

# **The Role of Culture in the Struggle for Independence**

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The struggle of peoples for national liberation and independence has become a tremendous force for human progress and is beyond doubt an essential feature of the history of our time.

Objective analysis of imperialism as a fact or historical phenomenon that is 'natural', even 'necessary', to the economic and political evolution of a great part of mankind, reveals that imperialist rule, with its train of misery, pillage, crimes and its destruction of human and cultural values, was not a purely negative reality.

The huge accumulation of capital in a half dozen countries of the northern hemisphere as the result of piracy, sack of other people's property and unbridled exploitation of their labour, did more than engender colonial monopoly, the sharing-out of the world and imperialist dominion. In the rich countries, imperialist capital, ever looking for higher profits, heightened man's creative capacity. Aided by the accelerated progress of science and technology, it profoundly transformed the means of production, stepped-up the social organization of work and raised the standard of living of vast sections of the population.

In the colonized countries, colonization usually arrested the historical development of the people – when it did not lead to their total or gradual elimination. Here imperialist capital imposed new types of relationships within the indigenous society whose structure became more complex. It aroused, fomented, inflamed or resolved social contradictions and conflicts.

With the circulation of money and the development of the domestic and foreign markets, it introduced new elements into the economy. It led to the birth of new nations out of ethnic groups or peoples at varying stages of historical development.

It is no defence of imperialist domination to recognize that it opened up

new worlds to a world whose dimensions it reduced, that it revealed new phases in the development of human societies and, in spite of or because of the prejudices, discriminations and crimes it occasioned, helped to impart a deeper knowledge of mankind, moving as one, as a unified whole amid the complex diversity of its various forms of development.

Imperialist rule fostered a multilateral, gradual (sometimes abrupt) confrontation on the different continents not only between different men but between different societies.

The practice of imperialist rule – its affirmation or its negation – demanded and still demands a more or less accurate knowledge of the people dominated and their historical background (economic, social and cultural). This knowledge is necessarily expressed in terms of comparison with the dominating power's own historical background.

Such knowledge is an imperative necessity for imperialist rule which results from the usually violent confrontation of two different identities, distinct in their historical backgrounds and antagonistic in their functions. Despite its unilateral, subjective and often unjust character, the search for such knowledge contributed to the general enrichment of the human and social sciences.

Indeed, man has never shown such interest in learning about other men and other societies as during this century of imperialist domination. An unprecedented amount of information, hypotheses and theories was thus accumulated concerning subjugated peoples or ethnic groups, especially in the fields of history, ethnology, ethnography, sociology and culture.

Concepts of race, caste, clanship, tribe, nation, culture, identity, dignity and many more besides have received increasing attention from those who study man and the so-called 'primitive' or 'evolving' societies.

More recently, with the upsurge of liberation movements, it has been found necessary to analyse the characteristics of these societies in terms of the struggle that is being fought, so as to determine which factors spark off or restrain this struggle. Researchers generally agree that, in this context, culture takes on special importance. Any attempt to throw light on the true role of culture in the development of a liberation (pre-independence) movement can be seen as making a helpful contribution to the general struggle of peoples against imperialist rule.

Because independence movements are as a rule marked even in their beginnings by increased cultural activity, it is taken for granted that such movements are preceded by a cultural 'renaissance' of the dominated people. Going a step further, culture is regarded as a method of mobilizing the group, even as a weapon in the fight for independence.

From experience of the struggle of my own people and it might be said of all Africa, I feel that this is a too limited, if not erroneous, conception of the vital role of culture in the development of liberation movements. I think it comes of generalizing incorrectly from a real but restricted phenomenon that appears at the level of colonial elites or diasporas. Such a generalization is unaware of or disregards an essential factor – the indestructibility of cultural

resistance by the mass of the people to foreign rule.

With a few exceptions, the era of colonization was too short, in Africa at least, to destroy or significantly depreciate the essential elements in the culture and traditions of the colonized peoples. Experience in Africa shows that (leaving aside genocide, racial segregation and apartheid) the one so-called 'positive' way the colonial power has found for opposing cultural resistance is 'assimilation'. But the total failure of the policy of 'gradual assimilation' of colonized populations is obvious proof of the fallacy of the theory and of the peoples' capacity for resistance.

On the other hand, even in settlement colonies, where the overwhelming majority of the population is still indigenous, the area of colonial and particularly cultural occupation is usually reduced to coastal strips and a few small zones in the interior.

The influence of the colonial power's culture is almost nil outside the capital and other urban centres. It is only significantly felt within the social pyramid created by colonialism itself and affects more particularly what may be called the indigenous petty bourgeoisie and a very limited number of workers in urban centres.

We find then that the great rural masses and a large fraction of the urban population, totalling over 99 per cent of the indigenous population, are virtually isolated from any cultural influence by the colonial power. This implies that not only for the mass of the people in the dominated country but also for the dominant classes among the indigenous peoples (traditional chiefs, noble families, religious leaders) there is usually no destruction or significant depreciation of culture and traditions.

Repressed, persecuted, humiliated, betrayed by certain social groups which have come to terms with the foreigner, culture takes refuge in villages, in forests and in the minds of the victims of domination, weathering all storms to recover all its power of expansion and enrichment through the struggle for liberation.

That is why the problem of a 'return to the source' or a 'cultural renaissance' does not arise for the mass of the people; it could not, for the masses are the torch-bearers of culture; they are the source of culture and, at the same time, the one entity truly capable of creating and preserving it, of making history.

For an accurate appreciation of the true role of culture in the development of the liberation movement, a distinction must therefore be made, at least in Africa, between the situation of the masses who preserve their culture and of the social groups that are more or less assimilated, uprooted and culturally alienated.

Even though marked by certain cultural features of their own indigenous community, native elites created by the colonizing process live materially and spiritually the culture of the colonialist foreigner with whom they seek gradually to identify themselves in social behaviour and even in their views of indigenous cultural values.

Over two or three generations at least under colonization, a social class has

been formed of government officials, employees in various branches of the economy (especially trade), members of the liberal professions and a few urban and agricultural landowners. This indigenous lower middle class, created by foreign rule and indispensable to the colonial system of exploitation, finds itself placed between the mass of workers in the country and in the towns and the minority of local representatives of the foreign ruling class.

Although its members may have more or less developed relations with the mass of the people or the traditional chiefs, they usually aspire to a way of life similar to, if not identical with, that of the foreign minority. Limiting their relations with the masses, they try to become integrated with that minority, often to the detriment of family or ethnic bonds and always at personal cost.

But despite apparent exceptions, they never succeed in crossing the barriers imposed by the system. They are prisoners of the contradictions of the social and cultural reality in which they live, for they cannot escape their condition as a 'marginal' class. This marginality is the real social and cultural drama of the colonial elites or indigenous petty bourgeoisie. While living conditions and level of acculturation determine its intensity, this drama is always lived at the individual, not the community, level.

Within the framework of this daily drama, against the background of the usually violent confrontation between the mass of the people and the ruling colonial class, a feeling of bitterness, a frustration complex, develops and grows among the indigenous lower middle class. At the same time, they gradually become aware of an urgent need to contest their marginal status and to find an identity. So they turn towards the other pole of the social and cultural conflict in which they are living – the mass of the people.

Hence the 'return to the source', which seems all the more imperative as the sense of isolation and frustration of this lower middle class grows. The same holds true for Africans dispersed in colonialist and racist capitals.

It is not by chance, then, that theories or movements such as Pan Africanism and Negritude (two pertinent expressions based mainly on the notion that all Black Africans are culturally identical) were conceived outside Black Africa. More recently, the Black Americans' claim to an African identity is another, perhaps desperate, expression of this need to 'return to the source', though it is clearly influenced by a new factor – the winning of independence by the great majority of African peoples.

But the 'return to the source' neither is nor can be in itself an act of struggle against foreign (colonialist and racist) rule. Nor does it necessarily mean a return to traditions. It is the denial by the indigenous petty bourgeoisie of the superiority claimed for the culture of the ruling power over the culture of the dominated people with which this petty bourgeoisie feels the need to identify.

This 'return to the source', then, is not a voluntary step; it is the only possible response to the irreconcilable contradiction between the colonized society and the colonial power, between the exploited masses and the foreign exploiters.

When the 'return to the source' goes beyond the individual to find expression in 'groups' or 'movements', this opposition turns into conflict (under cover or open), the prelude to the pre-independence movement or struggle for liberation from foreign yoke.

This 'return to the source' is thus historically important only if it involves both a genuine commitment to the fight for independence and also a total, irrevocable identification with the aspirations of the masses, who reject not only the foreigner's culture but foreign rule altogether. Otherwise it is nothing but a means of obtaining temporary advantages, a conscious or unconscious form of political opportunism.

It should be noted that this 'return to the source', whether real or apparent, is not something that happens simultaneously and uniformly within the lower middle class. It is a slow, discontinuous, uneven process, and its development depends on each person's degree of acculturation, material conditions of life, ideological thinking and individual history as a social being.

This unevenness explains the splitting of the indigenous petty bourgeoisie into three groups in relation to the liberation movement: a minority which, even though it may want the end of foreign rule, hangs on to the ruling colonial class and openly opposes the liberation movement in order to defend and secure its own social position; a hesitant or undecided majority; another minority which helps to create and to direct the liberation movement.

But this last group, which plays a decisive role in developing the pre-independence movement, does not really succeed in identifying itself with the mass of the people (with their culture and their aspirations) except through the struggle, the degree of identification depending on the form or forms of the struggle, the ideological content of the movement and the extent of each person's moral and political awareness.

Culture has proved to be the very foundation of the liberation movement. Only societies which preserve their culture are able to mobilize and organize themselves and fight against foreign domination. Whatever ideological or idealistic forms it takes, culture is essential to the historical process. It has the power to prepare and make fertile those factors that ensure historical continuity and determine a society's chances of progressing (or regressing).

Since imperialist rule is the negation of the historical process of the dominated society, it will readily be understood that it is also the negation of the cultural process. And since a society that really succeeds in throwing off the foreign yoke reverts to the upward paths of its own culture, the struggle for liberation is above all an act of culture.

The fight for liberation is an essentially political fact. Consequently, as it develops, it can only use political methods. Culture then is not, and cannot be, a weapon or a means of mobilizing the group against foreign domination. It is much more than that. Indeed, it is on firm knowledge of the local reality, particularly the cultural reality, that the choice, organization and development of the best methods of fighting are based.

This is why the liberation movement must recognize the vital importance not only of the cultural characteristics of the dominated society as a whole

but also of those of each social class. For though it has a mass aspect, culture is not uniform and does not develop evenly in all sectors, horizontal or vertical, of society.

The attitude and behaviour of each class or each individual towards the struggle and its development are, it is true, dictated by economic interests, but they are also profoundly influenced by culture. It may even be said that differences in cultural level explain differences in behaviour towards the liberation movement of individuals of the same social class.

It is at this level, then, that culture attains its full significance for each individual – comprehension of and integration within his social milieu, identification with the fundamental problems and aspirations of his society and acceptance or rejection of the possibility of change for the better.

Whatever its form, the struggle requires the mobilization and organization of a large majority of the population, the political and moral unity of the different social classes, the gradual elimination of vestiges of tribal or feudal mentality, the rejection of social and religious taboos that are incompatible with the rational and national character of the liberating movement. And the struggle brings about many other profound modifications in the life of the people.

This is all the more true because the dynamics of the struggle also require the exercise of democracy, criticism and self-criticism, growing participation of the people in running their lives, the achievement of literacy, the creation of schools and health services, leadership training for rural and city workers, and many other achievements that are involved in the society's 'forced march' along the road of cultural progress. This shows that the liberation struggle is more than a cultural fact, it is also a cultural factor.

Among the representatives of the colonial power as well as in their home countries, the first reaction to the liberation struggle is a general feeling of surprise and incredulity. Once this feeling, the fruit of prejudice or of the planned distortions typical of colonialist news, is surmounted, reactions vary with the interests, the political opinions and the degree to which colonialist and racist attitudes have crystallized among the different social classes and individuals.

The progress of the struggle and the sacrifices imposed by the need to take colonialist repressive measures (police or military) cause a split in metropolitan opinion. Differing, if not divergent, positions are adopted and new political and social contradictions emerge.

From the moment the struggle is recognized as an irreversible fact, however great the resources employed to quash it, a qualitative change takes place in metropolitan opinion. The possibility, if not the inevitability, of the colony's independence is on the whole gradually accepted.

Such a change is a conscious or unconscious admission that the colonized people now engaged in the struggle have an identity and a culture of their own. And this holds true even though throughout the conflict an active minority, clinging to its interests and prejudices, persists in refusing the colonized their right to independence and in denying the equivalence of cultures

that right implies.

At a decisive stage in the conflict, this equivalence is implicitly recognized or accepted even by the colonial power. To divert the fighters from their objectives, it applies a demagogic policy of 'economic and social improvement', of 'cultural development', cloaking its domination with new forms. Neo-colonialism is, above all, the continuation of imperialist economic rule in disguise, but nevertheless it is also the tacit recognition by the colonial power that the people it rules and exploits have an identity of their own demanding their own political control, for the satisfaction of a cultural necessity.

Moreover, by accepting that the colonized people have an identity and a culture, and therefore an inalienable right to self-determination and independence, metropolitan opinion (or at least an important part of it) itself makes significant cultural progress and sheds a negative element in its own culture — the prejudice that the colonizing nation is superior to the colonized one. This advance can have all-important consequences for the political evolution of the imperialist or colonialist power, as certain facts of current or recent history prove.

If culture is to play its proper role, the liberation movement must lay down the precise objectives to be achieved on the road to the reconquest of the rights of the people it represents — the right to make its own history and the right to dispose freely of its own productive resources. This will pave the way to the final objective of developing a richer, popular, national, scientific and universal culture.

It is not the task of the liberation movement to determine whether a culture is specific to the people or not. The important thing is for the movement to undertake a critical analysis of that culture in the light of the requirements of the struggle and of progress; to give it its place within the universal civilization without consideration as to its superiority or inferiority, with a view to its harmonious integration into the world of today as part of the common heritage of mankind.