Opinion

The importance of the mind is critical in many ways. Even some diseases can be cured by addressing specific psychological issues. Similarly, in social settings, the mind determines the destinies of peoples and nations. In this opinion piece based on the forthcoming book Apartheid in South Africa: Reflections and Lessons edited by Francis Lukhele and published by Nova Publishers, and to which I contributed the chapter titled Unchain the Mind, I write about the significance of the mind in resisting oppression. This is important because without a hold on the minds of the oppressed, the oppressor cannot control their ‘subjects’. This piece therefore is concerned with the objectives of the Status Campaign of 1959 during the colonial oppressive rule of the settler minority in South Africa. The campaign actually captured the single narrative of inferiority and superiority of one race over the other.

The Status Campaign was a response to colonial and settler-colonial conditions under which African people were forced to live under. Those were conditions of violence and inhumane policies. Their dignity as a people was subjected to psychological oppression and subjugation among other things. However, to overthrow that unjust system required that those who were its victims rose to claim their birthrights as human beings. If they accepted or tolerated the denigrating treatment that their colonizers melted out to them, they could not demand freedom and self-determination.

Launching the Status Campaign, the founding President of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (South Africa), Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe (1924-1978), declared that for the people to be free, they first needed to free themselves psychologically and he explained that: “The struggle in South Africa hinges on the twin problem of land and status. To that effect, the return of land was the crucial condition that would restore the dignity of the African. However, the oppressed would never rise against their oppressors until they were mentally ready to do so. Such readiness meant rejection of white rule and the humiliating treatment, which Africans were being subjected to. The Status Campaign therefore recognized the importance of psychological warfare required for liberation. The Psyche of Oppression

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The Psyche of Oppression

Sobukwe targeted the day-to-day suffering of the African people in the hands of white people who regarded Africans as children regardless of their ages, or mental capabilities. In South Africa, it was ‘normal’ for the white people to refer to their African employees as boys and girls, or even give them names other than those Africans considered theirs. White children also grew up with that mentality and came to expect unquestioned obedience from those Africans considered theirs. White children would not be able to rise against the system of white supremacy. It was therefore critical that the African psyche be reoriented in the desired direction in preparation not only for the final liberation, but also for the execution of the process of liberation itself.

Pheko [2] posits that the PAC launched the Status Campaign as a first step towards liberation from colonialism, which it had identified as a national problem in South Africa. It argued that the oppressive laws would disappear with the overthrow of the settler-colonial State. Sobukwe therefore very early identified the land question as fundamental in the liberation of African people. It argued that the suffering of Africans had come as a result of their defeat by the colonizing foreign minority and the resultant loss of land. To that effect, the return of land was the crucial condition that would restore the dignity of the African. However, the oppressed could never rise against their oppressors until they were mentally ready to do so. Such readiness meant rejection of white rule and the humiliating treatment, which Africans were being subjected to. The Status Campaign therefore recognized the importance of psychological warfare required for liberation.
Phoko has argued that the Status Campaign was a process of undergoing mental revolution and mind decolonization. In the words of Fanon (1963, 1 & 266) mind decolonization should be “unconditional, absolute, total and seamless”. In South Africa, this was necessary because the settler-colonial State had inculcated a psychology of African inferiority and supremacy of the Caucasian (white) race something Sobukwe also disputed arguing that there is only one race-humans. He argued that when it comes to human beings, ‘race’ has no plural. The colonialists had devised means to infuse the fallacy of white supremacy through many channels including the newspapers, books, music, arts, radio and films. The Status Campaign culminated into the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March 1960 as African people took to resisting the pass laws, which restricted their movement in South Africa.

I am thinking that Sobukwe had carefully studied the modus operandi of the settler-colonial administration in South Africa and recognised that the mind was central in the whole situation. To continue the oppression, the oppressor relied on manipulating the mind of the oppressed. Similarly, Sobukwe understood that until the mind was free from the colonial grip, it would be impossible to liberate the oppressed. In this regard, the psychological make-up of individuals and groups is critical in understanding their conditions.

References
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