

The Role of Culture and its Relationship to African Women

"By culture, we understand all the material and immaterial works of art and science, plus knowledge, manners, education, a mode of thought, behavior and attitudes accumulated by the people both through and by virtue of their struggle for freedom from the hold and dominion of nature; we also include the result of their efforts to destroy the deviationist politics - social systems of domination and exploitation through the productive process of social life."³⁵
(Sékou Touré, 'A Dialectical Approach to Culture')

In that definition, Sékou Touré reminds us that culture must be viewed from a dialectical perspective. That is, culture must be understood historically. At the same time there must be an awareness of culture and its revolutionary potential as a positive force in the organization of Africans.

Cultural development, thus, can be seen as a historical progression that has mirrored societal development. As man moved through the stages of development from communalism to feudalism and slavery to capitalism and onward to socialism due to internal and external factors. These changes were concomitant with changes in culture.

Since culture has been and continues to be the dominant factor in determining the scope of both men and women's roles in society an examination of three case

studies may prove illuminating.

I. Algeria

Before the Algerian Revolution, women were viewed as minors. Women in Algerian society were always the responsibility of some male figure whether he was a brother, uncle, husband, or father. Women were socialised to never aggravate their fathers and subsequently never opposed their husbands. Algerian society, shaped by the narrow strictures of Islam imposed a childishness on women that was in turn reinforced by the Islamic religion.

The Revolution transformed the Algerian woman from being "a woman - for - marriage" into being "the woman - for - action". The militancy of these women as revolutionaries: carrying out dangerous missions, being away from home for extended periods, having to keep secret strategic information forced the attitudes of fathers to change toward daughters. The change in the fathers signalled a change in the perceptions of the rest of the male community. "The woman ceased to be a complement for man. She literally forged a new place for herself by her sheer strength. (Frantz Fanon, A Dying Colonialism). Thus the external occurrence, the Revolution, its armed struggle phase forced an internal change in the society and its perception of women and their new reality.

II. Mozambique

Frelimo, the Mozambique Liberation Front in the latter part of 1974 placed the emancipation of that country's women at the very top of its government's political agenda. The eradication of the exploitation and oppression of the Mozambican women is one of the government's most important political education programs.

Women, historically, have been regarded as production units in Mozambican society. Chief among these functions have been women as primary agricultural producers; the production of children was seen as a secondary task. Thus Mozambican women were and continue to be viewed in terms of valuation more for their fertility than for their ability to contribute in other ways to the socialist reconstruction.

As in the previous case study, Algeria, the revolutionary armed struggle against colonialism provided Mozambican women with the dual opportunity to liberate their people from the colonizer but also to snap open the shackles of chauvinism and the fetters of oppression fed by traditional opprobria.

The late Josina Machel founded the Women's Detachment of Frelimo. She spearheaded a popular movement that continues to work to alleviate the last vestiges of reactionary chauvinism that oppresses the women of

Mozambique.

Culture, after the Revolution^{is} a synthesis of the forward movement of the new as well as an accumulation of the people's previous struggle.

III. Zimbabwe

Tradition in Zimbabwe is both a negative force to be struggled against and something to be upheld. The lobola, the bride's prize, epitomizes the negative impact of Zimbabwean culture on its women. Women are considered to be objects to be sold and traded. Haggling over the amount of cattle a bride is worth is still a common occurrence. The trauma of being told how many cattle one is worth is an humiliation Zimbabwean women suffer. Forced marriages and polygamy simply add insult to injury.

As we have previously cited in our brief looks at Algeria and Mozambique, participation in revolutionary armed struggle affords women an opportunity to be part of the liberation process for themselves and for their people.

Zanla, the Zimbabwe Africa National Liberation Army has women combatants. The contribution of women to the fight for freedom only serves to substantiate the claims of women to be partners in the society.

Education in all three cases, Algeria, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe after the armed struggle phase of the revolution serves to continue the process toward the completion of the new socialist reconstruction. Free schools for both girls and boys can only serve to eradicate superstitions, customs, and traditions that negatively impact women and hamper their contributions to their progressive societies.

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Submitted 1/22/80