Culture, liberation, and 'development'

Shubi L. Ishemo

Introduction

It has become a fetish to talk about traditions when referring to socio-economic processes in Africa. This is common not only among Western 'development experts', but also among some African intellectuals. 'Tradition' carries with it meanings of timelessness, of stasis, of being fossilised. For the society so described, the notion of 'tradition' denies it a history. The implications for such an approach are manifest in the economistic ideology of 'developmentalism', which, as Shivji (1986:1) has shown, has been 'the dominant ideological formation in post-independence Africa'. The basis for this ideology, he further notes, is as follows:

> We are economically backward and we need to develop and develop very fast. In this task of development we cannot afford the luxury of politics. Therefore politics are relegated to the background, while economics come to occupy the central place on the ideological terrain.

We might also add that, in this ideological formation, culture, like politics, is seen as an obstacle and therefore relegated to the back-ground. This obsession with economistic developmentalism is not new. It has historically, and in various forms, served to legitimise domination over working people in every society. Historically, too, in the relationship between the West and the South, it has been based on the belief that the processes of Western socio-economic and political development are universal and that these, and these alone, constitute progress. It has been the dominant view since the age of European 'Enlightenment' in the eighteenth century and was popularised during colonial times. It has, in various guises, dominated the policies not only of the Western 'donor' governments, some NGOs, and international financial institutions, but also of some Southern governments. That

dominant view is Eurocentric, in that it assumes that the Western model is superior. It carries with it biases and lack of concern for the cultures and history of African and other Southern societies.

National liberation as an 'act of culture'

It is important to remind ourselves of the historical dimension. Colonialism, in Africa in particular and the South in general, served the need of the highly industrialised countries in Europe and North America for capital accumulation. In spite of political independence, this has not changed; in fact it has been consolidated, as capital restructures itself to resolve the crisis and to ensure continued accumulation through a variety of mechanisms. I shall come to this later. The colonialists started from the premise that Africa had no history; their mission was to bring the continent into history. Those ideas therefore denied Africa a culture and served as an ideological licensing of exploitation.

In the struggle for national liberation, the issue of history and culture became central. Amilcar Cabral, a revolutionary theorist and leader of the PAIGC liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde, wrote:

> Our countries are economically backward. Our peoples are at a specific historical stage, characterized by this backward condition of our economy. We must be conscious of this. We are African peoples, we have not invented many things … we have no big factories … but we do have our own hearts, our own heads and our own history. It is this history which the colonialists have taken from us. The colonialists usually say that it is they who brought us into history: today we say that this is not so. They made us leave history, our history, to follow them, right at the back, to follow the progress of their history.

Cabral argued that the national liberation struggle was a way 'to return to our history, on our own feet, by our own means and through our own sacrifices' (1974:63). Imperialist and colonial domination was therefore 'the negation of the historical process of the dominated people by means of violently usurping the free operation of the process of development of the productive forces' (1973:41). By 'productive forces', Cabral meant the means of production (such as tools, premises, instrumental materials and raw materials) and labour power. He emphasised that every society is an 'evolving entity', and that the stage of its development can be seen in the level of its productive forces.

Each of these reacts to nature. Groups enter material relationships, relationships with nature and the environment, and relationships among individuals or collectives. To him, these components constitute not only history, but also culture. In usurping all these, imperialism practises cultural oppression. Therefore, national liberation aims at the 'liberation of the process of development of national productive forces' and consequently the ability to determine the mode of production most appropriate to the evolution of the liberated people. It necessarily opens up new prospects for the cultural development of the society in question, by returning to that society all its capacity to create progress. National liberation, therefore, is 'necessarily an act of culture' (1973:43).

Cabral warned (1973:52) against naturalising culture and linking it to supposed racial characteristics.

> It is important to be conscious of the value of African culture in the framework of universal civilisation, but to compare this value with that of other cultures, not with a view of deciding its superiority or inferiority, but in order to determine, in the general framework of the struggle for progress, what contribution African culture has made and can make, and what are the contributions it can or must receive from elsewhere.

Cabral saw culture as a 'fruit of history', an integral part of historical processes. The most fundamental element for progress was the regaining of people's creative capacity and potential, which imperialism had usurped. This creative capacity has a democratic content, in that people determine what is best for themselves, and adapt new techniques and knowledge to their concrete reality. So when we speak about culture, we are referring not just to customs, beliefs, attitudes, values, art, etc., but to the whole way of life of a people, which also embraces a complex web of economic and political activities, science, and technology. These are not exclusive attributes of any single race or people. He referred to a scientific culture, a universal culture free from domination (1973:55).

I have dwelt on Cabral's work at length, because his analysis of the positive role of culture is relevant in the struggle against the most pressing problems of our time. His profound work has been shamefully ignored, especially by those in positions to exert a positive influence on policy and strategies that meet the needs and interests of the working people.

'Development' policies and cultural dependency

Much of the debate about 'development' has been conducted from differing and contending perspectives. It is not my intention to consider that here, but I wish to dwell briefly on how some of these perspectives have dealt with the cultural dimension in 'development' policies.

Modernisation theories regard cultures of non-industrialised societies in the South as obstacles to development. Those societies are seen as being characterised by kinship (which apparently hinders individual enterprise), religious obscurantism and fatalism, stagnation and resignation. In short, they are 'traditional'. The opposite of this is a 'modern' capitalist sector.

From a different source, another perspective, associated with Warren (1980), sees underdevelopment as being internal to poor societies of the South, and argues for a 'progressive' mission of capitalist imperialism. With specific reference to Africa, this position is unrelentingly restated in the words of John Sender and Sheila Smith (1987). They see capitalist imperialism as having led to the development of the productive forces and a rise in living standards. Both perspectives share the superficial nature of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity; both dwell purely on economic factors, and see the causes of the crisis in Africa as internal.

Recently, as Samir Amin (1990:96) has pointed out, the cultural dimension has been embraced by researchers as an important element in socio-economic processes. To my mind, however, this is not new. For working people in poor countries of the South, it has always been at the heart of any initiative that affects their lives. Central to the cultural dimension of socio-economic processes is the question of identity. Samir Amin further draws contrasts between the development of capitalism in Western Europe and Japan, on the one hand, and in Africa on the other. In the former he sees a longer process of social transformation with 'no break but a complex process of selective repossession of former cultural components within the context of technological and economic development'. This explains the dynamism of economic and technological creativity of those societies. By contrast, capitalist development in Africa was imposed from the outside and confronted local cultures in a violent manner, with the result that 'Identity ..., rather than being gradually broken down and rebuilt to productive effect, is more or less ferociously destroyed,

without putting in place compensatory processes of production of new cultural components, capable in turn of supporting accumulation and innovation' (1990: 98-9).

The origins of Africa's problems lie in the specificity of capitalist development and its long-term effects on African societies. It is fair to state that the European model was forced down their throats. African people had no say in this, because that was the nature of the Eurocentric project. It precluded all positive knowledge that African societies had generated.

Colonial institutions inculcated Euro-centric values unremittingly. European intellectuals served to legitimate the Eurocentric project. As George Joseph (1990:3) and his colleagues have argued,

> During the heyday of imperialism, the scholar was useful, not only in constructing a conceptual framework within which colonial ideology could be defended and extended, but in helping to select problems for investigation which highlighted the beneficial effects of colonial rule.

The purpose of colonial research institutes like the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in the then Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) is too well known to repeat here. In many colonies, ethnicities were invented; in the case of post-colonial Rwanda and Burundi, the cumulative consequences of the invention of ethnic identities by the successive German and Belgian colonial administrations are all too painfully apparent. The study of African cultures served the needs of colonial occupiers, particularly in the creation of labour reservoirs and the segmentation of labour along ethnic lines. It was not meant to invigorate and energise those societies to absorb and adapt new positive elements to their own realities. This was reinforced by the colonial education system. African intellectuals were colonised. The medium of instruction became European languages, whose cultural influences cannot be underestimated. Cultural dependency has been the consequence of that process.

It is in this context that socio-economic, political, cultural, and intellectual processes in post-colonial Africa must be understood. The penetrating analysis of Amilcar Cabral of the role of culture in the processes of change is very relevant, not only in contemporary Africa, but also throughout the South. He made a distinction 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 culture. They seek to identify themselves increasingly with this culture both in their social behaviours and even in their appreciation of its values. (1973:61)

In identifying the latter group, Cabral made a further distinction between those who vacillated and those who identified themselves with the masses. Post-colonial Africa has by and large been dominated by the vacillators. They have collaborated with imperialism in determining the strategies for 'development', by failing to challenge models that do not address people's needs. Their strategies reflect an unthinking and uncritical imitation of the West. They are intellectual and cultural captives of imperialism. This is not to say that this model has not been challenged in post-colonial Africa. Some of the liberation movements were a source of great inspiration for many. There were, in those movements, some 'organic' intellectuals like Amilcar Cabral who studied the reality of their societies meticulously. From such study they identified themselves with the aspirations of the masses and created popular structures in which the people participated in devising strategies for economic, social, political, and cultural advancement. In some countries, progressive strategies, designed to meet the people's needs, were initiated — even if sometimes frustrated by a lack of clear reference to the cultural dimension, by bureaucratism, and by populism. 'Organic' or politically engaged intellectuals played an important part in opening up avenues for real advancement. (There are some excellent essays on this subject in Diouf and Mamdani, eds., 1994.) We know what happened to those strategies and those intellectuals. External intervention and local reaction stifled them and continue to frustrate them.

Corporate profits and the quality of life

The current structural adjustment policies (SAPs), though they have their origins in the period dating from the early 1980s, are not new. What is new is the bold and shameless assertion of their neo-liberal ideological underpinnings and the intensity and viciousness of their implementation. SAPs have had devastating effects on the living standards of working people, including unprecedented increases in the levels of unemployment and a decline in levels of pay. Emphasis on export-led commodity production to service an ever-increasing debt

to the international financial institutions (IFIs) has resulted in low productive capacity for the internal market and an increase in dependency on (often subsidised) Western agro-industrial conglomerates. As Samir Amin (1994:38) has noted, IFIs like the World Bank have 'focused on destroying the autonomy of the peasant world, breaking the subsistence economy by supporting forms of credit designed to this end, and promoting the differentiation of the rural world through the famous "green revolution"'. The conditionalities imposed by the IFIs have led to a decrease in social expenditure and the deterioration of health-care and education systems (Chossudovsky, 1991 and Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, 1992). Many studies show a correlation between debt, SAPs, and ecological deterioration. For the World Bank, pollution is a sign of progress. In a famous observation, Lawrence Summers, the Bank's vice-president, recommended the transfer of 'dirty' industries to the Third World:

> I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that ... I have always thought that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly under-polluted, their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently high compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City. (Dore, 1992:85)

It is clear that, as Samir Amin (1994:38) has argued, 'The Bank has never seen itself as a "public institution" competing or potentially clashing with private capital (transnationals). On the contrary, it has viewed itself as an agent whose task is to support their penetration of the Third World.' The SAPs are economistic. They are more concerned with corporate profits than enabling the working people to improve the quality of their lives. In ignoring environmental issues, they downplay the cultural dimension; for, as Cabral (1973:42) noted, when we speak of culture, we refer to 'relationships between (humanity) and nature, between (humanity) and his (her) environment'. Thus, as Dore (1992:84) has observed, it is not surprising that, in the Third World, contemporary struggles of the working people have reflected the 'fusion of ecological, economic and cultural struggles'.

SAPs have engendered a culture of unbridled consumerism, with sections of the cities bristling with luxury commodities which are well beyond the means of working people. Far from inaugurating a new epoch of progress, they have exacerbated inequalities and weakened social bonds and solidarity through emphasis on the individual, rather than on society or communities.

Under empty slogans of a compressed world and a globalised economy, the sovereignty of the fragile nation states has been weakened. Decisions that affect millions are made in the boardrooms of the IMF and the World Bank, fully supported by the Western governments. 'Democracy' is imposed and regulated from the outside. The fall of authoritarian regimes has been a welcome development, but the popular content of that change has been hijacked by those committed to the neo-liberal project. The implications for people's participation in determining their strategies for advancement have been negative. Initiatives from below have been constantly frustrated by obsession with the laws of the market.

Acknowledging 'people as a living presence'

In 1979, Adrian Adams wrote an excellent account of a peasant co-operative in Senegal. It is one of the most moving and inspiring accounts that I have ever read. There is every reason to believe that there have been and continue to be similar experiences throughout the South. It is necessary reading for anyone who is serious about real 'development'. Adams details the development of a peasant farmers' initiative to improve their food production and to 'base rural development on existing communities and values'. The peasants' appeal for help to Western NGOs to adapt irrigation technical inputs to their farming methods attracted an array of NGOs, the Senegalese State bureaucracy, and USAID, all vying to control and direct what the peasants had initiated. What emerged was a predetermined Eurocentric approach, which ignored the peasants and brushed them aside as ignorant of 'development'. Technical 'assistance' was conditional on the peasants dismantling collective forms of production and parcelling out land into individual family plots, growing rice instead of millet, having production targets imposed on them by the State, purchasing fertilisers beyond their needs, and virtually surrendering control of their bank accounts to the State. The peasants rejected this paternalism, clearly recognising the peril that has befallen many poor countries: 'You go into debt, and then you have to sell them your whole harvest to pay off your debt. We don't want debts. We just want freedom' (Adams 1979:458). The people wanted 'peasant development' with 'a common fund, to give us strength. We, ourselves, decide what we want to do. We, ourselves, decide how many hectares we want to plant. We are working for our own people' (p.463). They rejected top–down 'administrative development'. The issue then was: what constitutes 'development'? Those so-called 'experts', as

Adams correctly noted, were unable to 'acknowledge the existence of a people here and now, having a past and a future' or 'to acknowledge the people as a living presence'. Indeed, that 'living presence' is the culture of a people.

What emerges from Adams' account of the struggle of the people in one Senegalese village is the sheer arrogance on the part of the self-appointed 'aid experts', compounded by the complicity of the State bureaucracy. Such arrogance in some 'donors', some political leaders and bureaucrats, transnational corporations and their local agents has been pervasive throughout the South. A catalogue of misconceived projects would be of biblical length. Those who initiate major infra-structural projects — dams, for example — neither consult the local population nor take into account their way of life, which includes, above all, accumulated knowledge of the ecological balance, their beliefs, and their sacred sites. This amounts to what Saleth (1992) has termed 'bypassing and alienating economic development', which reinforces existing inequalities of access to land and the displacement of the most vulnerable sections of the peasantry. Examples of these, and the opposition they have generated, can be found in India, where peasants have struggled courageously to halt a dam project sponsored by the World Bank and supported by the Indian Government; or in Namibia, where a government-proposed dam project which would have long-term effects on the Himba pastoral people has created controversy and led some officials into scathing condemnation of those who defend 'bare breasted' and 'primitive' people (*The Observer*, 29 January 1995) standing in the way of modernisation. And recently the activities of Michelin, the giant Western rubber conglomerate operating in Nigeria, have similarly shown the top–down approach to 'development'. There, the company expanded a rubber plantation into the protected Okomu forest without concern for the environment and the culture of the local people. It destroyed medicinal trees, shrines, and other symbols dear to the inhabitants. In reply to protests, the company pleaded ignorance and added, 'But we know the impact on the community can only be positive. We are providing employment, schools, clinics, electricity and water supplies' (*Financial Times*, 8 March 1995).

Of course, no local inhabitant objects to schools or clinics. But the company has a different conception of 'development', which involves destroying the symbols of the people's identity. The company, probably with the complicity of State bureaucrats, does not involve the local people in decision-making or incorporate their world-view into projects.

Some NGOs operate on the same basis. The case of their operations in Mozambique is well documented in Hanlon's study (1991). A number of African academics (such as Ayesha Imam and Amina Mama, 1994, and Abdel Gadir Ali, 1994) have noted that some NGOs and other 'donors' deliberately ignore locally funded research and wheel in 'experts' (from Europe and North America) whose recommendations carry more weight than the work of the local intelligentsia. In an example from Sudan, Abdel Gadir Ali (1994) notes how Sudanese economists who were critical of structural adjustment policies were deliberately excluded from an ILO mission requested by the Sudanese government to study the economic situation and advise on long-term strategies. Ali (1994:112) details the ensuing struggle which the local intelligentsia waged, and how 'a donor community with substantial resources waging a media war on local research efforts expressing reservations on the results of an established donor community's wisdom on how an African economy should be managed'. Consequently, as Mama and Imam (1994:86) have noted, African intellectuals are 'forced to take on board [Eurocentric] norms and waste time tilting at windmills to find out why we deviate from these patterns, instead of finding out what our own patterns and realities are'.

Making cultural sense of technology

Technology which is imposed on the people can be ill-suited to local needs. Bina Agarwal's study (1986:79-80) of wood-fuel crisis in the South shows how new cooking-stove technology, designed to save wood fuel, ended by doing exactly the opposite. In Guatemala, one important function of the 'traditional' stove was to emit smoke, which killed mosquitoes and pests in corn ears hung from rafters. This benefit was lost when the new stoves were introduced. When a new stove was introduced in Ghana, women found it technically cumbersome and ill-suited to using many pots at once. Local artisans and women had not been consulted in the design of the stoves. These projects claimed to employ 'appropriate technology', but they wholly failed to consider local needs and cultures. They assumed peasants in their ignorance to be responsible for the depletion of wood fuel, and presumed to import European science and technology to resolve their problems. As a consequence of not being consulted and involved in the development of new techniques, local artisans have become de-skilled. Such technologies are useless, because they are not specific to local techniques and they are not culturally familiar. The starting point for

the introduction of new technology must be to recognise, as Vandana Shiva (1991) has noted, that all societies have 'ways of knowing' and 'ways of doing' and that

> all societies, in all their diversity, have had science and technology systems on which their distinct and diverse development have been based. Technologies or systems of technologies bridge the gap between nature's resources and human needs. Systems of knowledge and culture provide the framework for the perception and utilisation of natural resources.

Technology is therefore not culture-free. It is central to the question of identity. Since it constitutes 'ways of doing', it is one of the principal elements of a people's identity. You can have science and technology, but with no 'development'. The two must make cultural sense, to achieve true development. In their campaign to establish a just international economic order, non-industrialised countries, through the South Commission [1990:45-46, 80, 132], chaired by former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, strongly argued for the centrality of culture in economic processes:

> Capital formation and technical progress are essential elements of development, but the broad environment for their effectiveness is a society's culture; it is only by the affirmation and enrichment of cultural identities through mass participation that development can be given strong roots and made a sustained process. For only on secure cultural foundations can a society maintain its cohesion and security during the profound changes that are the concomitants of development and economic modernisation.

The South Commission recommended that strategies must be sensitive to cultural roots, that is values, attitudes, and beliefs, and that cultural advancement itself depends on people-centred strategies. It warned that strategies which ignore the cultural dimension could result in indifference, alienation, social discord, and obscurantist responses.

These warnings have not been heeded. Economistic approaches that are central to the neo-liberal agenda have unleashed social instability. Ethnic rivalries and religious fundamentalism are a consequence of a profound sense of deprivation unleashed by 'structural adjustment'. As Samir Amin (1990:98) argued, 'fundamentalism emerged as a cultural protest against economics', and 'its growth [is] largely conditioned by the forms of social and economic change'.

The obstinate reluctance of the donors and Western governments to understand the atomising tendencies of 'structural adjustment' is mirrored in new concepts such as 'global culture'. These are based on the restructuring of capital on a global scale; the proliferation of consumerism, propagated by new communication technologies; and the supposed irrelevance of national frontiers. Western governments, transnationals, and their intellectual underlings harp on 'globalisation' without asking who gains and who loses (in economic, political, and cultural terms). 'Global culture' is a Western construct (particularly dear to the Western media). It is a piece of ideological baggage designed to legitimate 'structural adjustment'. It is an expression of cultural imperialism which particularly affects young people in poor countries.

Cultural penetration is linked to economic exploitation and ultimately to political and military domination. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Third World countries waged a struggle within the framework of UNESCO to establish a New World Communication and Information Order. The principal issue of the debate was the ever-increasing unidirectional flow of cultural products and 'news' from the advanced capitalist countries to the South, and the distorting effect on the cultures of Southern societies. The West condemned the Third World moves as politically motivated, claiming that they amounted to an infringement of the freedom of information. The United States and Britain withdrew from UNESCO in protest. It is clear that the monopoly over the news media and the distribution of cultural products was linked to the Western monopoly over information and communication technology. Third World attempts to link culture to the wider issue of a more just world economic order led to the West's campaign to weaken UN structures. These had been effective channels in a collective struggle for a more just international order. Their replacement, through the strong-arm tactics of the Western governments and the transnationals, by the 'unholy trinity' of the IMF, World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation has implications of an economic, political and culture nature for Africa and the rest of the South. It amounts to recolonisation.

Traditional cultures and knowledge have also attracted attention from the pharmaceutical and cosmetics transnationals. Some are well known for operating under hollow slogans of 'fair trade' and 'empowerment' of poor peoples. At the same time, the West demands 'rights' of intellectual property over Southern flora, fauna, and (increasingly) human achievement. This is the civilisation, the

globalisation, the 'development' that apparently will bestow benefits of the 'market' on working people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America! That there has been a peasant uprising in Chiapas is not surprising. If more rebellions break out, they will, under the circumstances, be justified. Maybe NGOs should look carefully at whose side they are on.

References

Adams, A. (1979) 'An open letter to a young researcher', *African Affairs* 78: 451-79.

Agarwal, B. (1986) *Cold Hearths and Barren Slopes, The Woodfuel Crisis in the Third World*, London: Zed.

Ali, A. G. (1994) 'Donors' wisdom versus African folly: what academic freedom and which high moral standing?' in M. Diouf and M. Mamdani (eds), 1994.

Amin, S. (1990) *Maldevelopment. Anatomy of a Global Failure*, London: Zed.

Amin, S. (1994) 'Fifty years is enough', *Southern African Economics and Political Monthly*, November.

Cabral, A. (1973) *Return to the Source*, New York: Africa Information Service.

Cabral, A. (1974) *Revolution in Guinea, An African People's Struggle*, London: Stage 1.

Chossudovsky, M. (1991) 'Global poverty and new world economic order', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2 November.

Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (1992) 'The World Bank and education in Africa', *Race and Class* 34/1.

Diouf, M. and M. Mamdani (eds.) (1994) *Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA.

Dore, E. (1992) 'Debt and ecological disaster in Latin America', *Race and Class* 34/1.

Hanlon, J. (1991) *Mozambique: Who Calls the Shots?*, London: James Currey.

Imam, A. M. (1994) 'The role of academics in limiting and expanding academic freedom', in Diouf and Mamdani (eds.) 1994.

Joseph, G., V. Reddy, and M. Searle-Chatterjee (1990) 'Eurocentrism in the social sciences', *Race and Class* 31/4.

Saleth, R. M. (1992) 'Big dams controversy: economics, ecology and equity', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 July.

Sender, J. and S. Smith (1987) *The Development of Capitalism in Africa*, London: Methuen.

Shiva, V. (1991) 'Biotechnology development and conservation of biodiversity', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 Nov.

Shivji, I. G. (1986) *The State and the Working People in Tanzania*, Dakar: CODESRIA.

The South Commission (1990) *The Challenge to the South*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Warren, Bill (1980) *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capital*, London: Verso.