



## REALITY ON AFRICA

In this issue **Reality** begins a series of articles on African politics in which the authors will try to analyze the roots of politics in social and economic processes. There is so much loose talk about what 'experience in Africa' is supposed to 'prove' and so little understanding of what the problems are that are being addressed, of what options are available, and of what resources are to hand for pursuing social options. Moreover, the nature of conflict between groups about policy options and about the control of resources is so often obscure. And while pointing to 'tribalism' and 'corruption' as explanations may not be incorrect, it is usually not very illuminating. There are surely deeper layers of explanation which need to be unearthed. At least, if it turns out that the in-depth excavations themselves produce murky results, the added detail and the contextual descriptions produced ought to make behaviour appear more intelligible than it often does. Thus an attempt to analyze how 'tribal groups', 'classes', and 'regional populations' are related in Kenya (say) may bog down into serious conceptual and theoretical problems, but the attempt is likely to take one well beyond 'Kikuyu versus Luo' or 'capitalism in Africa'.

Of course all of this is easier to hope for than to produce. Scholars with detailed information are busy, and are accustomed to wider canvasses than we can offer here. In the nature of things deep excavations do not fit easily into short, pithy articles. However, we have been able to assemble some writers who are willing to start the series and we hope very much that others will come forward and offer to discuss countries they know well, or offer to redo countries or themes that have not been discussed satisfactorily.

We begin with a piece by Peter Wickins of the Department of Economic History at the University of Cape Town about some of the economic background to African experience in the last two decades. Dr. Wickins has recently published **An Economic History of Africa from the Earliest Times to Partition** (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1981), and his astringent comments are informed with scholarship. He opens up a series of issues which we hope will receive further treatment as the series develops.

*Norman Bromberger*

## AFRICA'S ECONOMIC PROSPECTS ON THE RESUMPTION OF INDEPENDENCE: Constraints Inherited and Acquired.

by Peter Wickins

The decolonisation of Africa was compressed for the most part within half a dozen years. Such was the flamboyance, ambition and eloquence of Kwame Nkrumah that the independence of the Gold Coast (1957) is embedded in public memory as the opening of the floodgate. In fact this was not so. The year before colonial Gold Coast became the new state of Ghana, the French terminated their protectorate over Tunisia and Morocco and the British withdrew from the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. These, of course, were part of the Arab or arabised north, and their recovery of self-rule had been anticipated by the ending of British control of Egypt, a gradual process that began with the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 and reached completion under nationalist pressure in 1954. Libya was emancipated as early as 1951. By 1956 only Algeria among the Muslim nations remained in foreign hands, whose grip, however, was being bloodily contested in a conflict that was technically a civil war since the territory was administered as part of metropolitan France. Yet Ghana, though not the earliest beneficiary of European surrender of power, was the first black African state to be decolonised, apart from Ethiopia, which, as the last of the European conquests in Africa and the soonest liberated, experienced only five years of colonial rule.

The course of events that started with Ghana was virtually finished by 1961. After that there remained only the hard cases, countries with substantial European populations — the Rhodesias (and their adjunct, Nyasaland), Kenya and South-West Africa — or countries with other pronounced racial or tribal divisions — Uganda and Zanzibar — or countries of small area or sparse population and of doubtful viability — the Gambia and the southern African protectorates. Then there were the colonies of Portugal, which displayed not the slightest intention of relinquishing them. The less intractable of these difficult problems were solved in the 1960's, leaving the really tough nuts to be cracked in the 1970's, notably the Portuguese territories and Southern Rhodesia. Now all that is left is Namibia, if South Africa itself is excluded from the category of colonial territories on the grounds of its substantial population of European descent, its three centuries' history of white settlement and its seventy odd years of self-government.

The newly-independent states of Africa — even the oldest still little more than a quarter of a century old — can be classified in more than one way for purposes of generalisation about their economic prospects at the dawn of independence. One way would be to differentiate between

those which began their new lives with a large European population and those which did not. Since, however, the rapid reduction of that group, or at least the substitution of temporary expatriate experts for permanently resident whites, was characteristic of the post-colonial developments in former colonies of European settlement, this is not an important source of difference in economic performance. It is more useful to distinguish the Arabised north from black sub-Saharan Africa, not so much for cultural or racial reasons as on grounds of historical continuity. The Arab countries of the Mediterranean basin have a history of Muslim states lasting well beyond a millennium and, indeed, Egypt has experienced a history in which the Arab conquest itself was only one of a series of foreign dominations that began with the Hyksos in the 2nd millennium B.C. In such a perspective of time European rule was but a fleeting phase, scarcely more than a century even in the case of Algeria and much shorter in that of the rest of the north. Ottoman imperialism lasted a great deal longer. Thus, despite its prolonged and untypical struggle for independence, Algeria does not differ as much from the other Arab countries as they all differ from one another for quite separate reasons (e.g. in their political systems.) In contrast, the African states south of the desert were almost entirely the artificial creation of the clashes and compromises of European powers. Ethnic groups — the Somalis were a striking, but by no means unique, example — found themselves dispersed between two, or even among several, European colonies. So it was that, although there had evolved in pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. in West Africa, especially in the northern savanna) some powerful and efficient polities, there was no direct descent from them to new African nations. Some of the indigenous states were incorporated as administrative units into the European colonies subsequently endowed with nationhood (e.g. the emirates of Northern Nigeria and the kingdom of Buganda in Uganda) and a few retained a shadowy existence through the British practice of indirect rule, but their vitality had left them, submerged in the new heterogeneous groupings.

The rawness of their statehood had two consequences for African states. One, the lesser, was that they were tempted to establish an identity by a spurious or at least doubtful link with an earlier, long vanished, empire: the Gold Coast with Ghana, Southern Rhodesia with Zimbabwe and Dahomey with Benin. In default of such pretensions, they saw advantage in demonstrating national status through expensive and sometimes vainglorious symbols of state prestige — auditoria for international conferences, air lines, extensive diplomatic representation and armed forces with the latest weapons. The more important consequence was that they were compelled to grapple with the problem — part of their colonial legacy — of welding into a single nation different tribes, often speaking different languages. Tribalism or regionalism is certainly not a problem confined to Africa, but it was presented in a particularly acute form. Europe itself, whose international and intranational conflicts (unlike Africa's) were not a sudden creation, but the product of centuries, has been far from successful in achieving harmony. Even the relationship between English and Scots remains delicate, while that between the Scotch Irish and the Celtic Irish is positively murderous. On the continent the Basques demand self-determination, the Walloons and the Flemings squabble, the Croats, Serbs and Yugoslav Albanians are held together in an unstable

federation, and so forth. In many an African state tribes with a long tradition of mutual hostility were thrown precipitately into each other's arms, with sometimes the former dominant people (the Matabele, the Asante, the Baganda, the Watusi, etc.) cast in the subordinate role, and the problem of tribal dispute might well be aggravated by neighbourhood irredentism. If the colonial inheritance included any compensation, it was the gift of a lingua franca, French, English or Portuguese.

Among meretricious attempts at asserting national self-importance there was an objective that had more worthy, though mixed, motives. This was economic development, regarded as the second phase of progress towards true independence, as an exercise in state-building and as a means of improving living standards in conditions of rapid population growth. Development was not thought of simply as growth of national income or even as a rising per capita income. There was a strongly stated bias towards egalitarianism. The developed society was one without a gulf between rich and poor. Few African leaders, even those dedicated to the pursuit of personal enrichment in an economic free-for-all, could resist laying claim to socialist principles.

Of the brands of socialism affected with more or less genuine commitment one was indigenous, or purported to be. This was African socialism, which was supposed to afford a route to justice through the adaptation of traditional African institutions to the modern world. Like the Russian Narodniks of the 19th century, the African socialists looked forward to development that would escape the hardships of capitalist industrialisation and the patent injustices of the free market economy. Unfortunately the content of their ideology was ill-defined and too often ill-founded. It was as authentic as the Scottish tartans designed after the decline of the clan system had set in or as public notices in Gaelic in the Irish Republic. Sometimes it amounted to little more than the changing of place-names bestowed by European colonisers on towns that had never existed before annexation or of adopting fanciful dress that had little to do with the sartorial austerities of the mass of people before the introduction of European or Arab dress.

The most persistent and determined of the African socialists was the leader of Tanganyika (in 1964 rather loosely united with Zanzibar as Tanzania), Julius Nyerere. What his socialism amounted to was an amalgamation of the village community, purified of the insidious corruption of individualism and modernised in its techniques, and state appropriation of the alien part of the economy, the expatriate mining, industrial, commercial and financial enterprises. The "traditional" and "modern" sectors of the "dual economy" were in effect to be frozen rather than gradually integrated as envisaged by western economists, such as Sir Arthur Lewis, who anticipated the withering away of the "traditional" sector. African socialism was not a recipe for development or even just plain growth. Its aim was wholly admirable, to preserve all that was best in autochthonous economic arrangements. It was, however, an attempt to arrest a process set in motion by the inexorable movement of Africa into the world economy; even an attempt to put the clock back. Pre-colonial African agriculture, the overwhelmingly dominant economic activity, was characterised by inalienable family land-holding, family cultivation and unhampered access to new land. Allocation of land was within the gift of the tribal

authorities, but continued use guaranteed tenure. Faced by a constant threat of hunger posed by natural disaster, the prevailing economic concern was risk-sharing. Social obligations that were onerous, but also protective because duties were reciprocal, equalised the endeavour and spread the misery of harvest failure or rewards of success. All were entitled to land as their birthright and, though strangers could be accommodated on unused land, its sale or purchase had no place in law or custom. The stress upon the community and effacement of the individual, however, could not survive the spread of the money economy or the growth of population, neither of which originated with colonial rule, though both were accelerated by it.

In those parts of sub-Saharan Africa with early contacts with market forces — West Africa and South Africa — erosion of the pristine virtues of African communism predated conquest. Growing population led to pressure upon land, subdivision of holdings, over-exploitation and even landlessness; the increasing use of money and the emergence of opportunities to earn it (through the production of cash crops or through wage labour) subverted communal solidarity and encouraged individualism. Periodic allocation of new land upon the exhaustion of old ceased to be possible as all land was taken up. Family or even individual attachment to particular pieces of land weakened the sentiment of tribal ownership, developed (or degenerated) into family or individual aggrandisement and undermined communal obligations. A process analogous to land alienation took shape in some places. No society, however highly it values the virtue of sharing, can keep landlessness and economic and social differentiation at bay for ever. When land ceases to be freely available and becomes an avenue to affluence and status, inequality results. To the extent that African socialism sought to preserve the levelling effects of traditional arrangements when the conditions that made them possible, notably abundant land, were disappearing, it was a reactionary force, however praiseworthy in motive. In so far as it was effective it thwarted the development of a prosperous smallholding peasant class producing the surplus urgently needed for feeding a growing urban population and earning foreign exchange. Such a peasantry emerged in West Africa from the end of the 19th century, cultivating cocoa, groundnuts and oil palms. Whether such a class exhibits desirable social characteristics is a matter of controversy. What is irrefutable is that its destruction (as in Stalinist Russia) or its victimisation (as in Amin's Uganda) or its frustration (as in Nyerere's Tanania) has everywhere had a profoundly damaging effect upon agricultural output and efficiency.

There is little evidence that the social customs and arrangements native to Africa represent a chronic and inescapable constraint upon the economic growth rendered essential by population increase and urbanisation. Like comparable social institutions in the European past, they are open to adjustment, however slow to begin with. Obligation to kith and kin are frequently said to inhibit those forces that have promoted the expansion of the developed economies. The family is commonly held to be the culprit in the stunting of entrepreneurship and the stifling of individual initiative because the rewards of enterprise have to be shared. Yet African history, pre-colonial and since, is replete with examples of successful businessmen, and the close-knit family can be as capable of mobilising capital for new undertakings as responsible for dispersing it amongst its

members. More pertinent is that Africa in its quest for economic growth entered the struggle hampered by a culture that, whatever its other qualities, did not equip it for an economy based upon science and a constantly advancing technology. In agriculture, metallurgy and craft manufacture the pre-colonial achievements of Africa were impressive. None the less, there was a wide technological gap between it and Europe even at the time of the first contacts between sub-Saharan Africa and Portuguese expeditions in the 15th century. African ignorance of, unfamiliarity with or indifference to the wheel (whatever the explanation may be) has no doubt been laboured but it remains a fact of great significance. The wheel is, after all, the foundation of mechanical engineering, just as mathematics, another area in which sub-Saharan Africa made only slight progress, is the foundation of science. Indeed, it was only in Christian Ethiopia and its predecessors and the islamised parts of Africa that language was even committed to writing. Modern science and technology are approachable only through a foreign language, mostly English or French, and alien ways of thought. It would be absurd to suggest that traditional African behaviour was irrational. It was rather that explanations for natural phenomena (e.g. malice as a cause of disaster) led inquiry into a cul-de-sac.

Cultural differences are no doubt partly responsible for the dearth at the time of independence of skilled technicians at all levels, from motor mechanics to engineers of every sort, resulting in a reliance upon expatriate skills. Only medicine among the sciences has enjoyed popularity with the African educated, a profession which may well be considered an art as much as a science and to which (in its pharmaceutical aspect) Africa itself had a contribution to make. Frequently the paucity of trained personnel has been attributed to the failings of colonial education, mission and government, not only grudging, but also the wrong sort, academic not vocational, literary not scientific. It is arguable that, whatever colonial shortcomings were, the propensity of the élite to seek the profits of politics, administration and the law must furnish at least part of the explanation for the shortage of scientists, artisans and managers. On the other hand, the very process of decolonisation and africanisation and the enlargement of the public sector (and all the patronage that went with it) in the colonies made politics and administration (not to say the army) much more fruitful than commerce or industry.

The value or worthlessness of the colonial legacy is a contentious issue that will never be resolved. Yet to compile a dispassionate balance of advantage that recognises the benefits that came from the expansion of trade, the construction of towns and railways, etc. which occurred during the colonial period, it is not necessary to accept the morality of colonialism or to dispute the plundering and oppression that are an inevitable feature of foreign domination. Growth of population itself indicates a rising life expectancy. If anything, cynical as such an argument might appear, colonial administration was rather too successful in reducing mortality by its provision of hospitals, clinics, health education and medicines. Rapid population expansion is almost universally regarded as a curse, swallowing up the gains of improved productivity as soon as they are made, leaving everyone at the same level of prosperity as before. However, the demographic problem is not a simple one and there was a time when the British industrial revolution of the 18th century was

attributed to population growth. The conventional wisdom now is that 18th and 19th century Europe was much more favourably placed than the modern developing countries, with a population increase altogether more modest and with job creation in the early stages of industrialisation much cheaper.

The cost-benefit analysis of colonisation remains an emotive subject, and there are those who will never admit that colonial rule showed even the slightest redeeming feature. More than that, such harsh critics, who, contrary to common experience, see men and events as either wholly good or wholly bad and who pass moral judgments now fashionable upon the behaviour of those who accepted in good faith a rather different code of conduct, are not content with an implacable condemnation of colonial government, but regard that as simply a stage in a continuing process of exploitation. Colonial domination was followed by neo-colonialism – robbery through unequal exchange in trade, selfish monopolisation of scientific and technological information and, above all, manipulation of developing countries by all-powerful multi-national companies. These strictures no doubt have some justification. It could well be, however, that the curse of colonialism is not so much the damage it inflicted as its mere existence as a scapegoat for failure. "No memory is so deep and enduring," wrote J.K. Galbraith, himself by no means unsympathetic to Third World aspirations nor uncritical of the colonial record, "as that of colonial humiliation and injustice. But, it must also be added, nothing serves so well as an alibi. In the newly independent countries the colonial experience remains the prime excuse whenever something goes wrong. So, in this respect too, colonialism remains a lively source of myth. Once the myth was made by those who colonized. Now by those who were colonized." (The Age of Uncertainty, p.112.)

Muslim Africa resembles the rest of Africa both in blaming shortcomings on imperialism and in espousing a form of socialism – Arab socialism – as amorphous as the African variety. In other respects, however, the historical inheritance of Mediterranean Africa was different. As part of Islam the North African people use a language, spoken and written, that is one of the major *linguae francae* of the world. There was a time when it was Europe that trailed behind the Arab world in science and technology and, indeed, derived its knowledge of much of the scholarship of Graeco-Roman civilisation through Arabic sources. After, however, making a substantial contribution to the corpus of scientific knowledge and to technology, Arab culture turned in a different direction and its science atrophied, perhaps as early as the 12th century. Whatever the explanation for this – and religious fundamentalism is sometimes suggested – the gulf between the west and Islam widened in Europe's favour and the Arab countries are now only somewhat less dependent than sub-Saharan Africa on external technology. To religion also have been imputed other constraints upon economic development, such as the fatalism that is said to result from Muslim pre-destinarianism. The trouble with socio-religious explanations is that they are never of universal application. Calvinist doctrines of predestination are said to have contributed to the evolution of the Protestant work ethic, and yet the "poor whites" of South Africa were Calvinists. There has never yet been a convincing explanation of why modern economic development originated in western

Europe and was successfully imitated in Japan and why there remain large parts of the world which have been stubbornly resistant to it. Plenty of plausible partial explanations are available, stressing social structure, religious beliefs or natural endowment, but none is generally accepted, still less any "theory of economic history". So often arguments become tautological, e.g. Britain experienced rapid economic development in the late 18th century because it was already, by the standards of the time, highly developed.

The debate about the British industrial revolution (if there was such a thing) still exercises the ingenuity, and even the passions, of economic historians and there is little prospect of a consensus. At least now the "models" are only tentative. Twenty years ago they were more facile and confident. In its small way the economic history profession contributed to that false optimism of the early post-colonial period which bred much mistaken policy. In 1960 W.W. Rostow published his *Stages of Economic Growth*, a work of great influence. Central to his argument of an economic "take-off" (when the economy escapes from the shackles of "traditional society" into the empyrean heights of "self-sustaining growth") was the role of capital investment. The take-off, in fact, consisted in, was proved by, a dramatic increase in the share of national income allocated to capital formation. Thus the rôle of capital was crucial. Rostow, however, was merely looking into history for the verification of current economic theories. The renewed interest in long-term economic growth which preoccupied economists after the Second World War had solved for them (at least for the time) the problem of unemployment, led to the revival of the classical economists' emphasis upon the capital stock as the key variable. Growth models, such as the Harrod-Domar model and its variations, gave pride of place to capital. The foreign development economists who converged upon Africa in the immediate post-independence period envisaged a rapid acceleration of capital formation. Their plans made industrialisation their principal target, particularly the foundation of producers' goods industries, which required substantial application of capital and long gestation periods.

Capital for industrialisation may come from one or more of three sources. Industry may meet its needs from its own resources, but only once the initial investment has been made, and naturally only if it is profitable. In the absence of a self-financing industry capital can come only from foreign gifts or loans or from squeezing the consumption of those sections of the nation that have least ability to resist a depression of their living standards. Foreign capital was in fact made available on a generous scale, much of it in the form of outright grants or low-interest loans, but the results were meagre. The domestic source of capital was principally peasant cultivators, especially, of course, those who enjoyed an income that could be raided, and they were the ones who were often the chief earners of the foreign exchange that could be used for the import of capital goods. Loose definitions of investment, to include the white elephants of national self-importance, and a misplaced confidence in capital formation irrespective of any adequate return on investment, blighted early economic prospects. Foreign aid was blamed because it was insufficient or because it was really a hypocritical device to extort advantage for the self-styled donor. The earnings of cash crop producers, accumulated by marketing boards in times of high raw material and foodstuff

prices, were squandered, leaving the producers themselves without the means of investment or reserves in the event of price collapse.

The mania for producers' goods industries, the belief in the value of capital accumulation as the essence of the development formula, the conviction that it was right for one generation to suffer privation for the benefit of posterity and proper for the burden to be borne chiefly by those destined to have no place in the economy of the future, together with unbounded faith in comprehensive, centralised planning, all these notions found support in the enormous prestige of the Soviet Union, the champion of colonial emancipation and the proof positive of the efficacy of scientific planning and the necessity of restricting the consumption of the "unprogressive classes". In fact, the example of the U.S.S.R. was of little assistance. Five year plans proliferated, too often founded upon hopelessly inadequate statistical information and drawn up by foreign experts insensitive to local customs and prejudices, over-ambitious and dependent for implementation upon the goodwill, understanding and efficiency of a bureaucracy ill-equipped for the tasks thrust upon it and in process of rapid africanisation. The partial, pragmatic plans of the colonial authorities, going back to the Guggisberg ten year plan for the Gold Coast after the First World War, were despised as mere "shopping lists". It is true that some colonial planning served as a ghastly example of what could go awry with half-baked plans, such as the post-war groundnut scheme of Tanganyika. The lesson of misdirected

effort to achieve quick results was circumspection, not even greater ambition. The colonial experience of failure did not serve to raise doubts about the suitability of the Soviet example. On the contrary, the U.S.S.R. was the source of an even more disastrous error of judgment, an uncritical acceptance of "scientific socialism", with its class animosities and its assaults upon those very sectors of the economy that were producing the most wealth. Thus it was that Africa, emerging into an independence full of hope and promise, was badly served by both the economics of the west and the dogmatism of the east.

It is difficult to apportion responsibility for Africa's present economic backwardness between the constraints that originated in indigenous culture and those that were directly or indirectly the result of colonisation. The history of other parts of the world does not give much of a clue. Japan, able to ward off imperialism long enough to find its own road to economic power, adapted with conspicuous success, China, though subjected to humiliation and harrassment at the hands of imperialist states, also escaped partition, but did not adapt before first becoming a battleground for imported ideologies. How Africa would have proceeded if the partition had never occurred, is beyond the scope even of speculation. One has only the example of Ethiopia to go on, and that is too untypical (e.g in its landholding system) to be a guide. In economic history it is easier to pose questions than to find convincing answers. It is possible, however, that the questions are inappropriate. □

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