ON THE APPLICATION OF THE MARXIAN CONCEPTIAL FRAMEWORK TO THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES

by

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In our struggle against European rule in Africa, we must take into account the fact that colonialism was not only territorial but also mental. The geographical occupation of space in Africa had to be facilitated by the creation of a psychological disposition toward subjugation. Colonialism was therefore accompanied by a process of intellectual seasoning, a point emphasized by Franz Fanon when he argues that

> *to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil. Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values... The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is ... the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil.*

The prevalence of such concepts as "primitive", "pagan", "Dark Continent", "civilising mission", etc., shows the extent to which attempts were made to create within the African an inferiority complex which would sharply contrast with a parallel and contemporaneous superiority complex in the colonizer.

On close examination, the European's denigration of the African's heritage will be found to have been based on the assumption of a monolithic unilinear, Euro-centric, and directional conception of human evolution. By initially maintaining that all mankind ought to have followed the same path of evolution, the European path , the colonizer put himself into the ideologically advantageous position of treating anything that was different as a deviation from the supposed universal norm of civilization. This "universalistic" and Euro-centric interpretation of human evolution put the African in a particularly vulnerable position inasmuch as we differ from the European in such respects as ethnic institutions, traditional non-Christian religions, patterns of property ownership, etc. Our communal

existence contrasted very sharply with the European individualistic conception of man and society.

In this respect, it has to be understood that unless man's history is conceived of as unilinear and directional, there can hardly be such a thing as a "backward" society. If, for example, history is understood as multi-linear, then the terms "backward" and "advanced" are applicable only to those societies that are following a common line of evolution. Britain could be thought of as "backward" or "advanced" if compared with her European neighbors only to the extent that one presumes that she shares a common line of evolution with other European peoples. Conversely, Nigeria could not be conceived of as "backward" or "advanced" in comparison with the European states insofar as she could not be presumed to be moving on the same line of evolution as the latter; and yet the same terms would be relevant if she were compared with other African states. In other words, in the context of a non-linear and non-directional conception of history, such terms as "backward", "advanced", and "primitive" are altogether meaningless.

From the preceding analysis it follows that the would-be anti-colonial African revolutionary had to adopt a strategy that struck at the intellectual foundations of the oppressive system; one that allowed his compatriots to win psychological liberation so that they could proceed to wage a physical struggle against the colonial administrators. He had to challenge the Euro-centric and unilinear conception of history, (at least so far as an attempt was made to extend it to Africa) so as to de-activate such potent imperialist weapons as "uncivilized", "pagan", "backward", etc. By asserting historical and cultural relativism, the nationalist saw our "different-ness" as the essence of our non-backwardness. Hence the development of such concepts as "Negritude", "African Personality", "African Socialism", etc., which sought to cut off our former opprobrious association with European civilization.[2] It is therefore not surprising to find that Leopold Senghor went so far as to argue that our process of cognition was biologically different from that of the Western world in that whereas the latter's is rational, the African's is intuitive.[3]

It is the object of this paper to argue that the psychological satisfaction and benefits we might have drawn from this radical assertion of our separate authenticity still need to be evaluated in the light of the actual African historical reality. We further argue that while the struggle against colonialism immensely benefited from the emphasis on the distinctiveness of an African consciousness entirely unrelated to that of Europe, the post-revolutionary future of Africa

will equally benefit from a sober detection of those historical parallels and similarities which we may have ignored. The need to make some specific historical comparisons between Africa and Europe also arises from the fact that African societies did not differ equally from those of Europe in every respect. For example, the extent to which they may have been religiously different is not necessarily the same as that to which they differed politically. The one respect should not therefore mislead us to presume corresponding differences in all other respects.'

One area in which, in our revolt from European imperialism, we may have thrown away the useful with the useless is the Marxist methodology of historical analysis and explanation. There is, however, no question whatever on my part that in spite of its claims to universalism, traditional Marxism (as distinguished from nationalised versions of it such as Leninism, Chinese or Cuban Marxism, French Socialism, Fabian Socialism, etc.) enunciated by Marx and Engels was essentially European in its origin and character and in its terms of reference. It was intended to summarise the developments of a supposedly Euro-centric world so as to forecast its inescapable direction in the modern tecnhological age. In this context, Marxism sought to periodise European evolution into clearcut periods of history based on the dominant economic modes of production and the concomittant social relations they necessitated. It also attempted to relate institutions -- social, political, and intellectual -- to the economic matrix; it sought to expose the impact of the latter on the former, particularly with respect to the unequal distribution of political power in society. With respect to the modern era, Marxism attempted to forecast the final resolution of the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.[4]

We propose to show that even though Marxism is an intellectual phenomenon that is essentially European in origin and character, some of its aspects are not entirely irrelevant to the study of African traditional societies. Specifically, this paper will attempt to argue that while Marxist methodology cannot be applied in its entirety to Africa without doing a lot of violence to historical reality, neither can it be entirely excluded from the study of African traditional societies without losing some considerable perspectives on African history. Furthermore, this paper does not argue that Marxism is the only European phenomenon which may have a degree of relevance to the study of African societies. Quite the contrary, it recognizes that there may well be other approaches to European history and society which may be more or less relevant to the study of Africa. Because the paper is entirely comparative

rather than definitive, the reader will be presumed to be thoroughly acquainted with the major trends of African history, at least from earliest times to 1900 A.D. A similar familiarity with European history in general and Marxism in particular will also be assumed. The term "African traditional societies" is here to be understood as referring only to those African communities that were or still are untarnished by European 'civilization.' With respect to the Marxian method of historigraphy, we propose to deal with two aspects:

(a) The Marxist Linear Dialectics and Historical Periodization; and
(b) The Concept of the Materialist Foundations of History.

On the Application of Marxist Linear Dialectics and Historical Periodization to the Study of African Traditional Societies.

The present study denies the applicability of Marxist linear dialectics and historical periodization to African traditional societies. By dialectics is meant the process of contradictory tension inherent in the physical structure of matter itself which brings about change in quality through a redisposition of the component properties without the importation of additional or different quanta.[5] Marx and Engels extended the applicability of the process not only to biological evolution,but also to social phenomena so as to imply that change in society is itself a product of the tensions inherent in the latter. This is how it became known as historical materialism, meaning that the process which accounts for qualitative evolution in matter also accounts for social revolutions in history.[6]

While we do not challenge the use of such terms as dialectical or historical materialism, we question the Marxist assumption that the consequent social changes necessarily produce a linear process of historical evolution from the simplest forms of society to the most complex, corresponding to an evolution from barbarism via primitive communism, feudalism, the bourgeois stage, to proletarian society. History, on this assumption, is thereby presented not only as a linear process but also as being divisible into clear-cut and consecutive stages. Marx himself emphasized this conception of history when he said:

> *we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois methods of production as so many epochs in the progress of the economic formation of society. The bourgeois relations of production are*

> *the last antagonistic form of the social process of production...*[8]

In describing the social relations that correspond to these consecutive epochs of economic evolution, Marx and Engels argued that at the various stages, "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another..."[9]

According to this Marxian chronology and periodization of history, the African tribal and traditional societies would seem to fall at the level of the "Asiatic" or the "ancient" modes of production; that is, at the very dawn of history when primitive communism reigned and society was prefeudal - six thousand years behind that of Europe.[10] In fact, this view that Africa is at the dawn of history and must necessarily begin from the bottom of the ladder of history and go through all the epochs prescribed by Marx was expounded by Rene Milon when he argued that "according to Marx, socialism must inevitably succeed capitalism, just as capitalism succeeded feudalism, and feudalism, ancient society... Capitalism must precede socialism, just as feudalism preceded capitalism."[11] That such a view can easily merge with the traditional apologies for imperialism is evident from the following description of African society by a European socialist lecturer:

> *A communistic society which is not yet differentiated into antagonistic classes, in which 'private property in the strict sense of the word' does not exist, which is deeply steeped in superstition, and the level of productivity of which is barely sufficient to meet its own needs, is only a primitive stage in the historical development of society.*[12]

However repulsive the preceding extract might sound, the author was nevertheless squarely within the Marxian framework of linear dialectics and historical periodization.

I. I. Potekhin, the late Soviet scholar on Africa, seriously attempted to extricate Marxism from this dilemma by insisting that "There is no detailed theory of noncapitalist development in the works of Marx and Engels, that is, the transition of backward peoples to socialism, bypassing the capitalist stage. The necessary conditions for this did not exist in their lifetime."[13] By his very use of such terms as "backward peoples", "transition", and "bypassing", Potekhin only demonstrated his own inability to escape from the Marxian prescription. It is not surprising therefore that even

while he admitted the absence of a detailed Marxist theory on the subject, he nevertheless continued to place African traditional society at the dawn of history, and only relaxed the Marxist interpretation with respect to the line and the speed that Africa may take in her transition from her present "ancient" stage to the epoch of socialism. Hence his statement that Marx and Engles "recognized that certain peoples and countries might bypass certain of these stages."[14]

Briefly, Marxism apparently holds that all history is unilinear and monodirectional, and that in their transition from barbarism, all societies have to pass through the stages of primitive communism, feudalism, and bourgeois production to that of socialism. One can object to this theory on the grounds that it is an apology for imperialism. We object to it however, primarily because it is simply not in line with African historical realities. Far from disputing its applicability to the evolution of European societies, we shall go so far as to say that it is so particularly European that it does not fit into the African situation. Marx and Engels were obviously correctly summarising the main features of European history and assumed that the same would be the case everywhere else.

This has not been the case in Africa. For example, the stages of economic evolution from primitive communism through slavery, feudalism and capitalism, and then on to socialism that Marx described have, in African history, been neither linear nor consecutive; that is, African society has not had to traverse them one at a time. Quite the contrary, where such stages are discernible in traditional society, they have frequently been contemporaneous; "primitive communism" has existed side by side with feudalism and serfdom, and with commercial (as opposed to industrial) capitalism. When one looks at the Sudanic empires of West Africa, at Kush and Meroe, and the Zimbabwe empires, one finds a situation in which "primitive communism" and tribal institutions and social relations, feudalism and serfdom, bourgeois commerce at both the local and international levels, as well as highly sophisticated urban life so co-existed that instead of supplanting one another in successive stages, they in fact complemented and reinforced one another.[15] There is no doubt that the Ghana and Mali empires were basically feudal in character; and yet they also had some prevalent elements of domestic and international commerce in the hands of a small class. That their political centers were situated, not in the well-watered and agriculturally favorable valleys, but in the north where life was pastoral shows that their basis was the trans-Saharan trade rather than peasant agriculture. They disintegrated when this trade was disrupted

In Southern Africa a similar situation can be observed with respect to the Zimbabwe empire. When its extensive commerce with the Indian Ocean was disrupted by the Portuguese from the beginning of the sixteenth century, it lost its political and cultural potential and degenerated into petty feudal states under competing paramountcies. In fact, the whole eastern seaboard of Africa, ranging from Ethiopia all the way to Quilimane and beyond, was so permeated with international trade during the "Dark Ages" of Europe that it would be erroneous to classify this belt as merely tribal or feudal. It will therefore be seen that the stages of historical evolution which Marx and Engels correctly observed as consecutive and successive in Europe were frequently contemporaneous and coterminous in Africa. The so-called tribal stage did not have to vanish before feudalism could come.

So much for the question of historical periodization. As pointed out earlier, Marxism holds that history moves in an irreversible line from simple primitive communism upwards to complicated bourgeois states and proletarian rule. And yet it will be seen that traditional Africa's evolution, at least until the age of imperialism in the middle of the nineteenth century, did not exactly follow the path of Marxist dialectics. The powerful feudal systems with semi-capitalist urban centers did not progress monodirectionally to full-fledged capitalism as did their European counterparts. Instead, they frequently "devolved" to subsistence agriculture and meager pastoral life when the basis of their commerce was eliminated. They were, so to say, completely "lost" to history.

And yet the Marxist method of historiography makes no provision for the accommodation of such regressive and devolutionary developments. One could thus be easily misled into believing that Europe was always "ahead" of Africa just because she made the "progressive" transition from feudalism to capitalism. In actual fact, many parts of Africa attained an advanced stage of feudalism long before it was even in an embryonic stage in Europe, but, while many of these areas "devolved" to "primitive communism" Europe "advanced" to the bourgeois stage.

From his study of the history of African traditional societies, the late Kwame Nkrumah also tried to resolve this question of linear dialectics of history and the accompanying concepts of monodirectionality and inevitability in history. He accepted the concept of the dialectical evolution of history but rejected its association, in traditional Marxist thought, with a linear, continuous, or monodirectional conception of history. He also rejected the implicit concepts of inevitability and necessity in history. He argued instead that "dialectical evolution should not be conceived as being linear,

continuous and monodirectional," because such an approach " "gives no explanation of the transformation of one kind into another" since "it only represents an accumulation of phenomena of the same sort." Specifically, he maintained that

> *Linear evolution is incompatible with the evolution of kinds, because the evolution of kinds represents a linear discontinuity. In dialectical evolution, progress is not linear; it is, so to say, from one plane to another that new kinds are produced and the emergence of mind from matter is attained.*[17]

What his argument meant for history is that in the process of evolution, there is neither a necessary path nor an inevitable stage. That is, no stage in history is necessarily prior or antecedent to another (except perhaps in retrospect). Consequently, and contrary to Marx, he argued that capitalism is not any closer or more antecedent to socialism than is tribal society, and that not even socialism is inevitable in history.[18] As far as he was concerned, Marx had in fact exaggerated the distance between the "ancient" society that was based on slavery, and its supposed successor systems, such as feudalism and capitalism. He argued that there was no qualitative transition or substantive change, except in the methods of social control, in the shift from slave society to feudalism and serfdom, and from the latter to capitalism. As he put it:

> *Capitalism is a development by refinement from feudalism, just as feudalism is a development by refinement from slavery. The essence of reform is to combine a continuity of fundamental principle, with a tactical change in the manner of expression of the fundamental principle. Reform is not a change in the thought, but one in its manner of expression, not a change in what is said but one in idiom. In capitalism, feudalism suffers, or rather enjoys reform and the fundamental principle of feudalism merely strikes new levels of subtlety. In slavery, it is thought that exploitation, the alienation of the fruits of the labour of others, requires a certain degree of political and forcible subjection. In feudalism, it is thought that a lesser degree of the same kind of subjection is adequate to the same purpose. In capitalism, it is thought that a still lesser degree is adequate.*[19]

Nkrumah therefore concluded that Marx had really exaggerated the degree of evolution from slave society that has been achieved by capitalist society as contrasted with that of African traditiona

society, for there is really no change of principles between slave society and capitalism. As far as he was concerned, "Capitalism is but the gentleman's method of slavery."[20]

There is no doubt that many Europeans would feel more comfortable with Marx's interpretation than with Nkrumah's, particularly because the latter challenges the many centuries of "progress" which Marx attributes to Europe. If European evolution was linear and consecutive, there is no basis for translating the fact into a universal rule. Marxism tends to overstate the distance which Europe has travelled between slave society and capitalism. When one observes that capitalist society is in fact less inclined to the principles of justice inherent in socialism than is African 'tribal' society, one will agree with Nkrumah that "socialism is obviously not a development from capitalism" because, as a negation of capitalism, "socialism cannot develop from capitalism."[21] The supposed large chronological gap between tribal and capitalist society that is implicit in Marxist theory is thereby exposed as a mere surface illusion.

On the Materialist Foundations of History

In the preceding section, we argued against the applicability of Marxist linear dialectics and historical periodization to the study of African traditional societies. We now propose to argue that the Marxist concept of the materialist foundations of history is both relevant and applicable to the study of these same societies. In fact, we shall go so far as to suggest that far from being irrelevant, this Marxist approach is indispensable for the purpose.

According to Marx and Engels, the consciousness of a people as manifested in their social relations, their intellectual modes, their philosophies, their religion, and their legal and political institutions, is not so much an outcome of the deliberate activities of their minds as it is a result and a reflection of their economic being. Marx's argument was that the mind cannot be the basis for explaining the social modes of society because it is itself shaped and conditioned by a prior and antecedent factor -- the economic mode of society. He summarised this view of the materialist foundations of history, which is also known as "historical materialism," as follows:

> *I was led by my studies to the conclusion that legal relations as well as forms of state could be neither understood by themselves nor explained by the so-called general progress of the human mind, but that they are rooted in the material conditions*

of life, which are summed up by Hegel... under the name "civil society"; the anatomy of that civil society is to be sought in political economy. [22]

Commenting on the same theme, Marx emphasized that:

"In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum-total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society -- the real foundation on which rise legal and political superstructures, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. [23]

Along the same vein Marx and Engels argued that the "production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life," so that "conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. They argued that in contrast to German philosophy

which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagines, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. [24]

In conclusion, they insist that:

The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life processes, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion,

metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this, their real existence, their thinking, and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. [25]

The preceding extracts essentially summarise the essence of the Marxist materialist conception of history. This notion of history has been the subject of a lot of controversy, particularly as to whether or not it is a closed theory of economic determinism. Such arguments have, however, frequently tended to distract intellectual attention from the content of the theory to emotional semantics, and they are in any case not relevant to the present critique. What is relevant here is whether there is evidence that the consciousness of the various groups of African traditional societies - as manifested in their social being, their social relations and organization, the structure and patterns of their religious beliefs, morality, ethics and value systems, and their political systems - has in fact tended to correspond to and reflect their contemporary economic milieu. Furthermore, this study aims at showing whether or not these societies can be seen in the light of Engels' statement that "the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure" inasmuch as "in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged." From this it would then follow that

the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the philosophy, *but in the* economics *of each particular epoch.* [26]

The general but often superficial reaction to whether this materialist conception of history is relevant to Africa is to say that since Marxism "has not succeeded" in Europe, all its concepts are therefore all the more irrelevant to Africa. Here one notices the fallacious assumption that whatever originates in Europe must first "succeed" there before it can be relevant

to Africa; such an assumption is as false as the corrolary that those concepts that have succeeded in Europe are necessarily capable of success in Africa.

Even a casual examination of the writings of non-Marxist anthropologists and social scientists on African traditional societies shows that their analyses (which are the result of empirical observation) lend unintended support to Marxist interpretations of history. Let us take as an example Professor E. E. Evans-Pritchard's famous work on the Nuer people of the Nile valley whose livelihood revolves around their cattle:

> *at heart they are herdsmen, and the only labor in which they delight is care of cattle. They not only depend on cattle for many of life's necessities but they have the herdsman's outlook on the world... Most of their social activities concern cattle and* cherchez la vache *is the best advice that can be given to those who desire to understand Nuer behavior.*
>
> *The attitude of Nuer towards, and their relations with neighbouring peoples are influenced by their love of cattle and their desire to acquire them. They have profound contempt for peoples with few or no cattle... while their wars... have been directed to seizure of cattle and control of pastures. Each Nuer tribe and tribal section has its own pastures and water-supplies, and political fission is closely related to distribution of these natural resources, ownership of which is generally expressed in terms of clans and lineages. Disputes between tribal sections are very often about cattle, and cattle are the compensation for loss of life and limb that is so frequently their outcome.* [27]

On the Nuer social hierarchy, he makes a similar cattle-related observation: "in speaking of age-sets and age-grades we find ourselves describing the relations of men to their cattle, the change from boyhood to manhood is most clearly marked by a corresponding change in those relations at initiation." He also points out that the cohesion of the social groups is the outcome of this "bovine" culture, for whereas a single family cannot protect or herd cattle alone, a group can. Of kinship ties he observes that these are conditioned "by the operation of exogamous rules, often stated in terms of cattle and every phase of the ritual is marked by their transference or slaughter" while the legal status of the partners and of the children is defined by cattle-rights and obligations." Cattle are so crucial to kinship and marriage that

"movements of cattle from kraal to kraal are equivalent to lines on a geneological chart."[28]

Evans-Pritchard further observes that the impact of the cattle economy on the Nuer goes even to the level of individual personality:

> *Men are frequently addressed by names that refer to the form and colour of their favourite oxen, and women take names from oxen and from the cows they milk. Even small boys call one another by ox-names ...a child usually taking his name from the bull-calf of the cow he and his mother milk. Often a man receives an ox-name or cow-name at birth. Sometimes the name of a man is handed down to posterity in his ox-name and not birth-name. Hence, a Nuer geneology may sound like the inventory of a kraal. The linguistic identification of a man with his favourite ox cannot fail to affect his attitude to the beast... the most striking evidence of the pastoral mentality of the Nuer.* (p. 18)

Even the religion of the Nuer is traceable to their cattle economy. It is their cattle which

> *Play a foremost part in ritual. A man establishes contact with the ghosts and spirits through his cattle. If one is able to obtain the history of each cow in a kraal, one obtains at the same time not only an account of all the kinship links and affinities of the owners but also of all their mystical connexions. Cows are dedicated to the spirits of lineages of the owner and of his wife and to any personal spirit that has at some time possessed either of them. Other beasts are dedicated to ghosts of the dead. By rubbing ashes along the back of a cow or ox one may get into touch with the spirit or ghost associated with it and ask it for assistance... No Nuer ceremony is complete without the sacrifice of a ram, he-goat or ox.* (p. 18)

He goes on to point out that Nuer institutions, customs, folklore, thought, and social behaviour directly emanate from their cattle. The Nuer, he says, "tend to define all social processes and relationships in terms of cattle. Their social idiom is a bovine idiom." (pp. 18-19)

His advice is that

> *he who lives among Nuer and wishes to understand their social life must first master a vocabulary referring to cattle and to the life of the herds. Such complicated discussions as those which take place in negotiations for marriage, in ritual situations, and in legal disputes can only be followed when one understands the difficult cattle-terminology of colours, age, sexes, and so forth.* (p. 19).

Thus the impact of the cattle economy is directly reflected in the political, legal, religious, social and intellectual relations of the Nuer. If Marx had written a critique of the Nuer it is difficult to see how he could have made it any different from that of Evans-Pritchard, a non-Marxist.

Oral history has recently become the fashionable vogue for studying African traditional societies. But in the light of this possibility of a materialist approach to these societies, we need to be reminded of Marx's warning that just as "our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself," so can we not evaluate a period of history "by its own consciousness."[29] And yet scholars of African traditional societies too frequently try to derive the characteristic consciousness of a social group from the latter's mythology, folklore, and tribal ideologies, which, in the last analysis, are no more than a particular group's opinion of itself. These manifestations are really a consequence of, not a basic cause of, a group's way of life.

In this respect reference could be made to Basil Davidson's observations of the Amba people of north-western Uganda. He points out that although their folklore would make one believe that their social being is an outcome of their adherring to their ancestral charters, in reality the Amba are"part of the fundamental pattern of the social and political growth which governed the peopling of Africa in remote times, and framed its dominant beliefs and ideologies." Noting the "upside-down" character of tribal ideologies, he declares that:

> *innovations were many, and were the harvest of a most practical observation that was scientific in its empiricism. But these innovations, in order to become acceptable, had to be absorbed within an ancestral system which, by definition, was itself opposed to experiment or change.* (pp. 58-60)

In Marxian terminology, Davidson is saying that traditional Africa's existence was based on a more or less scientific, hence stable, relationship to nature in terms of economic production, but that because this ideality was passed on from generation to generation as a guarantee of survival, it acquired the abstract and anti-scientific character of a tradition and became shrouded in mystery and superstition.

Reference can also be made to the Dinka people of the Nile valley who have frequently been characterised by anthropologists as "changeless" socially, intellectually and culturally. Davidson observes that if they did not evolve any ideologies of change in material culture and social relations, it was because their economic life was drastically circumscribed by the plains in which they lived and which were alternately flooded and farmed. Thus this very "changelessness" was a reflection of their scientific relationship to their particular ecology:

> *The essence of their balance with nature consists in a seasonal system of millet cultivation, stock-breeding, and regular retreat to rainy seasons camps, while its main content rests in the maintenance of more or less numerous herds of cattle... Such is the Dinka year; and it is difficult to see how it could be, or ever could have been, very different. The Dinka have fitted themselves into their land, and the land has given them a living.* (pp. 61-62)

And, as Davidson points out, this land-imposed relationship to ecology, which necessitates a complete dependence on cattle, "emerges, ideologically, as a construct fashioned by kinship relations and attitudes to cattle" so that the *wut*, which is the widest kinship grouping, is not only "synonymous with cattle-camp," but also represents the periphery of Dinka moral obligations and peaceful resolution of political disputes because from their relationship with cattle "there derived a corresponding morality and set of legal norms." (pp.61-62). Socially and intellectually, it will also be seen that "cattle are the subject of a capacious imagery, often subtle and imaginative, poetic and allusive, which refers to every aspect of Dinka thought about what life is and what life should be." (pp. 62-64)

Here, as in the case of the Nuer, the analysis of a traditional society's consciousness is likely to go astray if it is merely derived from the folklore of that society without reference to the latter's material foundations. Because it is a superstructure, folklore becomes false when it presents itself

as the structure, as it almost invariably does in traditional Africa. It must be realized that some more or less similar material causations frequently find expression in quite different social idioms, depending on the particular kingroup. Thus several tribes inhabiting the same ecology and practicing a very similar way of life frequently have totally different tribal legends to account for the way they live. The answer to the development of divergent folklore from a similar material base lies in that even though a discovery may have been scientific at the beginning, it was more easily passed to later generations as a tradition prescribed to the ancestral spirits and acquired different interpretations in the passage.

This is similar to the empirical observation on the part of many ancient peoples that certain animals, birds and fish were unwholesome food because they tended to be disease-ridden. But in order to transmit this empirical observation as an effective injunction, Moses declared that it was a sin against Almighty God to eat them; Mohammed that it was a sin against Allah; and many African clans that it would enrage the vindictive ancestral spirits. Here we see three different superstitions designed to individually embody the same scientific fact. While there can be no such thing as a superstitious science, there is obviously no question about the possibility of a scientific superstition; and African traditional societies provide many examples of this fact if one examines their folklore in the light of their ecology.

Among many southern African communities, there used to be the "superstition of burning husks and cattle dung in the fields just before the beginning of the planting season. This was done to appease the "spirits of the land" who might otherwise cripple a whole crop. And yet it was a scientific superstition inasmuch as it corrected the shortage of potash in their soils. There is also the case of the Karimajong of Uganda and the Nyakyusa whose social stratifications tend to depend more on age-sets than on kinship groupings. Among the Nyakyusa the male population is not only sorted socially according to age-sets which bypass lineage loyalties, but is also geographically organised into age villages so that each village consists not of kinsmen but of age-mates with their wives and young children. (pp. 86-89) The Nyakyusa see these social patterns as "right and natural" because they are ancestrally-sanctioned. Misleading attempts have been made by some anthropologists to explain this situation. Monica Wilson, for example, argues that behind it lies sexual jealousies, with polygamous fathers fearing that their sons may seduce their wives and with sons fearing that their fathers may do the same to their wives. So a decision was supposedly

made to resolve the problem by making sons live in separate villages, away from their fathers. (pp. 89-90).

Clearly, however, the issue of jealousy cannot provide the answer since occupational colleagues pose a far more serious threat to marital fidelity than blood relations. The answer, it seems to me, lies in the vast occupational distinctions between the age-sets of the Nyakyusa. The men spend a large part of their lives driving cattle from pasture to pasture far away from home, and the allocation and non-allocation of the herding job depends on one's age. Thus the economy throws people together, at home or in the distant pastures, by age rather than by kinship so that young husbands have more in common with fellow herdsmen who may be non-relations than they have with their blood relations back home. And if sexual jealousy plays any role at all, that role will be found to be of economic origins, in that the economy forces men of certain ages to leave their wives at home during particular seasons. In this way, a pattern of social organization which may at first look superstitious or ancestrally derived will be found to be solidly grounded in material reality.

There is also the instance of the advanced level of the individual and of participatory democracy which was attained by Igbo traditional societies. There was considerable hope for the development of individualism as well as for the young men to challenge the rule of their conservative elders. Of this development Davidson observes that:

> *flexibility was the keynote of the Ibo system. They seem to have played with a relaxed and easy skill on all the possible chords and rhythms of segmentary organisation, using age sets, lineage loyalties, cross-cutting kinship relationships, ancestral cults and other such techniques whenever it happened to suit them. Their judicial system had the same mood of experiment.* (p. 93)

But how can one explain this versatility and individualism? I would suggest that for the answer, one need not go beyond their material conditions; Igbo political, social, and legal flexibility corresponded to their diversified economy which had advanced beyond mere subsistence communal agriculture and its concomittant tyranny of age and tradition that was characteristic of much of Africa. As Davidson observes, Igbo institutional flexibility was

> *a function of the natural fertility and farming wealth of Iboland. Density of population could blur the rigidities of precedent. So could variety of occupation. By the sixteenth century, and probably much earlier, simple forms of subsistence economy flanked by a minimal exchange of manufactures, locally produced, had given way to more complex economies in which a division of labour was able to support markets every four days or eight days... Here the mechanisms of change springing from labour specialisation and trading opportunity had long ago their due effect.* (pp. 93-94)

The diversification of the economy in Igboland and the consequent specialisation of labor were such that no one set of people could correctly represent the interests of all the others: hence the rise of individual participatory democracy.

Conclusion

We have attempted to show to what extent we can apply certain Marxian concepts to the study of African traditional societies. We have seen that although we cannot reconcile the Marxist notion of linear dialectics and consecutive historical periodization with the actual historical realities of these societies, we can use its materialist conception of history to enhance and sharpen our understanding of these same societies and the growth of their social, political, intellectual, and religious institutions.

Although only two areas of Marxism were critically examined and applied in this study, they do not necessarily indicate the limits of possible comparative studies; and it is therefore hoped that they will provide a stimulus for further exploration of the subject particularly with respect to such questions as the rise of social classes, the foundations of political power, the role of the state, and the causes of social changes and political revolutions in traditional Africa. There is as little harm in borrowing a useful methodology from the European intellectual tradition as there is in importing a sound tractor or an effective medicinal drug provided there is a compelling reason to do so.

Footnotes

1. Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1968), p. 41.

2. The importance of mental liberation to the struggle against colonialism is emphasized in almost all African anti-colonial literature. For some specific examples see Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth;* Kwame Nkrumah, *Autobiography* (London: Nelson & Sons, 1957), and *I Speak of Freedom* (N.Y.: Praeger, 1961); Alex Quaison-Sackey, *Africa Unbound* (N.Y.: Praeger, 1962); Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: O.U.P., 1968); and Ndabaningi Sithole, *African Nationalism* (N. Y.: O.U.P., 1970).

3. Leopold Senghor, *On African Socialism* (N.Y.: Praeger, 1961) pp. 72-73, 75, 93-94.

4. For some information on the essence of Marxism see Lewis S. Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959); Roger Garaudy, *Karl Marx: The Evolution of His Thought* (N.Y.: International Publishers, 1967); and Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (N.Y.: O.U.P., 1963).

5. On Marxian dialectics and dialectical change, see Frederick Engels *Dialectics of Nature* (N.Y.: International Publishers 1940); Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (London: Heinemann, 1964), pp. 22-27 and *passim.*

6. On historical materialism see Engels, *On Historical Materialism* (N.Y.: International Publishers, 1940); *Ludwig Feuerbach* (N.Y.: International Pubs., 1941); and *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (N.Y.: International Pubs. 1935); also Maurice Conforth, *Historical Materialism* (N.Y.: International Pubs., 1954).

7. See for example, Engels "Barbarism and Civilization," in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (N.Y.: International, 1967) pp. 144-163.

8. Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in L. S. Feuer, ed, *Marx and Engels,* p. 44; also Engels *Historical Materialism* where this concept is discussed at some length.

9. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto,* in Arthur P. Mendel, ed., *Essential Works or Marxism,* (N.Y.: Bantam Books, 1961), pp. 13-14.

10. Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State,* pp. 149-50.

11. Rene Milon, *Marxisme, Communisme, et Socialisme* (Paris, 1962), as quoted by I.I. Potekhin in "On African Socialism: A Soviet View," in William H. Friedland and Carl G. Rosberg, ed., *African Socialism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 97-8.

12. Published anonymously as "African Socialism - A Neo-Colonialist Ruse," *The Spark* (April 19, 1963), p. 2. The author was listed only as a European lecturer at the University of Ghana.

13. I.I. Potekhin, "African Socialism: A Soviet View," in Friedland and Rosberg, ed., *African Socialism,* p. 99.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

15. See Basil Davidson, *Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.); *A History of Central and East Africa* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969); *The African Past,* ed. (N.Y.: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964); see also J.D. Fage, *A History of West Africa* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969); J.F.Ajayi and Ian Espie, eds, *A Thousand Years of West African History* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965); L.H. Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia: Early Days to 1934* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965); Stanlake Samkange, *Origins of Rhodesia* (London: Heinemann, 1968); David Randall-MacIver, *Medieval Rhodesia* (N.Y.: Negro University Press, 1969).

16. See references in footnote 15, particularly Fage, p. 13, and Davidson's *Lost Cities of Africa* and *The African Past.*

17. Nkrumah, *Consciencism,* p. 26.

18. Nkrumah, "Step to Freedom": A speech (Accra: Govt. Printer, 1962), p. 9, and *Consciencism,* pp. 109-11 and 73.

19. *Consciencism,* p. 72.

20. *Ibid.,* p. 72.

21. *Ibid.,* p. 73.

22. Marx, "Critique of Political Economy," Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels,* p. 43.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

24. Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, ed., by R. Pascal (N.Y.: International, 1966), pp. 13-14.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

26. Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, p. 54.

27. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*((N.Y.: O.U.P., 1940), p. 16.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-18. Further page references will be enclosed in parentheses in the text.

29. Marx, "Critique of Political Economy," in Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels*, p. 44.

30. Basil Davidson, *African Genius* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969). p. 58. Further page references will be enclosed in parentheses in the text.

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