

# ON LITERATURE AND NATIONAL CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

By

Agostinho Neto

## ON LITERATURE<sup>2</sup>

Comrades:

It is with the greatest pleasure that I attend this formal ceremony for the installation of the Governing Bodies of the Angolan Writers' Union.

As all of you will understand, only the guarantees offered by the other members of the General Assembly and by the Comrade Secretary-General were able to convince me to accept one more obligation added to so many others.

Nevertheless, I wish to thank the Angolan Writers' Union for this kind gesture and to express my hope that whenever it may be necessary for me to make my contribution to the Union that the Comrades as a whole or individually will not hesitate to put before me the problems that go along with these new duties that I now assume.

I wish to use this occasion to pay homage to those Comrade writers who before and after the national liberation struggle suffered persecution, to those who lost their freedom in prison or exile, and to those who inside the country were politically segregated and thus placed in unusual situations. I also wish to join with all the Comrades here in the homage that was paid to those Comrades who heroically made the ultimate sacrifice during the national liberation struggle, and who today are no longer with us.

Comrades:

We have taken one more step forward in our national life with the forming of this Writers' Union which continues the literary traditions of the period of resistance against colonialism. During that period, and in spite of colonial-fascist repression, a task was accomplished that will go down in the annals of Angola's revolutionary history as a valuable contribution to the Victory of the Angolan People.

Comrades:

I have the honor of saluting those faithful interpreters of our cultural options and of our traditions who represent the

spiritual bulwark of the struggle. In the front lines of literature they, by creating, transmitting, and interpreting, salvaged whatever they could of the literary wealth of the Angolan People.

Comrades:

In order to establish the premises capable of permitting a brief introduction to some of our problems, we have to consider that life is a succession and a sum total of contradictory facts, which, according to their nature, may or may not be resolvable.

And the writer reflects life in accordance with the way in which he or she faces it. It is for this very reason that it is important to situate the social point of view from which phenomena are seen.

For the Angolan writer, the interpretation of existence cannot help but be subjected to this rule. And in order to do so, it is obvious that the writer cannot ignore reality, above all, those dramatic aspects of that reality which constitute its contradiction.

The people and the environment will be always present in each thought, in each word or written sentence, just as the shadow coexists with the light, and the leaf with the root.

The people and the environment here in Angola have been marked by the branding iron of slavery, and for a long time to come the life of the Angolan people will bear the marks of colonialism. The desire, the option, the orientation will not always coincide with the manner of expression or with the content of what is expressed. What exists in the subconscious of human beings, or that which underlies things, is to be revealed. And only action, in this case revolutionary action, will be able to condition radical change.

The superficiality of observation, the preconceived notion, or the complexes that marked existence during the colonial period, will still be with us. It is natural that such be the case.

The manual laborer, manual labor itself, the new role of those who produce and their capacity to transform nature, the philosophical principles that condition socio-economic structures and which, in turn, have philosophical consequences, will elude, for now, the sensibilities of the Angolan writer. And even the apparently simple fact of the contemplation of the black man or of the white man will for a long time suffer colonial influences--contradictorily so.

I think that all of us will agree that writers should situate themselves in their times and exercise their function as formers of consciousness. They should be active agents in the improvement of humanity.

Some of our writers still cry when it's time for them to sing; although, at times crying can also be singing and tears can mean joy. But knowing how to sing is sometimes more difficult than knowing how to cry because when the future becomes the present not everyone realized his or her dream. I mean to say by this that it is not always that the reality of the majority constitutes the happiness or the sorrow of each individual.

If on the one hand we have to deal with the fact of *independence* and, on the other hand, with the fact of *proletariat-peasantry*, we can rightfully ask, what is the writer's position in face of the new Angolan person who has resulted from the historic victory over one of the elements of the colonial contradiction? Because, one cannot forget the new historical factor introduced to Angolan reality and constituted by independence and by Freedom. Nor can one ignore the African context in which today people are considered in a manner different from that to which we became accustomed by centuries of slavery and colonialism. Today Africans are free people, or they are in the process of freeing themselves from colonialism and imperialism.

One cannot ignore the world context in which profound and definitive transformations have occurred and are occurring on the human as well as the social and material levels. No matter what the social condition of the observer, no matter what his or her political choices may be, no matter what sentiments he or she may have, no one can overlook the world context.

In independent Angola, headed toward a superior form of social organization, namely, Socialism, literature necessarily has to reflect this new situation. In the past much of the Angolan literature produced by those represented in the Writers' Union assumed an eminently patriotic character in its concern for social conditions. Today, for the sake of continuity, it will be necessary for Angolan literature to insert itself well into and be a reflection of Angolan culture. At this point we can infer that there have been profound social transformations in the structures that conform to the several classes, ethnic groups, and races which constitute the Angolan people.

In the past our literature was deeply immersed in European culture--it was indeed a part of the literature of Europe--whose currents were followed and one language of which was used as our only means of expression. In the past our culture was merely a "different" motif, a folkloric variation, a colorful contrast to embellish phrases and ideas. The political condition that

dictated literary modes was empty idealism and snobbish realism

Today, our culture has to be reflected for what it is, without deformations. Our culture itself has to be the motivator of literature.

During the national liberation struggles there were serious attempts to follow the new path; but the results were insignificant.

Under our particular conditions, however, cultural reconversion cannot be accomplished in just one generation. The effort--and this I am sure of--will be made; but the effects will only be felt much later when material conditions are sufficiently determinant of a new consciousness.

In order to be valid, expression has to be the result of experience and observation.

What can it mean to live Angolan culture, without falling into leftism? To live Angolan culture means to understand the people just as they are defined, to be an element of the people, to forget prejudices, and to go beyond class. To caricature the petty bourgeoisie, or to describe it, is as valid as exalting the peasant or the worker.

To live Angolan culture means to live the life of the people and, for those who concern themselves with literature, to know how to extract from sentiments, from aspirations, from the times, and from History itself, those elements necessary for their artistic endeavors.

Comrades, at this time it is no longer an acceptable idea to include in the category of writers just those who know how to use the Portuguese language well. The interpretation or the description of life does indeed fall to artists, but the form that this takes is not subordinate to a more or less perfect command of the language which we use today. Thus, the concept of writer and of member of this Union should be active expanded.

As a matter of fact, in a broader framework of culture and cultural activity it will be necessary to develop art in all its aspects and gather all possible elements of our oral and written literature. It will be necessary to retell the History of Angola in order to make known the long road travelled between the past and the present.

I mean to say that this Writers' Union is called on to play an important role in our Revolution. The cultural personality of the Angolan people has to be revealed through

literature and other forms of expression.

A while ago I referred to languages. The exclusive use of Portuguese as the official language, as *lingua franca*, and presently as the expression of our literature does not solve our problems. And in primary education and probably even in secondary schools it will be necessary to use our languages. And given the diversity of this country, sooner or later we ought to tend towards the agglutination of some dialects in order to facilitate contacts.

All of the development of the language problem will naturally also depend on the removal of regional barriers, on the consolidation of national unity, on the extinction of those complexes and blemishes inherited from colonialism, and on economic development.

The worker-peasant alliance, materialized in the development of transportation, means of communication, commerce, industry, agrarian collectivism, will contribute to the solution of the question of the use of our languages in the normal activities of the Angolan people. Therefore, the Writers' Union, and particularly Angolan writers themselves, cannot neglect this problem. I think that the Writers' Union, together with the organisms of the Culture Sector, should concern itself with the question of our languages. To my way of thinking, for now, and in a progressive manner, there should be an active integration into the Writers' Union of those literary values not expressed in Portuguese.

Comrades:

In this installation ceremony of one of the most valuable organisms for the spiritual life of our country, I wish to express the satisfaction that I will experience in witnessing debates on concrete problems of Angolan culture treated as one of the primordial concerns of the Angolan writer.

I believe that this wish will also be expressed by the 1st. Congress of the MPLA.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES! VICTORY IS CERTAIN!

\*\*\*\*\*

ON THE WRITERS' UNION<sup>3</sup>

Compatriots and Comrades:

This formal session in proclamation of the constitution of the Angolan Writers' Union is one more beginning in our young People's Republic. Once again we have seen our hopes

materialized, hopes that we have had since the start of our struggle for the total adhesion of all social strata and of all valid elements of the Angolan people. It is not by accident that all of Angola's writers belong to the MPLA. They belong or belonged. Those who are no longer with us, those who perished, belonged; those who are alive are in the MPLA. This fact is significant because literature in Angola, and we can extend this a little by saying art in Angola, has always served the Revolution. That which was done by comrades, in attendance, by others dispersed throughout the room, by others who have been lost, was done in support of the political struggle of our people for their independence. It was done in support of our people's desire for the establishment of a People's Democracy. Art in Angola was never dedicated to a reactionary view even when appearances suggested the contrary. Therefore, I hope, as do all of us, that the names that have been put forth as potential associates of this Union, that these names are approved in short order. Moreover, I hope to see this Angolan Writers' Union function, function in a dynamic way so that the culture of our people, the culture of the Angolan people, can be known to our own people and also known by the entire world that wishes at all costs to understand the soul of this Country.

I believe that it is fitting for us to underline--all of us who constitute the leadership of the revolution--to underline the fact that on the 10th of December, 1975, that is, just a month after the proclamation of independence, that we can meet here in this theater where the people were never allowed. Here the Portuguese colonialists met to enjoy their leisure time. Now, we proclaim here an Angolan Writers' Union at the service of our people. This is significant; this speaks to the future. We have always said that the struggle for national liberation cannot be separate from the struggle for the imposition, for the recognition of a culture which is peculiar to our people. Our people have their way of being, they have their idiosyncrasies which are revealed in many facts, on many occasions, many manifestations of art. From this moment on, let us begin with this beautiful initiative of old and young comrade writers let us try to organize, for our people, a synthesis of our culture. And I hope that this Angolan Writers' Union is indeed the service of the people, at the service of the workers and the peasants who constitute the most exploited classes in our country.

I hope that the comrades who have just made pledges here for our people and our future, they are valid pledges--will be able to bring about everything they spoke of, not only in the proclamation of this Union but also in the expression of the poems that were recited here today. And we have the added hope of seeing that our culture does not remain enclosed within Angola. Three of the poems recited here were dedicated to

foreign authors, dedicated to progressive authors, from among those we most esteem in the world today. And from its very beginnings this Union already goes beyond our borders, this being within the cultural logic of making all of the world's people join together in their common struggle for better social conditions. This activity also falls within a desired cultural comprehensiveness that our Movement wishes to see as our country's orientation.

I should tell the comrades who have come together in this theater that the Angolan Writers' Union has the support of the MPLA's Political Bureau. Therefore, this is a Union that from the moment of its birth has been oriented within the spirit of independence, within the spirit of the organization and the institution of People's Power, within the spirit of the directing of our Country towards a People's Democracy. And thus, we are all going to work together.

Thank you very much.

\*\*\*\*\*

*ON NATIONAL CULTURE<sup>A</sup>*

Comrades and Dear Colleagues:

Today brings to an end one more process in the life of the Angolan Writers' Union, an action which, after duly held elections, culminates with the installation of the new governing bodies.

A period of activities is about to begin for all writers with the installation of officers elected on December 29, 1978. And I hope that in March of 1981\* we will be able to take very positive account of this period which promises to be one of great prospects and production.

The directorship of our Union has made every effort to dynamize literary production at a time when there still exists some confusion in content about an Angolan, African, and universal future for literature and the political necessity of nationalism, or about the future of the writers' political activities and politics itself.

Thus, the task that lies before the new officers will not be merely one of administrative responsibilities, but also one

---

\*The next General Assembly of the Angolan Writers' Union was scheduled for this date (trans. note).

of analysis and criticism. It will not be an easy task. I believe that we will soon open debate to the assessment of our work within the true context of the Angolan Nation, or better yet, of the Angolan People.

Therefore, in the name of the Board of the General Assembly it gives me great pleasure to congratulate the elected executive body of the present directorship, which has before it a grand task to perform in the dynamization of Angolan culture. May their work go well.

I think it necessary to talk about culture in general before dealing with literature in particular. Let us take advantage of this excellent opportunity to examine some essential aspects of our culture.

Fortunately, among Angolan intellectuals some hesitation and doubts have already been raised as to whether Portuguese culture, which did serve some Angolans who were detached from their own people, is or is not that which should be presented as the cultural emanation of the Angolan people. Doubts lead to affirmation.

Obviously, culture cannot be inscribed in chauvinism, nor can it avoid the dynamism of life. Culture evolves with material conditions and at each stage it corresponds to a form of expression and of concretization of cultural acts. Culture results from the material situation and from the state of social development.

In the Angolan context cultural expression results, if not from imitation, at least, for the time being, from the effects of centuries of acculturation. This acculturation has claimed to reflect the material evolution of the people who, after becoming independent, became submissive and completely dependent, and then became independent again under new conditions.

We must turn to our own reality, without chauvinism and without denying our universalist calling. Cultural chauvinism is as detrimental as was the concept of *Proletkult* which emerged right after the Revolution of October and which Lenin so vigorously opposed. Lenin insisted that the Soviet nation, for the elaboration of a new socialist culture aimed at the masses, should necessarily find fulfillment in and take advantage of its cultural heritage. Later on, of course, the concept of *socialist realism* also proved to be detrimental.

Today, the culture of the Angolan people is composed of fragments that extend from the assimilated urban areas to rural areas where European assimilation had only superficial

effects. And because capital cities like ours,\* overgrown with bureaucracy, exert a magic influence on the rest of the country, there is a tendency to imitate. This tendency to imitate is readily apparent in the cultural realm. Thus, the Angolan Writers' Union has a special responsibility. Both the responsibility and the task are enormous. Where to begin? Or, how to continue?

If my esteemed comrades and colleagues will permit me, I will say that we should not fall into fixed patterns or stereotypes like those of the *socialist realist* theorists. On a par with our nationalist capacities, we have to intervene in such a way as to join with the rest of the world even as we go about laying claim to our national reality.

In our initial phase, and from the cultural point of view, it is necessary to analyze and not indulge in mechanical adaptations. It is necessary to analyze reality profoundly and to utilize the benefits of outside techniques only when we are in possession of an Angolan cultural heritage.

To develop our culture does not mean to subject it to other cultures.

We have not yet reached a level of material production that will permit us to dedicate ourselves intensively to spiritual production. We need more time. But, Comrade Writers, that time cannot be taken up with accommodations to imported themes and forms.

Angolan culture is African; above all, it is Angolan. Thus, we have always been offended by the way our people were treated by Portuguese intellectuals.

If it is not yet within our capacity to transform the writer into a professional of literature or cultural research, we are headed in that direction. And some proposals put forth by the Secretariat may be able to be honored during vacation periods or active weekends.

I believe that shortly artists and writers will just be artists and writers, able to devote themselves to problems that I merely touch on now, at the end of this Assembly.

To my way of thinking, however, it will be necessary to go deeply into issues that have to do with the culture of the several Angolan nations, today united into one, and with the

---

\*The reference is to Luanda, capital of the People's Republic of Angola (trans. note).

effects of acculturation resulting from contacts with European culture. There is likewise a need to reach an agreement on the utilization of agents of culture from the people and to bring about a single comprehensive current of this culture in Angola.

Not unlike the botanist or the zoologist, the scientist or the philosopher, let us bring together all elements. Let us analyze these elements, and let us do it scientifically, and within two years let us present our results. And I am sure that we shall arrive at the conclusion that Angola has its own characteristic culture, one that has resulted from its history, or from its histories.

It would be a good thing (but if it's not possible, we won't cry over it) if during the next Party Congress we could count on the opinion of the Angolan Writers' Union on these matters.

As for other agents of culture, like painters and sculptors and even those who, under present conditions, are charged with the dissemination of information among the masses of the people. I think it only normal procedure for the Angolan Writers' Union to assume responsibility in orienting and transmitting ideas. This function is one that the Party organisms can only define through texts, and one which the State organism can dynamize by becoming itself the vehicle for the results to be obtained by those engaged in formulating ideas.

I think it necessary that we have the broadest possible debate on ideas, the most extensive efforts in research dynamization, and public presentation of all forms of culture existing in this country. And we should do this without any preconceived notions of an artistic or linguistic nature.

We need to make it so that the artists of the people can create!

We would need a lot more time to emphasize the fact that in order to speak for the Angolan people it is necessary to be part of the Angolan people. It is not a question of language but one of national quality.

Dear Colleagues and Comrades:

If we persist in attitudes which are inattentive to our people, we will not be capable of interpreting the "spirit" of the people as it emerges from study and from lived experience.

To narrate the political experience of the moment is easy but to arrive at the essence of thought of the several ex-nations is not so easy.

Thus, let us free artists from the incumbrances of the past in order that they gain a broad and comprehensive attitude toward all of our processes of cultural reconstruction.

Once again, we should remind ourselves of the necessity of our commitment to the artists of the people, not for reasons of interpreting folklore, but in order to understand and to interpret culture, and in order for us to be capable of reproducing folklore and culture.

The repetition of the imported aspects of culture is certainly an act of which no one approves. And since I have been called on to express an opinion, I would wish that all which is directed to our people by the most capable agents of Angolan culture be representative of the people's aspirations and forms of expression.

All of this must be accomplished as it was with respect to independence, as it is with respect to the adoption of the Party's political line, as it is with respect to the forms of carrying out this political line, and on the other hand, as it is, and will be, with respect to the People's spiritual activity.

May I recommend to my esteemed comrades and colleagues that they take every advantage of those conditions that will permit our writers to work and produce and to observe every nook and cranny of our national geographic sphere as they live the life of the people. Material conditions will always be created to the extent that it is possible, until such time as we can turn writers and artists in general into authentic professionals of culture, linked to socio-political realities.

By the same token, I would hope that by bringing about these conditions we will aid in the formation of an Angolan literature that encompasses political circumstances and, especially, the very life of the people.

Once again, I wish to direct my most sincere congratulations to all those who take office today.

**THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES! VICTORY IS CERTAIN**

---

<sup>1</sup>These speeches were translated by Professor Russell Hamilton, Department of Portuguese, University of Minnesota. The editorial board thanks Professor Gerald Bender, University of Southern California, for making them available to *Ufahamu*. They were first published as *Cadernos 20* and are reprinted here with the permission of the Angolan Writers' Union.

<sup>2</sup> A speech by Comrade President Agostinho Neto on 24 November 1977 on the occasion of the inauguration of the president of the General Assembly of the Angolan Writers' Union.

<sup>3</sup> Words spoken by Comrade President Agostinho Neto during the formal session in proclamation of the Angolan Writers' Union on 10 December 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Text of a speech by Comrade Agostinho Neto, president of the MPLA-Workers' party and of the People's Republic of Angola and president of the board of the General Assembly of the Angolan Writers' Union. The address was delivered on 8 January 1979 on the occasion of the investiture of the governing body of the Angolan Writers' Union for the biennium 1979/1980.