

The Tribal Question in the Advanced Stage of the Struggle

Eduardo Mondlane

Response to an interview question by the President of FRELIMO. The interview was conducted in 1969 a week before his assassination, and was published in Tricontinental, 12, May-June 1969.

Tricontinental: You said that the tribal question in the advanced stage of the struggle became a sort of problem. Was it at this stage?

Mondlane: Yes, the point at which tribalism arises, as does regionalism, is the point where psychological warfare comes into operation. When the Portuguese Army is being hurt by our forces, when the Portuguese become more and more aware that FRELIMO is a force to contend with, as it became in 1965-66, they begin to devise new means. Salazar launched propaganda which they were the only ones to believe: that there is no Mozambique without Portugal; that the Mozambique people are a motley of tribal groups who have never had any unity. According to the Portuguese, their presence in our country stopped the possibility of fratricidal fights and trouble from springing up among us. Well, there isn't such a thing. So how do you prove, how do you make happen, that which you wished for? They began to organize whatever ethnic or language differences existed among people in Mozambique and tried to foment them. Or, they tried to infiltrate into FRELIMO individuals who were from one region to create confusion among

the military by saying that 'you have been commanded by men from another region'. These attacks have all failed, but we are not fooling ourselves, as we sense even now that there is a constant pressure to make out of regionalism or tribalism a factor in every structure we create. We know that the enemy is still interested in fomenting these problems and we continue to fight against them.

Tricontinental: What has been the work carried out with the tribal chiefs?

Mondlane: What happens in every region where action is taking place is that any chief who is against the liberation struggle is sent away before military action takes place. But as soon as military action begins he either has to run over to the enemy or he is eliminated. Only those chiefs who have become part of FRELIMO, which means becoming chairmen, or secretaries of cells, sections, districts, or provinces of our work, can remain. And at that point they are one and the same with any one of us. So the functions they had before had an influence in their selection only because they had prestige and, therefore, they were elected chairmen, but, once the struggle begins, the whole thing is people of Mozambique together. And the paramount chief is unimportant as such in that stage.

Tricontinental: And how has armed struggle influenced the traditional political structure, habits, and so on?

Mondlane: The traditional political structure was really destroyed by the Portuguese. In some parts it took a longer period than in others. In the South, and in some parts of the West, it is only recent. But even then, for example, in my area, Limpopo Valley, in the southern part, the king of that area was captured and our army destroyed only in 1898, during my father's youth. The political structure is gone, practically. There isn't a traditional political structure, except the system of authority which is reflected by that administrative system which the Portuguese perpetuated. But even this is split into small units whose paramount chiefs are nothing but policemen. They have no value politically in the country. And most of them are so police-like that they are despised by the people. FRELIMO is organizing a new political structure out of a vacuum of no politics or no tradition, really, of politics. A system of authority did exist, and some people still cherish a tribal leader. But these tribal leaders possessing a real or spiritual influence have been emasculated by the eagerness of the Portuguese to destroy the tradition and create a new Portuguese administration. This is very favourable to FRELIMO now. In our economy we use the people to produce cotton, to produce sisal, to produce tea, and the other things that the Europeans want. People who are in the rural areas grow rice, cashew nuts, and so on for the European economic interests directly. We say: 'Look, you are being exploited.' And we can point to the paramount chief's excesses, the way he violates even the traditional system of work, because the administration of Portugal says he must, and when he does things that the administration doesn't want he is humiliated in public, beaten by the palmatoria, by the Portuguese.

This exemplifies the lack of power that we people suffer from in Mozambique. So the political structures of the past have gone, and have gone for good. FRELIMO must fill in the vacuum with new politics.

The Portuguese, because theirs is a fascist regime, in the last 40 years never encouraged any development of local traditional political structures the way the British have done in British Africa. Therefore, we are dealing with a fresh situation which is actually a challenge for us.