

CULTURE AND THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST STRUGGLE IN AFRICA¹

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Culture summarise the way of life of a people in totality. All human activities and impacts that manifest their presence, their works and the changes they make upon nature, is culture. The process of survival, of producing people's material needs, is the process of creating culture. The development of productive forces, education, science and technology and all that which people create to make their work easier and to increase their ability to extract a more and better living from nature; to realise and increase their material needs both quantitatively and qualitatively; to make their environment more beautiful, more comfortable, more lively, and more conducive for living; to increase their knowledge and command of the laws of nature and society; - all this is culture.

Then there is that part of culture related but at the same time apart from material culture itself, the sum total of the values of a people, nationality or nation; the spiritual and intellectual aspect, that part of culture that expresses and manifests human consciousness of nature and society; that which is about social relations: morals, customs, traditions, beliefs, religion, politics, etc.; art or the human activities that convey human emotions through live images: literature and orature, music, dance, theatre, sculpture, painting, etc.; aesthetics; sports; etc.

Culture is by human beings and for human beings. It manifests peoples presence on earth. African culture is a manifestation of Africans in Africa both yesterday and today. Culture distinguishes human beings from animals. For animals do not create culture as they do not consciously change nature - and the process of consciously changing nature as we have observed, is the process of creating culture. Since all human beings have always struggled to better their lives on earth, it follows that all human beings have produced a culture of their own, to a greater or lesser degree respectively, depending on the historical, environmental, and material conditions that exist at a particular time and place.

To claim, therefore, that Africans had no culture before contact with Europe or before the coming of colonialism, as imperialist scholars did and still do, is to say that Africans were not existing as human beings before the coming of colonialism. To say that African culture was (is) primitive and backward and that to be civilised the African must adopt European or American bourgeoisie culture, is the same as saying that Africans are like animals but animals who can be tamed from nature by being converted into slaves and puppets of US, Western and Japanese imperialism! Yet, this is the role of imperialism in relation to the cultures of Africans.

Colonialism was about political and economic domination of Africa and Africans by capitalist and imperialist Europe. But political and economic domination cannot be realised without cultural domination. A people with a culture of their own and national pride cannot be easily colonised. That is why, since all Africans had developed cultures of their own over time, everywhere in Africa, slave trade, colonialism and all forms of foreign domination were met by resistance from African peoples who always refused to be ruled, exploited and dominated by foreigners.

The history of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa is the history of resistance and struggle of the African peasants, workers and patriots on the one hand and that of colonial state violence, exploitation, and oppression supported by imperialist surrogates in Africa, on the other

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hand. Colonialism is a period of organised physical and psychological war aimed at destroying the material and intellectual cultures of the African peoples. The destruction of the cultures of African peoples by the terror, brutality, fascism and genocide committed by Europeans during the five centuries of slave trade, was continued in the nineteenth century by colonialism, and is still continued today by neo-colonialism.

Amidst a lot of historical evidence to the contrary, colonialism fabricated all sorts of 'facts' to prove that Africans were primitive, backward and barbaric and that their history started with contact with Europe and with colonialism. Missionaries, colonial administrators, explorers, adventurers, ignorant and or racists intellectuals and philosophers, colonial education, all united to teach that Africans had no culture, and that whatever they had which can be termed as culture was either primitive or somehow came into Africa from outside Africa, most probably Europe or the Middle East.

Yet Africa has always been part and parcel of human history which has always shown dynamic signs of growth and development. The earliest human being is said to have lived in Africa. The history of mankind, therefore, started in Africa and then spread to other parts of the world. Many years before Jesus Christ was born and before Sahara became a desert, there was no doubt, even to the ancient Greeks, Arabs, Jews and people of the Middle East, Romans, etc., that Africa was the cradle of human civilisation. The Nubian and Egyptian civilisation along the river Nile symbolises African peoples' cultural achievements. Many racists historians and scholars who could not and cannot deny the existence of Nubian and Egyptian civilisation, nevertheless deny that it was Africans or Black people's civilisation, in spite of large historical evidence that proves that it was indeed Black Africa's civilisation.

Thus also the Great Zimbabwe civilisation in the centre of Africa was ascribed to the Queen of Sheba just as that of Ethiopia was said to have been the culture of some Roman legion which had been lost deep in the heart of Africa. The Swahili civilisation at the coast of Eastern Africa was ascribed to the Arabs and Kiswahili which by all linguistic evidence is an African language of Bantu origin of the Swahili people was said and is still said to be the extension of Arabic. Children in the West, and also Africa, because of imperialist education still in African countries, are hardly taught about the ancient cultural achievements of Ethiopia, Maghreb, Western Sudan (the zone presently occupied by Sudan, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and parts of Nigeria, Guinea and Mauritania) or about Bunyoro-Kitara (the civilisations that were around Lake Nyanza - or the colonial name Lake Victoria - which include Bunyoro, Ankole, Toro in Uganda and Karagwe in Tanzania). Neither are they taught about Zimbabwe, the Congo, etc., all of which shining examples of Africa's cultural achievements thousands of years before the coming of colonialism are.

Imperialists and racists always either deny the history and culture of African peoples or distort it and attribute it to outside Africa in order to justify colonialism and neo-colonialism. For imperialism has to lie to its population at home that it is not motivated by imperialist's interests of expanding capital and wealth by exploiting the human and natural resources of the African people. It instead cheats its people at its home and also its victims in countries under colonial domination that it is in Africa for humanitarian and Christian missions of civilising and developing African people who are in the state of nature, without morals, religion or civilisation. While the domination of Africa's economic and political life by neo-colonialism is the basic cause of the culture of poverty, corruption, dictatorship, wars, violation of human rights, dependency and all manifestations of underdevelopment in our continent, we are told that neo-colonialism is there for our own good, to provide us aid and loans, to create employment, industries, technology and to teach us about democracy and human rights.

Imperialism denies Africans of their history and culture in order to destroy their creative and struggling spirits and in order to enable them to start looking at themselves and the world from outside themselves, from imperialist Europe. The distortion of Africa's history, the denial and destruction of African cultures, was aimed at making Africans lose faith in their ability to determine their own destiny as human beings equal to any human beings anywhere in the world. It was and is calculated to make the victims dependent on their enemies, to make Africans see colonialism, neo-colonialism and capitalism as their saviour. It is aimed at making Africans to accept the culture of producing agricultural, mineral, forestry and other raw materials for capitalist markets that furthermore add value to the products to maximise profits and at the same time determine the prices for them. The economies of African countries are made to remain dependent on importing manufactured goods from the imperialist countries. African peasants are forced into the culture of hunger and malnutrition by being made to abandon traditional food crops and sustainable farming systems by adopting the culture of producing coffee, tea, cocoa, pyrethrum, cotton, sugar, etc., not for their own industrial and other needs but for export. The objective of neo-liberalism is to cheat Africans that we can liberate and develop our countries not through destroying colonial and neo-colonial economic and cultural structures but by consolidating them.

Unfortunately, the leadership in most African countries has either embraced or given in to neo-liberalism and are implementing political and economic policies manufactured by imperialism and that, furthermore, have hitherto failed to end poverty and underdevelopment in Africa and in the world. The capitalist oriented policies have escalated not only neo-colonialism but the culture of violations of human rights, slums, exploitation of person by person, tribalism, conflicts and violence.

Imperialism in its colonial form institutionalised racism to justify state violence against African cultures and to rationalise the rape, plunder and underdevelopment of Africa. Racist and imperialist historians, anthropologists, 'researchers', 'scientists' were and still are always 'collecting data' to prove that Africans were and still are barbarians in the state of nature. They could and still cannot accept and/or believe that Africans were and are part and parcel of human history and civilisation and that, in fact, Europe and the rest of the world had borrowed a lot from Africa and that the development of European material culture is dialectically related to the underdevelopment of Africa's material culture.

They deliberately choose not to believe or say the factual truth that long before we had any contact with Europe, long before Africa was invaded, partitioned, colonised and dominated by European imperialism, we Africans were there. We were living and living like all human beings in the world. We were developing, we were struggling with nature and ourselves, we were creating culture, we were making history. We had our religions, customs, morals, philosophies, beliefs, social organisations, values, etc. We had our agricultural, educational, economic and political systems. We were developing in science and technology as it was reflected in our productive forces. We had our own highly developed languages, literature's, theatres, dances, music, sculptures, fine arts, etc. We were not living in caves, under trees or on top of trees. We were not sitting and waiting for foreigners or colonialists or God to come to provide us with food, shelter, clothes or to teach us how to behave and live in society, to dance or celebrate. As a matter of fact, the culture of dependency, of sitting and mourning and waiting for foreigners to do things for us - this reactionary culture being imposed upon Africans by imperialism and the African traitors controlling state power today, of believing that we cannot develop without foreign aid, without the same forces that are the cause of our underdevelopment - this was never the culture of our ancestors.

In Africa, the second largest continent in the world, we were already as large as our continent itself, composed of thousands of different nationalities, languages and cultures which are as diverse as they are similar. Our cultures were at different stages of development. Some were pastoralists and nomads while others were sedentary farmers combining crop agriculture and rearing of animals. Others were living in the villages while others had developed a highly sophisticated urban life and cultures. Some were at different stages of communalism manifesting the social relations of a classless society while others were at higher modes of social development, slave and feudal at various stages, with cultures manifesting class contradictions.

Everywhere, our cultures were developing and changing. True, the development and changes were not identical. It was in Africa as it was also everywhere in the world, that due to geographical, historical, structural and superstructural conditions, different societies have developed differently and at different rates.

Our peoples and cultures were interacting and by so doing developing each other through the processes of assimilation. Those at the coast of our vast continent had been interacting and assimilating the cultures of Europeans and Asians, just as the Asian and European cultures were assimilating African cultures in return. This was normal, logical and inevitable cultural development which was interrupted by among others, mercantilism, slave trade, colonialism and today neo-colonialism - the processes that developed and still develops Western Europe, United States of America and today also Japan, by underdeveloping Africa. It is the same process which makes Western Europe and USA to assume or arrogate itself to be the centre of the universe in terms of culture and to force African nations and nationalities, and also other colonised people, to define themselves and their values in terms of standards set in and centred in the imperialist countries.

To paraphrase Ngugi wa Thiong'o², to appreciate the question of culture in Africa we must recognise the reality of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism and accept the full implications of the recognition. The struggle for national and cultural liberation is the struggle against European, Japanese and USA imperialism. Neo-colonialism is about the domination of economic and political life of Africa by Western, USA and Japanese capitalism. Through this process of exploitation and oppression, Africa a very rich continent by all standards, has the poorest people in the world. Imperialist domination in Africa is sustained by the neo-colonial states which are led by the comprador class of imperialist puppets who amass wealth by collaborating with imperialism to exploit and underdevelop their own countries and peoples.

Neo-colonialism is opposed to the development of popular national cultures in Africa. With the exception of a handful, all states in Africa are used to disseminate Western imperialist cultural values while impeding the development of African cultures which continue to live even in the hostile climate of neo-colonialism, dictatorship, and even fascism, thanks to the creativity, resistance and struggle of the African masses of peasants and workers.

The comprador and petty-bourgeoisie class worships and parrots European and American capitalist cultures and imposes them upon the rest of African societies. In fact, it is the unpopular, dictatorial, corrupt and veiled pro-imperialist regimes in Africa that are presented to the imperialist world as democratic and successful. Anti-imperialist regimes that represent the wishes and aspirations of the masses of their country of national and social liberation, social

² Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the most famous Kenyan writer.

justice and national identity, are presented by the imperialist mass media as unpopular, and dictatorial regimes.

Thanks to imperialists and their puppets who control economic, political and state power on behalf of imperialism, Africa is portrayed by the international mass media controlled by imperialists in grim colours, with emphasis on the negative reality: catastrophes, wars, famine, violation of human rights, HIV - Aids and general misery. The true root cause of all this human misery is never told. The image of Africa in the West, USA, Japan and the world controlled by imperialist mass media is deliberately falsified as that of poor helpless people, beggars, primitive, backward and docile victims resigned to their fate. Everything in Africa is terrible, horrible, horrifying, disgusting, strange, exotic and abnormal, according to the imperialist mass media which shapes the views of the people in the West, USA and also in the world about Africa.

For example, the image of Kenya in the West is that of wildlife and nature. If they are fair, then they portray us as formidable long distance runners as though this is our only achievement. The people and cultures of Kenya are represented by the images of poor - begging - semi - naked Masais and Turkanas living in *manyatas* side by side with wild animals in primitive shelters. No wonder there are people in the West who honestly believe that there are no towns in Kenya and that all Kenyans live naked in the jungle except "very few educated and civilised ones". Personally, while in Europe, I have been asked whether there are buses, telephones, schools, shoes, industries, food and etc. in Kenya, and whether we don't fear to live in jungles and the wilderness with wild animals! Many in Europe have implied by their questions that I had not known civilised life until I came to Europe. The true and living culture of the Kenyan people, and of Africa for that matter, is hardly portrayed by the imperialist mass media. What is known about Rwanda, Somalia, Ethiopia, Burundi, Angola, Congo, Chad, Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, etc., through the imperialist press is nothing but war, genocide, destruction, death, diseases, hunger, refugees, etc. Before catastrophes take place Africa hardly exists in the racist Western and USA mass media.

Yet the truth about Africa is that behind all these wars, poverty, hunger, misery, dependency, dictatorships, corruption, violation of human rights, etc., - which we admit, sadly, exist today, as it is in other places of the world including Europe and USA - is USA, Western and Japanese imperialism.

They may say that we are poor and underdeveloped because we are lazy, because we are overpopulated, because our cultures are against development, because we are stupid, because we are Africans or whatever, but we know the truth. This truth is that Africans have been living, are still living and will continue to live in Africa and in the world despite all this.

In fact, the African masses of workers and peasants are daily creating their material and spiritual cultures. While there is imperialist culture, there is and has always been the culture of resistance and struggle against internal and external exploitation and oppression. This popular culture is rooted among the majority of African people, the peasants and workers. It is against dictatorship, capitalism and imperialism.

Popular African culture is national in form as it struggles for the cultural identities of African nations and nationalities. It rejects the imperialist notion of viewing ourselves and the world from the eyes of CNN, Voice of America, the BBC, Discovery Channel and other pro-imperialist mass media within Africa itself. It refuses the lie that freedom, democracy and development is synonymous with capitalism. For popular culture is, naturally, patriotic and revolutionary in content as it struggles for a democratic and just society and a world without tribalism, racism,

capitalism, imperialism, gender discrimination and all forms of oppression and exploitation of person by person. Imperialism is aware of this cultural reality in Africa. But they will not publicise it as to do so is the same as digging their own grave. Yet this cannot stop the African masses from digging the grave of burying both internal and external exploitation and oppression in order to free popular and progressive African cultures.

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