

National Liberation and Culture

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NATIONAL LIBERATION AND CULTURE*

Amilcar Cabral

WHENEVER Goebbels, the brain behind Nazi propaganda, heard anyone speak of culture, he pulled out his pistol. That goes to show that the Nazis who were and are the most tragic expression of imperialism and its thirst for domination—even if they were, all of them sick like Hitler, had a clear idea of the value of culture as a factor in the resistance to foreign domination.

History teaches us that, in certain circumstances, it is quite easy for a stranger to impose his rule on a people. But history equally teaches us that, whatever the material aspects of that rule, it cannot be sustained except by the permanent and organized repression of the cultural life of the people in question. It can only firmly entrench itself if it physically destroys a significant part of the dominated people.

Indeed, to dominate a nation by force of arms is, above all, to take up arms to destroy or at least, to neutralize and paralyze its culture. For as long as a section of the populace is able to have a cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation. At any given moment, depending on internal and external factors which determine the evolution of the society in question, cultural opposition (indestructible) will take on new forms (political, economic, military) with a view to posing a serious challenge to foreign domination.

The ideal situation for foreign rule, whether imperialist or not, would be one of these two alternatives:

— either to practically liquidate the entire population of the dominated country, thus eliminating all possibility of that kind of cultural resistance;

— or to succeed in imposing itself without adversely affecting the culture of the dominated people, that is to

say, harmonising the economic and political domination of these people with its cultural personality.

The first hypothesis implies the genocide of the indigenous population and, creates a void which takes away from the foreign domination its content and objective: the dominated people. The second hypothesis has not up till now been confirmed by history. Humanity's great store of experience makes it possible to postulate that it has no practical viability: it is impossible to harmonise economic and political domination of a people whatever the degree of its social development, with the preservation of its culture.

With a view to avoiding this alternative—which could be called the dilemma of cultural resistance—colonial imperialist domination has attempted to create theories which, in fact, are nothing but crude racist formulations and express themselves in practice through a permanent siege of the indigenous populations, based on a racist (or democratic) dictatorship.

It is for example so in the case of the so-called theory of the progressive assimilation of native populations, which turns out to be no more than an attempt to destroy more or less violently, the culture of the people in question. The utter failure of this “theory”, put in practice by several colonial powers, of which Portugal is the most notable, affords the most ready proof of its non-viability if not of its inhumanity. It reaches the highest degree of absurdity in the case of Portugal, with Salazar's assertion that Africa does not exist.

It is equally the case of the so-called theory of Apartheid, created, applied and developed on the basis of economic and political domination by a racist minority, with all the crimes against humanity that it involves. Apartheid is characterised by the frenetic exploitation of the labour of the African masses, penned and suppressed in the largest, most cynical concentration camp that mankind has ever known.

*This extract from Cabral's memorial lecture for Eduardo Modliane is translated by NII OSAH MILLS

These facts show a little of the drama of foreign domination when faced with the cultural realities of the oppressed people. They also show the close interaction of dependence and complementarity existing between the cultural fact and the economic (and political) fact in the functioning of human societies. Indeed, culture is, at any moment in the life of a society (whether an open or a closed one), the more or less conscious result of economic and political activities, the more or less dynamic expression of the relationships prevailing in that society. On one hand between man (considered individually or collectively) and nature, and on the other hand, between individuals, groups of individuals, social strata or classes.

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign rule lies in the fact that, in the ideological or idealistic context, it is the vigorous manifestation of the materialist and historical reality of the society already under domination, or about to be dominated. The fruit of the history of a people, culture, at the same time determines history through the positive or negative influence it exerts on the evolution of the interaction between man and his surroundings, and between man or groups of men within a society, as well as between different societies. Ignorance of this fact can explain quite adequately the failure of many attempts at foreign domination, as well as that of some national liberation movements.



Culture, whatever may be the ideological or idealistic manifestations of its character, is thus an essential element in the history of a people. It is, perhaps the product of history as the flower is the product of a plant. Like history, or because it is history, culture has

as its physical base the forces of production and the means of production. It plunges its roots into the material reality of the soil of the environment in which it grows, and reflects the organic nature of society but being all the same capable of being influenced by exterior factors. If history allows us to know the nature and the causes of the imbalances and conflicts (economic, political and social) which characterise the evolution of a society, culture teaches us what have been the dynamic syntheses, structured and established by the mind of society for the solution of these conflicts, at each stage in the evolution of this same society in the quest for survival and progress.

As with the flower in a plant, it is in culture that you find the capacity (or responsibility) for the production and the fertilising of the seed which ensures the continuity of history, ensuring at the same time, the perspectives of the evolution and of the progress of the society in question. It is therefore seen that imperialist domination being the negation of the true historical process of the oppressed people, it must necessarily be the negation of its cultural processes. We understand further why the practice of imperialist rule, like all other foreign rule, demands for its own security, cultural oppression and a direct or indirect attempt to control the essential aspects of the culture of the oppressed people.

The study of the history of liberation struggles shows that in general, they are preceded by an increase in cultural phenomena which progressively crystallize into an attempt, successful or not, to assert the cultural personality of the oppressed people in an act of rejection of that of the oppressor. Whatever may be the state of subjection of a nation to foreign rule and the influence of economic, political and social factors in the furtherance of this domination, it is generally in culture that the seed of protest, leading to the emergence and development of the liberation movement, is found.

A nation which frees itself from foreign rule, will only be culturally free if, without a complex and without underestimating the importance of positive contributions from the oppressors' culture and of other cultures, it recaptures the commanding heights of its own culture, which derives sustenance from the living reality of its environment and equally rejects the harmful influences which any kind of subjection to foreign cultures involves. Thus one sees that if imperialist domination necessarily practices cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture.

Nowadays it has become quite commonplace to assert that each nation has its own culture. The time has gone when, in an attempt to perpetuate the domination of people, culture was considered to be the prerogative of privileged peoples or nations, and by ignorance or bad intention, culture was confused with technology, or with the colour of the skin or shape of the eyes. Liberation movements, representative and defender of the culture of the people, have to be conscious of the fact that whatever may be the material conditions of the society that it represents, that society is the bearer and creator of culture. The liberation movement must besides achieve a mass character, the popular character of the culture, which is not, and cannot be the prerogative of one or of certain sectors of the society.

In the detailed analysis of the social structure that all liberation movements should be capable of making in

coming to grips with the imperatives of the struggle, the cultural characteristics of each sector of society have a supremely important place. For, though culture has a mass character, it is nevertheless not uniform, it does not develop equally in all sectors of the society. The attitude of each social group when faced with the struggle is dictated by its economic interests, but it is also profoundly influenced by its culture. One could even say that it is the differences in the levels of culture which explain the different reactions of individuals in the same socio-economic group to the liberation movement. And it is here that the full importance of culture for each person is reached: understanding of, and integration with his environment, identification with the fundamental problems and aspirations of the society, and acceptance of the possibility of change in the direction of progress.

Experience of colonial domination shows that, in the attempt to perpetuate exploitation, the coloniser not only creates a whole system of repression of the cultural life of the people colonized, but also arouses and develops the cultural alienation of a section of the populace either by the so-called assimilation of the indigenous people or by the creation of a social abyss between an indigenous elite and the popular masses. As a result of this process of division, or widening of the divisions in society, it happens that a considerable section of the population, notably the *petite bourgeoisie*, urban or peasant assimilates the mentality of the coloniser, considering themselves culturally superior to the people they belong to, and whose cultural values they either despise, or do not know. This situation, characteristic of the majority of colonized intellectuals, crystallizes as the social privileges of the assimilated or alienated group increases, with direct implications for the response of the individuals of this group to the liberation movement. Thus a reconversion of minds—of mentalities, becomes indispensable to their integration with the national movement. Such a reconversion—*reafrikanisation* in our case—can be started before the struggle but it is not complete until during the course of the struggle, in the daily contact with the masses, and in the communion of sacrifice that the struggle demands.

It is necessary nevertheless to be aware of the fact that, as the prospect of political independence draws near, the ambition and the opportunism that the liberation movement generally suffers from, may bring non-converted individuals to the struggle. Such people armed with their learning, their scientific or technical knowledge, and without losing their class prejudices, could ascend to the highest ranks of the liberation movement. On the cultural as well as political level, vigilance is thus indispensable. For also in the concrete and very complex conditions of this phenomenon called the national liberation movement, all that glitters is not necessarily gold: the political leaders—even the most celebrated—may be culturally alienated.

But the class nature of culture is even more perceptible in the behaviour of the privileged groups in the rural areas, notably, kin-groups with a socio-vertical structure, where nevertheless, the influences of assimilation or alienation are nil or practically nil. It is for example so in the case of the Fula elite. Under colonial domination the political authority of this class (chiefs, royal families, spiritual leaders) is purely nominal,

and the popular masses are aware of the fact that actual power resides in and is exercised by the colonial administration. Yet the ruling classes preserve a basic cultural authority over the populace with implications of great political importance.

Aware of this reality, the coloniser, who represses, and opposes the culturally significant manifestations of the popular masses at its roots, supports and protects the prestige and the cultural influence of the ruling class. He installs some friendly and influential chiefs, gives them various material privileges including the education of older children, he creates chiefdoms where they do not exist, establishes and develops cordial relations with religious leaders, builds mosques, organises trips to Mecca, etc. And, especially, he assures the political and social privileges of the ruling class over the popular masses by means of the repressive machinery of colonial administration. All that does not make it impossible that there might be, among these ruling classes, individuals or groups of individuals who might adhere to the liberation movement, although this will happen less often than in the case of the assimilated "*petite bourgeoisie*". Many traditional and spiritual leaders become involved in the struggle right from the start or during its course, making an enthusiastic contribution to the cause of liberation. But here also, there is an indispensable need for vigilance: preserving well anchored, the cultural prejudices of class, firmly anchored, the individuals of this category generally see in the liberation movement the only viable means of succeeding in eliminating colonial oppression of their own class and re-establishing the same complete political and cultural domination over the people—and in the process exploiting to their own advantage, the sacrifices of the people.

In the general framework of the struggle against colonialist imperialist rule and in the concrete conditions to which we refer, it is confirmed that among the most faithful allies of the oppressor, one finds some high officials and assimilated intellectuals in the liberal professions, and an important number of representatives of the ruling class in the rural areas. If this fact gives a measure of the influence (negative or positive) of culture and cultural prejudices in the problem of political option with regard to the liberation movement, it also reveals the limits of this influence and the supremacy of the class factor in the behaviour of the various social groups. The assimilated high official or intellectual, characterised by his total cultural alienation, identifies himself politically with the traditional or religious leader, who has not been significantly influenced by foreign cultures. For these two categories place their economic and social privileges—their class interests above all the facts or needs of their culture and against the aspirations of the people. Here is a truth that the liberation movement can only ignore at the risk of betraying the economic, political, social and cultural objectives of the struggle.

The greater the differences between the culture of the oppressed people and that of the oppressor, the more possible such a victory becomes. History shows that it is much less difficult to dominate and sustain domination over a people with a similar or analogous culture to that of the conqueror. One could perhaps, assert that Napoleon's ultimate defeat, whatever may have been the economic and political motivation of his wars

of conquest, lay in his not limiting or not being able to limit his ambitions to the domination of people of a culture more or less similar to that of France. One could say the same for other empires, ancient, modern or contemporary.

One of the gravest mistakes, if not the gravest committed by the colonial powers in Africa, must be that of not knowing or of underestimating the culture of the peoples of Africa. This attitude is particularly evident in Portuguese colonial rule, which has not been content with the absolute negation of the existence of the African's cultural values and of his status as a social being, but is stubbornly bent on banning him from every kind of political activity. The Portuguese people who have not even enjoyed the riches seized from the African people by Portuguese colonialism but have all the same assimilated most of them, the imperialist mentality of the ruling classes of their country, are paying very dearly today, in three colonial wars, for the error of underestimating our cultural reality.

The political and violent resistance of the people of Portugal's colonies as in other countries or regions of Africa, has been crushed by the technological superiority of the imperialist conquerors, with the complicity or treachery of some indigenous ruling classes. The elites who are faithful to the history and culture of the people have been destroyed. Entire populations have been massacred. The colonial kingdom entrenched itself with its characteristic crimes and exploitation. But the cultural resistance of the African people has not been destroyed. Suppressed, persecuted, betrayed by some sections of society that have compromised their stand against colonialism, African culture has survived all the storms, by seeking refuge in villages, in forests and in the spirit of generations of victims of colonialism. Like the seed that long awaits the most propitious moment for germination, so as to assure the continuity of the species and its evolution, the culture of the African is today continuing its growth across the continent in the struggles for national liberation. Whatever the forms of these struggles, their success or failure, the length of their development, they mark the beginning of a new phase in the history of the continent and are in form as well as in content, the most important cultural phenomenon in the life of the African people. The fruit and proof of cultural vigour, the liberation struggle of the African people opens up new vistas for the development of culture in the service of progress.

The time when it was necessary to marshal arguments to prove the cultural maturity of African peoples is past. The irrationality of the racist "theories" of a Gobineau or of the Levy-Bruhls, neither interest nor convince anyone except the racists. Despite colonial rule (and perhaps because of it) Africa has been able to achieve respect for its culture. She even proved herself to be one of the richest continents in culture. From Carthage or Gizah to Zimbabwe, from Meroe to Benin and Ife, from the Sahara or Timbuctoo to Kilwa, across the immense diversity of the continent's natural conditions, African culture is an undeniable fact: in works of art as well as in oral and written traditions, in cosmological concepts as well as in music and dancing, in religions and beliefs as well as in the dynamic equilibrium of economic political and social structures that the African has created.

If the universal worth of African culture is today an undeniable fact, it must not however be forgotten that the African whose hands as the poet has said "has laid the foundation stones of the world", has evolved his culture under conditions which have frequently if not always been hostile: from the deserts to the equatorial forests, from the coastal marshes to the banks of the great rivers which are subject to frequent floods, and despite all the complications of plagues which destroy not only plants and animals but people as well. One can say with Basil Davidson and other students of African society and culture, that the economic, political, social and cultural achievements of the African genius, considering the unfriendly environment, constitute an epic comparable to the historical examples of the grandeur of man.

Of course, this fact is cause for pride and is an encouraging fact for those who fight for the liberation and the progress of the African people. But it is important not to lose sight of the fact that no culture is a perfect and complete whole. Culture, like history is necessarily a dynamic, moving phenomenon. Even more important, one must realise that the fundamental characteristic of culture is its intimate interaction with the economic and social realities of the environment, and with the level of the forces of production and the means of production of the society which created it.

Culture, the fruit of history always reflects each moment the material and spiritual realities of the society, of individual man, and of man the social being, confronted by the conflicts which put them into opposition with nature and the imperatives of life in a community. Further, every culture is made up of essential and secondary elements, strengths and weaknesses, values and defects, positive and negative aspects, progressive and stagnant or regressive factors. Further, culture—the creation of the society and the synthesis of the equilibriums and solutions which society engenders for the resolution of the contradictions which characterise it at every stage of history—is equally a social reality independently of the will of men, of the colour of skin, or the shape of eyes.

In a profound analysis of cultural reality one cannot claim that continental or racial cultures exist. And like history, the development of culture proceeds in an uneven manner at the continental, racial or even societal level. The co-ordinates of culture like those of any other dynamic phenomenon vary in space and time, whether they be material (physical) or human (biological and psychological). The fact of coming across the existence of specific common traits in the cultures of Africa's peoples, independently of the colour of their skin does not necessarily imply that one and only one culture exists on the continent. In the same way that from an economic and political point of view one discovers the existence of several Africas, so also are there several African cultures.

Undoubtedly the denigration of the cultural values of the African peoples based on racist prejudices, and on the aim of perpetuating their exploitation by foreigners, has done much harm to Africa. But in the face of the vital necessity of progress, the following acts and practices will be just as harmful: undiscerning praise; systematic exaltation of virtues without any criticisms of faults; blind acceptance of cultural values



without considering the negative, reactionary or retrogressive aspects it has or can have; confusion between that which is the expression of an objective and material historical reality and that which seems to be a figment of the mind, or the result of a specific nature; the absurd linkage of works of art be they valuable or not, to claimed characteristics of a race; and finally the unscientific critical appreciation of the cultural phenomenon.

The important thing also is not to waste time in some rather byzantine discussion on which African cultural values are specific or non-specific to Africa but to envisage these values as a conquest by a parcel of humanity for the common heritage of man, achieved in one or several stages of his evolution. The important thing is to get on with the critical analysis of African cultures faced with the task of liberation, with the demands of progress, and of this new stage in the history of Africa. To be aware of its value in the context of universal civilisation, but to compare this value with that of other cultures, not with a view to deciding which is superior or inferior, but to determine within the general framework of the struggle for development what help it can or must receive.

As we have said the liberation movement must base its programme on profound knowledge of the culture of the people, and it must be able to appreciate the elements of this culture, giving to each its due weight, and also, appreciate the various levels it has reached in each social category. It must also be able to discern the essential from the secondary, the positive from the negative, the progressive from the retrogressive, the strengths from the weaknesses in the total cultural complex of the peoples. All this, with a view to the various demands of the struggle, and with an aim of

being able to concentrate its efforts on the essential without forgetting the secondary, to arouse the development of positive and progressive elements and to resist flexibly but stoutly, negative and retrogressive elements; and finally, with a view to utilizing the strengths and eliminating the weaknesses or transforming the latter into strengths.

The liberation movement must be able to bring about slowly but surely, in the course of its political programme, a convergence of the levels of culture of the various social categories which can be deployed for the struggle, and to transform them into a single national cultural force which acts as the basis and the foundation of the armed struggle. It must be noticed that the analysis of the culture gives at once an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the people, faced with the demands of the struggle, and constitutes a valuable acquisition concerning the strategems and tactics to follow as much on the political plane as on the military. But it is only in the course of the struggle, launched from a satisfactory base of political and moral unity that the complexity of cultural problems makes itself known in full. This frequently demands continuous adaptations of strategy and tactics to the realities which only the struggle can reveal. Knowledge of the struggle shows just how utopian and absurd it is to pretend to apply methods adopted by other peoples during their wars of liberation and the solutions which they found to problems with which they were or are faced, without considering the facts of the locale (especially the culture).

The armed revolutionary struggle, launched in reaction to colonial aggression and oppression reveals itself as a sad but efficacious instrument for the development of the cultural level, not just of the leadership cadres of

the liberation movement, but also the various social categories which take part in the struggle.

The leaders of the liberation movement, coming from the "petite bourgeoisie" (intellectuals, employees) or from the working classes of the towns (workers, chauffeurs, wage-earners in general), having to live daily with the various peasant communities in the heart of the rural population, get to know the people better, discover at the source, the richness of their cultural values (philosophical, political, artistic, social and moral), acquire a sharper awareness of the economic realities of the countryside, the problems, suffering and expectations of the masses. Not without a certain surprise, they discover the richness of spirit, the capacity for argument and for clear exposition of ideas, the ease with which they understand and assimilate concepts, that the masses have—they the masses, who only yesterday were ignored if not despised and considered by the colonisers and seen by some nations, as lesser beings. The leaders thus enrich their personal culture—cultivate themselves and free themselves from some complexes, whilst reinforcing their ability to put the movement to the service of the nation.

From their point of view, the labouring masses, and especially the peasants, usually illiterate and never having crossed the boundaries of village or region, lose the complexes which once hindered them in their relations with other ethnic and social groups, by coming into contact with other groups they realise their position as the decisive element in the struggle; they shatter the bounds of the village world and progressively integrate themselves into the whole country, and into the world; they acquire an infinite world of new knowledge, useful to their immediate and future activity in the struggle; and their political awareness grows, whilst assimilating the principles of the national and social revolution demanded by the war. They thus become more fit to play the decisive role of being the backbone of the movement.

It is well known that the violent war of liberation demands the mobilisation and organisation of a significant majority of the population, political and moral unity of the various social categories, the efficient handling of modern and other tools of war, the progressive liquidation of the remnants of the tribal mentality, the rejection of social and religious rules and taboos which hinder the struggle (gerontocracy, nepotism, social inferiority of women, rituals and practices that are incompatible with the rational and national character of the struggle, etc.) and brings about many other profound changes in the lives of the people. The armed war of liberation thus implies a veritable forced march on the road of cultural progress.

If we were to go to the inherent facts of a liberation struggle, the practice of democracy, of criticism and self-criticism, of increasing popular participation in the running of their lives, mass literacy, creation of schools and the provision of sanitary facilities, the formation of leadership cadres among the rural and working population, we shall see that the armed struggle is not only a cultural fact but also a builder of culture. This undoubtedly is for the masses the primary compensation for the efforts and sacrifices which are the price of war. From this perspective, it falls upon the liberation movement to define clearly the objectives of the cultural resistance which is the integrating and decisive factor in the struggle.

From all that we have just said, one can conclude

that in the context of gaining independence, and from the point of view of bringing about economic and social progress for the masses, the following at least ought to be the objectives: developing a popular culture, and all the positive and indigenous cultural values; development of a national culture grounded in history and on the victories of the liberation struggle itself; the constant raising of the political and moral consciousness of the people (from all sectors of the society) as well as of patriotism, the spirit of sacrifice and of devotion to the cause of independence, of justice and of progress; the development of a scientific culture, technical and technological, compatible with the demands of progress; the development of a universal culture, grounded in a critical assimilation of the achievements of mankind in art, science, literature and so on; with a view to a perfect integration in the modern world and in the prospective course of its evolution; the ceaseless and widespread raising of humanistic sentiments of unity of respect and of selfless devotion to the human person.

The realization of these objectives is indeed possible, for the armed war of liberation, in the concrete conditions of the life of the African peoples, confronted with the imperialist menace, is an act of enriching history, the expression of our culture and of our African-ness. It must be expressed when victory comes, in a ferment signifying above all the culture of the people which has freed itself.

If this is not the case, then the efforts and the sacrifices voluntarily undergone during the struggle will have been in vain. The struggle will have failed in its goals, and the people will have missed a chance to make progress in the general framework of history.

In commemorating, with this conference the anniversary of Dr. Eduardo Mondlane, we render homage to the politician, to the soldier for freedom and especially to the man of culture. Culture, not only that acquired in the course of his personal life, and in the lecture rooms of the university, but principally amidst his people during the struggle for the liberation of his people.

One can say that Eduardo Mondlane has been barbarously assassinated because he proved capable of identifying himself with the culture of his people, with their deepest aspirations, despite all the attempts and the temptations of alienation from his African and Mozambiquan identity. Because he forged for himself a new culture in the struggle, he fell like a soldier.

It is no doubt easy to accuse the Portuguese colonialists, the agents of imperialism and their allies of the abominable crime perpetrated against the person of Eduardo Mondlane, against the people of Mozambique and against Africa. They are the cowardly assassins. However, all men of culture, all soldiers for freedom, all souls who believe in peace and in progress—all the enemies of colonialism and racism—must have the courage to hear part of the responsibility which attaches to them for this tragic death. For if the colonialists and the agents of imperialism can still assassinate a man like Dr Eduardo Mondlane, it is because something foul still flourishes at the heart of humanity: the will to dominate. It is because men of goodwill, defenders of the culture of nations, have not yet accomplished their task on this planet.

This to our mind, gives a measure of the responsibilities of those who are listening to us in this temple of culture, on the subject of the movement for the liberation of oppressed peoples. □