

Decolonising the African Mind

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Introduction

Calibans vs. Ariels

The school teacher considered himself white. In Europe or North America this school teacher would be seen as a black person. When I laughed at him for considering himself white, he was shocked. . . . I said: "How can you consider yourself white when you are black?" He was angry and said he was brought up that way. His complexion would make the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat look like a blue-eyed blond.

—Munyama Ngangura, Zimbabwean traveller reporting from Southern Algeria on the B.B.C., in 1986

The experience of colonial domination shows that in the effort to perpetuate exploitation, the colonizer not only creates a system to repress the cultural life of the colonized people; he also provokes and develops the cultural alienation of a part of the population . . . As a result . . . a considerable part of the population . . . assimilates the colonizer's mentality . . . A reconversion of minds—of mental set—is thus indispensable to the true integration of people into the liberation movement. Such reconversion—re-Africanization, in our case—may take place before the struggle, but it is completed only during the course of the struggle . . .

—Amilcar Cabral

I*

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's parable on colonialism, when Prospero, the ruler of the island, sailed back to his own country, he handed power over his colony to Ariel, his obedient native auxiliary, but not to Caliban who had fought against his rule. In each Third World country, the colonial administrator's mission, like Prospero's, was to conquer, pacify and rule, and to extract as much wealth as possible for the West. The native auxiliaries of colonialism, the Ariels, were trained to assist this mission wholeheartedly.

The anti-colonial nationalists—the Calibans of their world—aimed to expel the conquerors, revitalise the nation, and develop its resources for its people. With independence, the Ariels have had to adopt at least parts of the Calibans' programme in order to stay in power. But can minds conditioned for the first purpose accomplish the second without re-education? Can Ariel carry out Caliban's mission, especially when it requires him to battle his mentor, Prospero?

There was once a stuntman who would stand his partner against a board and throw a knife at him, always missing him by a hair's breadth, until his partner's shape was outlined in knifepoints upon the board. One day the two quarrelled; the stuntman resolved to kill his partner during their next performance. But no matter how he tried, he could not hit him: he kept missing his partner's body by the habitual hair's breadth. His purpose had changed, but the habits of his eye and muscles had not.

Even if Ariel were to overcome his ingrained awe and turn on his creator, his conditioning would likewise conspire to defeat his new purpose.

For as long as Ariel leads in the Third World, Prospero's old world order—whether economic, cultural, political or informational—will be safe. For the present Third World

* This part was published in *South* (London) January 1983

struggle to succeed, Caliban must press on with his old battle until he routs Prospero's agent, Ariel.

Ariel and Caliban symbolise two factions in the Third World; indeed two rival tendencies in each Third World mind. Ariel's rout would mean the eradication of the colonial mentality. The decolonisation of the mind required to accomplish this is a necessary step toward a new world order which will be more than a refurbished version of the old.

II

In decolonising the African mind, as distinct from the Third World mind, certain particulars of African history need to be taken into account. The most important is that, for the past thirteen centuries, Africa has been invaded, conquered and colonised by Arabs and Europeans. Their cultural assimilation programmes, which continue till this day, have burdened Africa with Arabised and Europeanised Ariels.

Severed from his ancestral traditions and alienated from his natural African identity, the Arabised African strives to be even more Arab than his Arab master; and the Europeanised African strives to be even more European than his European master. Like Uthman Biri ibn Idris, a 14th century King of Borno, the Arabised African declares himself an Arab on the basis of his Arabised culture, or of a fictitious genealogy linking himself to some Arab ancestor, preferably to some alleged member of the Prophet Mohammed's tribe of the Quraish. The Europeanised African, like the late Kofi Busia, one-time Prime Minister of Ghana, declares himself a European because of his European education and culture. Fanon's famous phrase "Black Skin, White Mask" applies to both kinds of African Ariel. Both believe in the intrinsic superiority of the white invaders of Africa; each proselytises for the culture of his Prospero, is hostile to decolonisation, and is contemptuous of any re-Africanisation of African culture.

Believing that Arabs are Allah's chosen people, the Arabised African does not find it anomalous that there are so many "Arab Republics" on African soil. He is not moved to ask: How did they come into existence? What does their presence mean? Why are their numbers increasing? If anything, he views them as a matter for rejoicing. Obviously, he can't well resist Arab imperialism if he believes that Arabs are god's chosen mediators between man and god; or that Arabic, one of the major colonial languages in Africa, is the language of god himself. Any invitation to de-Arabise his culture would be viewed as sacrilegious; as an invitation to opt to spend eternity in hell.

The Europeanised African, for his part, is overwhelmed by the fantastic achievements of industrial civilisation. But having accepted the European propaganda that industrial civilisation is the genetic property of its European pioneers, he fails to distinguish industrial civilisation as a type from modern European civilisation as an instance of the type. His desire for the former is therefore perverted into a wish to assimilate himself into the latter. He overlooks the fact, which the Japanese and the Chinese have demonstrated, that industrial civilisation can be replicated by non-Europeans, and so cannot be regarded as somehow intrinsically European. And he is usually ignorant of the fact that Europeans were latecomers to scientific culture, and that their pioneering of the industrial revolution was based on the scientific heritage they borrowed from others—including the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilisations. Obviously, he can't resist European imperialism if he believes that Europeans are the sole owners of the paradise of industrial civilisation; or that European languages, which are colonial languages in Africa, are indispensable for participation in industrial civilisation. Any invitation to de-Europeanise his culture would be viewed as an invitation away from the industrial paradise and back to some pre-industrial hell.

Such veneration of alien cultures leaves the African Ariel susceptible to foreign domination. It makes him eager for approval and acclaim by Arab and European imperialists. He wants to write and read literature approved by these imperialists. He wants to contest in those sports that these imperialists organise and dominate. He wants to embark on the subservient economic development which these imperialists promote. He wants to accept the identity which these imperialists fashion for him. He is eager to abandon his ancestral religions for those concocted and dispensed by these imperialists. He wants to hear only the version of his history which these imperialists peddle. He is eager to join the "commonwealths" which these imperialists sponsor. If the African Ariel has his way, African countries would join or perpetually remain in the Arab commonwealth known as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the British Commonwealth, the French Community, and the COMECON of the Russians. Yet these are only thinly disguised continuations today of the old Arab, British, French and Russian empires.

The historic mission of present-day Africans is to effect a renaissance of African civilisation in an industrial mode so that Africa can henceforth defend itself against all invaders. In this connection, the African Ariel's commitment to alien religions has curious consequences for his defence of Africa. It was recently proclaimed that the Nigerian Army recognised only two religions: Christianity and Islam. This means that religions which were founded by Jews and Arabs, and which were imported into Nigeria, are the only ones recognised in the army of the leading nation of the Black World. Their shrines in Mecca, Rome and Jerusalem are sacred to the Nigerian state, which helps fund pilgrimages to them; but shrines at Ife, Benin, Calabar, etc., which belong to religions founded by the ancestors of Nigerians, are given no place in the rites of the Nigerian state. Thus, if Nigeria ever went to war against invading Jews or Arabs

(as might well happen, given Nigerian passions over the Arab-Israeli conflict), patriotic Nigerians would march out, praying to Jehovah of the Jews and Allah of the Arabs to help them vanquish these invaders. But what god would desert his chosen people and side with outsiders against them? A sorry fix Nigerians would then find themselves in for relying on the gods of others.

As that example shows, our historic mission demands a re-Africanisation of the African even in such matters as his religion. But at the core of its demands is a restoration of the African cultural personality in a version consistent with an industrial economy. Doing that requires that Africans exercise an independent cultural initiative. Decolonising the African mind, freeing it from alien control, is a necessary condition for such initiative.

The reason is simple. The colonised mind, like a well-conditioned slave, is incapable of initiative independent of its master. Initiative in pursuit of the slave's own interest would be tantamount to revolt. Given his conditioning, all his master need do to end his revolt is to speak in tones that trigger his deeply ingrained habit of obedience. Ending his habit of submission to his master's voice, destroying his master's authority over him, become necessary if that slave is to do things in his own interest. A renaissance of African civilisation in an industrial mode is not in the interest of Africa's Arab and European enemies. So long as they have any authority over what Africans do, they will assuredly use it to sabotage such a renaissance.

The central objective in decolonising the African mind is to overthrow the authority which alien traditions exercise over the African. This demands the dismantling of white supremacist beliefs, and the structures which uphold them, in every area of African life. It must be stressed, however, that decolonisation does not mean ignorance of foreign traditions; it simply means denial of their authority and withdrawal of allegiance from them. Foreign traditions are

part of the harvest of human experience. One should certainly know about them, if only because one must know one's environment, and especially one's enemy. One should certainly use items from other traditions provided they are consistent with African cultural independence and serve African objectives; but one should neither ape nor revere them, let alone sacrifice the African interest to them.

The strategic importance of overthrowing the authority of alien traditions lies in this. A renaissance of African civilisation in an industrial mode implies a far-reaching renovation of African cultures. Renovation calls for selectivity guided by the new objectives. Like a plank, brick or tile being used to renovate a house, every cultural item for use in renovating African civilisation has to be critically appraised to see if it meets the specifications demanded by the new objectives. Elements from African tradition, no less than elements from non-African traditions, have to be thus appraised. But such appraisal would be impaired, if not entirely prevented, if a tradition exercises an intimidating authority over Africans—as is now, alas, the case with the Arab and European traditions.

Overthrowing the authority of alien traditions will allow for the questioning of their contents, for selection of what is useful, for adapting to African conditions and needs whatever is selected as useful. It will prevent the unexamined importation of the harmful, as well as the unexamined importation of that for which equivalent, or even superior, African counterparts exist. If a foreign technique or principle (in law, medicine, politics, economics, architecture, etc.) has its analogue in the African tradition, there is no reason not to keep the African item, provided both are of equal benefit. And even if they are not, the foreign item would be selectable only if the African item cannot be adapted to do the job. Otherwise, we will clutter our culture with unnecessary borrowings.

It ought to be stressed that Europeanisation and Arabisa-

tion are, at best, superfluous to the creation of an industrial version of African civilisation. We need to remind ourselves that the Japanese and Chinese have not repudiated their civilisations, and did not abandon their identities when they set out to industrialise. The notion that industrialisation of a society demands Europeanisation of its culture (whether in the American, Russian or other version) is a piece of imperialist propaganda. The cultures of the industrial societies differ profoundly from one another. What each has done is to take its pre-industrial culture and place it on an industrial foundation. In the process, each has had to extensively renovate its culture to install the scientific ethos, and to satisfy conditions necessary for industrialism. Africa's pre-industrial cultures can equally expect to be profoundly altered by the demands of an industrial foundation. Such changes should not be confused with Europeanisation, just because they were first manifested during the industrialisation of Europe.

If a case cannot even be made for Africa to Europeanise its culture; if Europeanisation is, at best, a pointless distortion; Arabisation would be pure retrogression, a flight into an archaic feudalism with an anti-industrial mentality. We must soberly ask ourselves: Has Arabic culture enabled the Arabs to achieve an industrial society? Have they been able to defeat the industrialised Israelis whom they outnumber some 75 to 1? If they have not, why would any sane African want to copy their impotent culture? Of course, the Arabs could claim to hold the keys to the Arab heaven. Africans should then emulate the moribund Arab culture if death, with entry into an Arab controlled hereafter, is their aim, rather than survival and prosperity in the here and now.

According to Fanon, with the withdrawal of the colonial masters, "the country finds itself in the hands of new managers; but the fact is that everything needs to be reformed and everything thought out anew."* The Ariels cannot see

* *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967, p.79.

beyond merely managing their colonial inheritance; indeed, they see it as against their interest to do anything else. But the Calibans know, with Fanon, that the task is not to manage the colonial inheritance, but to reform everything, to think everything out anew. The task is to define our own objectives, set our own standards, and pick our own heroes from among those who outstandingly serve our own interests.

Clearly, those Ariels who are Arabising or Europeanising Africa must be defeated if Africa is to be free to concentrate on its historic tasks. A battle must be waged against them by the African Calibans, the inheritors of the movement for political decolonisation. The battle is against Ariels among our artists and critics who pine for Prospero's praise. It is against Ariels who parrot Prospero's version of our history. It is against economic and political Ariels who would keep us subservient to Prospero's economic and political systems. These are today's equivalents of the old slaving elites who destroyed Africa while hunting slaves for sale to Arabs and Europeans.

Decolonising the African mind may alternatively be seen as a battle between the Caliban and Ariel tendencies within each African, for bits of Ariel and Caliban exist within each of us. No African living in the 20th century has escaped the taint of the colonial experience. None has freed himself from the colonial mentality in every department, or from the structures which maintain and reproduce that mentality. The decolonisation of the African mind must therefore be seen as a collective enterprise, as a communal exorcism through an intellectual bath in which we need one another's help to scrub those nooks of our minds which we cannot scour by ourselves.