CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AS AN ACT OF CULTURE

AN ILLUSTRATION FROM SUDAN

Gussai H. Sheikheldin

"We see therefore that, if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture."

—Amilcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," 1970

Introduction

IF YOU AND I MEET SOMEWHERE IN A "NO MAN'S LAND," AWAY FROM THE JURIS-dictions of legal authorities, and we both are going to remain there for years on our own, we will have only two options: either we openly compete and fight for resources, or we openly cooperate as equals.

There is little room for tricking one another into thinking what is not true about the other person's long-term intentions. If we both understand that we will improve our chances of survival through cooperation, we will do it; and we will understand that we could only maintain that cooperation effectively if we treat each other as equals. If we fail to see the point in cooperation, and we both need to survive by competing for the same resources, we will likely become adversaries. Either way we will know clearly where we stand in relation to each other.

That clarity is lost in long-standing social aggregates—in states and markets. When human groups are larger, more complicated rules come into play. States and markets normalize the exploitation and oppression of many in society

through the pretext of order and justice. We often do not know where we stand in relation to each other because the privileged groups claim (and some believe) that we cannot forego order and justice, while marginalized groups are divided about whether such claims are true or false.

The marginalized folk—the poor, the oppressed, the underprivileged, the disenfranchised, and the exploited—are often confused because clarity is distorted by complex social hierarchies, bureaucracies, and the division of labor, as well as by being entangled in a very large web of human relations, ceremonies, and protocols. Additionally, sentimental notions such as patriotism, religious group loyalty, ethnic cohesion, etc., play a part—unintentionally or intentionally—in making it more difficult for the marginalized to see where the lines are drawn. Privileged and marginalized groups in the same society share many of these kinships, relations of production, traditions, and ethos. Therefore, it is not easy to dissect where the privileged are the adversary, and where they are simply on the same team. It is confusing to the point that many marginalized people are admiring fans of some of the famous members of privileged group(s);[1] venerating them as role models and leading lights. It is confusing to the point that some members of the privileged group(s) themselves are not acutely aware of their privileges in society, and how those privileges are maintained by mechanisms that systemically undermine the well-being and legitimate aspirations of majorities in society.[2]

Indeed, some members of the privileged group(s) sincerely think that what is taking place is natural and circumstantial, and not a consequence of structural biases in society. We are all familiar with the rhetoric of economic elites in most societies, whereby rich folks claim to be so because they are hard-working and entrepreneurial, and poor folks are so because they are not hard-working or entrepreneurial enough.[3] At the macro and global levels, there exists an intellectual tradition that venerates capitalism, and claims that it naturally and objectively rewards innovation, industry, good planning, and fair competition.[4]

As Paulo Freire, the renowned adult educator, explained, critical consciousness is about becoming aware of the structural sources of oppression in society.[5] Freire described the process by which individuals develop critical consciousness as "conscientization." It is a process that is self-reflective and allows for the person to learn from events, activities, and experiences in the surrounding environment (including people) in a critical manner. In other words, conscientization is a form of critical education grounded in social reality.[6] If large social aggregates can reduce clarity in relations of marginalization among members of that society (whether in a country, region, or the global community), conscientization is the process by which this obscurity is unveiled and demystified. When the sources of oppressive relations are obscure,

those who are their chronic victims will not do much to change them, because they are neither critically conscious of them nor do they have a clue about how to change them. They may frequently complain, to each other and beyond, about their difficult conditions and the injustice they regularly endure, but will not often connect all these experiences together in a coherent critique of the social system itself. Moreover, those persons of goodwill and empathy who benefit from the status quo will not do much if they too do not acquire critical consciousness. This process, of developing consciousness and choosing to side with a just cause beyond narrow class interests, is what Cabral calls "class suicide"—a strategic, long-term commitment to sustainable progress and the right side of history. At its core it's a moral commitment.[7]

One could interject, however, that becoming aware of a phenomenon does not automatically imply that one will care to transform it, so understanding structural sources of oppression in society does not necessarily mean that one will seek to combat them. That is objectively true, but we should also be mindful that any genuine care is unlikely to happen *without* that understanding. Then there's the difference between understanding on the one hand, and "consciousness" (understanding plus caring), on the other. An intelligent member of the privileged classes may understand that the status quo is maintained by marginalizing a majority of the population, but that person may not have any material or moral stake in changing that status quo. While some members of the privileged classes may be persuaded morally to take a stand against a system that privileges them, members of the marginalized classes are reasonably expected to care about changing the status quo when they understand the structural nature of their marginalization. Attaining consciousness, in that case, means allowing one's acquired understanding to change their perspective and priorities (i.e. to care).

Conscientization and Culture

While it is difficult to find a comprehensive, agreed-upon, definition of culture, Amilcar Cabral defines it well as the fruit of a people's history that is simultaneously the determinant of that history. It is shaped by their cumulative history, hence a fruit of it, but it also determines it "through the positive or negative influences it exerts on the evolution of the interaction" between humans and their surroundings (including between themselves) as individuals or groups.[8] This instrumental definition could be complemented, as well, by Steve Biko's definition: "A culture is essentially the society's composite answer to the varied problems of life. We are experiencing new problems every day, and whatever we do adds to the richness of our cultural heritage."[9]

Culture is inherently dynamic. Every time the conditions of life change, culture changes in response. When a people are under conditions of dispossession, exploitation, and poverty, their culture carries a signature informed and shaped by these conditions, yet it also carries the keys to innovating and navigating beyond them. One of these keys is resistance. Hence, Cabral asserts that the process of liberation from external domination—or oppression or exploitation—is an act of culture. While Cabral focused on exploring resistance by a colonized people against foreign domination, we can see that the formula he proposed can extend to the relations of domination and marginalization within the various strata of the same society.

Building on the above, I argue that conscientization itself can be viewed as an act of culture, a radical act. Since conscientization is mainly concerned with combating and transforming structures of oppression within a society, culture is the vehicle by which it often expresses itself in both building critical consciousness and using it to practice change (praxis).

And just as it takes place among the marginalized, conscientization can sometimes take place during dialogue with privileged individuals and groups. The human ability of empathy allows us, through our imagination, to get a glimpse of other lives, personalities, and experiences. The dictionary definition of empathy is "the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another."[10] Through empathy, we can identify with humanity in a "humane" way. We can appreciate the thoughts and feelings of those who differ from us; we can try to understand their responses. The phrase "to put oneself in someone else's shoes" captures the essence of empathy. According to Freire, the purpose of human dialogue is transformative; It, however, needs to be practiced in certain ways to be humane and positive for the people: "Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which man transforms the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it."[11] For some informed individuals from privileged groups in society, empathy assists in developing critical consciousness from dialogue, which leads them to the realization of what Nyerere once articulated:

> We can try to cut ourselves from our fellows on the basis of [the privileges] we have had; we can try to carve out for ourselves an unfair share of the wealth of society. But the cost to us, as well as to our fellow citizens, will be very high. It will be high not only in terms of satisfactions forgone, but also in terms of our own security and well-being.[12]

While it is an established historical truth that rights are not voluntarily offered by the powers-that-be, but are taken by serious and persistent demands and resistance, it is also a historical truth that those who have a just cause eventually find allies of good conscience (and critical consciousness) from the other camp. Empathy plays a critical role in this process. Yet, empathy is facilitated by culture: the common cultural experiences (other than economic and political) that the privileged[13] and the marginalized share make it possible for them to relate to one another. Since culture has facets other than the socioeconomic and politics (such as arts, ceremonies, folk history, food, architecture, humor, symbols, values, and beliefs), it tends to provide a broad area of psychological overlap between the privileged and marginalized in a society, and through that area empathy can be facilitated. Granted, it is not usually that simplistic in reality, but the general theoretical strokes are valid.

Therefore, we can say that by facilitating empathy, culture is reinforced as an important vehicle for conscientization. It is not only a vehicle for conscientization among the poor, but also a vehicle for forging alliances between the marginalized and the conscientized privileged ones. It should however be kept in mind that critical consciousness is not inclusive of, or a substitute for, organized collective action. In desirable cases of social transformation, the two will overlap, integrate, and inform each other. Nonetheless, they are not the same thing; this essay addresses only one of them.

Case study: CUSH Manifesto and marginalization in Sudan

As iterated earlier, it is not uncommon that privileged groups are isolated from the grim realities of marginalized groups. In Sudan, it is true with regards to urban and rural areas, but it is more accurate to use the terms "center" and "margins." The center is not simply a geographic location. It is more a description of a socio-political, and somewhat cultural, social stratum. The center is not necessarily distinguished by ethnic affiliation (although ethnicity plays a large role) or clear geopolitical affiliation. It cannot be called a coherent socioeconomic class, either. However, it tends to sustain its power over the other social groups, and reproduce itself, through ideology and privilege. The ideology may carry a religious veil, or some other "sacred" veil. The privilege is that of social status—of perceived and politically imposed superiority. Economic privileges usually accompany the political ones, but may not be equally distributed across the center stratum. The margins, on the other hand, are basically all the other groups within the country, with different degrees of marginalization.

Marginalization is a complex process, not easy to define comprehensively. It often expresses itself overtly in a cultural context, but its direct material existence is in the distribution of power and wealth. If culture, after all, is a historical expression of a collective identity of a group of people with shared experiences and, sometimes, shared language and ancestry, then by itself it does not marginalize. It does not necessarily determine the rules of engagement with others (that is, other cultures or sub-cultures within the main/common culture). Marginalization only starts to manifest in systemic denials of fair access to power and wealth in a given geopolitical context. Such is the case in contemporary Sudan. Certain aspects of culture are utilized as a basis for marginalizing other groups. This is why combating marginalization is essentially an act of culture. The complex aspects of marginalization in post-colonial Sudan were first conceptualized by the late Ali Mazrui, and were later expounded on by others.[14]

One of the strongest treatises of political analysis in Sudan is the CUSH Manifesto. The strength of the manifesto derives from its approach to political analysis through understanding culture and marginalization, and then how it illuminates the structures of oppression with a conscientization approach. CUSH is an acronym for the Congress of United Sudan Homeland (a name that evokes the Sudanic, Meroetic, and ancient civilization of Cush that emerged and flourished in the land of present-day Sudan). In the mid-1990s a group of Sudanese intellectuals in Khartoum representing almost all marginalized areas began to formulate, under dangerous political conditions, a manifesto that could serve as a political platform for a broad alliance of marginalized Sudanese groups. It was initially drafted by a young man from the Nuba Mountains and then went through successive revisions in consultation with representatives of multiple marginalized groups. The Manifesto was widely circulated after reaching a sufficient level of coherence and consensus among the representatives.

The document marks the first time that a diverse group of Sudanese citizens who represent various marginalized groups decided to bring their collective voice together for the human right of self-determination. The significance of this initiative, however, is the authentic approach to sociopolitical analysis that came to light through it. "CUSH views the conflict in the Sudan as to be cultural in essence, with political, economic, and social manifestations," says the manifesto.[15] Before this statement, rarely had anyone spoken in Sudan about the political role of culture. Few and isolated voices spoke of this angle before the CUSH Manifesto (such as Mazrui, Mahmoud M. Taha, and others[16]), but still not in the same unique way. The main thesis presented in the manifesto is based on three concepts: the center,

the margins, and marginalization. Each one of these three is clearly defined and articulated in the CUSH manifesto:[17]

> *The centre*: refers to the social stratum that is in control of the state's central authority, and with it acquires an unfair share of power and wealth in the nation. The centre's social stratum legitimizes its existence, and reproduces itself, through claiming to represent certain cultural symbols; namely Islam and Arabism. By doing so, the centre does not really perform the job of the 'noble custodian' and 'protector' of Islam and Arabism in Sudan, but rather empties and exploits these two symbols – which are otherwise genuine members of Sudan's cultural mosaic, among other members – as vehicles of legitimizing its unfair distribution of power and wealth, and its repressive measures taken to keep the status quo. The centre, therefore, creates an oppressive "Islamo-Arab ideology," very different from the genuine cultural expressions of both Islam and Arabism in general Sudanese society. Thus, agents of the centre do not necessarily have to belong to certain ethnic groups in Sudan, pertaining to Islam and Arabism, but they have to be consistently portraying themselves as custodians of these two.
>
> *The margins*: refer to the social strata that do not subscribe to the cultural 'Frankenstein' created by the centre [i.e. other cultural identities and expressions that belong to the Sudanese cultural mosaic but are neither Islamic nor Arab-influenced]. They either do not subscribe to it by conscious choice or by being ethnically associated with cultural symbols different from Islam and Arabism.
>
> *Marginalization:* refers to the process of activating and maintaining the monopoly over power and wealth by the centre and denying the rightful demands of the margins (i.e. fair distribution of power and wealth). Marginalization materializes in two forms: developmental and cultural. Power facilitates both. Developmental marginalization is embodied in allocating more economic resources to improve the standards of living of the centre social stratum and those who are complicit with it (for one reason or another). Cultural marginalization is added on top of developmental marginalization, and those who suffer this double marginalization are the most oppressed – the ones who do not associate, by their ethnic identities, to either Islam

or Arabism (or both). Cultural marginalization deems those targeted as almost invisible. They don't deserve development or deserve to have access to expressing themselves as equal contributors to the Sudanese cultural mosaic (which is portrayed as a mono-culture by the centre).

While developmental marginalization is easily quantified through economic, educational, and health indicators, cultural marginalization is less quantifiable and more insulting.[18] It kills the marginalized slowly, but not always, as sometimes-direct violent measures are taken to keep them quiet, such as what we have witnessed during the vicious military attacks and war crimes by the Sudanese central government against civilians of marginalized communities in Darfur and South Kordofan in recent years.[19] It is also cultural marginalization that depletes the viable resources of resistance through continuously suffocating and eliminating diverse spaces for non-conforming cultural expressions. Marginalization ultimately begins with culture and ends with culture, according to the manifesto.

Therefore, the manifesto concludes that culture itself should be the main weapon of countering marginalization:

> [T]his situation should be changed through cultural democracy. Hereby, we, in the movement of CUSH, proclaim the reign of the outburst of Sudanese creativity in all its cultural and linguistic spectra. The reign of centricity eradication has come: no 'national' broadcast, no 'national' TV, no 'national' newspapers! It is high time we call things with their real names; these media have never been national, but central all the time. We proclaim the reign of real national creativity in its cultural pluralistic nature which begin by dismantling the cultural taboos enveloped with silence so as to expose them.[20]

Other proposals included in the manifesto relate to political and economic reform, broadly based on acknowledging historical injustices and working to redress them through strategic development plans and programs and political restructuring schemes (for example, land reform, a political federation, reorienting development priorities).

The manifesto then ends with clarifying remarks about the difference between the Islamo-Arab ideology of the center, as a tool of oppression, on the one hand, and the Islamic and Arabic (and Arabophone) elements of the culture of many Sudanese groups, on the other hand:

> We are not against the Islamic and Arab Middle of the Sudan;
> it belongs to us and we belong to it. We are against the Centre
> and its Islamo-Arab ideology of hegemony and persecution…
> It is the right of any group of Sudanese people to identify with
> the Islamic and Arabic culture as far as it finds itself in that;
> likewise, it is the right of any group of the Sudanese people
> to identify with its pre-Arab and pre-Islamic African culture,
> without this being an excuse for breaching its fundamental
> rights. In this, the institution of the State should not take sides
> in favour of a certain culture at the expense of other cultures.[21]

As a Sudanese who belongs to cultural strata that largely identify with Islam and Arabophone expression (albeit often in syncretic forms with native Nubian and other influences) and generally belongs to a privileged class of urban natives who had access to higher education in post-colonial settings, I observe my country with critical eyes. It seems that groups of the center in Sudan are not only unable to understand the suffering of the peoples of the margins, but can't grasp their own inability to understand. Although most of the population of the center groups have been living under conditions of relative poverty and political repression by tyrannical regimes, in most of Sudan's post-colonial years, there is plenty of historic evidence that marginalized groups have been consistently worse off under the same regimes, in addition to enduring more forms of cultural and state violence.[22] The July 2011 secession of South Sudan, and the creation of the youngest state in the world, is but one result of that history of marginalization.[23] When I read the CUSH Manifesto, it helped me see the structures of oppression stacked up against the marginalized groups of Sudan more clearly, and inspired me to be an ally of their struggle.

Logically, the manifesto concludes by proposing channels of organized sociopolitical action informed by the expressed principles and goals. It also proposes various ways of reorienting Sudan toward broad pan-African interests and identities. The original signatories to the manifesto comprised small groups from the margins as well as independent intellectuals and some political figures. It was foreseen that the Congress would grow into a larger alliance and become a new collective movement. Yet, although it received serious acclaim from heavyweight representatives of the Sudanese left, it has yet to gain appreciable momentum to more greatly influence the Sudanese scene.[24] Nonetheless, the perspective of the manifesto itself has already percolated into the Sudanese sociopolitical discourse, analyses, and progressive aspirations. For example, the terminologies of the margin, the center, and marginalization, are already widely used in the Sudanese left in cultural, political, and

socioeconomic discussions (albeit with some deviations from the original definitions of the manifesto). Clearly there is more potential, however. For others and myself, the manifesto strongly speaks to the current affairs of Sudan. A future harmonious, egalitarian, and prosperous Sudanese nation requires a greater incorporation of the manifesto.

Endnotes

1   This state of affairs is the longstanding reason for low levels of, or non-existent, critical consciousness among the poor. They often do not see themselves as members of a marginalized class with oppositional socioeconomic and political interests to those of the privileged classes.

2   In spite of some members of the privileged classes not being self-conscious of the mechanisms that maintain their socially and economically elevated status, they do display a much higher degree of class consciousness than the marginalized. Members of the privileged classes invariably advocate for policies and programs that advance their (short- and/or long-term) economic interests and class standings in society.

3   Jana Kasperkevic, "Do the rich just work harder? Some CEOs certainly think so." *The Guardian*, September 26, 2014. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/money/us-money-blog/2014/sep/26/rich-work-harder-ceos-jack-ma.

4   Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin Press, 2011).

5   Gerald Doré, "Case study: Conscientization as a Specific Form of Community Practice and Training in Quebec," in *Community Development Around the World: Practice, Theory, Research, Training,* ed. Hubert Campfens (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 93–100.

6   Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development: a critical approach* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2005).

7   Amilcar Cabral, "The Weapon of Theory," Address delivered to the first Tricontinental Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America held in Havana in January, 1966.

8   Amilcar Cabral, "National liberation and culture." *Transition*, 45 (1974), 13 (paper originally delivered on 20 February 1970 as a contribution to the Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture Series at Syracuse University).

9   Stephen Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 96.

10   "Empathy." Dictionary.com. Available online: http://www.dictionary.com/browse/empathy.

11   Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* translated by Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1984), 77.

12   Julius Kambarage Nyerere, *Freedom and Development (Uhuru na Maendeleo): A Selection from Writings and Speeches, 1968–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

13   It is usually a minority of the privileged members of society that supports the cause of the marginalized, but the support is usually critical in cases of reformist or revolutionary struggles.

14   Ali A. Mazrui, "The Multiple Marginality of the Sudan" in *Sudan in Africa: Studies presented to the First International Conference sponsored by the Sudan Research Unit, 7–11 February 1968,* ed. Y. Fadl Hassan (Khartoum: University of Khartoum Press, 1971), 240–255.

15   Congress of United Sudan Homeland (CUSH), *The CUSH Manifesto* (Khartoum, April 1996). This document was published as a political pamphlet.

16 Mahmoud M. Taha, *Ath-thawra' Ath-Thaqafiyya (the Cultural Revolution)* (Arbaji, Sudan, 1972).

17 CUSH, *The CUSH Manifesto,* (mostly verbatim).

18 Muna A. Abdalla, "Poverty and inequality in urban Sudan: Policies, institutions and governance" (PhD diss. Universiteit Leiden, 2008). For data on development inequality in Sudan: African Studies Centre, *African Studies Collection*, vol. 13, available online: https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/13106/ASC-075287668-1015-01.pdf?sequence=2.

19 Raluca Besliu, "South Kordofan: Sudan's Hidden Ethnic Cleansing" *Global Politics,* June 6, 2015, available online: http://global-politics.co.uk/wp/2015/06/06/south-kordofan-an-ethnic-cleansing-rooted-in-the-1960s/.

20 Congress of United Sudan Homeland (CUSH), *The CUSH Manifesto.*

21 Ibid.

22 Mansour Khalid, *War and Peace in Sudan: A Tale of Two Countries* (London: Kegan Paul International, 2003).

23 Sara Suliman and Gussai Sheikheldin, "Sudan's Secession Referendum: A Historical Punctuation Mark in the Making," *Science for Peace: The Bulletin*, April 2011. Available online: http://scienceforpeace.ca/files/bulletin-201104.pdf.

24 It was widely alleged that the late Dr. John Garang DeMebior, renowned national figure and leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), after reading the CUSH manifesto, described it as "the most comprehensive treatise of its kind."