

EMANCIPATION

*Emancipate Yourself
from Mental Slavery*

RUPERT LEWIS

DEAR MR. GARVEY,

Emancipation anniversaries are the affirmation of our right to renewal at the personal and community levels. I liked how Emancipation anniversaries entered into the way the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League structured its organizational life. Your annual conventions in the 1920s and 1930s, which brought together representatives of black communities in Africa and the Diaspora to discuss our condition and plan for the future, were held in the month of August. In another letter I will ask you about the organizational challenges you faced in attempting to network, without the Internet, over 1000 UNIA divisions in 38 countries.

I have been asked to give the Emancipation 2000 lecture at the Boulevard Baptist Church and this coincides with the 60th anniversary of your death in London in 1940. "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery" is a phrase made popular by Bob Marley in his famous 'Redemption Song'. Marley, who like you hailed from the parish of St. Ann, was born five years after your death and he died in 1980. His music has had a powerful global outreach. 'Redemption Song' is the last tune on the *Uprising* album by Bob Marley and the Wailers. That album came out in 1980 and I still have my copy of the original long-playing record. So it is 20 years now that we have been listening to this profound message of revolution. Bob got hold of your speech and put the line to very creative lyrics and music and has directed us to the philosophical and historical

depth of your conceptions. But it takes much more than very good music to get there.

The word 'revolution' has now become commercialized and advertisers use the word to describe new fashion in jeans, shirts and shoes. It has also been used to describe the new information technology. On another level it has become associated with violence used to overthrow the state. But the way you fought mental slavery implies a kind of mental emancipation that is revolutionary on a profound level because it means releasing the shackles on our minds, cutting through the doctrines of racial inferiority to arrive at our human potential.

THE IDEA OF MENTAL SLAVERY

Professor Barry Higman, an Australian scholar of West Indian history, has written that this idea of mental slavery goes back even further than your speech in 1937. Little did you know that the phrase you used in 1937 in an address in Menelik Hall, in the town of Sydney, in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada, would have been picked up and given new life. This is part of the reason why I feel confident in writing this letter because in many ways you have taken on a second life in our minds. But the life in our minds takes on many forms and some of these forms do not reflect what you meant by mental freedom. So we sport the red, black and green, of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, have your image on coins, and have streets and schools named after you. But do we really know what you stood for and what mental emancipation continually demands of us?

Professor Higman has identified one source of the term 'mental slavery' in a letter by "one Sydney Moxsy of Dry River, Hayes, Clarendon", which was published in the *Daily Gleaner* of 31 July 1919 under the caption 'Manual and Mental Slavery'. Professor Higman (1998: 9-10) says that Moxsy

believed that slavery was of at least two kinds, the mental and the manual. Manual or 'body slavery' was forced on people through the enslavement of 'one man to another', whereas 'mind-slavery' was either created or permitted by people themselves, and was therefore more a matter of sorrow than of anger. All human beings were potentially subject to mental slavery, said Moxsy, and, in words foreshadowing Garvey and Marley, he claimed 'none but the individual himself can alleviate it.' The trouble was, he argued, that whereas people would readily help to free others from manual slavery they 'will not make any personal effort to free themselves from the slavery of their own passions; or from that slavery of custom and carelessness which permits of extravagance and waste.

Moxsy had a moral approach to mental slavery but he put his finger on the important concept of self-liberation.

Professor Higman suggests that you might have gotten the idea of mental slavery from Moxsy. Maybe you got a copy of the *Gleaner* in New York in 1919 during your demanding travel schedule throughout the United States and, somehow, in your 1937 speech you decided to use it; or maybe it is sheer coincidence that you and Moxsy used the same formulation. I wonder how useful speculation is on this matter when we have no idea of the conversations you were having during the August meeting of the second Regional Conference of the branches of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the United States and Canada. Moreover, you had just finished giving your lectures in the School of African Philosophy which was meant to train new leaders. The oral tradition is very strong with us. But I am glad you were a journalist and printer and so much of what you wrote and spoke is with us today. Since I started writing this letter I found that in the *Blackman* newspaper of November 22, 1930, you refer to mental and physical subjugation in Liberia as you comment on 20th century slavery and the anti-slavery movement there. If we dig deeper we'll probably find the term in wider use during the 19th century and the early 20th century. What does it matter? What matters now is the relevance of mental slavery to your grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the year 2000.

Professor Higman (1998: 11) notes:

Perhaps part of the attraction of the mental slavery model in recent times has been its apparent usefulness in explaining continuing social inequality, the perceived failure of independent politics and the new forms of international bondage associated with globalization and the 'free' market. It goes together with the idea that neo-colonialism is simply another form of slavery, and that Jamaican (black) people are still not truly free, something Rastafarians have regularly contended.

MENTAL EMANCIPATION

You said,

We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind. Mind is your only ruler, sovereign. The man who is not able to develop and use his mind is bound to be the slave of the other man who uses his mind, because man is related to man under all circumstances for good or for ill (Hill 1990: 791).

You have taken the discussion to the general level of man. Those who read you purely in racial terms miss where you are heading. Your discussion about mental slavery and mental emancipation takes place at a more general level, which is why you argue that under all circumstances the persons who develop their minds will dominate those who do not. By the way I also found out that one of the most frequently used words in your *New Jamaican* newspaper of 1932-1933 was the word 'mind'. You recognized that whether it was the renaissance art of Europe, the Pyramids of Egypt or the engineering genius of the Panama Canal, it had to start in the mind. The idea of mental emancipation in your work is connected to a conception we took from you in 1969 when some of us started the *Abeng* newspaper. As a banner on the front page of a few early issues we used your phrase, "We want our people to think for themselves." This is no easy thing to do and requires daily application. Thinking for ourselves implies that we have a sense of self and selves, implies community and also that if we don't think for ourselves we follow those who think. Coupled with this is the challenge of confidence in self. You placed such a big emphasis on this and in fact your entire work is premised on this idea of how we think and whether how and what we think advances or hinders our goals.

Coming from the experience of plantation slavery and continued in the post-slavery years of colonialism has been this idea of inferiority, of us being of less capacity than white people. This was no easy battle to wage given the fact that the Western world, its universities, research institutions and philosophers all said the same thing. Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher and one of the sources of Western modernity, said, "This fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid" (Eze 1997: 38). The Western traditions of modernity from left to right of the political spectrum all shared variations of this view. The problem you identified was not so much whether white thinkers had this view but whether black people believed it as well. Some people of African descent who resisted this idea seized educational opportunities and tried to demonstrate through hard study that they were as good as the whites and struggled for acceptance. Yet when some of these educated blacks came to hold power in Africa and the Caribbean they implemented the same laws, institutions and practices that upheld slavery and colonialism and thus continued oppression on their people. So education does not necessarily resolve this problem of self-contempt. In fact it can compound it. Moreover, in any group, regardless of race, education and wealth, from which power-holders are drawn; power can

be and is abused by human beings.

One of the things that mental slavery still means is vulnerability to new forms of the virus of racial self-contempt from the days of slavery to the 21st century. Each generation during slavery and after slavery engaged this issue. The fact that I am writing you on this matter of mental slavery is evidence that it is still an issue in Jamaica today.

Peter Abrahams, the South African-Jamaican writer, in his recent memoir makes an observation that will shock some of his readers. While recognizing the strengths of the Jamaican people he points to the depth of black self-contempt in Jamaica (Abrahams 2000: 244).

We had adopted and applied to ourselves the judgements and values whites had used to justify the way they treated blacks. We had, to a greater extent than I had seen elsewhere, become the frontline of black self-contempt.

In his manuscript of this book, Abrahams (ms. 2000: 252) elaborates:

Black mothers told their own little daughters they were ugly because they were too black. African hair was 'bad' hair; African features were ugly; ugly fat lips, ugly broad noses. You are black therefore you are worthless.

It is true that many of us reject these stereotypes but there are too many who subscribe to these racist values. There are too many men who state their preferences in terms of a brown shade and too many women who bleach to please them. Too many who live as if "nutten black nuh good".

This problem of racial self-contempt is not only a Jamaican problem. It is an international problem that bears on the children of Africa in and outside of the continent itself. Talking to black people in Brazil or in Central America we hear variations on a familiar theme. It is ironical that in many of these places Jamaican black people are held up as torch-bearers of freedom from racial inferiority because of your reputation as well as the reputation of Bob Marley.

What is most disturbing about Abrahams' observation is that this type of mental slavery operates in the way many of us think in day-to-day relations with our families, in our communities, and which bear on judgements we make about each other.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Jamaica is at the same stage on this issue in 2000 as we were in the 1930s. There is no legal barrier to a black Jamaican taking up any position in the island whether in the state or in the private sphere. A lot of black Jamaicans are positive

about themselves and many of us who have lived abroad, as in your time, feel inferior to nobody and have demonstrated this in outstanding achievements in many spheres whether in Jamaica or in different parts of the world. There are many more opportunities for us to demonstrate our potential than in your time. In fact, the present generation has no idea of the world as it was during the first half of the 20th century. Black Jamaicans who have come into money are very eager to demonstrate it by the expensive cars they drive and the 'great houses' they build.

But at the same time as there have been changes from the white-skin dominance of the colonial era there continues to be a widespread view that it is better to have light-skinned people in positions of leadership and authority. This is due to the fact that some people still associate being black with negative social behaviour such as criminality, violence, corruption, and inefficiency. If that premise is accepted it follows that you need people with light-skins to be in charge.

Anyone who follows world events will realize that criminality, violence, corruption and inefficiency are in no way functions of race or colour. Criminality, violence, corruption and inefficiency abound in China, India, in Europe, as well as in the United States and Latin America and are rooted in the workings of human nature and in particular social circumstances. They are not the product of pigmentation.

Yet mental emancipation must engage with the Achilles heel of racial self-abasement in the Jamaican psyche, which keeps on reasserting itself. Colour stereotyping is the single most important mental obstacle to the realization of our human potential. The same people who deny that this is a problem are often the same people who give preference to their children with a lighter skin, who have preferences for lighter people, who bleach themselves or who in daily conversations pass judgements on people based on skin colour. The ascription of social value to skin colour is an idea rooted in old slave relations.

TO WHAT END DO WE STRUGGLE FOR MENTAL EMANCIPATION?

Our struggle for mental emancipation is connected to your discussion early in the 1937 speech on world civilizations. You discussed African civilizations, then went on to other civilizations, identifying Persian, Greek, Babylonian, Roman and European civilizations. You identified some of the artefacts and scientists of the early 20th century. Too often we look at what took people hundreds and thousands of years to build and we are awed by the achievements but we lose sight of the essential point that they represent the finest in human potential for particular periods

of time. To be civilized is to realize our human potential. This is long-term thinking but the start of a new century is a good time to at least think about your challenge. In the same 1937 speech you also said, "The only way you can be happy is to lay the foundation in one generation for the succeeding generation" (Hill 1990: 793). You were the conscious beneficiary of the experience of previous generations. One can be the beneficiary of something without being aware of it. Consciousness of complex and contradictory legacies, and being able to build on the positive and to root out the bad grass from our mental yards was part of your challenge.

The closest I have come to thinking along this line is the discussions started by Thabo Mbeki, the South African President, on the African Renaissance (Mbeki 1998). What you were calling on us to do, together with the people of Africa and the Diaspora, is to conceive of and build an alternative civilization. Our struggle for mental emancipation represents the affirmation of our capacity to deal with the problems facing us today. Mental emancipation also has to oppose the idea of human expendability.

Human expendability has been one of the fundamental assumptions underlying the formation of the Caribbean. We ought not to forget the Tainos were victims of a genocidal violence in Jamaica from the 16th to the 18th century. And this violence extended to the entire indigenous people of the Americas. The Guyanese writer, Jan Carew, paid attention to this but it is often neglected in our historiography (Carew 1994).

The issue of human expendability is due to the fact that too many Jamaicans whether black, brown, yellow or white, write off other Jamaicans, particularly poor black Jamaicans. It is this that contributes to the justification of arbitrary executions that take place by agents of the state, by dons, by gangs and by mobs. The privileged sectors of society ignore the execution of young black men in inner cities. And young black men execute with impunity those who don't belong to their corner, street or community. This idea of expendability is a variation of notions of expendability developed during slavery: that a slave's usefulness was a function of his/her contribution to labour processes and property accumulation. This rationale for slavery was well developed by Eric Williams, the Trinidadian scholar and the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, in his classic book *Capitalism and Slavery*. Our post-colonial political ideologies also contributed to ideas of human expendability particularly in the context of the Cold War struggles between communism and anti-communism. In Africa and the Caribbean black people

killed each other on ideological grounds based on Marxism-Leninism, socialist or pro-capitalist positions and political movements and parties justified this slaughter. But we don't need ideologies to kill each other. Disputes between a man and a woman as well as disrespecting someone in the thousand and one ways this can take place can easily lead to murder today.

Mental emancipation never ends if it is a process of realizing our human potential. That requires effort, work, discipline and self-confidence. It requires literacy, the foundation of modern and expanded knowledge. Your emphasis on reading and on opening up ourselves to where the world is in our time continues to be relevant. The story you told in 1932 to an audience in Kingston still rings true today: you spoke about returning from England with books on Africa and economics and leaving them in your office. No one touched them; but, you said, if you had left a farthing it would have disappeared. But in addition to our individual efforts, civilization concerns the circumstances of our everyday life: peace, the right to live, freedom from fear and poverty, the right to speak and disagree with others, freedom of movement. These are civilizing because they are profoundly part of the conditions necessary for realization of human potential. This takes us into some comments on political changes in the 20th century bearing on our struggle for civil liberties and sovereignty.

In 1937 you were in your fiftieth year and by 1940 you were gone. You missed the Second World War and the important changes that came after it. India gained independence, China had a revolution and this was the beginning of change in Asia and Africa. The West African nationalists, Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe who learnt so much from your work, and spoke so highly about you, returned to the Gold Coast and Nigeria to lead independence movements. Well, South Africa was to take a much longer time and it was only in 1994 that majority rule was achieved under the African National Congress (ANC) led by Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela. Today, the colonial empires that dominated the world in your time no longer exist. But what is remarkable is that Europe carved up Africa during your lifetime and when this dismemberment seemed destined to last for centuries you felt that an international campaign could be waged to free Africa. Imagine what you had to face: empires that seemed permanent and global racism bolstered by law and huge armies. The dimensions of this carving up never fail to astonish me. The Europeans acquired in the late 19th century "30 new African colonies or protectorates, covering 16 million sq. km (10 million

sq. miles). They had divided a population of approximately 110 million Africans into 40 new political units, with some 30 per cent of the borders drawn as straight lines, cutting through villages, ethnic groups, and African kingdoms" (Appiah and Gates 1999: 1683).

REPARATIONS

On the centenary of Emancipation in the West Indies in 1934 you wrote in the *Black Man* magazine about the handicaps faced by the descendants of transatlantic slavery:

The West Indian Negro to a certain extent has accomplished much in the one hundred years. They, like the American Negroes, who were freed in 1865, through the good efforts of Abraham Lincoln, and the force of national urgencies, were set loose upon the world without a cent in their pockets or a bit of land to settle on that they could call their own. From the beginning they have had to fight their way up to where they are today. Some have done well, but the great majority are almost where they were when they came off the plantations. They are propertyless and almost helpless (Garvey and Essien-Udom 1977: 92).

At Emancipation the West Indian planters got twenty million pounds and the enslaved got nothing. The West Indian planter interests estimated that their slaves were worth 40 million pounds. In the folk tradition in the West Indies this injustice has not been forgotten but there has never been any sustained movement to claim reparations or compensation. The 21st century is not too late to correct this error where we who are free do our ancestors and ourselves an injustice.

Meanwhile, in self-help efforts to lift ourselves economically, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw massive migrations from the Caribbean outward to Panama, Cuba, Central America and the United States. These migrations were in response to the economic disaster faced by the post-Emancipation freed African populations in the West Indies. But you analysed a further impediment in our efforts to achieve civilization, the goal of social and economic emancipation. You argued that: "Millions of Negroes of the West Indies, like the millions of Negroes of the United States have not yet formulated a programme of racial preservation, nor have they any settled racial outlook. They are still drifting in the white man's civilization" (Garvey and Essien-Udom 1977: 92). So we come back to notions of civilization and the route of realizing our potential through individual, family and collective vision.

The movement you led sought to reshape the world created by colo-

nialism and imperialism. For the oppressed to think about reshaping the world we have to create new fundamentals. And one vital element lies in the assertion of our humanity. Of the last two centuries, the 19th century agenda was the struggle against slavery; the 20th century has been the struggle for political rights and sovereignty. The 21st century challenges us to again determine our place in the world, reckoning with issues of justice and fundamental economic opportunities for our people. These goals cannot be arrived at by chance but by conscious decision and collective effort to change the world we live in to meet our aspirations. At the start of the 21st century, let us continue to seek guidance from you as you in your time emancipated yourself from mental slavery.

Yours in the struggle for mental emancipation,

Rupert Lewis

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