



## The Sound of Oppression by Firouz Gaini

Act 3: The Faroe Islands, May 12 – June 4, 2006

The unique cultural event *Reinventing the Postcolonial Self*, which took place in the beautiful Nordic House in Tórshavn a sunny evening in May, exposed the generally rigid and provincial character of our conservative rhetoric on Faroese identities in the Nordic postcolonial present. The local public discourse has repeated the same formal political/ideological refrain for decades, not being able to introduce fresh, global (and postcolonial) perspectives to the hidden and isolated Faroese/Danish articulation of the mind and corpus of colonialism.

Hopefully, this vivid artistic *tour de force* with participants from Cambodia/USA, the Caribbean/USA, South Korea/Denmark, South Korea/Sweden, Indonesia and the Faroe Islands can function as an explosive, breaking up old dualistic worldviews of Us/Them and North/South regarding modern colonialism. The sound of oppression has many more tones and tunes than we knew. The image of oppression has many more colours and shades than we were taught. The spoken word is a powerful language that reshuffles our cultural categories, even creates new borders, hence also connects our personal experiences and lives to the postcolonial reality. Dominant models are contested, informal power abuse unveiled, and social conformity objected.

But we are not used to these kinds of projects in the Faroe Islands. And unfortunately, the Nordic House was far from packed on this charming day in May. "Rethinking Nordic Colonialism" and "Reinventing the Postcolonial Self" are, I am afraid, too abstract and "academic" as headings for many Faroese Islanders. For those finding their way to the Nordic House, it was anyway a memorable and touching meeting with young artists of very different backgrounds, with very personal approaches to the problem of postcolonialism today.

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The event started with Jane Jin Kaisen & Tobias Hübinette's multimedia performance on adopted children's position and role in the so-called Nordic neo-colonialism – with special focus on the thousands of Korean babies who have been adopted throughout the past decades to rich countries in North America and Europe, including the Faroe Islands. The artists, based in Copenhagen and Stockholm respectively, were themselves adopted from South Korea and attempt to speak about “this unique experience of alienation and deprivation, regaining and reclaiming agency through art, cultural production and academic research” (Kaisen & Hübinette). It was a strong performance, shocking many guests usually considering adoption as harmless, a simple act of helping “poor children from poor countries” to get a bright future. The case of the adopted children also unveils the cultural categories we use when defining the value of strangers, foreigners and minorities in the Nordic region. The Korean adoptee should, we believe, be thankful and happy for getting into the safe, Nordic family system.

The alienated Korean adoptee was also represented at the art exhibition *Living (in) the Postcolonial* (The Faroe Islands Art Museum, May 12 – June 4, 2006) where the provocative, reversed situation was displayed on video: A happy Korean couple adopting a Danish baby from the remote, cold North. This performance forced the audience to reflect on a subject from a new angle: are we, the Faroe Islanders, also taking part in this form of neo-colonialism? If we are “victims” ruled by Copenhagen, are we then not innocent in global neo-colonialism? The *Reinventing the Postcolonial Self* project demonstrates that the victims are also perpetrators and vice-versa. We live in a complex fragmented world where, as mentioned before, old static stereotypes and binary contrasts seldom fit social reality. Everybody has to take responsibility. This is what Kaisen & Hübinette force us to realize in the lesson from the lost adoptee.

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After a short break spiced with the eclipsed musical expression of the Indonesian DJ-duo HYDROXYBROMIDE (part of the group Ruangrupa that will be presented later), Anida Yoeu Esguerra, based in Chicago, entered the stage to perform her exciting and aggressive poetry & performance piece entitled “On the Cusp of Phoenix Rising”. Anida, a young Asian American woman of Cambodian origin, impressed the very quiet and passive Faroese audience with her political poetic

fusillade exposing an untamed fighting spirit giving associations to some hardcore American rap and hip hop lyrics and messages. Anida's uncompromising volley of furious and moving spoken words, still very focused, about the numerous American wars in Eastern Asia and elsewhere since the 1950s, about Muslims living in post-9/11 USA, about structural racism and prejudices against ethnic and social minorities, about cynical capitalist globalisation, etc., quaked people in the Nordic House and made some faces very bleak and depressed. Anida's technique, extremely powerful, yet simple, mixes subcultural hip hop, political demagoguery and spiritual revival meeting. The audience was hit hard, again and again, with sharp-pointed oral ammunition shot out of Anida's speech. There was no option for the audience – you could not escape her political poetic blast without leaving the building. Anida, self-confident and experienced as monologue-speaker, communicates with her audience adjusting her energetic show and style to the people in front of the stage. The brilliant spoken word monologue "Excuse Me, AmeriKa" was fast and twinkling, bombarding the listener with facts, like the daily news from commercial television emissions. Some Faroese Islanders in the audience felt a bit lost in translation trying to catch Anida in her youthful sprint through time and space using a foreign language spiced with urban slang and unfamiliar metaphors. The distance from traditional Faroese political discourse was enormous; therefore it was also a big challenge for some people to cogitate Anida's rich and multifarious presentation of symbols and expressions relating to the history and experiences of minorities in USA. The question of how do we relate to this discourse was probably on the mind of some people, feeling inspired and confused at the same time. The performance was illuminating and disintegrating, giving ideas and raising questions, but no clear answers. And even if the oral traditions are very rich in Faroese culture, connecting the history of many generations together through songs and tales, the spoken words from young contemporary urban American artists may be very hard to decipher for the least internationalised part of the Faroese population – the older generations. But we, the Faroese Islanders, really need these new artistic expressions in order to get fresh angles and approaches to defining our self-image. Our mirror has always been Denmark. *Reinventing the Postcolonial Self* is the first and best attempt to find a new mirror to reflect on.

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After Anida Yoeu Esguerra came Imani Henry, a writer and performer based in New York, with the multimedia theatre piece "Living in the Light & B4T (before testosterone)" on the agenda. Again, a lonely person filled the whole stage and

hall with his personal story and his dreams, using the human voice, photo/film and music to communicate another interpretation of the postcolonial self. Imani Henry, from the Caribbean/USA, has been actively involved in so many projects and campaigns and associations that together compose a complex personality and life-story, but also tell a muted chapter in the brutal history of America. However, when Henry slowly enters the stage in loose white clothes, smiling and looking at the nervous faces around, nobody knows his story (except those reading the *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* booklet carefully before) and nobody can imagine the start and end of his tale. Through his multimedia theatre, we travel to Brooklyn and Martinique, to large demonstrations and political rallies; we meet old and young people, men and women; and they all take part in the Henry-drama that only features one single actor playing all the roles on stage. His gentle voice, noble movements and sedate face radiate the wisdom of the elders, kindness of the mother and freedom of the youth. We are sitting under the tall African trees listening to the story of the daughter who became a boy. What? Yes, a boy. Without any scandalizing effects or provocative behaviour, we learn that Imani is a boy that used to be a girl. Is it a joke or reality, people gathered in the Nordic House ask themselves; but it is not a joke. The little man, happy and sincere, has changed sexual identity and feels emancipated from mental and physical slavery. "Living in the Light & B4T (before testosterone)" is a cabaret-style piece that tries to erase the barriers between the audience and the actor, making everybody involved in the conflicts and tragedies, movements and discussions that Henry wants us to reflect on. This piece is at least twenty years before its time in the Faroe Islands where taboos on sexual and religious identities are oppressing minorities through silence, deep silence keeping critical utterances mute. Henry confuses the audience, not by coincidence, by taking the activist's role as freedom fighter to all spheres of life, including the sexual identity of minority community members. He incarnates the struggle of countless suffering people around the globe. Slavery is a system taking place on many levels in society. And even if it is not obvious that the spectator is familiar with all the details informing "Living in the Light & B4T (before testosterone)," Henry's language is basically universal, communicating across cultural and geographical boundaries. Henry could have made a huge scandal in the value-conservative Atlantic islands, openly discussing transsexuality without any Christian moral condemnation. He avoids it, partly because the piece didn't get the media attention it deserved, but also because of his peculiar way of storytelling.

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After Imani Henry's presentation, the crowd, participants and guests left the main auditorium in the Nordic House and moved to the lobby/café where the Faroese punk-rock band 200 (Tveyhundrað) was ready to propagate Faroese independence from Denmark through naïve provocative texts and noisy punk beats. The local contribution to the Spoken Word/Performance/Music Event, a very popular Tórshavn band that has inspired several new Faroese underground rock bands, is probably the most effective taboo-breaker in our society at the moment. Without any attempt to sound sophisticated or unbiased, 200 is explicitly bullying the Christian fundamentalists, political unionists and other powerful societal groups with a large amount of humour and irony in their songs.

Their mission is so successful that the main Faroese conservative newspaper, *Dimmalætting*, even had a leading article warning the public against the ugly, destructive anti-unionist project of 200. People were dancing and jumping, drinking and singing, while anarchic 200 had control over the usually very classic and uncontroversial Nordic House in Tórshavn. As young patriotic republicans, with a twinkle in their eyes, 200 play their songs in Faroese language (even if their two latest releases are called "Viva la Republica" and "Graceland"). Some local teenagers came now to listen to 200. They had probably heard rumours that 200 was giving a concert in town, without showing any interest in the rest of the *Reinventing the Postcolonial Self* programme.

Even if the foreigners, participating artists like Imani Henry and the Indonesian guys making up the artists' group Ruangrupa, as well as the officials and organizers from Denmark, Finland and elsewhere, could not understand the Faroese texts, they clearly enjoyed the raw and storming show orchestrated by three young men dreaming of Faroese political independence without any reservation. Faroe Islanders were in general very proud of 200, even reactionary unionists, I guess, as they were our representatives at an international event gathering talented artists from all the corners of the globe. Maybe they are too provocative and negative, some people thought, but now they are at least part of a postcolonial exhibition project organized by ambitious respected people from the "big world". It was a recognition of 200. For many Faroe Islanders, they were a (bad) joke, now they are to be taken serious. But 200 don't want to be taken too seriously, because joking and childish shouting is part of their mission. They want to have fun and spread a political message to the young and non-intellectuals in society. They do not fit in any elaborated category regarding the political fronts and discourses in the Faroe Islands. Therefore they are also – like our Caribbean, Cambodian, Indonesian and African friends – reinventing the postcolonial self. Viva la republica!

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Finally, when most of their hits had been played, 200 left the stage and got the chance to relax and chat with their international audience. A bit shy and reserved they told about their music in simple terms – not touching any concepts like postcolonialism, neo-colonialism or postmodernism that are too heavy and abstract for their style. And then HYDROXYBROMIDE opened the party and ended the creative event. The DJ duo, Ade Darmawan and Reza Afisina, is, as mentioned, part of the Ruangrupa – an artists' initiative and collaborative platform from Jakarta involving a dozen of people. Slowly most of the audience (those not involved in the project) left the building to go home, while the rest celebrated a successful project and stimulating stay in the stormy Faroe Islands. Even if the spectators in the Nordic House had been rather few, the local newspapers and radio and television channels had given the *Reinventing the Postcolonial Self* event and the *Living (in) the Postcolonial* art exhibition quite a lot of attention during these days in May. The next day, Sunday May 14, most of the visiting artists left the Faroe Islands and this part of NIFCA's well-organized and efficient Act 3 ended. The exhibition was still up for some weeks.

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As an anthropologist of Faroese/Iranian origin, based in Tórshavn, with university degrees from Norway and Denmark, I was very happy to take part in *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*. Personally, the events of Act 3 (Faroe Islands) gave me deep inspiration and many new ideas regarding questions relating to Faroese society and culture, history and future, identity and experience. Usually focus is, in local exhibitions, on our own musicians and artists, maybe a few from neighbouring countries, but almost never from other parts of the world. Usually, we have to go to Copenhagen or London or other cities to experience international arts exhibitions and events. Therefore, I consider this event as quite unique. Usually, we are the periphery that is invisible in the larger urbanised societies. This time the so-called periphery has been the context, the central arena, of an ambitious project of high priority. The people of the Faroe Islands, not prepared for this honourable plan, is in general quite sceptical towards new "trends" introduced from the global cultural scene, but the younger generation and "creative class" love to get the opportunity to meet artists from other countries with programmes that are far away from the traditional local culture. Some dominant societal groups, caricatured in 200's texts, consider new styles and cultural trends as a threat and danger to the sensible small Faroese society.

Project of this kind are, in my opinion, very important for the Faroe Islands – helping to open up discussions, to contest stereotypes, to support creative activists, to give the mute a voice, as well as to replace our Danish mirror with a larger international mirror so that our images of the world will derive from many regions and cities of the globe. We need to rethink our position in the Danish state, in the Nordic region and in the world. The overall success of the project depends on the future; hopefully the project continues with new phases and gets back to the Faroe Islands with new echoes of the sound of oppression.