

## **Remembering our Guyanese sister Andaiye, and how much she gave to us and meant to us**

Andaiye had recovered so many times from serious health crises that we all got in the habit of believing she would always recover. A few weeks ago, I was doing a bit of work with Andaiye on the preface to her Anthology, I asked about her health, she said that her heart function was about 20%. Lisa Longstaff (with whom Andaiye had stayed when she came to London and who was helping me with reading) and I took little notice of the severity she had conveyed. I refused to acknowledge what I had heard.

I first met Andaiye when Margaret Prescod introduced her to us in England in 1982 to lobby for an international tribunal to investigate the government's assassination of Walter Rodney, leader of the Working People's Alliance (WPA – Andaiye was a founding member). We asked her to speak at the conference we were organizing that November 'Bringing it all back home: Black and immigrant women speak out and claim our rights.' She gave a very good speech about the struggle for survival of women in Guyana, and said that those who had emigrated to the UK and were coming home should bring money.<sup>1</sup>

Events impelled the English Collective of Prostitutes, for which I was spokeswoman, to occupy a church a couple of days later and Andaiye as if by nature became part of the support unit at our Women's Centre until the occupation ended 12 days later. Walter would have approved of our temporarily waylaying the purpose of her trip to support our demand: 'Mothers need money: end police illegality and racism in King's Cross.'

Andaiye was a larger than life person. You were always aware of depths and of her self-consciousness, including of mistakes and narrowness which she fought. She had both a sharp tongue and a compassionate one, and she and I didn't always agree about who should be the recipient of which. We knew that about each other and sometimes even by skype smiled at it. But she had a quality of respectfulness for most people which is rare among politicians, especially in a class-ridden society like an ex-colony trying to pull itself out of its past and into its own principles.

Most of these qualities were on display when, after 20 years or more of sparring and arguing, she agreed to the perspective of wages for housework, which meant fighting for a living wage for mothers and other carers. She changed at a meeting of grassroots women that Red Thread had pulled together. She told them that 'Selma James says that women

---

<sup>1</sup> Her speech is published in *Strangers and Sisters: Women, Race and Immigration*, Falling Wall Press 1985 p164

produce and reproduce labour power', and was about to pass on to the next profundity when one of the women said 'Mek I see' and asked her to repeat what she had just said. The women seemed to grasp it in ways that Andaiye had not and were delighted to know that they were doing such important work. At that moment, according to Andaiye, she also knew it. It says a lot about her that she could learn from people she was there to teach. She would always end this story by saying 'It only took me 20 years!'

It changed her. I think it enabled her to look again at the class divisions among Caribbean women which most of us don't love to face. It also enabled her to write a piece about a decisive struggle in the 70s that Guyana housewives made – nobody would have seen them as who they were but Andaiye.

Some women in Red Thread, the organization she loved and whose problems of clarity and direction plagued her, did a fantastic piece of work: a time-use survey of the work grassroots women did every day. They surveyed not only Afro- and Indo-Guyanese but Amerindian women who are usually left out of every consideration. It was path breaking. They found out how working-class women were spending their lives in order for them and their families to survive, and that the poorest – Amerindian women – had the longest working day. They had help from us in London (especially Solveig Francis), but they did it despite the hardship it imposed which their account described. We must know more about what they found out.

Sometime later, after a particularly destructive flood, RT organized with women from the different communities to get resources they were certainly entitled to. You could see how much RT women had developed in confidence and understanding and as movement organizers by doing the survey. This was Andaiye's considered view when we discussed it recently. The material and Andaiye's leadership are there for all to see. It shames academics who think they know how to find things out. We were overjoyed by RT's accomplishment but for various reasons it was never published. It is still to be done, and must be.

Andaiye's most enduring contribution to women round the world who for 14, 15, 16 even 18 hours a day do survival work of reproducing and protecting the human race, happened in Beijing in 1995 when many of us went to the UN conference on women there, as part of a delegation headed by Margaret.

Andaiye was part of the CARICOM delegation. This did not entitle her to chair the contact group of governments discussing whether unwaged work

should be measured and valued. She threw caution to the wind and took the chair. As this was the governments' conference, we were not allowed in. But Andaiye set up a runner to keep us informed, a white woman who had been a nun and would help in any way. She would carry a draft of the critical paragraph to us outside. I would read it and say 'No, this is not good enough.' The ex-nun would go back to Andaiye with my evaluation and tell the working group, 'No' and what was wrong with it. They would discuss further and another draft would come to me which I again turned down, which Andaiye would again tell the working group why she was turning it down, until the fourth or fifth draft which I thought with small amendments would do quite well. Our courier conveyed the positive news to Andaiye who then said this would do, and sent the paragraph in to the Committee which was to approve it and put it on the agenda of the plenary. But the Committee refused to accept that the work should be valued, worried that women would make claims on their governments and that countries of the South would make claims on the North. The fight was still on. Andaiye our witness our protagonist, was inside and about 50 of us were outside. Because we could not speak, we held a silent vigil in the corridor outside the meeting, wearing our Chinese T-shirt which said 'women count – count women's work', and held up signs saying the same in English. We won: the full conference passed it.

It changed everything. We now had confirmation that this survival work which women did was considered extensive and valuable by the United Nations. It was a great weapon and many people refer to it without knowing its humble origins or Andaiye's crucial role in it. We later learnt that Article 88 of Venezuela's revolutionary constitution had its roots in Latin American women also lobbying during the UN Decade for Women for unremunerated work to be recognized, which would have been strengthened by our paragraph. Andaiye was delighted by Article 88 and how grassroots Venezuelans constantly referred to the Bolivarian Constitution the people had constructed.

Recently the women in our Thai network, with Andaiye's permission, read all the material from RT's survey and decided to use it for a group of grassroots women organisers they have brought together, each of whom was involved in struggles of one kind or another: keeping the land, refusing for it to be used for mining or other pollution, feeding families, decriminalizing sex work, supporting prisoners who were criminalized in the struggle, etc. It was an enormous success when women enlightened each other about the heavy workday these unwaged 'non-workers' performed. Red Thread's work, with Andaiye's direction, is helping women organizing a long way from home.

Andaiye and Margaret worked hard and consistently to get CARICOM and Caribbean people generally to support the Haitian movement against US imperialism and the corrupt and greedy sector which the monster to the north backed to do its bidding. When the US coup against President Aristide took place in 2004, just after the bicentenary of the great Haitian revolution, they organized a letter of Caribbean women (which both my grand-daughter, Margaret's daughter, and I were honoured to sign), protesting the coup and informing others of the tremendous accomplishments of the movement which the coup aimed to smash. This is ongoing work which Andaiye was particularly committed to and which must grow. Andaiye and Margaret represented us at the inauguration of President Préval, who it was hoped would protect the Haitian movement but did not.

In 2006 about 70 people from the GWS, including Andaiye and the RT core, attended the Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela. Friends then took us on a beautiful tour to see the accomplishments of the revolution and meet some of the people who were doing this creative work on health, food, housing, disability, education..., mostly women.

In 2007 Andaiye and I did a speaking tour of the US, travelling from coast to coast for a month. Phoebe Jones (Philadelphia GWS) held the strings and made all the arrangements without a hitch. Andaiye's central subject was the exposure of the 'genderising' of structural adjustment – its attack on women. It had never been done this way before and we all learned plenty. The three of us had a great time and made some money for both Red Thread and the US campaign. We were such a good team that it didn't seem right at the end when we parted.

Not long after Lori Nairne, from Queer Strike (GWS) in San Francisco, and a homeopath, spent a month in Georgetown training Red Thread women on every day homeopathy for themselves and their children, with positive results including for Andaiye.

When speaking with Andaiye we had special fun when we thought that we had both uncovered some truth which had evaded others. One day we discussed Mr Slime from our mutual friend George Lamming's masterpiece *In the Castle of My Skin*, a portrait of the corrupt politician, 30 years before we met his ilk in the flesh in Georgetown, Port of Spain or Kingston. Andaiye later gave a splendid speech about this in Cuba.

When my Anthology was published in 2012, I told Andaiye 'now we must do yours'. She and Alissa Trotz gathered the speeches and articles which I began to edit but my eyes failed me and Alissa continued. We are thankful that Andaiye, despite illness, pain and every discomfort, was able to finish it

with Alissa's help. That's will power! (More than once she told me in great frustration, 'I can't work!' When she could she didn't complain.) We all look forward to its publication – as soon as possible.

When my partner Nina Lopez, who had been to Venezuela with her, and I visited Andaiye in Georgetown in 2016, she helped me finalize my piece on *Beyond a Boundary*.<sup>2</sup> She was the only cricket fan I knew who challenged CLR James for the depth of that addiction.

Andaiye grasped not only the implications of wages for housework but how we organize, 'person by person' as put it. She reconsidered her wide and rich experience in the light of the perspective of women's unwaged work and gave our politics a whole new dimension. Her constant preoccupation with bringing together women across the race divides in Guyana, strengthened and deepened our own antiracism. For all of these reasons, she was soon a much loved and respected point of reference in our international network. We are shocked and shattered by her death, and will miss her as we remember how much she gave to us and meant to us.

Selma James on behalf of the Wages for Housework Campaign and the Global Women's Strike

---

<sup>2</sup> *Marxism, Colonialism and Cricket*, Duke, 2018.