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African Socialism Revisited

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The term “socialism” has become a necessity in the platform diction and political writings of African leaders. It is a term which unites us in the recognition that the restoration of Africa’s humanist and egalitarian principles of society calls for socialism. All of us, therefore, even though pursuing widely contrasting policies in the task of reconstructing our various nation-states, still use “socialism” to describe our respective efforts. “The question must therefore be faced: What real meaning does the term retain in the context of contemporary African politics? I warned about this in my book *Consciencism* (London and New York, 1964, p. 105).

And yet, socialism in Africa today tends to lose its objective content in favour of a distracting terminology and in favour of a general confusion. Discussion centres more on the various conceivable types of socialism than upon the need for socialist development.

Some African political leaders and thinkers certainly use the term “socialism” as it should in my opinion be used: to describe a complex of social purposes and the consequential social and economic policies, organisational patterns, state structure, and ideologies which can lead to the attainment of those purposes. For such leaders, the aim is to remold African society in the socialist direction; to reconsider African society in such a manner that the humanism of traditional African life re-asserts itself in a modern technical community.

Consequently, socialism in Africa introduces a new social synthesis in which modern technology is reconciled with human values, in which the advanced technical society is realised without the staggering social malefactions and deep schisms of capitalist industrial society. For true economic and social development cannot be

promoted without the real socialisation of productive and distributive processes. Those African leaders who believe these principles are the socialists in Africa.

There are, however, other African political leaders and thinkers who use the term “socialism” because they believe that socialism would, in the words of Chandler Morse, “smooth the road to economic development”. It becomes necessary for them to employ the term in a “charismatic effort to rally support” for policies that do not really promote economic and social development. Those African leaders who believe these principles are supposed to be the “African socialists”.

It is interesting to recall that before the split in the Second International, Marxism was almost indistinguishable from social democracy. Indeed, the German Social Democratic Party was more or less the guardian of the doctrine of Marxism, and both Marx and Engels supported that Party. Lenin, too, became a member of the Social Democratic Party. After the break-up of the Second International, however, the meaning of the term “social democracy” altered, and it became possible to draw a real distinction between socialism and social democracy. A similar situation has arisen in Africa. Some years ago, African political leaders and writers used the term “African socialism” in order to label the concrete forms that socialism might assume in Africa. But the realities of the diverse and irreconcilable social, political, and economic policies being pursued by African states today have made the term “African socialism” meaningless and irrelevant. It appears to be much more closely associated with anthropology than with political economy. “African socialism” has now come to acquire some of its greatest publicists in Europe and North America precisely because of its predominant anthropological charm. Its foreign publicists include not only the surviving social democrats of Europe and North America, but other intellectuals and liberals who themselves are steeped in the ideology of social democracy.

It was no accident, let me add, that the 1962 Dakar Colloquium made such capital of “African socialism” but the uncertainties concerning the meaning and specific policies of “African socialism” have led some of us to abandon the term because it fails to express its original meaning and because it tends to obscure our fundamental socialist commitment.

Today, the phrase “African socialism” seems to espouse the view that the traditional African society was a classless society imbued with the spirit of humanism and to express a nostalgia for that spirit. Such a conception of socialism makes a fetish of the communal African society. But an idyllic, African classless society (in

which there were no rich and no poor) enjoying a drugged serenity is certainly a facile simplification; there is no historical or even anthropological evidence for any such society. I am afraid the realities of African society were somewhat more sordid.

All available evidence from the history of Africa up to the eve of the European colonisation, shows that African society was neither classless nor devoid of a social hierarchy. Feudalism existed in some parts of Africa before colonisation; and feudalism involves a deep and exploitative social stratification, founded on the ownership of land. It must also be noted that slavery existed in Africa before European colonisation, although the earlier European contact gave slavery in Africa some of its most vicious characteristics. The truth remains, however, that before colonisation, which became widespread in Africa only in the nineteenth century, Africans were prepared to sell, often for no more than thirty pieces of silver, fellow tribesmen and even members of the same “extended family” and clan. Colonialism deserves to be blamed for many evils in Africa, but surely it was not preceded by an African Golden Age or paradise. A return to the pre-colonial African society is evidently not worthy of the ingenuity and efforts of our people.

All this notwithstanding, one could still argue that the basic organisation of many African societies in different periods of history manifested a certain communalism and that the philosophy and humanist purposes behind that organisation are worthy of recapture. A community in which each saw his well-being in the welfare of the group certainly was praiseworthy, even if the manner in which the well-being of the group was pursued makes no contribution to our purposes. Thus, what socialist thought in Africa must recapture is not the structure of the “traditional African society” but its spirit, for the spirit of communalism is crystallised in its humanism and in its reconciliation of individual advancement with group welfare. Even if there is incomplete anthropological evidence to reconstruct the “traditional African society” with accuracy, we can still recapture the rich human values of that society. In short, an anthropological approach to the “traditional African society” is too much unproven; but a philosophical approach stands on much firmer ground and makes generalisation feasible.

One predicament in the anthropological approach is that there is some disparity of views concerning the manifestations of the “classlessness” of the “traditional African society”. While some hold that the society was based on the equality of its members, others hold that it contained a hierarchy and division of labour in which the hierarchy — and therefore power — was founded on spiritual and democratic values.. Of course, no society can be founded on the equality of its members although

societies are founded on egalitarianism, which is something quite different. Similarly, a classless society that at the same time rejoices in a hierarchy of power (as distinct from authority) must be accounted a marvel of socio-political finesse.

We know that the “traditional African society” was founded on principles of egalitarianism. In its actual workings, however, it had various shortcomings. Its humanist impulse, nevertheless, is something that continues to urge us towards our all-African socialist reconstruction. We postulate each man to be an end in himself, not merely a means; and we accept the necessity of guaranteeing each man equal opportunities for his development. The implications of this for socio-political practice have to be worked out scientifically, and the necessary social and economic policies pursued with resolution. Any meaningful humanism must begin from egalitarianism and must lead to objectively chosen policies for safeguarding and sustaining egalitarianism. Hence, socialism. Hence, also, scientific socialism.

A further difficulty that arises from the anthropological approach to socialism, or “African socialism”, is the glaring division between existing African societies and the communalistic society that was. I warned in my book *Consciencism* that “our society is not the old society, but a new society enlarged by Islamic and Euro-Christian influences”. This is a fact that any socio-economic policies must recognise and take into account. Yet the literature of “African socialism” comes close to suggesting that today’s African societies are communalistic. The two societies are not coterminous; and such an equation cannot be supported by any attentive observation. It is true that this disparity is acknowledged in some of the literature of “African socialism”; thus, my friend and colleague Julius Nyerere, in acknowledging the disequilibrium between what was and what is in terms of African societies, attributes the differences to the importations of European colonialism.

We know, of course, that the defeat of colonialism and even neo-colonialism will not result in the automatic disappearance of the imported patterns of thought and social organisation. For those patterns have taken root, and are in varying degree sociological features of our contemporary society. Nor will a simple return to the communalistic society of ancient Africa offer a solution either. To advocate a return, as it were, to the rock from which we were hewn is a charming thought, but we are faced with contemporary problems, which have arisen from political subjugation, economic exploitation, educational and social backwardness, increases in population, familiarity with the methods and products of industrialisation, modern agricultural techniques. These — as well as a host of other complexities — can be resolved by no mere communalistic society, however sophisticated, and anyone who

so advocates must be caught in insoluble dilemmas of the most excruciating kind. All available evidence from socio-political history discloses that such a return to a status quo ante is quite unexampled in the evolution of societies. There is, indeed, no theoretical or historical reason to indicate that it is at all possible.

When one society meets another, the observed historical trend is that acculturation results in a balance of forward movement, a movement in which each society assimilates certain useful attributes of the other. Social evolution is a dialectical process; it has ups and downs, but, on balance, it always represents an upward trend.

Islamic civilisation and European colonialism are both historical experiences of the traditional African society, profound experiences that have permanently changed the complexion of the traditional African society. They have introduced new values and a social, cultural, and economic organisation into African life. Modern African societies are not traditional, even if backward, and they are clearly in a state of socio-economic disequilibrium. They are in this state because they are not anchored to a steadying ideology.

The way out is certainly not to regurgitate all Islamic or Euro-colonial influences in a futile attempt to recreate a past that cannot be resurrected. The way out is only forward, forward to a higher and reconciled form of society, in which the quintessence of the human purposes of traditional African society reasserts itself in a modern context-forward, in short, to socialism, through policies that are scientifically devised and correctly applied. The inevitability of a forward way out is felt by all; thus, Leopold Sedor Senghor, although favouring some kind of return to African communalism, insists that the refashioned African society must accommodate the “positive contribution” of colonial rule, “such as the economic and technical infrastructure and the French educational system”. The economic and technical infrastructure of even French colonialism and the French educational system must be assumed, though this can be shown to be imbued with a particular socio-political philosophy. This philosophy, as should be known, is not compatible with the philosophy underlying communalism, and the desired accommodation would prove only a socio-political mirage.

Senghor has, indeed, given an account of the nature of the return to Africa. His account is highlighted by statements using some of his own words: that the African is “a field of pure sensation”; that he does not measure or observe, but “lives” a situation; and that this way of acquiring “knowledge” by confrontation and intuition

is “negro-African”; the acquisition of knowledge by reason, “Hellenic”. In *African Socialism* [London and New York, 1964, pp.72-3], he proposes

“that we consider the Negro-African as he faces the Other: God, man, animal, tree or pebble, natural or social phenomenon. In contrast to the classic European, the Negro-African does not draw a line between himself and the object, he does not hold it at a distance, nor does he merely look at it and analyse it. After holding it at a distance, after scanning it without analysing it, he takes it vibrant in his hands, careful not to kill or fix it. He touches it, feels it, smells it. The Negro-African is like one of those Third Day Worms, a pure field of sensations... Thus the Negro-African sympathises, abandons his personality to become identified with the Other, dies to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate; he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the Other; he lives in a symbiosis.”

It is clear that socialism cannot be founded on this kind of metaphysics of knowledge.

To be sure, there is a connection between communalism and socialism. Socialism stands to communalism as capitalism stands to slavery. In socialism, the principles underlying communalism are given expression in modern circumstances. Thus, whereas communalism in a non-technical society can be laissez-faire, in a technical society where sophisticated means of production are at hand, the situation is different; for if the underlying principles of communalism are not given correlated expression, class cleavages will arise, which are connected with economic disparities and thereby with political inequalities; Socialism, therefore, can be, and is, the defence of the principles of communalism in a modern setting; it is a form of social organisation that, guided by the principles underlying communalism, adopts procedures and measures made necessary by demographic and technological developments. Only under socialism can we reliably accumulate the capital we need for our development and also ensure that the gains of investment are applied for the general welfare.

Socialism is not spontaneous. It does not arise of itself. It has abiding principles according to which the major means of production and distribution ought to be socialised if exploitation of the many by the few is to be prevented; if, that is to say, egalitarianism in the economy is to be protected. Socialist countries in Africa may differ in this or that detail of their policies, but such differences themselves ought not to be arbitrary or subject to vagaries of taste. They must be scientifically explained, as necessities arising from differences in the particular circumstances of the countries themselves.

There is only one way of achieving socialism; by the devising of policies aimed at the general socialist goals, each of which takes its particular form from the specific circumstances of a particular state at a definite historical period. Socialism depends on dialectical and historical materialism, upon the view that there is only one nature, subject in all its manifestations to natural laws and that human society is, in this sense, part of nature and subject to its own laws of development.

It is the elimination of fancifulness from socialist action that makes socialism scientific. To suppose that there are tribal, national, or racial socialisms is to abandon objectivity in favour of chauvinism.

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