
THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE NEGRO PEOPLE

BY FRANCIS FRANKLIN

A COMMON culture is one of the characteristics listed by Stalin in his definition of a nation, the other characteristics being a common economic life, a common territory, a common language, and a common historical tradition. The fight for the self-determination of any oppressed nation must be waged against hindrances to free expression in any one of these five fields. In other words, any oppressed nation must fight for the ownership of the land upon which it dwells, for unhampered economic development to raise the standard of living of all its people, for full democratic liberties, for the right to study and use its language in case this is denied (there have been many instances where even this right has been withheld), for the right to study its own history and culture, and to win the opportunity of the fullest development of its cultural inheritance.

The fight for the liberation of any oppressed people must, therefore, be waged on *all* of these five fronts. It is not a fight for "cultural autonomy" alone, as formerly alleged by certain Social-Democrats. Basically, it is a struggle for land and for democracy. But accompanying the effort to secure land and democracy is the struggle for cultural development.

The oppression of the Negro people in the United States expresses itself in one of its phases in the distortion of Negro history. In order to enslave a nation, the exploiting classes of the oppressor nation must both stir up strife between the peoples of the two nations and also keep each in ignorance of the true conditions of the other. The American exploiters, by means of economic discrimination against Negroes, have always sought to align Negro and white toilers against one another. At the same time, the policy of Jim Crowism maintains ignorance between Negro and white. Jim Crowism expresses itself culturally in the fact that in the educational system Negro history is ignored. Even the Negroes are kept in ignorance of their own great history.

Efforts are made, however, to build calumnies upon the basis of this widespread ignorance. Thus, the Negroes who were first brought to America are alleged by white ruling class apologists to have been without exception "howling savages." The entire period of Negro life in Africa is presented as one maze of savagery.

In order to carry on the struggle for the national liberation of the Negro people, it is necessary also to wage ideological struggles, to conduct a

polemic against all bourgeois distortions of Negro history. The Negro people need to be strengthened by knowledge of their own history. This will help to produce among the Negro people *pride in themselves as a people*. Knowledge of the Negroes and of their achievements will also produce among the white people *respect for the Negro people as a whole*. This respect will help to eradicate all white chauvinism. In order to refute the base slanders of the imperialists against the Negroes as a race, it is necessary to be armed with knowledge of their centuries-old achievements.

EARLY NEGRO CULTURE IN AFRICA

The history of the Negroes in Africa is *not* a blank, not a mere maze of jungle superstition and cannibalism. In fact, Negroes were in touch with highly developed civilization when the ancestors of the proud Anglo-Saxon imperialists were themselves howling savages. Ethiopia, which is today being dominated by the Italian fascist destroyers of culture, is itself a living example of ancient Negro culture. Ethiopia was in touch with the great Egyptian civilization of antiquity, itself partly Negroid, and is mentioned throughout the chronicles of the antique world. Great numbers of Negroes participated in the building of Egyptian civilization. In the bas-reliefs and various pictorial representations found in the pyramids and other architectural remains, many Negroes are depicted. The representations of even some of the Pharaohs reveal distinctly Negroid features. The knowledge of how to smelt iron, the basis of all subsequent civilization, was first discovered by Negroes in the Sudan,

from which region it was introduced into the Northern countries.

Too often accounts of early tribes are gravely unfair in that they emphasize almost to the exclusion of all else the superstitions of these peoples. Instead of making an effort to understand superstitions, as science demands, bourgeois writers tend to hold them up as mere objects of horror, overlooking completely the genuine achievements of primitive tribesmen. These achievements were basically technological. And even in primitive societies, the technique of production frequently necessitated relatively complex forms of social organization. The primary function of life is to keep alive, *i.e.*, is economic. In order to wrest a living from nature, mere dreaming is not sufficient. There must be actual knowledge. The technique of production and the invention of tools and implements can take place only upon the basis of correct observation and experimentation, the formation of hypotheses, rigid deductive reasoning, and verification through practice. The control over nature which such technical progress makes possible indicates that there exists some accurate knowledge of nature. This knowledge does not exist in the form of myths, but is proved by practice. This method of acquiring knowledge is essentially the method of science. Thus, even the most backward tribe is not totally deprived of science. In its method of producing the necessities of life, there exists a scientific nucleus, limited though this may be.

The discovery of iron by the Negroes of the Sudan indicates the extent of technical and scientific achievement by those people. The

fact that such achievements were not carried further is to be explained partially by absence in the general climatic and geographical conditions of Africa of factors which would stimulate the development of higher productive forces. At the same time, it must be pointed out that, owing to a limited development of the means of production, the ancestors of the Europeans, even though dwelling in a more favorable climate, lived in a state of savagery and barbarism for thousands of years after highly developed civilizations had developed in China, India, Babylonia, Egypt, Persia, and after the emergence of Negro kingdoms in Africa.

Not only did the Negroes participate in the building of Egyptian civilization, but the influence of that civilization spread through the Negro tribes of the Sudan. Ethiopia, whose emperors claim to trace their lineage from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, was not the only Negro kingdom which arose in that region. There arose the Empire of Ghana; the kingdoms of Diaro and Soso; and Songhoy, Mandingo and Mossi empires; the Bambara kingdoms; and the Empire of Bornu. Historical and descriptive accounts of these kingdoms, which possessed cities and magnificent courts, renowned emperors, great warriors, who led mighty armies in battle, may be read in such authoritative works as G. W. Ellis' *Negro Culture in West Africa* and Maurice Delafosse's *Negroes of Africa*.

Christianity entered the Sudan at an early date, evidently through the early ascetics who fled from "the world" into the Egyptian deserts. Today, the oldest Christian Church in

existence is the Coptic Church of Ethiopia. Within its ritual can be found earlier forms of many of the rites of the Catholic Church.

Subsequently, the Sudanese Negroes came in touch with another developed civilization, that of the Mohammedans, which arose about 500 A. D. Many Negro tribes and kingdoms adopted the Moslem religion. At the time when the Moors conquered Spain, many Negroes accompanied them. In fact, the Moors themselves were partly Negro, and today the Spaniards possess a certain percentage of Negro blood. Negroes partook in the Moorish culture in Spain. Many of them attended Spanish universities, became scholars and poets, and carried the culture acquired there back into Africa.

In all the tribes and kingdoms of the Sudan, art flourished. This art was not the product merely of an inherent, natural gift, but a product of the social organization of the people. Its development was the product of struggle first of all against nature, later in America of struggle against oppression. The musical genius of the Negro is well known. If native African music was not highly developed melodically, no music has ever surpassed it in intricacy of rhythm. Native dances flourished along with this rhythmical music. Negro music and dancing both entered Spain, and profoundly influenced the development of the Spanish dance and Spanish music. Many of the fundamental rhythms of Bizet's opera *Carmen* are said to be Negro in origin.

At the same time, the Negroes expressed their genius in plastic art, especially in wood carving. The fig-

ures of Negro sculpture are not idealized natural forms such as those of the Greeks. Instead, Negro sculpture uses natural forms as plastic materials to be reshaped into new forms. As such, they attain a unique beauty in their presentation of forms. They must be appreciated on their own ground. When so approached, they impress one profoundly as virile and living presentations of what might be called the music of form. They have profoundly influenced modern painting and modern sculpture in Europe and America. For excellent photographs of many beautiful examples of Negro sculpture, one may go to Guillaume and Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture*.

There has also flourished among the African Negroes a vigorous folklore consisting of many proverbs, wise sayings and fables. These were taken up by Arabian travelers, who spread them into India, Greece and other lands. Influences of these tales are found in Arabian folklore and to a marked extent in the Indian fables contained in the *Hitopadesa*. Aesop's Fables are thought to be derived from Negro folklore. These fables and tales were taken by the slaves to America and were embodied in our literature in the stories of Uncle Remus.

Much trade took place among the various Negro tribes and kingdoms. Trade brought them in contact with Arab and Moorish merchants and with Moslem civilization. Wealthy trading centers sprang up in the Sudan, the most famed being Timbuctoo. Here, there were wealthy Negro merchants and numerous handicraft shops where many objects of exquisite beauty were created. A famous Negro

university sprang up here. Timbuctoo became the center of Negro culture.

DEVELOPMENT OF NEGRO CULTURE IN AMERICA

What was the character of the Negro slaves imported to the New World? The tribes on the coast were bribed by the merchants to make raids in the interior of Africa to capture prisoners. There were Mohammedan Negroes who could read the Koran among these early slaves. However, the slave traders and landlords deliberately sought to destroy all remnants of African culture by separating members of the same tribe who spoke the same language as a conscious measure for preventing slaves from communicating with one another and thus from uniting for rebellion. Thus, the Negroes were forced to discontinue the use of their African language and to learn English which became a "common language" for them in America. In this process the Negroes were forced to forget the greater part of their African cultural heritage. Vicious measures were taken to hold the Negro in illiteracy. Negroes today still tell gruesome stories of how their grandparents were held in illiteracy during slave days. On certain plantations, if a Negro was found with a pencil in his hand, the master would, for the first offense, pound his thumb with a hammer; for the second, he would cut off his index finger; for the third, he would cut off his hand. If caught looking into a book, the Negro would be forced to kneel before his master, who would spit tobacco juice in the slave's eyes.

By such brutal measures, a great part of the old African cultures was

uprooted. Negroes from many tribes and kingdoms were united by a common system of oppression. They were fused into a new people with a common language and common culture.

The Negro slaves owned nothing, not even themselves. They suffered unspeakable anguish. By means of numerous glorious insurrections, such as those of Gabriel, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey and Madison Washington, they sought freedom. But all revolts were crushed, until advancing capitalism, by its onslaught against the slaveholders, gave them allies in their struggles among the white population.

For a time, the partners in the slave traffic justified slavery by stating that the Negro had no soul. Afterwards, they justified it by claiming that through slavery they were saving his soul. They taught the slaves Christianity. In doing so, they forgot that Christianity had arisen among the oppressed masses of the Roman Empire after their revolts had been crushed, and had only subsequently been converted into a ruling class religion. The Negroes revived the primitive aspects of Christianity as a religion voicing the aspirations of the slaves and oppressed classes generally. The masters, on the contrary, sought to use Christianity as an "opium." They sought to divert the minds of the slaves from thoughts of happiness on earth to dreams of "otherworld" bliss.

These dreams and the ability to sing were the only things in which the slaves found compensation for the miseries of their actual lives. From Africa, they had brought their sense of rhythm. In America, they came in

contact with English melodies. They learned how to unite melody with their own native rhythms, and in songs which are among the most sublime of any folk music, they expressed the new conditions of their lives. In their "sorrow songs"—spiritual and work songs—they voiced their suffering and their sense of wrong, they expressed their belief in the wickedness of oppressors and the righteousness of those who toil. They also voiced their dreams of heaven.

But even within these dreams, there was expressed the sense of wrong which could so easily spring into rebellion. In fact, religion frequently became a disguise for plots for insurrection, and the masters, from fear of this, frequently forbade them to hold religious services. At times, songs became signals for conspiratorial activities. Thus, the spiritual, "Steal Away to Jesus," was sung right under the eyes of the unsuspecting "bosses" as a signal for the Negroes to "steal away" at midnight to an island on Roanoke River for meetings. In this manner, Negro culture in America was developed as a form of struggle. It was the struggle for freedom which gave to Negro culture its greatest impetus.

The greatest music produced in America has been Negro folk music. This music, Negro dancing, and folklore, expressive Negro figures of speech, etc., have profoundly influenced American culture, to such an extent that, as one Negro writer has said, the American Negroes are an example of a people who, though economically, politically and socially oppressed, are yet to a certain extent culturally dominant. In spite of this fact, the arts and the theatre have

continued to portray an utterly distorted conception of the Negro people as a degraded people.

In the Abolition movement and during Reconstruction days, Negro orators and statesmen of the outstanding character of Frederick Douglass were beginning to come forward. But for a time, after the suppression of the democratic revolutionary movement of the Negro people, leading Negro intellectuals tended to follow the submissive features of Booker T. Washington's policy, which, in other respects, made contributions to the cultural enhancement of the Negro people.

A spirit of disillusionment over their betrayal expressed itself among the Negro people after Reconstruction in the famous "blues" songs. This attitude is voiced clearly in the words, "I'm goin' where they don't shovel snow no more"; "Got de blues, but I'm too damn mean to cry"; the song of the Negro soldiers in the World War, "I've got a grave-diggin' feelin' in my heart," as in practically all of these poignant melodies. The "blues" songs were a notable artistic creation of the Negro people during the period following Reconstruction. They have profoundly influenced all American culture. Many of them have become popular among all the people. They have formed a pattern for many other popular tunes which are today known as typically American.

RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEGRO CULTURE

In recent years, the Negro people have begun to shake off the Booker T. Washington school of thought. Negro artists and intellectuals are con-

tinuing their great tradition of cultural achievement in the realms of poetry, drama, fiction, the plastic arts, and in the movement for liberation. Among the greatest artistic figures of our epoch may be counted Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, Richard Wright and Rose McClendon, to cite but some. The works of the outstanding Negro intellectuals of our day manifest a new spirit of confidence, pride and unwillingness to continue to submit to the indignities imposed by national oppression.

The work of the Communist Party in challenging the whole system of sharecropping and Jim Crow oppression has been of outstanding significance in helping to develop this new culture of national liberation among the Negro people. In voicing most clearly the aspiration of the Negro people for complete social, political and economic equality, in giving a scientific, theoretical basis to this aspiration, in giving a lucid interpretation of the national character of the Negro liberation movement, and in giving that movement the perspective of realizing the full right of self-determination, the Communist Party has brought a new clarity into the long-continuing struggle of the Negro people for liberty. It has dramatized the plight of the Negro people in the world-famous cases of Scottsboro, Herndon and in its pioneer work among the sharecroppers of the Black Belt. This clarity is profoundly influencing Negro art, as indicated in the development of the younger Negro writers, the Negro drama, etc.

As the democratic front movement

advances among the Negroes, organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League are showing a more determined opposition to the old status of oppression. More and more, all Negro organizations are joining forces through the National Negro Congress and the Southern Negro Youth Conference for the great cause of their liberation. One of the outstanding demands of these organizations is for the inclusion of the real history of the Negro people in all American schools. Knowledge of this history will aid the further development of Negro culture and of American culture as a whole. The recent growth and development of the Southern Negro Youth Conference is especially outstanding. It is undertaking the fight for the right to vote, for full citizenship, and for equal educational opportunities right in the heart of the South. At the same time, through launching and supporting forums, discussion groups, People's Theaters, and other forms of educational activity on the burning needs of the Negro people and of the whole South in Negro churches, schools and other organization, it is launching a cultural movement of profound significance among the Negro people of the South.

Of equal importance with these developments among the Negro people themselves is the growing recognition among the white people of Negro cultural achievements and aspirations. This was expressed most dramatically in the recent outpouring in Washington to hear the great Negro singer, Marian Anderson, after she had been denied the use of a hall by the Daugh-

ters of American Revolution, and by the large white audience which attended her concert in Birmingham, Alabama.

The growing recognition by white Americans of the contributions of the Negro people has also been indicated by the cooperation of Negro and white in the momentous Southern Human Welfare Conference, held in Birmingham last November; also by the inclusion on Presidential committees in recent years of such outstanding Negro scholars as Dr. Charles S. Johnson.

The greatest of all achievements in furthering the cause of the unity of Negro and white toilers has been the excellent position toward Negro labor adopted by the C.I.O. Within the last few years, it has taken considerable strides toward uniting Negro and white workers in the same locals, thus beginning to break the stranglehold of segregation, which in the past has been foisted upon the labor movement by the reactionary bureaucrats within the A. F. of L. At its last convention, every genuine progressive in America hailed the resolutions there adopted which called for full equality for Negro toilers and which called for an intensive organizational drive in the South. The carrying into life of these resolutions will do more toward securing that unity of the Southern people, so necessary for the development of Negro culture and of Southern culture as a whole, than any event since the end of Reconstruction.

The work of the Associates in Negro Folk Education in popularizing Negro history and culture through their Bronze Booklets is to be wel-

comed and should be widely supported. Such a magazine as *New Challenge* can play an important role in spreading knowledge of the Negro's cultural heritage. Similar commendable work has been undertaken by the theater in various places, for example by the Negro W.P.A. theaters, and by such bodies as the Negro People's Arts Committee of Harlem. Of especial significance is the Negro People's Theater of Richmond, Va. The launching of such theaters in the South can be of enormous importance in rallying the Negro people and in breaking down the "Stepin Fetchit" characterization of the Negro, thus giving the white people a new understanding of Negro life.

The cultural achievements of the Negroes both in Africa and in America must be popularized everywhere. These achievements refute the lies of imperialist chauvinism. They show that the Negro has influenced great and ancient civilizations, that there have existed and still exist highly developed social systems among Negroes, that the Negro has produced art of inestimable worth. Nearly all memory of African culture was crushed by slavery. In this way, slavery brought "civilization" to the Negro, as the slaveholders boasted! Nevertheless, out of their suffering, while held in complete bondage and in a state of the greatest ignorance and illiteracy, the Negro people still proved themselves capable of cultural creation of high value.

If such have been the achievements of Negroes in primitive and unfavorable conditions, as in Africa, and while suffering under the most cruel oppression, as in America, what might

not their achievements be under conditions of freedom in the present epoch of advanced technology? Some glimmering of such potential achievements may be obtained from the great cultural development of the formerly oppressed peoples liberated by the great Russian Revolution of October, 1917.

The Negro people are increasingly becoming aware of the fact that in the Soviet Union racial and national oppression have ceased to exist. There, all races and nationalities find genuine equality. More and more, Negroes are learning that socialism grants the freest development to national cultures.

The imperialist bourgeoisie have proved themselves the greatest enemies of culture. Not only do they ruthlessly destroy colonial cultural traditions, seeking to substitute their own shoddy commercialism and culture of the prison, but they seek to throttle all free cultural development in the present. This imprisonment of the human spirit affects not only all those who are thereby brutalized, but also all lovers of culture.

Jim Crowism is hostile to cultural development. Jim Crowism does not merely affect the Negro people; it works both ways. Jim Crowism not merely separates Negro from white, but also white from Negro. The result is cultural impoverishment of white toilers and intellectuals as well as of the Negro people. The latter are capable of giving the whites as much as the whites are capable of giving them. The Negro people form an integral part of America. Their cultural tradition is an American heritage. The American people have a right to this

cultural heritage. Jim Crowism denies them the inalienable right to come in intimate contact with Negroes and to know their history and their culture. Only by drinking at the fountain of many cultures can mankind attain the highest development. There is nothing so sterile as an intellectual caste system. Negro segregation deprives the majority of white toilers of the opportunity of establishing friendships with the Negro people and of absorbing Negro culture, which is their *inalienable right*. Every toiler and intellectual must cry "Down with the stifling of culture! Long live the cultural development of all peoples!"

All lovers of culture must today join forces with the National Negro Congress and the Southern Negro Youth Conference and other groups which are demanding an end to slanders against the Negro people in the factories, in the professions, in literature, on stage and screen, over the radio, or wherever they may be found; which are demanding channels through which the Negro people may more easily obtain cultural opportunities and give expression to their own creativeness, *viz.*, equal educational opportunity, the inclusion of Negro history in all school curricula, federal support of Negro people's

theaters, the right of Negroes to participate in all cultural pursuits.

These cultural demands will be fully realized as the basic demands for land and for democracy are realized. Ownership of the land on which they toil and full democracy will in the end give the Negro people the material and political basis for full cultural development. Therefore, everyone who stands for the most complete development of Negro culture must at the same time seek to prepare the way for the full realization of the right of self-determination for the Negro people in the Black Belt. The immediate tasks in working toward these great objectives are to throw the full weight of popular support into the endeavor to put an end to lynching, to do away with Jim-Crowism and particularly to win the right to vote for every Negro and poor white person in the Southern states. Full citizenship rights are necessary to secure such farm tenancy legislation as will begin to convert the millions of farm tenants in the Black Belt into farm owners. Struggles for such legislative guarantees of economic security are the necessary accompaniments of the effort to develop the culture of the Negro people in our country to the highest possible extent—and thereby to develop the national culture of the entire American people.