

THE FORMATION OF NATIONS: II

by I. POTHEKIN

In the first part of this article ('LIBERATION' No. 34) Professor Pothekin discussed the development of African societies from tribes to nations. He described an intervening stage, in which communities have ceased to be tribes but not yet become nations. Such a community he terms, using the Russian word, a "narodnost"

I WILL now look at the methodology of the investigation of this process which I used as a guide in my work.

The first criterion of a nation is a common territory. That is why a study must start by working out the frontiers of the territory of the emergent nation, which must itself be based on the linguistic classification of the peoples. Here we find an obstacle that is difficult to overcome because there is not yet any unified and universally recognised classification of African languages. Each linguist puts forward his own classification, and I rather think that each seeks to outdo the other in producing a classification as complicated and imposing as possible. Johnston estimates that there are 226 Bantu languages; Van Bulk discovered 518 in the Belgian Congo alone, and it is further estimated that there are 700 or even 800 in the Sudan.

The linguistic map of Africa bears thousands of names indicating different languages. I am not a linguist but an historian, sociologist and anthropologist. It is difficult for me to criticise existing language classifications. I would, however, assure you that the real linguistic map of Africa is simpler than the linguists have tried to suggest. It is true that the linguistic divisions are a fact, and one which no scholar can deny or ignore since it is an irrefutable proof that for most of Africa neither nations nor narodnosts have yet emerged. The linguistic divisions reflect the tribal divisions of the people.

However I am equally certain that the picture of linguistics divisions given by the language specialist derives from their conventional linguistic approach to the work of classifying languages and their ignorance from the historic point of view. The development of languages follows the evolution of the tribal languages, then those of the narodnost and finally of the national languages. At a particular historical stage in the evolution of society the tribal languages become territorial dialects of the language of a particular narodnost, which later becomes the language of a nation.

I don't think that the linguists take this important transformation sufficiently into account and continue to consider tribal and territorial dialects as independent languages.

At all events the assistance of linguists is essential in working out the territorial community of the nation. We can say here in general that any serious study of the formation of nations requires the co-operation of various specialists — historians, ethnographers, linguists and economists.

A further difficulty in defining the territorial community of a nation is that colonial frontiers do not correspond to ethnic frontiers. Many peoples, speaking the same language or languages so similar to each other that they can be considered as dialects, are cut in two by colonial frontiers, and different groups of the same people can be found in different colonies. This artificial division of the colonial frontiers is an especially great obstacle in the way of nations in formation, and especially in the case of neighbouring colonies belonging to different countries pursuing a different policy concerning the development of language and of culture. The most striking example is probably that of the Somalis who live in Somaliland under Italian, French or British domination or in that part which is included in Ethiopia. It is obvious that such a people cannot form a nation as long as the colonial frontiers which cut them into several pieces remain. The fact must not be excluded that the prolonged existence of such frontiers can divide a people into several related nations, i.e. separate nations can emerge in each portion formed by these frontiers. The history of mankind gives examples of a narodnost divided into several nations by reason of peculiar conditions. My own country is one. A long time ago, between the eighth and twelfth centuries approximately, there was a single old Russian narodnost with a common territory, language and culture. Later, different conditions determined by history and external factors in particular saw it divided into three parts, from which emerged three nations: Russia, Byelorussia and the Ukraine. Now each has its own national state.

There is another question in connection with the determination of a common territory. Following their policy of indirect government, the colonial powers keep the divisions into kingdoms, sultanates and chiefdoms. This is a particular form of feudal division which does not divide the common territory as it does not hamper the popular relations or the moving of people from a kingdom or sultanate to another. However, it prevents other criteria of the nation from maturing, and as a result is an obstacle to its formation.

A COMMON LITERARY LANGUAGE

Another characteristic of the nation is the community of language, the existence of a common literary language.

The object of the study of these criteria is to find the lines following which the languages develop, their structure becomes simpler and the tribal languages become territorial dialects.

The language of a narodnost or national language comes into existence when one of the neighbouring tribal languages, for a number of reasons, succeeds in spreading more widely than the others, becoming an inter-tribal language which supplants displaced languages. Through its triumph over the other tongues, this language becomes the literary language.

The course taken by this process is, due to historical conditions, very long, and wholly new in the African countries.

The major obstacle in the path of the creation of a single national literary language derives from the fact that the "official" language of the country is the language of the metropolitan country, English, French etc., and not the vernacular tongue. This is the language used for communication between people of different tribes speaking various tribal languages. This is the language of all gatherings, newspapers, radio stations etc. Scientific and dictional works by African authors are written in this language. An African wishing to make his way in the world beyond the confines of his tribe must firstly know the official language.

There are a good number of other difficulties confronting the formation of a national language. One is the ignorance of the mass of the people and thus the absence of a need for a literary language. A further difficulty derives from the feudal divisions which I have described earlier based on tribal particularism, the rights of the oldest tribesmen, an excessive devotion to local factors and sometimes a suspicion of anything concerning other tribes.

All these reasons show that the diversity of languages is of no value, since it holds up the development of a single national language based on one of the tribal languages.

Can a metropolitan language become a national language? Theoretically one cannot exclude such a possibility. Several English- or French-speaking nations can emerge. This does not contradict the interpretation of the term nation which I have put forward. Every nation must have a language common to all its members, but there is no reason why every nation should speak a different language.

The theoretical possibility therefore exists of the African nations being formed on the basis of European languages. This is, however, no more than a possibility which can scarcely become a reality.

As I have already said language is the mirror of the soul of a people. It is only in his mother tongue that man can fully express his real self. *Language is an aspect of the culture of each people. Even the most perfect translation is no more than an imperfect copy of the original.*

It is quite natural that the people should zealously conserve the right to speak their mother tongue.

I have dealt so far with the difficulties in the way of the development of African languages. There are, however, numerous other circumstances which help this development. In the first place there is the growth of the

towns and the concentration therein of people belonging to many different tribes. A mass movement in search of urban employment influences the development of the languages by bringing them in contact and by mutually enriching their vocabulary and lessening the phonetic divergences.

In the last few years one has seen a growing interest amongst African intellectuals in linguistic problems. Associations for the development of African languages have been established. In some regions the question of standardising the writing of related languages has already been discussed. All this shows the extent of the national awareness, which reflects the objective process of national formation in the minds of the people.

COMMUNITY OF CULTURE

The third criterion of a nation is community of culture. The African peoples have created their own original culture for centuries — music and dance, songs and stories, sculpture and painting — their own clothes, buildings etc. The cultural heritage of past centuries is great and remarkable. This heritage represents a very rich store-house for the formation of national cultures.

Colonialisation has brought together in Africa two very different cultures — African culture and European culture. In some ways European culture was more advanced than the African. The Africans have assimilated something of this culture, and they should not reject the good elements which it contains.

However, this has come about in conditions wholly unfavourable to the development of African culture, which has been pushed into the background. Certain forms of African art and, in particular, certain artisan occupations have been forgotten and allowed to perish, while others have been adapted to European taste.

At the present time there are three different opinions amongst African intellectuals concerning the future paths of the development of African culture. Some would like to make European culture the basis of African national culture and forget the cultural heritage of the people. They describe themselves as progressive although to tell the truth I see nothing very progressive in it. Others would like to develop traditional African culture and assimilate nothing of European culture. This group calls itself traditionalist. Finally, the third group which describes itself as neo-traditionalist proposes to establish a national culture on the basis of a reasonable combination of elements from both African and European culture, taking the traditional African culture as a basis.

This reminds me of the controversy around the Russian national culture in the nineteenth century. One section of the Russian intelligentsia considered the original Russian culture as backward and almost barbarian—preferring even to speak French rather than Russian. They suggested imported Western culture and their representatives were called "zapadniki" (Westerners) as a result. Another part of the Russian intelligentsia praised everything which was originally Russian and Slav in general, in-

cluding the backward aspects of Russian culture of the time. They suggested closing the door against Western influence and constructing a wall separating the country from the rest of the world. This group called themselves the "Slavyonophiles". The Russian people did not take either of these two ways. It built its national culture on the basis of its cultural heritage, and took from the West what it considered worth while.

The national culture of the African peoples is developing in incomparably more difficult conditions, especially in the countries where a policy of artificial assimilation is in vogue. There the peoples have to defend their right to a free development of their culture.

Anyone studying the cultural community of a nation in formation encounters complex problems. Culture itself is a complex and many-sided phenomenon. It includes everything that is created by the hand of man as well as his brain. National culture includes many local characteristics. These local peculiarities exist even in the culture of old nations formed a long time ago. They have their origin in the local characteristics of the economic activities and the geographical situation and are therefore inevitable. It is natural they take an important place in the culture of nations in formation.

The tasks connected with the study of the process of formation of the cultural communities of the African nations are particularly complicated by reason of the specific conditions in which these nations are formed. The task of the scholar consists essentially in the necessity to isolate from the immense variety of forms taken by the culture of a particular people those which have already become the property of the whole people and which have lost their local character. This task includes determining what forms of the European cultures are already firmly rooted in the customs and awareness of the people, and which are only a temporary and superficial pastime of a part of the population.

Here I am touching on a critical question. Is it possible to speak of the existence of a national culture if there is no more or less developed literature in the national language and if there is not as yet any graphic art, music or professional theatre? I do not think that is possible. The absence of these expressions of culture shows that the national culture is not yet in existence. There is a popular culture and a folklore. There are the materials which will serve to build a national culture. But the culture itself does not yet exist.

Only literature (novels and poetry etc.) and its more or less wide popularity amongst the masses completes the process of formation of a national language as the main expression of the national culture. Only the creation of professional art gives the national culture its perfection of form, its specific colouring and its truly national characteristics. If we try to estimate the level of development of the African on this criterion, we will have to recognise that the national culture of a good many of the African peoples is still at a certain stage of its development in spite of all the richness of its cultural heritage.

THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

Let us look now at the methodological considerations in connection with

the last criterion of the nation, the economic community. The economic community of a nation comes into existence at the same time as a national market makes its appearance; if there is no national market there is no nation. In consequence study of this criterion comes back to the study of the national market. It is a purely economic problem. The main conditions needed for the formation of a national market are the geographical division of labour and the existence of developed exchanges on a profit basis within a capitalist mode of production.

Even a superficial knowledge of the economy of the African countries will show the presence of these conditions although not everywhere developed to the same extent. For example, capitalist exchanges in the African world are still relatively few and in some regions are still only at their beginning.

To my knowledge it can be said that the question of the formation of the national market is still completely unexplored. I do not know of any books devoted to this question. We know what is produced and where it is produced. We know what products and in what quantities are exported abroad. We know fairly well the foreign economic bonds but we know nothing practically of internal economic exchanges. It is to be hoped that economists will eventually study these internal relations.

As sparse as our information may be we can say that most of the African countries have no national market as yet or at the most they are only beginning to have one. To determine the degree of development of the national market it is necessary first to find the answers to two questions: 1. What part of the production is sold, i.e. what part takes the form of productive links giving rise to profit? 2. What part goes to the internal market and what part is exported? The economists of U.N.O. have made approximate calculations for some countries and I will mention the book **The Enlargement of Exchange Economy in Tropical Africa, 1957**. From these calculations one can see that in certain countries a considerable part of production is already transformed into profit, but it is mainly exported abroad. This is one of the characteristics of colonial economy. The colonies have become suppliers of raw materials for the metropolitan countries. This fact holds back the formation of a national internal market and thus hinders the development of the process of the formation of a nation.

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The formation of the nations is accompanied by the development of national consciousness of belonging to the same people, and an awareness of national interest. Where nations have already taken shape each person is aware of belonging to a nation and is proud of it. The feeling of national pride is one of the deepest human feelings; an insult to national dignity is always taken as a personal insult.

The study of the process of national formation should include the study of national consciousness. One should point out how the consciousness of belonging to a large ethnic community; how the people realise themselves to what nation and people they belong, how strong is the feeling of national dignity etc. But this is essentially a special and scientific problem which calls for special methods which I have no room to explain here.

(Letter to the Editor—continued from inside cover)

The fact is correct, but is the deduction?

Until an army in the field has been completely and utterly defeated, it does not break off contact with the enemy. Even whilst retreating it constantly harasses, snipes at and worries the superior forces, at the same time regrouping its own forces, preparing all the time to turn defence into attack, in addition to studying and surveying the terrain. Congress (I use the word to denote the movement as a whole) has suffered setbacks; but Congress has not been routed. Its influence today—an influence that extends to all sections of the population—is stronger and wider than it was in 1952.

Are not bannings, persecutions, the mass political trial, etc., the stock-in-trade of the ruling class, to be utilised whenever a determined challenge is launched against the status quo?

For the Government (the agent of the ruling class — let this not be lost sight of) — only the status quo is legal; are not all attempts to modify or reform, let alone transform, the status quo 'illegal', or as Strijdom declared, 'treasonable'?

If the Government fails to prove 'treason' in the Treason Trial, need we not expect Parliament to enact a new definition of the word?

Surely, this is one of the reasons why Parliamentary session after session passes new legislation and amendments to existing legislation?

Of course, the Government is out of step with the general interest; but how often and under what circumstances does the particular interest of the ruling class conform or coincide with the general interest of the community in a class-ridden society?

Surely it is because the dominant section of the ruling class' rise to and retention of power was based on and demands a rigid, doctrinaire fanaticism that no flexibility, or relief for the oppressed, can be expected from the Nationalists?

Is it not obvious therefore that only the further application and development of non-violent resistance can lead to Congress achieving liberation?

For years, 'work', 'efficiency', 'honesty', 'punctuality', and 'education' have been advocated as essential for the waging of a consistent and successful struggle, but never, until now, that is, has it even been suggested that 'mass action', as expressed and reflected in the forms of struggle adopted by the people — protests, boycotts, stay-at-homes, go slow, non-collaboration, demonstrations (the Johannesburg women completely outwitted the South African Police with their novel form of demonstration on the City Hall steps) etc., should be halted.

Surely this is not really new thinking? How does it make for any additions to our ability to campaign? What you have done is to elevate to forms of struggle, qualities essential to the running of any organisation that seeks to realise its aims. There is and can be no alternative to mass

action. This, however, needs not only acknowledgement, but even more, it must be translated into practical activity.

No one can doubt that Congress is in urgent need of study classes. The education of the movement has lagged sorely behind, and far too many members are unaware of the contents of the Freedom Charter. Endless education must proceed in order to enlighten the people. Study circles, pamphlets and rallies must be used to help raise the consciousness of the people. In fact, far too many speakers have been using Congress meetings to hurl abuse against the Government, without in any way adding anything new to the peoples' understanding. But, none-the-less, 'a skilful, courageous and utterly determined leadership' is not created from study classes alone. Understanding is essential, but understanding divorced from activity might just as well not have been garnered.

What Congress requires is a spirit of self-sacrifice amongst its members, for without such a spirit there can be no stimulus to the masses to follow the movement. Volunteers completely devoted to the struggle and dedicated to the people are required in Congress! a group of people (thousands strong) who will be in a Zeerust or Sekhukhuniland when required, to give strength to the persecuted, to provide organised leadership to the struggle of the people; a group of people who are of the soil and of the blood of the people — this is what Congress needs.

Such people, too, are not created by study classes alone, but from the examples set them by leaders imbued with the same spirit — Gandhi and Mao spring immediately to mind. The Defiance Campaign showed that we had such people, but what has happened to them? Where are they now? Why did we lose them, or if we have not lost them, why are they not active today?

These are the questions which demand our attention; for it is in the finding of answers to problems such as these that we will understand why there is an 'unhappy position' in Congress, the Africanist breakaway, the suspensions, expulsions, resignations, from executive positions, the simple 'dropping out of activity', etc. Here, surely, is the crux of the problem? Part of the answer lies in the way in which the problems confronting us are presented.

Your editorial, for example, when describing the falsity of the 'clash of colour' picture drawn by the Nationalists, poses the 'correct picture' as follows: "Instead they (the African people under the leadership of the A.N.C.) have seen the picture as it really is: a clash of principle: on the one side, the Nationalists principle of racial domination, autocracy and repression . . . on the other side the principle of democracy and human rights . . ."

I agree, no one will argue with this formulation, as far as it goes; but does it go far enough? Is it the whole picture? Are we not only skimming the surface if we limit the issues involved to expression in these terms? Elsewhere in the editorial, you do go further (cf 'as long as there is a penny to be made out of sweated labour') but only in passing.

Why is there racialism in South Africa? What are the socio politico-economic forces that breed this scourge? Whence do they stem? Why is the liberatory movement in the forefront of the struggle for 'democracy and human rights' — surely not simply because it calls itself the liberatory movement?

Of course the Nationalists stand for 'racial domination, autocracy and repression'. But then so does the United Party. Is the principle of white domination any different from that of white leadership? What are the factors common to the N.P. and the U.P. which make them support basically similar policies, and yet, at the same time, what is it that makes for there being differences in their approach to their common problems?

But more importantly for the liberatory movement, can 'white domination' be eliminated without it being challenged at its source — the drive of all sections of the ruling class to make that 'penny out of sweated labour', to make profits (whether average or maximum need not concern us here)?

These are the questions which require debating in Congress; and if they are debated I am convinced that none will argue, that only through the emancipation of our productive forces will 'democracy and human rights' be achieved. Without Congress going to the people with a programme based on such an approach — the Freedom Charter approach — no amount of 'work', 'efficiency', etc. will convince them of the correctness of the Congress cause; and unless our activity is directed towards achieving this end, quite obviously 'mass action' must fail, for no strengthening of our organisations — the individual Congresses and the Trade Unions in S.A.C.T.U. — will have been attained.

Again, these are only a few of our problems; such matters as the relationship of certain sections of the ruling class, which have similar demands (for different reasons), higher wages for African workers, the ending of the 'industrial colour bar', etc. to the Congresses, and vice versa; the present make-up of the movement itself, events in Africa, etc., also require discussion; but the points I have raised do require debate to obtain clarification and decision, and are, I believe, a more satisfactory way of presenting our problems than that in your editorial.

V. S. GOLDBERG.

[As a discussion journal, LIBERATION welcomes criticism from readers of all articles, including editorials, and we invite further discussion on the points raised by Mr. Goldberg. We must say, however, that it was never our intention to suggest that mass action, in the various forms listed by him "should be halted." If Mr. Goldberg, and perhaps other readers, gathered that impression we must have expressed ourselves inadequately. Nor of course did we disparage the heroic defiance campaign of 1952, and here there is no justification for Mr. Goldberg's suggestion that we did so.—Editor, "LIBERATION."]