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THE STATE IN AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY:

A REASSESSMENT

by

JOHN THORNTON

A great transformation has been wrought in African historiography as a by-product of the independence of Africa, and the increasing awareness of their African heritage by New World blacks. African historiography has ceased to be the crowing of imperialist historians or the subtle backing of a racist philosophy. Each year new research is turned out demonstrating time and again that Africans had a pre-colonial history, and that even during colonial times they played an important part in their own history. However, since African history has emerged as a field attracting the serious attention of historians, it must face the problems that confront all historiography; all the more since it has more than the ordinary impact on the people it purports to study. Because it is so closely involved in the political and social movements of the present-day world, it demands of all engaged in writing African history - from the researcher down to the popular writer - that they show awareness of the problems of Africa and the Third World.

African historiography, not surprisingly, bears the imprint of its history, and its involvement in the polemics of Black Liberation and racism. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the attitude of the new African historiography about the state, especially in pre-colonial Africa. One of the most important themes in imperialist and racist historiography is the lack of state institutions in pre-colonial Africa, and the "need" for Europeans to enter and create them. This was even true for the state institutions that were known to exist in pre-colonial times. For example, Maurice Delafosse argued that the state-systems of the Western Sudan were first created by immigrant Judeao-Syrians, and that these people in the form of the Fulani helped spread it elsewhere.¹ Also, the "Hamitic" hypothesis, advanced, among others, by Georg Seligmann, continued the same theme for other areas of Africa: the history of Africa was seen as the history of waves of white invaders "civilizing" passive blacks.² Almost all the pro-African historiography of the pre-independence era was a reaction to the theories of the colonizers. The African-ness and originality, as well as the power and extensiveness, of African state systems was vigorously asserted. Such was much of the

work of W.E.B. Dubois,³ as well as his less well known contemporaries, culminating in the late 50's with the work of Basil Davidson, who forms the bridge between them and modern African historiography.⁴

The debate over the process of state-formation in African historiography undoubtedly owes much of its political significance to the attitude toward the state in European historiography, as well as to the public mind which both sides sought to reach. The building of states was viewed as one step in a long process of social evolution, which started with tool-making and culminated in the Western industrial state. Derived during the mid-nineteenth century out of the thought of Darwin by the American anthropologist Lewis Morgan, it continues to dominate the ideas of social theorists like V. Gordon Childe and A.L. Kroeber.⁵ The same thread runs through Marxist historiography, since to Marx the appearance of antagonistic classes and the state represented a step in the dialectical advancement of the forces of production which would culminate in socialism.⁶ Indeed, Engels produced a work clearly blending Marx and Morgan shortly after Marx's death.⁷ In short, the appearance of the state and all its accoutrements - massive buildings, armies, palaces and empires - has come to be considered as a step in human evolution, and clearly any regions which did not reach this stage was "evolutionarily backward".

As a result, African historiography has battled to show that the African was as "civilized" as his European counterpart; that they too had armies, states and empires. This is no longer argued on the grand scale of works by people like Seligman or Davidson, but has moved to the stage of 'minute studies' in state formation and enlargement of scale which often dominate the literature in the field. Thousands of pages are written on the Ashanti who built a state, while the closely related Agni are virtually ignored, partly because they erected no such edifice. This bias is equally obvious in the summary statements in general textbooks, like *Aspects of Central African History* or *A Thousand Years of West African History*.⁸ In this way African historiography is being made into a photocopy of its European counterpart, with the usual parade of ruling dynasties, battles and dates.

This style of historiography seems curiously out of place among the frequently radical historians of the new African history. While they often hammer away at the imperialists and dynasts of the Twentieth Century (especially if they are European), they turn around and praise the sixteenth century African counterpart of these same dynasts and imperialists. The politics of race and imperialism have blinded them to the

radical social analysis which should cause them to denounce any ruling class regardless of its origin. Sometimes this brand of radicalism produces strange mixtures; for example, Walter Rodney neatly suggests that African social oppression stems from the European contact through the slave trade.¹⁰ The less radical, on the other hand, are often put in the uncomfortable position of defending the slave trade on the basis that it ultimately built and strengthened states, thereby contributing to the social evolution of Africa.¹¹ C.C. Wrigley has taken up a position attacking this remarkable reversal of the usual interpretation of the slave trade. He suggests that the reasoning which J.D. Fage uses in his discussion of the slave trade and state formation is "historicism", and that it is not simply necessary for African evolution to fit into the same categories of European evolution.¹² He points out that writers like Omer-Cooper, who heroicize "psychopaths" like Shaka, and vindicate the terrible and destructive Zulu "Mfane" at the start of the nineteenth century, solely because they contributed to state formation, are also subject to the same tendency.¹³

It is time for the African historian to take a careful look at what the state means, in Africa and all over the world. This is not just the clearly destructive or exploitative Zulu or slave-trade states which Wrigley discusses, but the old states that might be seen as the product of natural growth. African states, like their European and Asian counterparts, were instruments of oppression in the hands of a ruling class which had little concern for the life and welfare of its ordinary citizens, let alone advancing the forces of production. These states faced the whole spectrum of resistance as well, ranging from protest to revolution. Let us take a few examples from African history to illustrate this point, starting with the Kingdom of Kongo.

The complex state structure of the Kingdom of Kongo proved, to Leo Frobenius, that Africans were "civilized to the marrow of their bones," and showed that the people were fully aware of the value of ordered government. Basil Davidson, basing himself on seventeenth century records of oral tradition, records that the kingdom was founded in the fourteenth century by invaders from the north, and "having conquered the local people, the Ambundu and Ambwela, the Kongo (Bakongo) took care to get on good terms with them. Here we have a good example of Bantu political custom."¹⁴ However, he does not mention that the Bakongo formed the nobility in the new state, and three centuries later were still "always regarded as strangers in the land."¹⁵ Nor does he mention their typical behavior, as does Giovanni Francisco da Roma, a seventeenth century eyewitness:

*...whenever a noble personage passes by a village the poor villagers must give him food from their stock, even if he has many servants. In fact they obtain food for him, but the servants are insolent and if they are not given all they ask for they roam the fields with great brutality and take all that falls into their hands.*¹⁶

This was not, as Rodney might suggest, a custom introduced by the slave trade or European contact, for the very first Europeans to visit Kongo were accompanied by a Kongo noble and 200 servants who seized the goods of the country people in the same brutal manner.¹⁷ However, the people of Kongo did not remain passive under the oppression, and put up constant resistance. They built their homes away from roads so as to avoid being robbed of all they possessed; and, as da Roma continues, they "abstain from sowing abundantly and raising domestic animals; they prefer to suffer penury than to work for someone else."¹⁸ The tradition of resistance in the countryside made it difficult for the nobility to collect their taxes as well, as another seventeenth century writer, Giovanni da Montecuccolo Cavazzi, reports:

*To collect the tribute they almost always need to use violence, and this requires a lot of time and work The collectors, if they are not well accompanied, risk losing their lives because of the evils they inflict on the mubata or country-inhabitants to get them to pay. These, oppressed and vexed frequently, rebel, and if they cannot avenge themselves in any other manner, expell them from the country...*¹⁹

The resistance of the Kongo peasantry was finally blessed with some success, although the struggle lasted until around the middle of the eighteenth century. Reports from this period indicate that a revolution in social relations in Kongo had occurred; the king and his nobility were no longer obeyed at all, they collected no taxes and exercised no authority.²⁰ This remarkable transformation is often seen as "decline" and blamed on the activities of Portuguese slave raiders.²¹ Considering, however, that the number of whites in Kongo during the crisis period rarely exceeded ten, and that the Portuguese armies never penetrated this far north,²² such a hypothesis seems far-fetched. The Portuguese may have played a part in Kongo history, and the slave trade was certainly not a positive force in the Kingdom, but any look at the documents of the period clearly shows that the transformation was part of a popular movement, and certainly not a

decline. It is only a decline to those who feel that centralized authoritarian states are the ultimate in pre-industrial social evolution.

The full documentation available for the Kongo region makes the analysis above more certain than elsewhere, but Kongo was not the only area that possessed oppressive state systems or militant peasant opposition. For example, the wealth that made the pilgrimages of the Medieval Mansas of Mali so famous was based on an extensive servile population, whose conditions and dues were dutifully inscribed by the authors of the seventeenth century *Tarikh el-Fettaah*.²³ These may well have been descendants of the people of Soso who were enslaved in the mid-thirteenth century by Sunjata Keita after he defeated their ruler, Sumanguru Kante;²⁴ others may have possessed conditions of servitude dating back to the Empire of Wagadu (Ghana) in the sixth or seventh century.²⁵ As the *Tariks* clearly show, while the great empires of the Western Sudan rose and fell, they merely exchanged servile populations, who were carefully regulated to insure that they never gained their freedom.²⁶ In the Western Sudan, as in Kongo, the tradition of exploitation is matched by a tradition of resistance and rebellion. The gold miners of the Mali Empire, to resist mass conversion to Islam, with all the duties to the Islamic state that this implied, went 'on strike' and refused to produce any gold, according to the fourteenth century writer al-'Umari.²⁷ In this they were successful, for the Mansa eventually had to recognize their independence, although he continued to collect a tribute.²⁸ Oral tradition occasionally records servile rebellions as well; for example, the rebellion in the seventeenth century of captives along the River Faleme,²⁹ or the equally noteworthy rebellion of the Kusa. The Kusa, led by Maren Jagu Dukure, rebelled against, and eventually killed their tyrannical ruler, Garakhe Jimbiga. But Maren Jagu Dukure, decided to recreate the Kusa kingdom with himself as king, and to extract the entire produce of the people's great fields for himself. At this point the people replied by sowing his fields with gravel, renouncing the former state organization, and dispersing.³⁰

While it must be admitted that the typical African state was oppressive, it is usually defended in terms of its "evolutionary importance" or its "role in advancing the forces of production." In fact, while this seems a logical theory for the grand scheme, a sort of culmination of the discovery of agriculture or iron working, it will not stand up against a close examination of the actual productive systems. Nobles all over the world disdain to do any work, especially if it is related to something as mundane as

growing food or producing tools, clothing and shelter. Cavazzi wrote in 1687:

*The inhabitants of the cities, contrary to the inhabitants of the country called mubata have an extreme abhorrence to any kind of work, even honorable. Therefore, with the exception of the slaves, who suffer the weight of all the work, no one does more than watch these same slaves or smoke tobacco in the company of others lazily spending the entire day sitting in a circle on the ground, singing or talking.*³¹

The *mubata* were the rural descendents of the conquered Mbundu, while the city inhabitants (*Mumbanza*) were the descendants of the conquering Bakongo.³² The planning and organization of production was left entirely up to the local community, and only after the harvest was collected would the nobility send out for their share.³³ It is similar in the Western Sudan, for example in the region called Gadiaga, whose noble class dates back to the days of Wagadu; maximum levity is allowed to the local community, and only through the payment of dues and taxes are the nobility sustained.³⁴ The local communities, on which the whole edifice of class structure rests, are organized, not into states, but into remarkably democratic communal systems. Production is divided within the community so that all work, and all receive equally of the production.³⁵ Of this production, the nobility only takes a "cut". The organization of state systems based on peasant communities is often communal at all levels, with class formation being in the relations between communal units.³⁶ This is not to imply that African elites are uniquely parasitic, or that they failed in their "historic mission", for this pattern is common around the world. For example, in thirteenth century England, as *Seneschaucie*, the famous document dealing with the ideal manor, shows, the officers of the lord were charged with inspecting, not organizing production, so as to ensure that the peasants in the community did not cheat the lord.³⁷ Similarly, in pre-industrial France, the manorial system typically allowed a maximum of peasant holdings with rent in kind, and a minimum of common labor on desme land.³⁸ European society, like its African counterpart was organized into communal orders, or "estates" as they were called in Europe.³⁹

Africa also possessed, until the time of the European conquest, a number of "stateless" societies, which were simply the same communal units that made up the productive classes of the statist societies, without the ruling class. These stateless societies had no less advanced agricultural techniques, metallurgy, or artistic achievements than the statist societies that

surrounded them. For example, Ukara Island in Tanzania, which was long a refuge for people fleeing rulers on the mainland received its first chief from the Germans in 1900. Yet it possesses one of the most advanced agricultural systems in the world, supporting a population density of over 1200 persons per arable square mile.⁴⁰ One cannot really tell the difference between the agricultural works of the stateless Bambara and those of the Malinke, their neighbors who have had state systems for 800 years and speak the same language.⁴¹ It is only in the statist conceptions of "civilization" which often include state structure as a criterion, that these people can be considered less advanced, but not if one examines their daily productive systems.

If the state systems of Africa did not improve productive processes, then perhaps they were instrumental in creating unity. Wrigley criticizes this position, in suggesting that while the "nation building" argument has a great deal of political relevance to historians today, it can be carried to extremes when the national state is taken as the end-all of African history. He also suggests that this type of forced unity had little to do with ending war, but probably made them more vicious.⁴² Girolamo de Montessarchio, a seventeenth century Capuchin missionary observed that when nobles fought each other, or peasants fought each other the casualties were quite low, but when the nobility fought the peasantry the number killed was considerably higher.⁴³ Bernardo da Gallo wrote in 1710, four centuries after the foundation of Kongo, that the separate origins of the Bakongo and Mbundu were still the dominating fact of its social structure.⁴⁴ Far from creating a unity between the two peoples, the state structure had deliberately categorized the people, and it was only after the revolutionary transformation of the Kongo during the latter part of the eighteenth century that the Bakongo and Mbundu peoples finally merged into the single ethnic group they are today. In addition, the very unconcern for altering the forms and organization of production illustrated above, is not conducive to unity. All the great empires were forced to grant a great deal of independence to local units, so that the only real contact that the state and the people had was through the tax collector. In Kongo the overcentralizing attempts of the monarchy, coupled with the greed of the aristocracy vis-a-vis the peasantry combined to paint the picture of constant civil war that emerges from the source material on Kongo prior to its transformation.⁴⁵

States are often praised for their role in resistance to the European invasion at the end of the nineteenth century. Actually, however, their role was somewhat ambiguous. Some,

it is true, resisted fairly well; Dahomey's resistance was quite determined, for example.⁴⁶ But many state societies collapsed on impact with the Europeans, and at any rate the social tensions of the state system did not permit effective resistance. The efforts of both Samori Ture and Shehu Ahamudu in the Western Sudan were burdened by constant revolts caused mainly by their high-handed and exploitative state structures.⁴⁷

On the other hand, the resistance of stateless societies was often long-lived and heroic. The people of central Ivory Coast put up a resistance lasting 27 years, and were only defeated by an early variant on the "strategic hamlet" scheme.⁴⁸ Other societies that were at first untouched by European rule, resisted when the Europeans tried to extend the rule beyond treaties to real government. Much of the resistance that goes down as "tribalistic revolts" or "pacification", like the Moyen Congo revolts of the 1930's is of this type.⁴⁹ Recently, historians have suggested that African resistance would have been more effective had it been of the guerrilla type,⁵⁰ but the only societies capable of fighting guerrilla warfare were those whose leaders were legitimate, and by and large the leadership of the states, exploitative and tyrannical as they were, did not possess the legitimacy to go to the country and carry on the wars. It was the stateless societies - Igbo, Baule, Agni, and others - that carried on the guerrilla wars.

The combination of uselessness and exploitation that characterized the African state systems was also an important factor in their instability. Peasants could hardly be expected to flock openly to the defense of the state and the result was an often and rapid exchange of elites. This made for meteoric rises and spectacular falls. Sunjata Keita built a gigantic empire in the space of his lifetime,⁵¹ while the edifice of the Empire of Songhay was blown away within a year by 4,000 ailing Moroccans.⁵² Empires often faced a banditry problem, and a bandit could go far by skillfully exploiting the discontents of the peasantry. A good example is the Empire of Kaarta, which was created by a runaway scion of the house of Kulibali in Segou and a handful of followers. He moved to Kaarta, built a little fort in the bush and soon was joined by bands of displaced peasants, nomads and runaway slaves who became the army with which he destroyed the old ruling class.⁵³

The emphasis on the glory of old Africa, by means of exemplifying its pre-colonial state structures is, we believe, overdone. Such writing may have had its place in the 1930's or even in the 1950's when a more radical analysis would only

have been scoffed at, but it is sadly out of date today. Even a superficial look at the 'glorious' old empires reveals a picture that is not particularly glorious. What is glorious is the almost constant theme of resistance, rebellion and revolution which runs throughout the histories of these states. The African people, then and now, resisted their oppressors often, as in the case of Kongo or the Kusa, with considerable success. Here is a theme which is worthy of more study; not state formation, but anti-statism.

In recent years a great research effort has been made to discover and analyze resistance movements during the colonial period. We hope that a similar effort will be devoted to the pre-colonial antecedents of these resisters. It might be equally fascinating, on the one hand, to study resistance in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa, to see what common themes these might contain; and on the other hand to examine the similarities between pre-colonial ruling classes and the ruling classes of modern African states. This is not to say that state-formation as a theme of study should be ignored, but that the historian should be more concerned with what state-formation really entails for the entire society, and not just for the "glory" of the ruling classes.

The present line of reasoning on the pre-colonial history of Africa would seem to misplace the heroes of history. The point is that, in our opinion, the state builders and imperialists are not the subject matter that makes for a glorious history. The real heroes are those who led the attacks on this system, just as their later counterparts are the acknowledged heroes of the colonial period. The state builders may have resisted Europeans, but by and large they are guilty of the same crimes that the Europeans are guilty of. They formed the important middleman sector in the slave trade, and it was they who led the slave raids. To place the blame on Europeans only is to completely miss the role of the African elite in this. At the same time, while they fought Europeans for their independence during the conquest of Africa, they did not lose too much by colonialism, and the Europeans did a great deal to preserve them in their positions, by indirect rule, or even by the direct rule system. Individuals or families may have suffered, but the basic social systems were preserved intact by the European conquest. If the "chiefs" are seen as a reactionary element in African society today, it is only because they have always been a reactionary element. The modern ruling elites, although not always connected directly with the "chiefly" regimes, are still a product of the same state systems of Africa which had generated their particular variants during colonial times. Slave traders, imperialists, dynasts and reactionaries are not the heroes of African history and any

attempt to make them so has sadly misplaced the heroes.

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