

CULTURE AND THE NATIONAL STRUGGLE

by D.Dingiswayo

Cultural struggle has always formed an integral part of the efforts of the oppressed in the fight for democracy and national liberation. But what do we really mean when we speak of 'culture'?

In general, we can distinguish three important and useful definitions of culture:

1)all behaviour that is learnt rather than inherited genetically;

2)customs, traditions and values;

3)intellectual and artistic production.

We can use the term culture in all these three senses as long as we are clear about which meaning we are using. In this article I will be using culture in the second and third meanings.

The first important thing to note about culture is that it is

not all of a piece, like a block of stone, but that it is rather constructed, like a car, out of many different materials - past traditions, values and practices developed in the course of struggle or the cultural products of cultural workers.

Culture is always developing, changing, always assimilating new elements while old ones fall away - culture is a process.

As Amilcar Cabral wrote "...culture, both as a cause and effect of history, includes essential and secondary elements, strengths and weaknesses, positive and negative factors ... contradictions, conflicts.' Thus all cultures are both complex and contradictory.

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The third important aspect of culture is that it is the basis of a people's sense of identity. It is culture, the way that people think of themselves as a group, the customs and traditions that they share, that make a group of people think of themselves as 'we' and others as 'they'. This sense of identity can cut across class divisions as a cross-class phenomenon.

The connection between identity and culture make culture "the very foundation of the liberation movement" (Amilcar Cabral). One of the strongest forces that binds people of different and even opposed classes together into a single nation is a common culture.

It is for this reason that we can see how inseparable the development of a South African culture and the struggle for liberation are. And at every moment, on farms, in villages, in townships and cities, a truly

"Recognising: that culture is an integral part of the national democratic struggle; the national democratic movement therefore asserts that the role of cultural workers is inseparable from the overall struggle against apartheid as well as the moulding of the future non-racial, non-sexist, unitary and democratic South Africa." (Resolution taken at CASA, Amsterdam, December 1987, on the role of culture and cultural workers in the struggle for a liberated South Africa.)

South African culture is developing.

So, a national identity is created within the context of culture, but culture remains complex, contradictory and ever changing. This is important in our context, because it means that the development of one South African culture does not exclude the existence of other distinctive cultures within it.

Research done in the Soviet Union has shown that culture is inclusive rather than exclusive - a sense of Soviet culture and identity is emerging that embraces rather than denies various national cultures. In South Africa, as in the USSR, we have a number of distinctive cultural groups, each of which has the right to develop their own cultural life. The Soviet experiences shows that this is not incompatible with the development of a single South African culture.

Within the urban centres where people have been drawn into a common economic life, the embryo of a future South African culture which can be shared by everyone has been created.

But this embryonic culture cannot develop fully when the state itself is set against the development of a common identity. It is only through the struggle against such a state that this culture can develop. The course that the struggle itself takes will, to a large extent, determine the form that the cultural development will

take.

Here we need to consider a thorny problem - can whites, or more specifically, can Afrikaners be expected to become part of this national culture that we are building?

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There are two aspects of Afrikaner culture - the one is the official kind, the culture promoted by the SABC, the FAK and the nationalist government, the culture that has developed out of racism, German idealist philosophy and a distorted Calvinism. This is the culture of the police station and the prison. The culture that the youth rose against in 1976.

But the other side of Afrikaner culture is that of Braam Fischer, Andre Brink, N P van Wyk Louw, Beyers Naude; a culture that identifies with the revolt against the tyranny of the Dutch East India Company, with the French Revolution of 1789 and with the true Calvinist belief that justice is the highest duty of the state and that revolt against an unjust system is justified.

Even though there are contradictions within this 'alternative' Afrikaner culture, as Lenin said, in every culture there are progressive elements which can be harnessed to progressive aims.

It is because culture is so complex and contradictory that there is space in it for various elements, even that of Afrikaner culture.

It is the duty of cultural workers to act as the 'midwives of the future', to make us feel how it will be to live in a free South Africa, to allow us to imagine the future even before it becomes reality. A writer or artist can show people how to look at their past from a new perspective,

nurturing and developing what is positive and putting aside what is negative and destructive.

There is a two-way process tying together the emergence of a unified culture and the national democratic revolution. The national democratic revolution is creating new cultural traditions and the conditions for the development of the embryonic South African culture, while the cultural workers and the cultural activities of the people are contributing to the struggle for liberation.

As Amilcar Cabral said 'A reciprocal relationship between culture and the struggle develops. Culture, as a foundation and source of inspiration, begins to be influenced by the struggle and this influence is reflected more or less clearly in the changing behaviour of social categories and individuals, as well as in the development of the struggle itself.'