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CULTURAL ALIENATION

"CYPRIOTS DEFEND THEIR DIALECT LIKE AJAXES"

by A.P.

The oppression of the Cypriot language/dialect or the process of nativization of the Cypriots

The nativization of the Cypriots

To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization...

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.

Frantz Fanon, Black skins, white masks

"Cypriots defend their dialect like Ajaxes" said with obvious frustration from Cypriot state television (and he was talking to Cypriots of course) a sympathetic Hellenic-centric linguist who wasted years trying to Hellenise Cypriot toponyms. For reasons that remain unfathomable (unless Neo-Cypriots also reached Anafotia and Latsia), the Cypriots damaged the signs that instead of Anafotia read Anafotida and instead of Latsia, Lakka (in Greek, that is). This underground resistance of the Cypriots to the "Koine Modern Greek" deserves to be interpreted, especially at a time when the language issue is coming back.

The language issue comes up regularly in Cyprus. Until the 1950s the main dimension of this controversy took the form of the demotion of the Cypriot dialect to the level of the "jungle" - of primary material. On the one hand, the Cypriot dialect was presented as genuine ancient Greek because of the survival of words and expressions from Homer's time. On the other hand, however, the educational system and the majority of intellectuals stressed that Cypriots had to learn to speak the Athenian version of the Greek language. The Cypriot dialect was proof that Cypriots were Greeks - now they could forget it and learn to speak the 'correct' modern Greek common tongue. In other words, the Cypriot dialect was the language of the uneducated natives whom the modern Greek nation had to civilize, to make human.

Thus a relationship of power was created between the official Athenian dialect/language and the Cypriot dialect. The Cypriots, as the folk tradition of the *piitarides* [folk poets] and *tsiattista* [oral poems] testifies, had no problem in expressing themselves. Not only could they express themselves

but, as has been observed, the very structure of the dialect had a musicality that made Cypriots develop a rich tradition of folk poetic speech (both written and spoken). The Cypriot dialect in this sense is the living memory of the history of Cyprus. The wealth of foreign words (Arabic, Latin, Greek, Turkish, English) that it possesses is the historical memory of the cultures that have passed through Cyprus. In this language, which the Cypriots developed on their own, they were able to express themselves and create.

Koine Modern Greek, on the contrary, was created by the intellectuals of Athens as a mechanism for homogenizing the population of the Greek state created after 1821. The aim of this language was ideological and political. It was consciously intended to eliminate the Arvanitic, Aromanian (Vlach) dialects spoken by the Greeks of mainland Greece and to condemn to decline the Greek dialects of the islands of the Eastern Mediterranean (Corfu, Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus, etc.) and other parts of the region.

“In order to establish Modern Greek as the superior language, all other dialects and local cultures had to be transformed into raw material... historical memory had to disappear”.

The official language of Athens (despite the conflicts between katharevousa and demotic) had behind it the state apparatus of Athens and the prestige of the “imaginary community” of the Greek nation. So to speak the Koine Modern Greek meant to be legitimate to the dictates of the national centre but also the promise that you would be “Greek”. A superior human, that is.

In order to establish Modern Greek as the superior language, all dialects and local cultures had to be transformed into “raw materials”, into raw material, which the intellectuals of Athens would use to create the mythology of the Greek nation. In other words, the memory of the local populations had to disappear. They now had to see themselves as poor relatives / as the periphery of the national centre. The fact that e.g. Kolokotronis spoke Vlach, that Botsaris did not know any Greek dialect, that the Souliotes, the people of Hydra and Spetses spoke Arvanitic, that many Greek Macedonian gladiators spoke the Slavic dialect of Macedonia, was completely erased from historical memory. The fact that in Cyprus other cultures besides the supposed Greek one flourished had to be forgotten.

The local populations were thus culturally transformed into “colonized” natives. Just as the European Colonialists recognized that Africans and Asians were human, but not complete, and thus had to be civilized - in the same manner the national center recognized Greeks from Moldavia to Cappadocia. But these “potential Greeks” had to be educated, to forget what they knew, to learn the new language, the new education. Only then would they become complete people, that is, Greeks.

National Colonialism and the Authority of Language

The process of alienating people from their immediate experience, the destruction of local creation was analogous to that of Colonialism as described by Fanon, Malcolm X and other anti-colonial revolutionaries. With one essential difference. This is a relatively unrecognized phenomenon - **National Colonialism**. The imposition of the culture of the state (the capital) on the province. Since

the 1960s, the awareness of this phenomenon led to various decentralization-devolution movements that sometimes resulted in the registration of local dialects (Occitania-France) and the recognition of bilingualism in dialect-formal language relations (USA).

The long-term effects of this power relation between the official language of the state and the dialect were to entrench power relations in society itself. The teacher, the priest, the civil servant, the politician, the journalist, the intellectual is separated from the mass of uneducated "peasants" by the use of the language of the national centre. You rose in the social hierarchy to the extent that you spoke "good Greek".

The equation until 74 was: The use of "Koine Modern Greek" meant you were educated, upper class, a human of authority. The use of the Cypriot dialect, on the contrary, meant vulgarity, underdevelopment, backwardness.

Thousands of years of history were and are being levelled in the classrooms by banning the Cypriot dialect. And of course the majority was condemned to silence. In the 1950s, Nikos Kranidiotis in a commentary in *Kypriaka Grammata* [Cyprian Letters] observed this awkward silence of the students, the fact that they still remained natives.

The Cypriot dialect has the tendency that the Helleno-centrics dislike so much - the tendency to mix.

"One of the most serious intellectual weaknesses of our young people is **linguistic deficiency**. Not only our uneducated but also our educated youth encounter insurmountable difficulties, especially in the spoken word, whose natural rapid rhythm requires a rich linguistic treasury and wide linguistic training. **Linguistically heterogeneous** and uneven full stops, phrases disjointed, sentences incoherent, **unhellenic expressions**, words that are not meant literally, adjectives faded, **vocabulary poor, syntax loose**, all together have created **a meagre discourse without without roundness, without precision**, without grace, in which the rough struggle and the clumsy - most of the times - effort to overcome successive expressive difficulties can be seen".

And these were written at the time of the EOKA struggle, for today's supposed "golden youth". On the contrary, 200 years ago, when Cypriots had not yet been "nativised" and their language had not yet taken a back seat, Monk Barsky found them completely different: **"Almost everyone in Cyprus is quick in perception and eloquent in speech."**

Language, education and authority:

The oppression of dialects

All students who speak a national language variant other than the school language are subjected to the brutal condemnation of their mother tongue at their first language lesson, once they are in the classroom. The entire semantic potential, which they possess and thanks to which they have been able to communicate wonderfully with their environment up to that moment, is relegated by the teacher to the category of error ('that's not right'),

poor quality ('say it better') and non-language ('that's not what it's called'). This condemnation of his/her mother tongue is for the student a sudden and unjust questioning of his/her ability to handle language and all its intricacies with ease and creativity, it is a denial of his/her undeniable ability to mean and communicate at all levels, from the expression of needs and desires to the delivery, to the transmission of information and expression at the abstract level of imagination.

Once in the new environment of the school, the student speaker of a (local or social) dialect learns from the teacher that s/he cannot speak, instead of being informed that besides his/her own language there is another variant of the school language, which s/he must learn, because it is more suitable for school and formal communication conditions, and therefore necessary for educational success, but also for social advancement. Instead of this information, which paves the way to the learning of the school language by all students without exception, the teacher, unwittingly and because of language myths, does something extremely violent and absurd; he or she challenges the students' mastery of the language. A logical consequence is what happens daily and systematically in all schools, students self-censor themselves, stop speaking in the classroom and instead of expressing themselves spontaneously, they search each time for what the teacher's accepted formulation would be. Thus, they usually babble like speechless beings, hesitate and start again, and limit themselves imitatively to the ready-made formulations of the textbook. In the classroom, students become mute, while they regain all natural comfort in creative speech once they are outside the school setting and the heavy linguistic censorship of the school.

Anna Frangondaki, "Language and ideology"

Forms of Resistance: political and cultural autonomy

In the 1950s, however, there was a revival of interest in the written and spoken language of the Cypriot dialect. Beyond folklore, a series of articles by Tefkros Anthias in *Haravgi* in the late 50s began a small shift in the reappraisal of the Cypriot dialect. During Independence the progressive realisation among Cypriots that they could live without being a province of the national centre certainly gave a boost to the preservation of the Cypriot dialect in some ghettos. From 1960 to 74, however, the Ministry of Education and the army (the mechanisms by which the Greek state implanted its Greek national identity and language) remained in the hands of the Greek embassy. Thus the ridicule of the Cypriot dialect and the inferiority complex of the Cypriots continued. The language was the mechanism through which Athens insisted on submitting to the Cypriots that they were poor natives without culture in the face of the supposed greatness of the Neo-Hellenic Nation. However, the discontent of the Cypriots with the constant interventions of the Athenian state, with the division that existed in Cyprus from 64 to 67, led to the development of what Attalides calls "Cypriot consciousness". A phenomenon articulated in the phrase "Cyprus for Cypriots". The phrase appeared as a slogan on the walls and the development of Cypriot consciousness among Cypriots was one of the charges against Makarios in the period 72-74. After 74, the underground Cypro-centric tendencies appeared more forcefully and openly. The relationship between Cypriot consciousness and the dialect, however, was not direct. The main peak of Cypriot consciousness until recently was to a large extent the political demand for the complete independence of Cyprus. Only on a secondary level did this "'consciousness" emphasise the need for cultural dialogue (not just coexistence) with the Turkish Cypriots. In fact, the Neo- Cypriots of the 1970s remained prisoners of the "nativisation"

imposed on them by the national colonialism of the "motherland" state. Only towards the end of the 70s and beginning of the 80s, with the publication of the 'Cypriot History' by K. Graikos, did the process of cultural self-identification of the Cypriot consciousness begin. It is in this context that some articles on the ghettoization and suppression of the Cypriot dialect appeared. Certainly a milestone for such a problematic is the article by Mr. Leontiou, excerpts of which we publish below. Mr Leontiou does not include his text in the effort of cultural self-identification. At one point in his article, in fact, he clearly states that he does not consider the politicization of language as a wise action. The article is a landmark, however, because it uses a modern scientific approach to analyse the self-ridicule, self-deprecation and general schizophrenia that Cypriots experience when they are forced to regard the living language they speak as inferior. He stresses at the outset the vagueness of the distinction between language and dialect and concludes with a more general reference to the oppression of diversity by the homogeneous language of nations.



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