

Cultural Racism

MPLA

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One of the most serious aspects of colonialism has been its effect on the culture of the African peoples.

A social system based on the exploitation of man by man in its most extreme form, seen as a whole, colonialism means the economic plunder of the land of the politico-social servitude of man. But it is not only this. Based on the enslavement of man, as in every situation of privilege in history, colonialism seeks to perpetuate this enslavement. Firearms and the whip not being sufficient, colonialism resorts to the destruction of the African, in this identifying him with any other colonial and making him lose his identity with himself through the destruction of his culture. Therefore, colonialism is also cultural genocide. It has plundered the land and debilitated men. It tried to wipe out their past in order to depersonalise them in the present and obstruct their future. Depersonalised meant 'tamed', which ensured the perpetuation of the colonial relationship.

This is how colonialism understood it and how it acted.

To avoid uprisings, the ideal conditions for enslavement had to be created, imbuing the slave with acceptance of his situation, that is making the slave accept being a slave.

How? Firearms and the whip could not serve this purpose. There was only one way to proceed: to destroy the colonial's culture and make him either submit or be alienated by the 'superior culture' of his oppressor.

Attacking culture has been the most tragic of colonialism's manoeuvres to enslave peoples, since it afflicts men, their institutions, their mode of behaviour and their way of thinking. And its consequences are even more serious in that while it is 'profitable' to the oppressor in the long run, it is also only in the long run that its effects can be rooted out.

A subtle and imperceptible weapon, it is nevertheless the most effective one for the colonialists' desired perpetuation of their privileges. 'The better to dominate and exploit him (the colonial), colonialism places him outside the historical and social, the cultural and technical circuit,' writes Albert Memmi in his 'Portrait of the Colonial'. But what is meant by culture?

Avoiding all over-simplified definitions of 'the sum of knowledge', whether it be at the individual level or that of the people, we find that their culture is the body of ideas and patterns of behaviour which come from them, all of which is related to a body of social structures which supports them. To this must be added also technology, which is essential to the survival of any community, as well as a measure of feeling, which gives culture certain nuances from one people to another.

From this we will agree that there is not only one culture. Given the different material conditions under which it exists and upon which it develops, and the variations in the realm of feeling, one is forced to admit that there are different cultures.

Culture is a repository with which each individual identifies himself as belonging to a people. That is, it is an acting and thinking entity to which he wants and feels himself to belong.

In the colonialist attempt to destroy the colonial, the intention is precisely to break this link of the individual's identification with the entity to which he belongs. In the initial phase, they start by denigrating the values of the colonised – cultural racism is the beginning of cultural assassination and its manifestation. Similarly, they deny that the colonial has a past – deliberately drawing a curtain of oblivion over the past. Then they loudly proclaim that the values of the black man (or of any other colonial) are immoral and un-aesthetic, or insignificant, that his is an 'inferior culture'. 'The black man has no history,' is said with the utmost insolence and emphasis, so as to lead to the logical conclusion that the history of the black man started with colonialism

There follows a whole process of manipulation to create in the black man an inferiority complex towards that which is his by inculcating in him the idea 'everything African is vile.' The colonial stops using that which belongs to him as his cultural heritage. An inferiority complex about African culture having been created in him, he tends to deify European culture. The deification of the allegedly superior European culture is the most characteristic feature of the alienated colonial.

Colonialism kills the colonial spiritually and creates barriers which prevent the black African from situating himself in time and finding himself, making of him an empty receptacle to be filled with manipulated education. If the colonial should want to put an end to the sub-human condition, he has to forget what he is and 'rehabilitate' himself through the mode of reasoning of the oppressors, adopting their values and language. All that is African has to be left behind and only in the family circle can he perhaps retain his links with that which is his. The nature of his country is unknown to him, his people's history forbidden him, and the heroes of his people are classed as murderers and shameful opponents of 'progress', brought by the European, of course. The colonised man knows nothing about his country or its people.

Hence the disuse, if we may use the term, of African culture which leads to its being forgotten. This is the amnesia colonialism wants. Amnesia and an inability to understand both past and present historical events. In addition

to not having a memory, the black man (the colonial) must not be able to see ahead.

Then comes the next phase of the process, that of getting the 'superior culture' of the master accepted in the present.

It is here that the problem of the effects of colonialism on culture becomes most critical. In fact this is the culminating moment when the colonial moves away from himself, i.e. from his people, to adopt the culture which is alien to him.

Portuguese colonialism calls this 'assimilation'. It makes a great deal of noise about it and presents it as the alleged cornerstone of its method of colonising or, as they say, of 'civilising'.

The ideologies of Portuguese colonialism claim that Lusitanian colonisation is 'different'; that Portugal, which alone has divine attributes, can adapt to any ecological and cultural environment, having an enviable ability to get close to the people there. Everything was done without friction and what happened was a result of osmosis between the Portuguese and the people there, through natural interpenetration. Hence the 'different' way of colonising – sorry! – of 'civilising'! But history shows that this tendency towards assimilation has happened only in one direction: it is the black man (the colonial) who, if he wants to affirm himself, has to adopt the patterns of the oppressor.

This cultural racism was even institutionalised in the 1933 Salazarist constitution, which is still in force and which says that the 'native', to be considered 'assimilated', must, among other things, adopt European ways of life and renounce African customs and traditions, i.e. African patterns of thought and behaviour. This means that the African has to renounce African culture if he wishes to lose his slave status in the eyes of the coloniser.

Nothing could show more clearly that cultural destruction forms a part of the essence of Portuguese, just like any other, colonialism. In the process of 'assimilation', the African has almost always to adapt to an education unconnected with his own world, and follow patterns of learning which are at odds with the ecological reality of the environment of his future activities.

Training and education, those essential aspects of culture, often take place in different fields and also different places. Therefore, if, despite everything, early training still manages to uphold traditional values, i.e. African culture, it is not completed and backed up by appropriate formal education, since the formal education given to the budding '*assimilado*' is intended precisely to destroy all African values in him.

It is easy to see what distortions and traumas are caused by this situation.

The so highly lauded interpenetration finally results in a hierarchy of values. Elements of African culture rarely appear in the 'superior culture' of the European. They are wholly rejected or, at most, tolerated either because they do not offend European canons or because of the touch of exoticism they provide, all of which merely goes to show how 'magnanimous' the masters are. 'Now you can see that we have nothing against African culture, that we do not want to destroy it. Indeed, we even use and accept

some aspects of your culture.' Thank you very much! The truth of the matter is that such aspects that are adopted are few and it can virtually be said that in the formal education handed out by colonialism African culture is rejected as a whole, especially since the rare aspects 'used' are watered down through adjustment to European models.

(Then they say that 'this is proof of the inferiority of African culture'! You see, if it had more 'good' features for adoption, our culture would certainly have adopted them, as it has the few features 'made use of'.) 'Assimilation and colonisation are contradictory, since they tend to smash the colonial relationship, to suppress privileges, to remove the difference between colonisers and colonised,' A. Memmi states in his 'Portrait of the Colonial'. This means, therefore, that 'assimilation' cannot go beyond a certain point if it is not to become a negation of that which it serves – colonialism.

In substance a farce, 'assimilation' does however have an important part to play in the act of colonisation, that of benumbing and destroying black African culture (or any other colonised culture).

For the newly independent African states, the most serious heritage is that which results from this facet of colonialism. The problem of culture is of particular importance and requires urgent solution, especially since the attacks on African culture continue even after independence.

One of the major weapons of neocolonialism and imperialism is still the conquest of the mind, of the 'soul' of the colonised man. It is not surprising that we should see a proliferation of 'cultural centres', libraries, 'friendship circles' etc. in the newly independent African countries. Colonialism and neocolonialism are identical in their essence, the one using some of the methods of oppression of the other.

Neocolonialism is also a powerful gag to stifle peoples culturally so as to continue colonial relations indefinitely. The independent African countries need to display a will of iron in reviving African culture. This task of restoring the African to himself is now one of the most crucial problems in the construction of the new independent African states.

But construction implies renovation, so that in African re-personalisation it is necessary to react against the patterns of education imposed by the coloniser – often mechanically transferred from his country to the colonised country – and make every effort to define African culture, or to redefine it for the requirements of progress.

Both things must be done courageously, with all the political and economic responsibilities and consequences implied. The definition of a cultural policy is an urgent need in the independent African countries if they wish to free Africa more rapidly from the effects of colonialism and to struggle more effectively against the economic and political dependence to which many African countries are still subjected.