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NATIONAL ANTHEMS FOR PEACE

During the summer of 2024, we witnessed a number of sporting events that were as large-scale as they were fascinating and excellently organised. The Olympic Games, the European Football Championship, the Tour de France.

With a rich display of flags and national hymns. A fanfare of tradition and national pride to stir the emotions, set to music in a swollen soundscape of slow wind instruments. These are the expected ingredients, and they have their place.

France, with its rich tradition of enlightenment thinking, was the host country and the setting for the Olympic symbolism of international sisterhood and brotherhood.

By allowing the sentence 'aux armes, citoyens' to penetrate my mind with sharpened awareness, I opened a Pandora's box in myself. Too often I had hummed along on the recognition of the melody without properly considering what message I had thus internalised with the words.

Would it dawn on athletes on their scaffold as winners, or to players on a soccer field, that when they sing praises to their country, they may be expressing a desire to take out, i.e. kill, their sporting opponent? With the hand on their heart. If these top athletes don't realize it, what about the masses of people in stadiums and squares?

THE NEGATIVE SIDE

An anachronism

I can live with a national anthem that is no longer of this time. It is the least of all nationalistic evils. I much prefer old-fashioned romanticism rather than modernist, smooth nonsense. Our Dutch neighbors and our own little Belgium have exhibited similar grandiloquence (Wiertz-worthy) in our bombastic lyrics.

One must wonder what meaning is still evoked by phrases such as 'holy land of the fathers' - 'Our soul and our heart are devoted to you' - 'The blood of our veins [orig: 'adren'] in young and old. And what about the solemn Wilhelmus of the Netherlands? 'I am, of German blood, faithful to the fatherland until death. A Prince of Orange am I, quite fearless, I have always honored the King of Spain.' – 'My God, please preserve thy faithful servant, that they may not surprise me in their wicked courage, and wash their hands in my innocent blood.' And so on and so forth.

Twenty years ago, the honored King of Spain would have been called Juan Carlos. One can think of better persons to merit this honor 'always.'

Because the Belgian-Dutch songs clearly do not stand the test of our time, let these examples suffice to make my point. However, our low countries are certainly not the only ones whose anthems groan under the baroque phrases from an outdated history.

Incomprehensible

Many songs are full of references to national history and local historical figures. Often these events or characters belong to a distant past.

Just a quick selection of notables and heroes who owe their celebrity to the hyper-national songbook: Mátyás, Ferruccio, Bendegúz. Marshall Wade, Árpád.

It is questionable whether these names still evoke anything in their own country.

The same applies to place names, references, saints, Gods and events: Sindh, Erinn, Gujarat, Bayamo, Maratha, David, Orissa, Vindyas, Yamuna, Ballila, Legnano, Baekdu Mountains, Tisza, the Cuman Fields, Toka.

We, the people, know more and more and can look up a lot. However, people may relate more easily with the anthems of foreign nations if they do not have to consult Wikipedia.

Superiority

The preceding negative aspects are rather innocent. A misconception. Language.

From here on, it goes downhill from mere nationalism towards collective culpable neglect. It can be no coincidence that in the poems of praise the number of [double] exclamation marks and affirmative repetitions of core ideas is innumerable.

'Self-praise stinks', as the proverb goes. This is worth considering when compelling fellow countrymen to a national sing-along which has a bad breath.

The most frightening wordings are literally transgressive in nature. They express the nation's own territorial demarcation and expansion as well as making geopolitical claims. This goes from right out unreasonable claims to a number of hollow legitimations which can be endlessly extended. History, law, the economy, threats, protection of linguistic minorities. And so on.

So-called great leaders - in their smallness - make a big deal about their popular motives but remain silent about their own ambitions for individual glory, being part of the great history book and raw power hunger. Whoever wants war will always find a reason to sacrifice millions of nameless citizens.

Whoever has 'destruction' written into the national anthem, will not rest or die until his or her mausoleum is coldly surrounded by mass graves of innocent anonymous dead.

'Africa, let her glory reach unto the heavens' [South Africa] – 'Let the laurels be forever' [Argentina] -

'Hasten to glory and supremacy' [Saudi Arabia] – 'Serbian glory, new splendor' [Serbia] – 'The much-celebrated Austria'

[Austria] – 'In full glory reflected, now shines in the stream: Tis the star-spangled banner' [US] – 'Deutschland über alles,

über alles in der Welt' [Germany] – 'Be glorious, our country! [...]. From the southern seas to the polar regions.' [Russia] –

'A people [...] whose fame shall go round' [Australia] – 'May the nation, the country and the state shine in eternal glory' –

'Let us sing your splendor and proclaim your high deeds. [Rwanda].

Enemy image

The illustrated timelines that we were given as homework on meters-long strips of paper from primary school onwards made it clear to the youthful version of myself that there was no line to be drawn in national histories.

Peoples were confronted with invasions, occupation, conquest, displacement, destruction, targeted or arbitrary power decisions, revolution, repression and - temporary or not - liberation. Not to mention the hellish situations in the news of the day, Nagorno Karabakh, Hong Kong, Aleppo, Myanmar and Haiti. In their extreme limitations these examples serve to remind us that humanity unfortunately does not become wiser.

In this light, a foreign country quickly takes on the evil role of aggressor, repeatedly identified by name. National anthems are often snapshots, linked to an experience of liberation, improvement of fate, renewal. A rediscovery of a presumed or imagined identity, a common goal.

The international community is at its strongest in forgetting. Ten years after what are called the facts, the thinned-out nature, howling with pleasure, will have spread over all the short-lived tragic human histories and their collective killing machines.

'The arrows of the plundering Mongols you brought upon us now and the yoke of slavery of the Turks' [Hungary]

'Contre nous de la tyrannie, l'étendard sanglant est levé' – 'l'antique esclavage' – 'vils despotes' – 'tremblez tyrans'

[France] - 'for centuries we were trampled and mocked' - 'the sword of the mercenaries' - 'the Austrian eagle has already

lost its feathers. The blood of Italy and that of the Poles he has drunk with the Cossacks' [Italy] – 'the foe's haughty host' -

'their foul footsteps' pollution' [US] 'our enemies will disappear like the dew in the sun' [Ukraine] – 'scatter his enemies

and make them fall, confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks' – 'grant that Marshall Wade, like a torrent rush

rebellious Scots crush [GBr – author's abbreviations] –

Military logic

In several songs we see rows of brave soldiers marching past in columns, towards an invisible opponent. They have land and nation to defend. They represent the whole population of their country, or at least its strongest contingent. We imagine trenches, sulphur and shouting. Concepts such as 'battalion' and 'cohort' colour the scene completely.

'Brave the enemy's gunfire, forward! Forward! Forward! March!' [China] – 'Mexicans, at the call of war, be ready to seize sword and rein. Let the earth tremble to its very core at the sound of a roaring cannon. If a foreign foe dares to defile your soil with his footsteps, remember, oh beloved Fatherland, that Heaven has given you a soldier in every son.' – 'O! Soldiers, you are the vanguard of the people.' [Mexico] – 'Soldiers we are, our lives Ireland's. For Erin's cause, pain or lash by cannon or gun. We sing the soldier's song.' [Ireland] – 'When the days of battle come, lead him to victory.' – 'Run to war, men of Bayamo, for the homeland looks upon you with pride. [...] Hear the trumpets call: Run, heroes, to war. Brave Cubans, let us fight, and the war cries resound. [...] And when the trumpet sounds: in the attack we will fight side by side and win an honorable victory.' [Cuba] - 'Where the foe's haughty host?' [US – repet.] – 'my horsemen were seen galloping very bravely through that field.' [Dutch] – 'Close ranks into a cohort.' [Italy].

God on our side

In many hymns, one God from the many-colored pantheon assumes the protection of the entire nation. This image provides an internal point of rest, or light, as well as a demarcation against differently oriented religions. A number of countries address God directly, making their hymn a prayer, a request. The Wilhelmus [NED] is a personal prayer of the prince in fifteen [an exclamation mark is justified here] couplets.

As long as we, humans, proclaim that one God is more divine than another, we perpetuate the struggle for the highest good and allow the continued proliferation of holy [civil] wars, medieval crusades, caliphates and religious republics.

'Unity and love reveal themselves to the people, the path of the Lord. We swear to free the soil of our nation, united by God. Who can overcome us?' [Italy] – 'Oh Fatherland [...] in heaven your eternal future is written by the finger of God.' [Mexico] – 'This flag of the crescent and the star [...] symbol of the protection of the Almighty.' – 'Our beautiful and dear country [...]. Priceless heritage, which God protects for you.' [Rwanda* -
'Bless, Lord God, bless Africa. Let his glory reach the heavens. Hear our prayers. Bless us, Lord, bless your children. God, we ask you, protect our people. Intervene and end all strife. Protect us, protect our people.' [South Africa] – 'Glorify the Creator of the heavens.' [Saudi Arabia] 'Be glorious, our country [...], protected by God' – 'bless, Lord God, bless Africa, let her glory reach the heavens. Hear our prayers. Bless us, bless your children. God, we ask you, protect our people' -
'Chile with your blue sky, pure winds blowing over you and your field decorated with flowers is a beautiful copy of Eden. Majestic snow-capped mountains given as a gift by God.' – 'God, bless the Hungarians with good mood and abundance. Reach out your arm of protection to them as they fight the enemy.' – 'God of justice, you who have saved us from destruction to this day, hear our voices even now and be our redeemer ever. Guide and protect with a mighty hand the ship of Serbian destiny. God, save, oh God, preserve the Serbian land and the Serbian race!' [Serbia] – 'And this is our motto: "In God is our trust" and the star-spangled banner shall wave triumphantly over the land of the free and the home of the brave!' [US].

In Great Britain then, the king favored by God seems like God on earth. With the British people as a secondary backdrop.

'God save our gracious King. Long live our noble King [...]. O Lord, our God, arise. Scatter his enemies and make them fall. Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks. On thee our hopes we fix: God save us all.'

In this way, all British citizens seem to grant the royal family the greatest possible mandate. The republic does not occur to them.

Offering young life

God and country. War cemeteries all over the world provide a more powerful honor salute than anonymous mass graves. For both, the sacred silence of death and destruction applies. Of sixteen-year-olds who have been driven to their deaths.

What implicit message do songs convey that justify cannon fodder and senseless suffering, give it meaning, grant it a higher significance? Songs that above all do not oppose such a horrible fate.

'Thousands of souls were sacrificed for you. You became a battlefield. Soldiers gave their lives for you. They become heroes.' [Azerbaijan] – 'Our youth will not tire, until your independence. Or they will die.' [Iraq] – 'Quick to war, men of Bayamo, because the homeland looks at you with pride. You have no fear of a glorious death, for to die for the country is to live.' [Cuba] – 'Then my princely heart longs: that is, that I may die with honor in that field, to gain an eternal kingdom as a faithful hero.' [Netherlands] – 'Close ranks into a cohort, we are prepared for death.' [Italy] – 'Brave the enemy's gunfire, forward.' [China] – 'Fatherland. Your sons swear to breathe out their breath on your altar when the bugle with its warlike tone calls them to fight worthily [...]. For them a tomb of honour.' – 'Oh, Cherished land of brave children, we are ready to give our lives for you, we are ready to give our blood to you [...]' [Mexico].

Domination and colonisation

Annexation, subjugation, exploitation, tyranny and domination have been with us for generations. The current economic exploitation, often channeled through shamelessly enriching rulers, is the more vile, because it is less visible. Nowadays it is disguised as voluntary and constructive economic cooperation. As if it were about the sale of a football team, economically weaker nations are granted long-term loans that those countries cannot possibly repay. In hymns, throwing off the yoke is a recurring theme. Smaller nations convince themselves, at the risk of overestimating their strength, that they are doomed in advance in the event of a new conflict. Those who call their own numerically clearly weaker people - their army, to begin with - invincible raise false hopes and are looking for trouble.

'You overcome the colonial-imperialist yoke that has devastated Africa entirely' [Rwanda] - 'Stand up, people who refuse to be slaves' - 'brave the enemy's gunfire' [China] - 'For centuries we have been trampled and mocked' [Italy] - 'We will drink from death and never be to our enemies like slaves. We do not want an eternal humiliation nor a miserable life' [Iraq] - 'The yoke of slavery of the Turks.' [Hungary] -

Cruelty

Parents today are rightly very concerned about the disastrous influence of increasing violence in visual culture. These same parents would do well to check the texts of their national hymns for horror before singing them. The Marseillaise provides us with a representative sample in the very first stanza. 'Entendez-vous dans les campagnes, mugir ces féroces? Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras égorger vos fils.'

Indeed: throats.

'The refugee hid himself [...], he looked everywhere but found nothing. [...], pain and despair beside him, pools of blood under his feet, above him a sea of fire [Hungary] – 'We will drink of death' [Iraq].

The brutal consequence of blood and soil. Unfortunately also the sum total; the reckoning.

A Man's Man's World

'But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl.' And yet the woman in the hymns - if she appears at all - is given a highly stereotypical role. There is a constant focus on fathers, sons and brotherhood. The very title 'fatherland' is significant.

In Rwanda, the motherland is sung, albeit as 'the motherly bosom of us all.'

'German women, German loyalty, German wine and German song must preserve their old beautiful sound in the world, inspire us to noble deeds, our whole lives long.' [Germany] – 'Lord make the nations see that men should be brothers and form one family, the wide world over.' [GB].

In the German national anthem, we find the Wein, Weib und Gesang all too conspicuously. In the English version, there is not even a mention of the woman.

THE PLUS SIDE

Nature

Several hymns praise the natural beauty of their country. Justifiably, being a universal and unifying theme. Also an excellent basis for an ode of jubilation that does no harm to anyone and cares about the future. Nature is omnivalent, shows itself in the greatest possible variety and needs protection worldwide if the gluttonous Mankind is not to claim all the space.

'Where the waves of the Tisza and the Danube roar [...]. For our sake on the fields of the Côme you made the ears of corn sway. The vines of Tokaj you made drip with nectar.' [Hungary] – 'Land of mountains, land by the river, land of fields.' [Austria] – 'Water bubbles through the meadows, pine forests rustle over the rocks, in the garden the spring blossom shines, sight of the earthly paradise.' [Czech Republic] – 'From the blue of our sky, from the depths of our sea, over our eternal mountains, where the rocks answer, the call to come together sounds.' [South Africa] – 'Chile with your blue sky, pure winds that blow over you and your field decorated with flowers, is a beautiful copy of eden. Majestic snow-capped mountains that are given by God as a gift and the sea that cleanses you, that will give you a favorable future.' [Chile].

Poetry

Amidst much language violence one can also find a large number of sentences or images that have been written down with a particularly subtle pen and that perhaps strongly express the experience of a people.

'You lie in the middle of the continent, like a strong heart.' [Austria] – 'The sea that cleanses you.' [Chile] – 'Until stone rocks are covered with moss.' [Japan] – 'Fountain of freedom, source of light. Where sovereignty and security meet.' [Morocco].

Good examples

The very limited selection that follows is my personal selection and inevitably subjective in terms of content. 'What appeals to me as a citizen of the country and a citizen of the world at the same time?' - 'What moves me?' were the simple questions I asked myself. In that assessment I recognize in myself the search for a higher value, which for me does not necessarily translate into a divine power but rather in what connects people and nations, what they have in common. I strongly suspect that the texts that have aroused my positive attention often also contain deep pain [Japan, for example]. The sublimation of this is then worthy sublimation without denial. Time and again the texts emphasize in their generality or in the fine strokes of their language brush the beauty and kindness in people and their environment.

Sometimes I deliberately do not include the entire text. The deleted stanzas then form part of the arguments in my negative balance. The stanzas that I have retained can serve as a good example for a possible continuation in the text. Sometimes a text or part of a text pops up that corrects the previously negative image of a country for me - whether or not it was suggested by the media -.

As in much liberal art and liberal culture, the recurring theme is 'we are people' - 'in our differences we are people with common values.'

Inevitably, the list will contain repetitions with previous chapters.

'Until stones become rocks, covered with moss.' [Japan – repet.] - 'From the blue of our sky, from the depths of our sea, over our eternal mountains, where the rocks answer, the call to come together sounds.' [South Africa] - 'Fountain of freedom, source of light, where sovereignty and security meet.' [Morocco] -

'My fatherland. Majesty and beauty, sublimity and splendor are in your hills. Life and salvation, joy and hope are in your air. When shall I see you? Safe and prosperous, [...] shall I see you in your eminence, reaching the stars?' [Iraq] – 'Land of mountains, land by the river, land of fields, land of cathedrals, land of hammers with a bright future. Home of wonderful daughters and sons, people gifted for the beautiful. [...] You lie in the middle of the continent like a strong heart [...] See us walking freely and faithfully, happy to work and full of hope.' [Austria] 'Chile with your blue sky, pure winds blowing over you and your field decorated with flowers is a beautiful copy of Eden. Majestic snow-capped mountains given by God as a gift and the sea that cleanses you, that will give you a favorable future.' [Chile] –

'Where is my home? [...] Water bubbles through the meadows, pine forests rustle over the rocks, in the garden the spring blossom shines. View of the earthly paradise. And that is that beautiful country, Czech land, my home.' [Czech Republic] - 'Respect for citizenship is great in our Ethiopia. National pride is seen, shining from one side to the other, for peace, for justice, for the freedom of peoples. In equality and love we stand together. Strong on the foundations [...]. We are people who live by working. Wonderful is the tradition, virgin of proud heritage, mother of natural values, mother of courageous people. We will protect you – we have a task. Our Ethiopia, live and let us be proud of you.' [Ethiopia] – Let the morning shine on the silver and gold of this land. This world with natural beauty. This is my beautiful homeland. The glory of wise people, raised in a magnificent culture with a five-millennia-long history. Let us dedicate our bodies and minds to encouraging this Korea forever. [...] We nestle in the spirit of work, the strong will, connected with honesty [...]. This country was created by the will of the people.' [North Korea] – – 'Saba, you rise from the ocean, with mountains and slopes so steep. How can we reach you to greet you, island of the sea, rough and deep? Come, let us look at the rowers with their faces so peaceful and calm. Guide us now safely through the surf, bring us to shore without harm. [...] Will memories of your beauty remain, should we wander far from you? Your ways all climb steeply among the green hills. Until the very last bend. [...] The scene is a picturesque valley with flowers so fragrant and fine. This landscape of enchantment imprints beauty on the mind. [...] The mist and the sea breeze mingle and freshen the air to make of you, Saba, so precious, a healthy and prosperous atmosphere. [...] Kind and lovely, though small.' [Saba].

THE SILENT [MAY BE WRONG]

Without Words

Spain has made the understandable choice to stick to a melody. This is again rooted in the painful civil war that affected the population and the oppressive Franco regime that still slumbers to this day.

The few other countries that have spared themselves lyrics evoke similar inflammability or impasse: Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kosovo.

For the equally picturesque as exemplarily peaceful San Marino [communists, socialists and Christian democrats find common ground through policy in the interest of their country] I see no reason why they should not search for a text in unison.

In my humble opinion silence [in Spain much has to be kept silent] is not a solution. Carefully chosen and shared words can connect and offer strength.

PROVISIONAL BALANCE

Today we live in a different Zeitgeist than a hundred or fifty years ago. Although it is established that nationalistic tendencies are increasing, these developments lag behind the multicultural and internationalised world in which we actually live.

The 'multicolouredness' within national borders has made the bond between nation and citizen - except among hardliners - much less sharp. The fact that many - whether or not later nationalised - sportsmen do not sing the national anthem, do not know the words or even behave disapprovingly, could indicate this.

It was not taught to them as children. It does not appeal to them - often quite visibly - [sometimes spectators have to look at a negative, haughty, rather egocentric rejection].

With this observation I have certainly not noted that it would be better - in view of our uncertain future - to deny the meaning of national recognition, identity and shared history. Connecting characteristics, a national roof over one's head, a sense of well-being within borders, can be of valuable significance.

Displacement is not a good thing for anyone.

A possible humane transgression is located at the sore spot where nationalism and patriotism become synonymous with national to regional exclusion and discrimination.

As indicated in part one of my argument, too many anthems in 2024 are struggling with a serious image problem.

For example, the concept of 'freedom', which is so crucial to our democracies, is often synonymous with a liberation or independence that has been *fought* for, regained or is still to be fought for.

In too many songs we find the atmosphere of fluttering banners, grandeur, flags, trumpets, spears, victory. The fact that the Serbian national anthem, for example, extolls the concept of 'race', introduces a difficult to define distinction between own and not own, which can evoke particularly bad memories.

Just like the environmental movements, all peace movements are under heavy pressure today. People are even more negative about it than fifty years ago. The world looks quite confused. The idea of war finds fertile soil in this mood of agitation and anxiety.

It would be a reassuring development to see national anthems sprouting that express reconciliation and a *glorious universal will for peace*.

The underlying idea is liberation from every thought of war. It is the hope I dare to cherish: that all peoples, free from their power-driven leaders, want peace and security. We live under the same sun, within a beautiful and diverse natural world, endlessly profligating but not 'by nature' hostile

A CAUTIOUS START

An anthem, as well as a musically distinctive element, remains meaningful. It is also, again, what history teaches us.

In a number of countries, referendums preceded the choice, or at least thorough parliamentary discussions.

If we want to express a universal will for peace in our songs, preliminary criteria, determined by an authoritative body such as the United Nations, can be a considerable help.

Some criteria to consider:

- A content that is as universal as possible [in one's own native language].
- Text and music.
- 1 to 2 verses + chorus.
- Not time-bound.
- Expression of the will for peace and reconciliation.
- The Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at hand or as inspiration.
- Understandable for everyone. This also means that historical events or figures should evoke an international and positive reputation. Figures such as Dante, Marie Curie, Martin Luther King, Newton, Buddha, Nelson Mandela, Einstein, Descartes, Pythagoras, Plato, JS Bach - to keep it at this selection - transcend the borders of their country and immediately evoke recognition. Our human achievements include the moon landing, the founding of the United Nations, the malaria vaccine, equality between women and men.
- Democratic decision-making. SWOT-analysis.
- Inter-religious. Not one religion, doctrine or God above others.

All in all, I am only interested in the lyrics. To make them more connecting and peaceful. In my opinion, there's no reason to change any of the music or the melody. In this way, the anthems remain immediately recognizable, both nationally and internationally.

KNOWING MY LIMITATIONS

My contribution is distinguished by its incompleteness. After consideration, I have decided to translate most of the texts into English using Google Translate [for the Flemish original: see the attachment].

Every translation carries the risk of errors and misinterpretation. Both the undersigned author - with apologies - and his readers must come to terms with the shortcomings in order to let the intention prevail.

A thorough analysis is beyond my physical and intellectual power. I did not want to provide more than a starting point. Further study and concretization require an extensive, multidisciplinary and specialised hard working team, supported by authoritative organisations such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Parliament, FIFA and others.

For once I advocate a resolutely *short-term* approach. Our threatened world peace is at stake. All benefits help. In today's discouraging context, this requires - let it be said with a hollowed-out fashionable phrase - a real sense of urgency.

Willi Huyghe