

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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## **Transcending the Battle in Seattle**

**Nafsi ya Jamii**

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In late November of 1999, the streets of Seattle, Washington, erupted in a human convulsion of more than 40,000 people. This demonstration, largely made violent by local police action, resulted from many years of worldwide organizing against corporations and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The events of those days still influence around the world organizing against economic injustice. Many mistakenly look only at those few days in their attempts to comprehend the lessons of the time and to measure what is effective or "successful." The movie *The Battle in Seattle*, despite references to much earlier organizing and actions around the world, dramatically imprints our minds and hearts with the emotions of those days. Those days have become vibrant and individualized.

The less visible and less dramatic use of the global technological Internet communications medium that made **The Battle in Seattle** possible is relegated to the less motive mood of political philosophizing, theorizing, and historical interpretation. It is much more difficult to be imprinted with thoughts or to hold thoughts that arise within calm contemplation than those that arise during times of a fast beating heart and adrenalin addled brains. That is the way that human animal memories are tuned. That is who we are.

But, at times, we have also transcended these limitations that are structured in our bodies and that flow from the often hidden, unconscious logic of our language and our communications tools. \*\*\*(Marshall McLuhan: *The Medium is the Message*) The wisdom revealed from shared collective and community contemplation often

rests in artistically “embroidered” Traditional Stories, Traditional Songs, sculptures, paintings, and such - touching multiple psychic levels. These wisdom bits are emotionally evoked and experienced in the oldest of communications technologies: drama, dance, and Traditional Ceremony. It is exactly these transcended views that all sides today - left, right, and middle - want to misinterpret and disregard.

What are the transcendent lessons from **The Battle in Seattle**? One is to recognize that the event itself is but a node in the so-called “Anti-globalization” Movement that could minimally be traced to 1988 demonstrations against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Berlin more than ten years earlier. Recognition has to also be given to more localized struggles against these forces over many decades that informed and influenced one another. This Movement cannot truly be separated from the worldwide movement against the **first** global trade regime: The Triangular Slave Trade. Each nodal effort has its own strategy and tactics that are shaped by local and contemporaneous circumstances. If we ignore the contingencies of the time, ignore local players, if we are ignorant of the local history of struggle, and the historical sweep of struggle in general, we **are** often doomed to failure.

A greater misapprehension of **The Battle in Seattle** is the lack of recognition of the importance and the dynamics of what went on **within** the Washington State Convention and Trade Center where the WTO Ministerial Conference was being conducted. The movie portrayed **some** of this, where representatives of people-of-color nations boldly stood their ground against exploitation by corporations. The US and many European nations undemocratically, callously, and vigorously manipulated circumstances to silence representatives of nations of the southern hemispheres as a means to support continued or increased exploitation. What happened inside the Convention Center was one of the early indications of the shift in global power that is eroding Super Power control of the world. It heralded the rise of a new locus of power vested in a group of emerging economies: BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). “Success” of **The Battle** can mostly be measured by the breakdown of the talks due to the intransigence of representatives of African and South American country representatives. The “**inside**” counted.

How and how much of what happened **outside** contributed to what happened **inside** is probably not knowable. It is probably in fact the wrong question. The logic of short sighted, individualizing, either-or

paradigm-dominated Western Culture leads us to miss or to be blind to the presence of “**non-causal co-arising**” and **both-and** paradigms that do not lend themselves to individually weighing influence or prioritizing agency. The community of elements and influences “moves” as a whole. Our cultural logic channels us to look for conspiracies between the people on the streets of Seattle and the people-of-color country representatives as if one needed the other to come to the conclusions and the actions they came to. A similarly inappropriate question is at the heart of the race debate: what is more important, nature or nurture? The answer is **both-and**. To give greater weight to the street demonstrations is to ignore those times when there were street demonstrations and no good outcome resulted or to ignore those times when there were no street demonstrations and relatively beneficial decisions were made.

There are many notable aspects to **The Battle in Seattle**. There was a powerful conjunction of environmentalists and labor activists. Over many months, a decentralized action structure was devised that prevented the capture of meeting centers and communications centers by the police from derailing the demonstrations. The Seattle Police, with its own history and its own politics in the community, was exposed for incompetence and injustice. The linking of various causes advanced mightily. And, local activists played a major role in the demonstrations.

However, unfortunately, most of the demonstrators descended “from above” in much the same way as the WTO did; not much was left behind to strengthen progressive Seattle. Despite the origins of the overall “anti-globalization” effort in local community struggles around the globe, this event leads our eyes and minds away from local struggles and/or local struggles are **used** and manipulated to further some larger agenda. “Success” is falsely, singularly associated with the high profile dramatic made-for-TV violent events. In this way, some left activists are as much imbedded in individualism as capitalists are. The root struggles that led to **The Battle in Seattle** are not learned from. The seeds are not nurtured, nor are these examples of courageous fights for justice raised up in their own right. The “Anti-globalization” Movement in the US has not been broadened beyond what it was in 1999; in fact it has shrunk. And its sustainability is in question as police departments and security folk around the Nation study Seattle and contemplate what happened there in order to devise new suppression tactics.

There is a quiet debate about the use of the term "anti-globalization." Some question the implicit hypocrisy of that term since it was the globalized mechanism of the Internet that facilitated The Movement. Some critics of the term want to substitute the positive term of "globalization from below." Putting the emphasis on the "below" corrects a Western Cultural paradigm that is leading us astray. There are many quiet debates going on within The Movement that must be paid attention to - **both-and** - as we engage in the heart pounding actions of the day. Let us learn the lessons of our history as we as whole human beings transcend it.

*[Note: Nafsi ya Jamii is the Swahili phrase that translates in English to "The Soul Community"]*

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