

Decolonizing the Mind

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Introduction: Towards the Universal Struggle of Language

This book is a summary of some of the issues in which I have been passionately involved for the last twenty years of my practice in fiction, theatre, criticism and in teaching literature. For those who have read my books *Homecoming*, *Writers in Politics*, *Barrel of a Pen* and even *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* there may be a feeling of *déjà vu*. Such a reaction will not be far from the truth. But the lectures on which this book is based have given me the chance to pull together in a connected and coherent form the main issues on the language question in literature which I have touched on here and there in my previous works and interviews. I hope though that the work has gained from the insights I have received from the reactions — friendly and hostile — of other people to the issues over the same years. This book is part of a continuing debate all over the continent about the destiny of Africa.

The study of the African realities has for too long been seen in terms of tribes. Whatever happens in Kenya, Uganda, Malawi is because of *Tribe A* versus *Tribe B*. Whatever erupts in Zaire, Nigeria, Liberia, Zambia is because of the traditional enmity between *Tribe D* and *Tribe C*. A variation of the same stock interpretation is *Moslem* versus *Christian* or *Catholic* versus *Protestant* where a people does not easily fall into 'tribes'. Even literature is sometimes evaluated in terms of the 'tribal' origins of the authors or the 'tribal' origins and composition of the characters in a given novel or play. This misleading stock interpretation of the African realities has been popularised by the western media which likes to deflect people from seeing that imperialism is still the root cause of many problems in Africa. Unfortunately some African intellectuals have fallen victims — a few incurably so — to that scheme and they are unable to see the

divide-and-rule colonial origins of explaining any differences of intellectual outlook or any political clashes in terms of the ethnic origins of the actors. No man or woman can choose their biological nationality. The conflicts between peoples cannot be explained in terms of that which is fixed (the invariables). Otherwise the problems between any two peoples would always be the same at all times and places; and further, there would never be any solution to social conflicts except through a change in that which is permanently fixed, for example through genetic or biological transformation of the actors.

My approach will be different. I shall look at the African realities as they are affected by the great struggle between the two mutually opposed forces in Africa today: an imperialist tradition on one hand, and a resistance tradition on the other. The imperialist tradition in Africa is today maintained by the international bourgeoisie using the multinational and of course the flag-waving native ruling classes. The economic and political dependence of this African neo-colonial bourgeoisie is reflected in its culture of apemanship and parrotry enforced on a restive population through police boots, barbed wire, a gowned clergy and judiciary; their ideas are spread by a corpus of state intellectuals, the academic and journalistic laureates of the neo-colonial establishment. The resistance tradition is being carried out by the working people (the peasantry and the proletariat) aided by patriotic students, intellectuals (academic and non-academic), soldiers and other progressive elements of the petty middle class. This resistance is reflected in their patriotic defence of the peasant/worker roots of national cultures, their defence of the democratic struggle in all the nationalities inhabiting the same territory. Any blow against imperialism, no matter the ethnic and regional origins of the blow, is a victory for all anti-imperialistic elements in all the nationalities. The sum total of all these blows no matter what their weight, size, scale, location in time and space makes the national heritage.

For these patriotic defenders of the fighting cultures of African people, imperialism is not a slogan. It is real; it is palpable in content and form and in its methods and effects. Imperialism is the rule of consolidated finance capital and since 1884 this monopolistic parasitic capital has affected and continues to affect the lives even of the peasants in the remotest corners of our countries. If you are in doubt, just count how many African countries have now been mortgaged to IMF — the new International Ministry of Finance as Julius Nyerere once called it. Who pays for the mortgage? Every single producer of real wealth (use-value) in the country so mortgaged,

which means every single worker and peasant. Imperialism is total: it has economic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences for the people of the world today. It could even lead to holocaust.

The freedom for western finance capital and for the vast transnational monopolies under its umbrella to continue stealing from the countries and people of Latin America, Africa, Asia and Polynesia is today protected by conventional and nuclear weapons. Imperialism, led by the USA, presents the struggling peoples of the earth and all those calling for peace, democracy and socialism with the ultimatum: accept theft or death.

The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish. Amidst this wasteland which it has created, imperialism presents itself as the cure and demands that the dependant sing hymns of praise with the constant refrain: 'Theft is holy'. Indeed, this refrain sums up the new creed of the neo-colonial bourgeoisie in many 'independent' African states.

The classes fighting against imperialism even in its neo-colonial stage and form, have to confront this threat with the higher and more creative culture of resolute struggle. These classes have to wield even more firmly the weapons of the struggle contained in their cultures. They have to speak the united language of struggle contained in each of their languages. They must discover their various tongues to sing the song: 'A people united can never be defeated'.

The theme of this book is simple. It is taken from a poem by the Guyanese poet Martin Carter in which he sees ordinary men and women hungering and living in rooms without lights; all those men and women in South Africa, Namibia, Kenya, Zaire, Ivory Coast, El Salvador, Chile, Philippines, South Korea, Indonesia, Grenada, Fanon's 'Wretched of the Earth', who have declared loud and clear that they do not sleep to dream, 'but dream to change the world'.

I hope that some of the issues in this book will find echoes in your hearts.