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ARTS

Culture is not a weapon

by Jim Russell

Songololo: Voices of Change

The Carpetbaggers have descended on South Africa.

They are presenting themselves as friends of the revolution while they are in fact just another wave of colonialists bearing "gifts."

Wrapped attractively in celluloid, they call CULTURAL NATIONALISM and FEMINISM *Songololo: Voices of Change*.

Songololo is a celebration of black South African culture, masquerading as a glimpse of a revolution in progress.

The do-good "Baggers" arrived with their suitcases filled with film and liberal notions of "solidarity," before proceeding to record beautiful images of the revolution.

Songololo is a beautifully filmed music video, but it is not about revolution.

Revolution is a horrible, gut wrenching process concerned with the removal of a horribly oppressive system. The experience is nearly unfilmable and, even as such, it would be

unwatchable.

Songololo was shot in South Africa in the fall of 1989.

A heady time for black South Africans as the winds of change swelled to hurricane force. The South African government was forced to legalize anti-apartheid demonstrations for the first time in thirty years.

It was during this period of liberalisation and euphoria that South African born director, Marianne Kaplan went to Johannesburg, Soweto and Natal to make her documentary. She chose to feature two talented black performers - singer, writer and director, Gcina Mhlophe and poet/musician Mzwakhe Mbuli.

The movie follows these two, showing us not only their public side, through live performances, but also their private lives through family vignettes.

Ms. Mhlophe speaks for the "woman and children of her country" while Mr. Mbuli is known as the "people's poet."

Described as "cultural activists," they seek to present culture as a valuable tool, "a weapon that does not rust."

It is here that they do the black

people of South Africa a great disservice.

Culture is not a weapon, it is a "quality" that shapes the soul and fills the oppressed masses with substance and a sense of identity. Culture can do nothing more.

Cultural Nationalism and the divisiveness inherent in Feminism, on the other hand, can dilute and divert the forces of change, providing valuable time for the oppressors to regroup.

Songololo will probably do well on the Canadian Art theatre circuit. Images of black people singing and dancing have always made us comfortable.

Now that this questionable film has opened in theatres across Canada, I have no doubt that it's major funders - Telefilm Canada, National Film Board, OXFAM, External Affairs and the Anglican Church are busy patting themselves on their liberal vertebrae. I hope they develop cramps in their arms.

I give *Songololo* a one out of ten, only because it would be wrong not to recognise the crew who produced a beautifully filmed, lit, edited and composed product.



Mzwakhe Mbuli and Gcina Mhlophe

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