come, you will stay here in the material present as we struggle for the continent you committed your life to.

As a young lecturer in 2009 I recall desperately looking for books, articles, and ideas to use for teaching in my history classrooms. Ideas produced within the continent, ones that did not simply regurgitate the formulas of the West. My sweet encounter with *Global History: A View from the South* was all I needed. I read your work alongside Walter Benjamin, writing histories in spaces of contradiction, histories of the oppressed in worlds shaped by the demands and exploits of capital. How are we to struggle to produce ideas on our own terms? I used these methods in my classes; methods that belonged to our history, relevant to our struggles that revolutionaries such as yourself had the audacity to speak of. Producing a framework relevant to our context wasn't simply a parallel project to the Eurocentric view of the world, but it was in direct opposition to it. A view from the global south was a history of the oppressed as a weapon against oppression, it did not fashionably sit side-by-side Eurocentrism as an "alternative," but it was indeed a confrontation with the assumptions of an Africa without history. An affirmation of an Africa that was complex and an Africa that was coerced into capitalistic social relations but found hope in the oppressed.

This was important for the young lecturer making sense of our history

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to a group of undergraduate students. It was important not to romanticize our futures as alternatives to the West, but not to become so pessimistic as to lose hope in the struggles that lay before us. It was precisely because of our contradictions that we found pockets of resistance everywhere. Class was not merely an imported Marxian term, but a lived history which we saw everywhere on the edges of capital in our world, in our shared history. It made sense to us through your writings.

Soon after, I was elated when I met you at the University of Dar es Salaam campus in the Nkrumah hall in 2010, overflowing with students and a few lecturers who still believed in the importance of ideas. We eagerly listened to the exchanges from the high table adorned with bouquets and color coordinated cloth. Samir Amin, you sat in the audience with your simple cloth bag, attentively listening with the rest of us. The talk was on Pan Africanism, a topic dear to us all as it held the dream of unity, for the continent. The question for all of us was clear: Whose unity? What was the basis of this unity? Our questions were not answered in the hall. In the naiveté of a young person but with the courage that comes with naiveté, I stood up and questioned the cultural unity that was being celebrated by our speaker, the oneness of Africa premised on its cultural heritage and riches. The assumptions of an "African" way of being, an untouched history, stagnant and unresponsive to the exploits of the world, encapsu-

lated by the fragile bubble of culture. I asked, what of the political unity Kwame Nkrumah spoke of? What of the anti-imperialist motive of a Pan African vision and what of a shared history of oppression? Were these not more urgent in constructing our Pan African vision? I sat down and Samir Amin took the floor in agreement with the young woman before him. I vainly cling on to that memory to this day. In very few words you reminded us that we did not have the luxury to speak of cultural unities in an unequal world, for we did not share one culture. Pan Africanism ought to be a project of the oppressed of Africa against imperialism and its compradors. Pan Africanism was not merely a celebration of who we were as a people but a forced assertion of our existence in the form of resistance. Pan Africanism was thought of as a political project from below, as a class project in defense of the peasantry and working people and as an anti-imperialist project birthed from the nationalist movements. Asserting our intellect not merely as cultural artifacts but as political social beings strategizing a revolutionary future. Flowers did not adorn you nor did color coordinated cloth!

I started my PhD studies with a proposal of intellectual histories of Islam and Africa as political projects, writing of the tributary mode of production and the destruction of Islamic city-state formations. I was enthralled by the depth of these histories and the immensity of these worlds. However, these worlds brought us to a political present, one where superficial binaries concealed economic contradictions, where the world was polarized between the Orient Muslim and the modern non-Muslim. Who was the oppressed? What did Political Islam come to



mean in our world? As I grappled with these questions I met you once again in 2015 at the CODESRIA General Assembly. Once again a brightly decorated panel accommodated speakers discussing Political Islam in Africa. Once again you were seated in the audience. This time not so patient with the discourse! You intervened in the discussion showing no sympathy for the advance of Islam on the continent as a political project or an alternative. Political Islam, at best was a

cultural project that concealed the class character of our societies, that if given the chance would act as all purely cultural projects have acted historically, reactionary and against the oppressed masses. Political Islam, you emphasized was not a movement of the oppressed, it was an identity that sought a piece of the capitalist pie and at best it was a sigh of the oppressed, quickly coopted by the logic of the forces it sought to oppose.

You live on Samir Amin, your life and your ideas live on – not in dusty bookshelves nor in adorned panel discussions but in our imagination of a more just world and in the fight against oppression.

Note

First published on the Pambazuka News online platform, August 23 2018.
<https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/letter-appreciation-natasha-shivji> [Accessed: 05.12.2018]