

Culture, Colonization, and National Liberation

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The people's struggle for national liberation and independence from imperialist rule has become a driving force of progress for humanity and undoubtedly constitutes one of the essential characteristics of contemporary history.

An objective analysis of imperialism in so far as it is a fact or a 'natural' historical phenomenon, indeed 'necessary' in the context of the type of economic-political evolution of an important part of humanity, reveals that imperialist rule with all its train of wretchedness, of pillage, of crime and of destruction of human and cultural values, was not just a negative reality. The vast accumulation of capital in half a dozen countries of the northern hemisphere, which was the result of piracy, of the confiscation of the property of other races, and of the ruthless exploitation of the work of these peoples, will not only lead to the monopolization of colonies, the division of the world,

and imperialist rule.

In the rich countries, imperialist capital, constantly seeking to enlarge itself, increased the creative capacity of man and brought about a total transformation of the means of production thanks to the rapid progress of science, of techniques and of technology. This accentuated the pooling of labour and brought about the ascension of huge areas of population. In the colonial countries where colonization on the whole blocked the historical process of the development of the subjected peoples, or else changed them radically in the name of progress, imperialist capital imposed new types of relationships on indigenous society, the structure of which became more complex, and it stirred up, fomented, poisoned or resolved contradictions and social conflicts; it introduced, together with money and the development of internal and external markets, new elements in the economy; it brought about the birth of new nations from human groups or from peoples who were at different stages of historical development.

It is not to defend imperialist domination to recognize that it gave new nations to the world, the dimensions of which it reduced and that it revealed new stages of development of human societies and in spite of or because of the prejudices, the discrimination and the crimes which it occasioned, it contributed to a deeper knowledge of humanity as a whole, as a unity in the complex diversity of the characteristics of its development.

Imperialist rule on many continents favoured a multilateral and progressive (sometimes abrupt) confrontation not only between different men but also 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 society it rules and of the historical reality (both economic, social, and cultural) in the middle of which it exists.

This knowledge is necessarily expressed in terms of comparison with the dominating subject and with its own historical reality. Such a knowledge is a vital necessity in the practice of imperialist rule which results in the confrontation, mostly violent, between two identities which are totally dissimilar in their historical past and antagonistic in their different functions. The search for such a knowledge contributed to a general enrichment of human and social knowledge in spite of the fact that it was one-sided, subjective, and very often unjust.

In fact man has never shown as much interest in knowing other men and other societies as during this century of imperialist domination. An unprecedented mass of information, of hypotheses and theories has been built up, notably in the fields of history, ethnology, ethnography, sociology, and culture concerning people or groups brought under imperialist domination. The concepts of race, caste, ethnicity, tribe, nation, culture, identity, dignity, and many other factors have become the object of increasing attention from those who study men and the societies described as 'primitive' or 'evolving'.

More recently, with the rise of liberation movements, the need has arisen to analyse the character of these societies in the light of the struggle they are waging, and to decide the factors which launch or hold back this struggle. The

Researchers are generally agreed that in this context culture shows special significance. So one can argue that any attempt to clarify the true role of culture in the development of the (pre-independence) liberation movement can make a useful contribution to the broad struggle of the people against imperialist domination.

In this short lecture, we consider, particularly the problems of the 'return to the source,' and of identity and dignity in the context of the national liberation movement.

The fact that independence movements are generally marked, even in their early stages, by an upsurge of cultural activity has led to the view that such movements are preceded by a 'cultural renaissance' of the subject people. Some might go as far as to suggest that culture is one means of collecting together a group, indeed one *weapon* in the struggle for independence.

From the experience of our own struggle and one might say that of the whole of Africa, we consider that there is too limited, even a mistaken idea of the vital role of culture in the development of the liberation movement. In our view this arises from a fake generalization of a phenomenon which is real but limited, which is at a particular level in the vertical structure of colonized societies — at the level of the *elite* or the colonial *diasporas*. This generalization is unaware of or ignores the vital element of the problem; the indelible character of the cultural resistance of the masses of the people when confronted with foreign domination.

Certainly, imperialist domination calls for cultural oppression and attempts either directly or indirectly to do away with the most important elements of the culture of the subject people. But the people are only able to create and develop the liberation movement because they keep their culture alive despite continual and organized repression of their cultural life and because they continue to resist culturally even when their politico-military resistance is destroyed. And it is cultural resistance which, at a given moment, can take on new forms (political, economic, military) to fight foreign domination.

With certain exceptions, *the period of colonization* was not long enough, at least in Africa, for there to be a significant degree of destruction or damage of the most important facets of the culture and traditions of the subject people. Colonial experience of imperialist domination in Africa (genocide, racial segregation and apartheid excepted) shows that the only so-called positive solution which the colonial power put forward to repudiate the subject people's cultural resistance was '*assimilation*'. But the complete failure of the policy of 'progressive *assimilation*' of native population is the living proof of the falsehood of this theory and of the capacity of subject people to resist. As far as the Portuguese colonies are concerned, the maximum number of people assimilated was 0.03% of the total population (in Guinea) and this was after 500 years of 'civilizing mission' and half a century of 'colonial peace'.

On the other hand, even in the settlements where the overwhelming majority of the population are indigenous peoples, the area occupied by the

colonial power and especially the area of *cultural influence* is usually restricted to coastal strips and to a few limited parts in the interior. Outside the boundaries of the capital and other urban centres, the influence is almost out. It only leaves its mark at the very top of the colonizers' social pyramid — which created colonialism itself — and particularly it influences what one might call the 'indigenous petit bourgeoisie' and a very small number of workers in urban areas. The influence of the colonial power's culture is almost nil.

It can thus be seen that the masses in the rural areas, like a large section of the urban population, say, in all, over 99% of the indigenous population are untouched or almost untouched by the culture of the colonial power. This situation is partly the result of the necessarily obscurantist character of the imperialist domination, which, while it despises and suppresses indigenous culture, takes no interest in promoting culture for the masses who are their pool of manpower for forced labour and the main object of exploitation. It is also the result of the effectiveness of cultural resistance of the people who, when they are subjected to political domination and economic exploitation, find that their own culture acts as a bulwark in preserving their *identity* where the indigenous society has a vertical structure; this defence of their cultural heritage is further strengthened by the colonial power's interest, in protecting and backing the cultural influence of the ruling classes, their allies.

The above argument implies that, generally speaking, there is not any marked destruction or damage to culture or tradition either for the masses in the subject country or for the indigenous ruling classes (traditional chiefs, noble families, religious authorities). Repression, persecution, humiliation, betrayal by certain social groups who have compromised with the foreign power, have forced culture to take refuge in the villages, in the forests, and in the spirit of the victims of domination. Culture survives all these challenges and, through the struggle for liberation, blossoms forth again. Thus the question of a 'return to the source' or of a 'cultural renaissance' does not arise and could not arise for the mass of these people, for it is they who are the repository of the culture and at the same time the only socio-structure who can preserve and build it up and *make history*.

Thus, in Africa at least, for a true idea of the real role which culture plays in the development of the liberation movement a distinction must be made between the situation of the masses, who preserve their culture, and that of the social groups who are assimilated or partially so, who are cut off and culturally alienated. Even though the indigenous colonial elite who emerged during the process of colonization still continue to pass on some element of indigenous culture, yet they live both materially and spiritually according to the foreign colonial culture. They seek to identify themselves increasingly with this culture both in their social behaviour and even in their appreciation of its values.

In the course of two or three generations of colonization, a social class arises made up of civil servants, people who are employed in various branches of the economy, especially commerce, professional people, and a few urban

and agricultural landowners. This indigenous petit bourgeoisie, which emerged out of foreign domination and is indispensable to the system of colonial exploitation, stands midway between the masses of the working class in town and country and the small number of local representatives of the foreign ruling class. Although they may have quite strong links with the masses and with the traditional chiefs, generally speaking they aspire to a way of life which is similar if not identical with that of the foreign minority. At the same time, while they restrict their dealings with the masses they try to become integrated into this minority, often at the cost of family or ethnic ties and always at great personal cost. Yet, despite the apparent exceptions, they do not succeed in getting past the barriers thrown up by the system. They are prisoners of the cultural and social contradictions of their lives. They cannot escape from their role as a marginal class, a 'marginalised' class.

The marginal character of their role both in their own country and in that of the colonial power is responsible for the socio-cultural conflicts of the colonial elite or the indigenous petit bourgeoisie, played out very much according to their material circumstances and level of culture but always resolved on the individual level, never collectively.

It is within the framework of this daily drama, against the backcloth of the usually violent confrontation between the mass of the people and the ruling colonial class that a feeling of bitterness or a *frustration complex* is bred and develops among the indigenous lower middle class. At the same time they are becoming more and more conscious of a compelling need to question their marginal status, and to rediscover an identity.

Thus they turn to the people around them, the people at the other extreme of the socio-cultural conflict — the masses.

For this reason arises the problem of the 'return to the source' which seems to be even more urgent than the serious isolation of the petit bourgeoisie (or native elites) and their acute feelings of frustration, as is the case when African diasporas are sent to countries with colonial or racist traditions. It comes as no surprise that the theories or 'movements' such as *Pan Africanism* or Negritude (two pertinent expressions arising mainly from the assumption that all black Africans have a cultural identity) were propounded outside Black Africa. More recently, the Black Americans' claim to an African identity is another proof, possibly rather a desperate one, of the need for a 'return to the source' although clearly it is influenced by a new situation: the fact that the great majority of African people are now independent.

But the 'return to the source' is not and cannot in itself be an *act of struggle* against foreign domination (colonialist and racist) and it no longer necessarily means a return to traditions. It is the denial, by the petit bourgeoisie of the country, of the usurped supremacy of the culture of the dominant power over that of the dominated people with which it must identify itself. The 'return to the source' is therefore not a voluntary step, but the only possible reply to the demand of concrete need, historically denied, and enforced by the inescapable contradiction between the colonized

society and the colonial power, between the mass of the people exploited and the foreign exploitive class, a contradiction in the light of which each level of social stratum or indigenous class must define its role.

When the 'return to the source' goes beyond the individual and is expressed through 'groups' or 'movements', the contradiction is transformed into struggle (secret or overt), and is a prelude to the pre-independence movement or of the struggle for liberation from the foreign yoke. So, the 'return to the source' is of no historical importance unless it brings not only real involvement in the struggle for independence, but also complete and absolute identification with the hopes of the mass of the people, who are struggling not only against the foreign culture but also on the foreign domination. Otherwise, the 'return to the source' is nothing more than an attempt to find short-term benefits, knowingly or unknowingly a kind of political opportunism.

One must point out that the 'return to the source', apparent or real, does not develop at one time and in the same way in the heart of the indigenous petit bourgeoisie. It is a slow process, broken up and uneven, whose development depends on the degree of acculturation of each individual, of the material circumstances of his life, on the forming of his ideas and on his experience as a social being. This unevenness is the basis of the split of the indigenous petit bourgeoisie into three groups when confronted with the liberation movement: (a) a minority, which, even if it wants to see an end to foreign domination clings to the dominant colonialist class and openly oppose the movement to protect its social position; (b) a majority of people who are hesitant and indecisive; (c) another minority of people who share in the building and leadership of the liberation movement.

But the latter group, which plays a decisive role in the development of the pre-independent movement, does not truly identify with the mass of the people (with their culture and hopes) except through struggle, the scale of this identification depending on the kind or methods of struggle, on the ideological basis of the movement and on the level of moral and political awareness of each individual.

Identification of a section of the indigenous petit bourgeoisie with the mass of the people has an essential prerequisite: *that, in the face of destructive action by imperialist domination, the masses retain their identity, separate and distinct from that of the colonial power.* It is worthwhile therefore to decide in what circumstances this retention is possible; why, when and at what levels of the dominated society is raised the problem of the loss or absence of identity, and in consequence it becomes necessary to assert or to re-assert in the framework of the pre-independence movement a separate and distinct identity from that of the colonial power.

The identity of an individual or of a particular group of people is a bio-sociological factor outside the will of that individual or group, but which is meaningful only when it is expressed in relation with other individuals or other groups. The dialectical character of identity lies in the fact that it identifies and *distinguishes* that an individual (or a group) is only similar

to certain individuals (or groups) if it is also different to other individuals (or groups). The definition of an identity, individual or collective, is at the same time the affirmation and denial of a certain number of characteristics which define the individuals or groups, through *historical* (biological and sociological) factors at a moment of their development. In fact, identity is not a constant, precisely because the biological and sociological factors which define it are in constant change. Biologically and sociologically, there are no two beings (individual or collective) completely the same or completely different, for it is always possible to find in them common or distinguishing characteristics. Again the identity of a being is always relative, even circumstantial, because defining it means picking out more or less strictly and cautiously the biological and sociological characteristics of the being in question.

One must point out that in the fundamental duality given in the definition of identity, sociology is a more determining factor than biology. In fact, if it is correct that the biological element (inherited genetic structure) is the inescapable physical basis of the existence and continuing growth of identity, it is no less correct the case that the sociological element is the factor which gives it objective substance, by giving content and form, and allowing confrontation and comparison between individuals or between groups. To make a total definition of identity the inclusion of the biological element is indispensable, but does not imply a sociological similarity, whereas two beings who are sociologically exactly the same must necessarily have similar biological identities.

This shows on the one hand the supremacy of the social over the individual condition, for society (human for example) is a higher form of life; it shows on the other hand the need not to confuse, in arriving at identity, the *original identity*, of which the biological element is the main determinant, and the *actual identity*, of which the main determinant is the sociological element. Clearly the identity of which one must take account at a given moment of the growth of a being (individual or collective) is the actual identity, and awareness of that being reached only on the basis that his original identity is incomplete, partial and fake, for it leaves out or does not comprehend the decisive influence of social conditions on the content and form of identity.

In the formation and development of individual or collective identity, the social condition is an objective agent arising from economic, political, social and cultural aspects which are characteristic of the growth and history of the society in question. If one argues that the economic aspect is fundamental, one can assert that identity is in a certain sense an expression of the economic reality. This reality, whatever the geographical context and the path of development of the society is defined by the level of productive forces (the relationship between man and nature) and by the means of production (the relationship between men and classes within a single society). But if one accepts that culture is a dynamic synthesis of the material and spiritual condition of the society and expresses the close relationship both between

man and nature and between the different classes within a single society we can assert that identity is at the individual and collective level and beyond the economic condition, the expression of a culture. This is why to attribute, recognize or declare the identity of an individual or group is above all to place that individual or group in the framework of a culture. Now as we all know, the main prop of culture in any society is the social structure. One can therefore draw conclusion that the possibility of a given group keeping (or losing) its identity in the face of foreign domination depends on the extent of the destruction of its social structure under the stresses of that domination.

As for the effects of imperialist domination on the social structure of the dominated people, one must look here at the case of classic colonialism against which the pre-independence movement is contending. In that case, whatever the stage of historical development of the dominated society, the social structure can be subjected to the following experiences: (a) *total destruction*, mixed with immediate or gradual liquidation of the indigenous people and replacement by a foreign people; (b) *partial destruction*, with the additional settling of a more or less numerous foreign population; (c) *supposed preservation*, brought about by the restriction of the indigenous people in geographical areas of special reserves usually without means of living, and the massive influx of a foreign population.

The fundamentally horizontal character of the social structure of African people, due to the profusion of ethnic groups, means that the cultural resistance and degree of retention of identity are not uniform. So, even where ethnic groups have broadly succeeded in keeping their identity, we observe that the most *resistant* groups are those which have had the most violent battles with the colonial power during the period of effective occupation,* or those who because of their geographical location have had least contact with the foreign presence.**

One must point out that the attitude of the colonial power towards the ethnic groups creates an insoluble contradiction: on the one hand it must divide or keep divisions in order to rule and for that reason favours separation if not conflict between ethnic groups: on the other hand to try and keep the permanency of its domination it needs to destroy the social structure, culture, and by implication identity, of these groups. Moreover it must protect the ruling class of those groups which (like, for example, the Peul tribe or nation in our country) have given decisive support during the colonial conquest a policy which favours the preservation of the identity of these groups.

As has already been said, there are not usually important changes in respect of culture in the upright shape of the indigenous pyramid or of the indigenous social pyramids (groups or societies with a State). Each level or

* In our country: mandjaques, pepels, oincas, balantes, beafadas.

** Pajadincas and other minorities in the interior.

class keeps its identity, linked with that of the group but separate from that of other social classes. Conversely, in the urban centres, as in some of the interior regions of the country where the cultural influence of the colonial power is felt, the problem of identity is more complicated. While the bottom and the top of the social pyramid (that is the mass of the working class drawn from different ethnic groups and the foreign dominant class) keep their identities, the middle level of this pyramid (the indigenous petit bourgeoisie), culturally uprooted, alienated or more or less assimilated, engages in a sociological battle in search of its identity. One must also point out that though united by a new identity – granted by the colonial power – the foreign dominant class cannot free itself from the contradictions of its own society, which it brings to the colonized country.

When, at the initiative of a minority of the indigenous petit bourgeoisie, allied with the indigenous masses, the pre-independence movement is launched, the masses have no need to assert or reassert their identity, which they have never confused nor would have known how to confuse with that of the colonial power. This need is felt only by the indigenous petit bourgeoisie which finds itself obliged to take up a position in the struggle which opposes the masses to the colonial power. However, the reassertion of identity distinct from that of the colonial power is not always achieved by the lower middle class. It is only a minority who do this, while another minority asserts, often in a noisy manner, the identity of the foreign dominant class, while the silent majority is trapped in indecision.

Moreover, even when there is a reassertion of an identity distinct from that of the colonial power, and the same as that of the masses, it does not show itself in the same way everywhere. One part of the middle class minority, engaged in the pre-independence movement, uses the foreign cultural norms, calling on literature and art, to express rather the discovery of its identity than to draw on the theme of the hopes and sufferings of the masses. And precisely because it uses the language and speech of the colonial power, the minority only occasionally manages to influence the masses, generally illiterate, and familiar with other forms of artistic expression. This does not however remove the value of the contribution to the development of the struggle made by this petit bourgeoisie minority, for it can at the same time influence a sector of the uprooted or those who are latecomers to its own class and an important sector of public opinion in the colonial metropolis, notably the class of intellectuals.

The other part of the lower middle class which from the start joins in the pre-independence movement finds in its prompt share in the liberation struggle and in integration with the masses the best means of expression of identity distinct from that of the colonial power.

That is why identification with the masses and reassertion of identity can be temporary or definitive, apparent or real, in the light of the daily efforts and sacrifices demanded by the struggle itself – a struggle, which while being the organized political expression of a *culture* is also and necessarily a proof not only of *identity* but also of *dignity*.

In the course of the process of colonialist domination, the masses, whatever the characteristic of the social structure of the group to which they belong, do not stop resisting the colonial power. In a first phase – that of conquest, cynically called ‘pacification’ – they resist gun in hand foreign occupation. In a second phase – that of the golden age of triumphant colonialism – they offer the foreign domination passive resistance, almost silent, but blazoned with many revolts, usually individual and once in a while collective. The revolt is particularly in the field of work and taxes, even in social contacts with the representatives, foreign or indigenous, of the colonial power. In a third phase – that of the liberation struggle – it is the masses who provide the main strength which employs political or armed resistance, to challenge and to destroy foreign domination. Such a prolonged and varied resistance is possible only because while keeping their culture and identity, the masses keep intact the sense of their individual and collective dignity, despite the worries, humiliations and brutalities to which they are often subjected.

The assertion or reassertion by the indigenous petit bourgeoisie of identity distinct from that of the colonial power does not and could not bring about restoration of a sense of dignity to that class alone. In this context we see that the sense of dignity of the petit bourgeoisie depends on the objective moral and social feeling of each individual, on his subjective attitude towards the two poles of the colonial conflict, between which he is forced to live out the daily drama of colonization. This drama is the more shattering to the extent to which the petit bourgeoisie in fulfilling its role is made to live alongside both the foreign dominating class and the masses. On one side the lower middle class is the victim of frequent if not daily humiliation by the foreigner, and on the other side it is aware of the injustice to which the masses are subjected and of their resistance and spirit of rebellion. Hence arises the apparent paradox of continuing colonial domination; it is from within the indigenous lower middle class, a social class which grows from colonialism itself, that arise the first important steps towards mobilizing and organizing the masses for the struggle against the colonial power.

The struggle, in the face of all kinds of obstacles and in a variety of forms, reflects the awareness or grasp of a complete identity, generalizes and consolidates the sense of dignity, strengthened by the development of political consciousness, and derives from the culture or cultures of the masses in revolt one of its principal strengths.