

African socialism

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CRUCIAL to the understanding of contemporary political trends in the African continent are the ways that different African states seek, in the era of post-colonialism, to transform their societies.

One of the most important of these strategies of transformation is the ideology of African socialism which has become the official ideology of such countries as Tanzania, Zambia, Senegal and Kenya. It is the purpose of this article to analyse this ideology and to assess its relevance in current African political change.

The first important feature of African socialism is that it has largely grown up as a means of resisting the intrusion of Marxism into the African continent. This may possibly surprise many people in South Africa where there has been a tendency to equate "socialism" with "communism" but in actual practice African socialists have rejected the tenets of communism as merely another form of colonialism.

Marx, after all, was a western thinker and the Soviet Union is a European power: there is thus no inherent reason why African states should seek to thrust off one type of colonialism to merely take on another.

In addition, the leaders of the independent nations in Africa have been influenced, to a very considerable extent, by the values of the former colonial powers: President Senghor of Senegal is a French-speaking Roman Catholic; President Nyerere of Tanzania is also a Catholic with a degree from Edinburgh University, while President Kaunda of Zambia, educated at a mission school, is also a Christian with "humanist" inclinations. None of these men can, in the slightest way, be described as "communists" or as having communist leanings.

African socialism, therefore, should be seen as rather an indigenous attempt by various African leaders to develop a distinctly "African" path of economic and political development. While colonialism has obviously left an indelible mark on their societies, it is now thought that a return should be made to traditional African values of the era before the advent of colonialism in the last quarter of the 19th century.

This has been especially the view of Nyerere of Tanzania who has developed the concept of "Ujamaa" socialism, a term borrowed from Swahili, as a means of transforming Tanzanian society. The emphasis here is on the traditional role of the village and the rural community in African life which is summed up by "Ujamaa" or "familyhood". This type of community, Nye-

rere says, is really socialist and can thus be upheld as the model of development to be impressed on people's minds:

"Socialism — like democracy — is an attitude of mind. In a socialist society it is the socialist attitude of mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern, which is needed to ensure that the people care for each other's welfare". (1)

This view of socialism is very different to Marxist doctrine where socialism is only seen as capable of being attained through class struggle and the victory of the exploited classes — the workers and the peasants — over the exploiting classes of landlords and capitalists.

Nyerere does not deny the actual existence of classes in society but he argues that these classes exist more through social outlook than through objective social conditions:

"Destitute people can be potential capitalists — exploiters of their fellow human beings. A millionaire can equally well be a socialist; he may value his wealth only because it can be used in the service of his fellow men. But the man who uses wealth for the purpose of dominating any of his fellows is a capitalist". (2)

"Ujamaa" socialism as a consequence is very much concerned with the transformation of people's attitudes in Tanzania.

To this extent, it can be compared with Maoist ideology in China where, through repeated "cultural revolutions", the Chinese peasantry has been exhorted to abandon bourgeois and individualist values in favour of communism. But here, I think, the analogy ends.

Nyerere has sought to impose on the Tanzanian peasantry a strategy of "Ujamaa" villages whereby the peasantry, through a system of co-operatives, will attain a higher agricultural output.

In 1967, he announced the famous "Arusha Declaration" which sought a policy of "self-reliance". It was recognised that Tanzania could not rely on grants of aid from Western countries in order to develop her economy: this aid was neither predictable nor desirable since it produced a dependent mentality.

The only strategy that was open to Tanzania was to mobilise what resources she already had and to obtain a higher output through the exertions of her populace. As a result, therefore, the Arusha Declaration saw Tanzania as involved

"in a war against poverty and oppression" (3) and a heavy emphasis was laid on hard work.

"Let us go to the villages", the Declaration went on "and talk to our people and see whether or not it is possible for them to work harder" (4). This was what, in fact, Nyerere has tended to do and in 1967 he went on a famous march through the countryside in an attempt to mobilise the peasantry to newer feats of economic achievement.

This stress in African socialism on the role of hard work is another distinguishing feature. There is almost a puritan obsession with the moral value of work which is quite unlike the welfare state type of socialism in the West. Though Nyerere and Kaunda have always been quite friendly to the Labour Party of Harold Wilson in Britain (in 1964 they stayed up late with ears glued to the radio listening to the election results when Harold Wilson defeated the Tories under Sir Alec Douglas-Home), there, again, the analogy ends.

None of the African states at present can possibly afford to finance a welfare state and they are not, in fact, trying to espouse that kind of socialism. Their objectives can rather be seen as trying to *avoid* many of the mistakes of contemporary industrialised societies and to seek some completely different way of economic development.

In this respect, the ideas of President Leopold Senghor of Senegal are very interesting. Senghor has been very much influenced by French metropolitan culture: in the 1930s he studied in Paris where, together with other alienated Black intellectuals, he helped form the concept of "negritude" as a means of maintaining a Black identity in a culture where it looked like being completely swallowed (as Sartre was to say, negritude was a kind of "anti-racist racism").

Senghor was also influenced by Marxist ideas in a period (the 1930s) where leftist ideas were growing in their influence in the struggle against fascism. But he absorbed Marxism only to reject it.

African societies, he said, do not necessarily have to go through the same kind of class conflict as European societies have done. Like Nyerere, Senghor also stresses the traditional communal values in what he calls "Negro-African Civilisation" which lead to the formation of a distinct culture that can transcend class divisions. This means that Marxism cannot fully interpret African realities:

"West African realities are those of underdeveloped countries — peasant countries here, cattle countries there — once feudalistic, but traditionally classless and with no wage earning sector. They are community countries where the group holds priority over the individual; they are especially, religious countries, unselfish countries, where

money is not king. Though dialectical materialism can help in analysing our societies, it cannot fully interpret them". (5)

This has led Senghor to develop a socialist ideology that pays obeisance to traditional African values.

In his poetry, Senghor has sought to define these values of "mother Africa". Here the consumer values of Western capitalism are rejected since they lead to the alienation of the individual from his surrounding society (Senghor spent a period in New York where he felt this especially strongly). The quest is, rather, for a return to the traditional and earthy values of rural life personified in his poem to the "Black Woman":

"Naked woman, black woman
Clothed with your colour which is life, with
your form which is beauty!
In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness
of your hands was laid over my eyes
And now, high up on the sun-baked pass, at
the heart of summer, at the heart of noon,
I come upon you, my Promised Land,
And your beauty strikes me to the heart like
the flash of an eagle" (6)

This stress on "Blackness" and "Negritude" has always played a vital role in Senghor's thought in a period when ideas on "black consciousness" did not really exist. As such, Senghor has sought, as President of Senegal, to make a major contribution to the development of African culture: Dakar, the capital, for example, has been the mecca for a number of African artists and writers as well as various arts and film festivals.

In the years after independence in 1960, however, Senghor has also been confronted with the problems of economic development and there has been an increasing emphasis on "technicity" and the values of technology. In some ways, this can be seen as a shift from his earlier views and, indeed, an original strategy of "animation" in Senegal, which would mobilise the masses in Senegal on lines similar to "Ujamaa" socialism, has been halted.

The result has been, in fact, a depoliticisation of development in Senegal and the system has become increasingly bureaucratised through such organisations as the *Centres Regionaux pour le Developpement* (CRAD) and the *Centres for Rural Expansion* (CER) which have gradually taken on a life of their own. Whether there will be an eventual unfreezing and a return to rural mobilisation remains to be seen, but so far Senghor's strategy has not been so successful in its emphasis on African socialism as Nyerere's.

The failure, by and large, of Senghor's strategy also raises certain general questions on the very nature of African socialism. It seems, in fact, to be increasingly confronted with the more radical ideas of the Marxist left which, of course, have

been given a tremendous boost by the Frelimo victory in Mozambique.

Perhaps the central weakness of African socialism is its inability to recognise the existence of classes in African society. It has come to be recognised by many observers and analysts of the African scene that independence for African states since the early 1960s has not brought all the fruits that were expected.

When the initial euphoria of independence had worn off, it was realised that the economics of most African states were still largely in foreign hands; hence the charge by Nkrumah of "neo-colonialism", a term that has now entered general usage. Any successful strategy for economic development, therefore, had to confront the structures that maintained neo-colonial domination.

It is in this respect that we must therefore judge African socialism for the most part a failure. For these neo-colonial structures depend on the maintenance of certain classes which extract profits from the economy and repatriate them to overseas investors. In Kenya, for example, the overseas control of many sectors of the economy, like manufacturing has increased since independence.

The response of African socialism to this challenge has been largely a populist one: the people are seen as an homogenous unit and development has been undertaken in an organic sense, thus perpetuating the very classes that inhibit economic development.

Until a more radical strategy is evolved, and there are now signs of this in the case of Tanzania, African socialism is probably doomed to repeat the mistakes of other societies in other continents; industrialisation and economic development will bring problems of class conflict, pollution and rural-urban disparities that may in only a very long-run-sense lead to a net improvement in the human condition.

1. *J Nyerere — Ujamaa, Essays on Socialism — OUP Eastern Africa, 1968, p. 1.*
2. *Nyerere, op cit, p. 1.*
3. *The Arusha Declaration — 5 February 1967.*
4. *op cit.*
5. *Leopold Sedar Senghor — On African Socialism — New York, Frederick A Praeger, 1964, p. 77.*
6. *In John Reed and Clive Wake (eds) — Senghor, Prose and Poetry — London, OUP, p 105.*



VIEWPOINT

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