

AFRICAN SOCIALISM IN NKRUMAH AND NYERERE

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Introduction

African historical experience is interesting. It is so because there are events that happened in the African past which have been seen to be largely responsible for the present deplorable conditions of African societies. Events that are slavery and colonization became at different points the daily bread of the African people, who, in the course of those processes, had the bitter taste of dehumanization in the hands of their foreign masters. Colonial rule caused a huge structural change in the cultural and value systems of African people. Africans, it is claimed, used to have grand culture which was the bond between them and which they cherished and respected so much. Traditional African values are said to be unique and reflect the true ontological nature of the African collectivity. In describing the phenomenal intrusion upon this cultural balance, Abraham W. E. writes that:

The traditional societies were irreversibly penetrated by brand of Islam and Christianity, and dominated by colonial powers. The encounter altered the force and direction of host cultures, altered social relations and the rationale underlying the organisation of traditional societies, introduced new ways of doing things and new reasons for doing them, and brought within common territories cultures which before were highly territorial. In a word, these encounters changed in many different ways at one and the same time relations between individuals and relations with the environment.¹

Also describing some important cultural ingredients of traditional experience in the time before the fatal colonial perversion, Abraham writes that:

African societies traditionally were mostly unions of clans. These clans consisted of wide network of households which were interwoven through linear descent. The clans were generally responsible for instilling common beliefs, social norms and living skills in members in order to bring loyalty to communal purposes and assurance of security and provision for all.²

It is thus not surprising that some African scholars still tell the tale of the African past with relish; its value was enormous and enthralling.

Then, after all this came the political independence of African states one after another from their various colonial governments. After the independence of some African states, Africans were not contended with an independence in which the expelled

colonial masters would dictate to them what political and economic decisions to take. It was perceived that the colonial master had prevented the growth and development of the African socio-economic landscape. Therefore, the urgency arose to fathom and develop an indigenous frame-work for African development through self-involvement and self-determination. African socialism grew out of this context. African socialism among other things was developed as an ideology to prosecute the developmental project of uniting Africans for a truly independent African nation. Abraham presents this lucidly in the following manner:

On gaining independence and sovereignty, African nations sought to fortify their independence by an assertion of an African personality or negritude. Attempts were made to characterise what is African and to declare an imperative to preserve and foster it as a way of exploiting political independence for the reclamation and pursuit of an African destiny, a destiny believed to have been interrupted by the colonial episode... the practices were called socialism and communalism.³

Though there are divergent approaches to the issue of getting total freedom using the ideology of African socialism, yet African socialism is based on a common ideological principle that will be elaborated in the course of this essay.

African socialism, according to Masolo is “a body of materials combining Marxist social and economic theories with negritude’s politics of difference.”⁴ African socialism can be interpreted as a socialism whose main theoretical basis is to be sought for on a pure African tapestry. Thus, African socialism seeks to adapt Marxist socialist vision of a non-classed society to African traditional community, noted for not being atomistic.

In this chapter, the nature of African socialism is our focus, taking primarily as our oracle of understanding the cases of Nkrumah’s Consciencism and Nyerere’s Ujamaa. To do this, I will expose the nature, basic tenet and purpose of African socialism and then argue that the problem inherent in African socialism is in its dependence on the African past as the instrument of social change.

The Nature of African Socialism

Prior to examining the nature of African socialism let us dig a little deep into a relevant question: why socialism? It would not be surprising that most of the newly independent African states adopted a socialist outlook for their national projects. After ejecting colonial rule, they sought to minimise dependence on the West, and also to reconstruct their economies in order to meet their local needs. African leaders thought this approach will help bring poverty to the lowest ebb and enhance social welfare for African citizens. It however, did not appear practicable to most African leaders that this objective could be achieved in a polity driven by capitalism and individualism. In the words of Thomson:

Few African leaders considered capitalism and liberalism appropriate methods to achieve these goals. These had been the ideologies of their former colonial oppressors, and still remained the philosophy behind the international system that continued to disadvantage African economies.⁵

Thus, it dawned on African leaders of this hue that the more egalitarian approach of socialism would mean the road to progress.

However, in spite of the socialist spirit that African leaders imbued themselves with, their sort of socialism, as hinted earlier, was different from the traditional European socialism enunciated by Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. One major reason why the sort of socialism sought by Africans is different from the Western version of it is that socialism of the latter kind is a product of capitalism and its corollary, class struggle. For instance Julius Nyerere, the then Tanzanian president claimed that “as prayer is to Christianity or to Islam, so civil war [which they called class war] is to the European version of socialism– a means inseparable from the end”.⁶ Léopold Senghor, the new president of Senegal explained the imperative for African socialism in his own following terms:

It is evident that African socialism can no longer be that of Marx and Engels, which was designed in the nineteenth century according to European scientific methods and realities. Now it must take into consideration African realities.⁷

Thus, African ideologues were aware of the immediate needs and nagging challenges of development which had been wrought by European colonial havocs. Let us observe that while the Marxist idea of socialism involves further disintegration of already classed society, a process in which the proletariat is envisioned to take control of capital (the means of production) by revolution while the bourgeoisie come to the low in return, African socialism was to be defined by a consciousness of expressed internal unity among various factions on the African continent— ethnic, religious, political, Christian and Islamic. Now we turn to our main business in this section.

The central theme in African socialism is African communalism. African communalism maintains that the central values of Africans in the traditional societies were communal rather than individualistic.⁸ Individualism belongs to the West while communalism belongs to Africa. It is believed that traditional African society had shared values wherein every man and woman lived as in a family. Therefore, the guerrillas of Africa socialism regarded socialism as a direct metamorphose of communalism. Therefore, while Marx’s socialism is a product of class struggle, African socialism is not a response to any class struggle whatever. In fact, for those that upheld African socialism, there are no classes in Africa.⁹ Let us say that what stands similar to class struggle is the rise against the colonialist by the people of the colonies, which invariably are African states.

It is in line with this that Marx’s positing of revolution as an inevitable tool for change is not relevant in socialism. Since there are no classes, there is no proletariat

neither is there any bourgeois. What only needs be done is reshape the present condition of the African man by bringing the communal nature of the African past to bear in the face of present day challenges. According to Alex Thomson:

There had been no landowners in these societies, it was argued, and the interest of the community had always been put above those of the individual. In this respect, Senghor believed Africans had already realised socialism before the coming of the Europeans. African socialism was therefore an attempt to rediscover these traditional values, and marry them with new technology and the modern nation-state.¹⁰

The ideological intention therefore was to combine the traditional socio-cultural ingredients of equality, cooperation and humanism that characterised the old African communal village life with the wealth and potential for organisation which modern production methods and state institution could jointly afford.

It is this mode of thinking that was understood by pioneer ideologues as a worthy response to what had become a dehumanizing and exploitative situation brought by European colonization.¹¹

At this juncture, we must point out the main enemy that African socialism was meant to wage war against. In the history of thought, the moment we hear socialism, what comes to mind as an interpretation is the reverse of capitalism. Therefore, the common enemy of African society as perceived by African first generation leaders was capitalism. Capitalism was perceived to be against the native value of traditional African society where men lived for one another, ate as brothers, and in fact, where one will not eat until another has got what to eat. Capitalism is a legacy of European colonialism. Europeans came, and injected the capitalist attitudes into African system. The more reason why Julius Nyerere emphasises that socialism is an attitude of mind.¹² Kwame Nkrumah also posits that socialism is the expression of the principles of communalism.¹³

Capitalism is an ideology based on the principle of individualism. The quest for personal wealth and glory is an individualistic orientation, which drives the quest to monopolize, hoard and maximise capital at the expense of the survival of others. Individualism is alien to African society according to African socialists. It is the very opposite of communalism. This distinct and clear difference is akin to the difference in Descartes' and Mbiti's theories of existence. While the ontological foundation of being in Descartes is the 'I' (for in his dictum he says "I think, therefore I exist"), it is another thing for Mbiti who says that in the African community system: 'I am because we are', since we are, therefore I am.¹⁴ Therefore, individualism with its attendants evils—slavery and capitalism, is alien to Africa and must be forced out of the land by common effort. This, by rising up against the capitalist legacy bequeathed by colonialism using a machine of mass party, employing positive action as in the case of Nkrumah, and by valuing and working on communal responsibilities by all Africans in the case of Nyerere. It is in this regard that Kaphagawani says:

...African communalism presented a desirable alternative to the western framework of individualism, which, in their view, was the underlying premise of exploitative and conflictual western capitalism. Communalism was thus not a metaphysical principle of social existence but also a sort of the critique of the social order, one derived from the European Enlightenment.¹⁵

The exploration above presents a certain aversion of the African socialists; they were against exploitation by means of any '*conflictual*' structure in the society. Thus, African socialism wants to nip in the bud the tendency of individualism to grow into the stage of tearing the African society into classes, a social phenomenon that would not allow total emancipation and development because it will be another avenue for the ousted colonialist to peep in Africa affairs. This, in Nkrumah's view happens when the people are divided from their leaders and instead of providing true leadership and guidance which is informed at every point by the idea of the general welfare, leaders come to neglect the very people who put them in power and incautiously become instruments of suppression on behalf of the neo-colonialists.¹⁶

To sum up the idea of African socialism, "the aim of African socialism as its protagonist understood it was to reconsider African society in such a manner that the humanism of traditional African life reasserts itself in modern technical community".¹⁷ It may be inferred from the foregoing that the fundamental themes of African socialism are the problem of continental identity, the crisis of economic development and the dilemmas of control and class formation.¹⁸ In the section that follows, I take Nkrumah and Nyerere one after the other in order to see their common grounds and appreciate where they differ in their approaches. But before then we can do some adumbration of some similarities between African socialism and European/Marxist socialism.

Some shared boundaries between Marxist socialism and African socialism are indeed, evident. We realised that the concept 'socialism' as well as its ideological meaning, intents and purposes, belongs first to the West. Thus it must have some content deemed useful to the project of African unity and development for it to have been thought of as adaptable to the African situation. We can therefore highlight three clear similarities between European socialism and the African version of socialism.

- (a) They are both theories of social change
- (b) They both involve judgements on behalf of the oppressed in view of the debilitating effect of the oppressor's methods and tactics. In other words, Marx sought freedom for the poor proletariat— something parallel to African independent nation's pursuit of total freedom from foreign domination
- (c) Marx's targets equity for the masses while African socialism targets the same for the African people.

Philosophical Consciencism

Kwame Nkrumah was the first president of independent Ghana. His African socialism is embodied in his idea of philosophical consciencism. Consciencism is both a philosophy and an ideology, the goal of which is the decolonization of Africa. 'It presents a picture of the African past, and the African present and visualizes an African future based on the philosophy and ideology of consciencism'. In pursuance of African emancipation Nkrumah followed Marxist 'material dialectics'.¹⁹ He conceives of materialism as the 'primary existence of matter', not as the 'sole existence of matter'.²⁰ He then maintains that matter has the capacity of spontaneous self-motion through which dialectical change is made possible. He however differs from Marx because he posited the co-extensiveness of materialism and the Christian belief in God and traditional African metaphysics. In this manner, Nkrumah thought he would be able to make a theory of African revolution.

Consciencism, according to Nkrumah, is

...the map in intellectual terms of the disposition of forces which will enable African society to digest the western and the Islamic and the Euro-Christian elements in Africa, and develop them in such a way that they fit into the African personality. The African personality is itself defined by the cluster of humanist principles which underlies the traditional African society. Philosophical consciencism is that philosophical standpoint which, taking its start from the present content of African conscience indicates the way in which progress is forged out of the conflict in that conscience.²¹

From the definition above, the conflict in the conscience of Africa could be interpreted as the struggle between the individualistic forces which invaded Africa through colonialism, as well as between other alien cultural influences in religion. These forces are to be developed into the African personality based on humanistic principles. Humanistic principles are claimed to be embodied in the communalism of the traditional African life. Nkrumah would claim that the goal of consciencism will come to materialization through the practice of socialism. He says socialism is the defence of communalism.

Socialism therefore can be and is the defence of the principles of communalism in a modern setting. Socialism is a form of social organization which, guided by the principles underlying communism, adopts the measure made necessary by demographic and technological developments.²²

Nkrumah had pointed out earlier in the chapter that in socialism, the principles underlying communalism are given expression. For him, if one is looking for the socio-political ancestor of socialism, one must go to communalism. In short, what Nkrumah sought to mobilize Africans for is the bringing into play the presence the communal life of the past in form of a shared political agenda against foreign rule in all its entirety. At the centre of consciencism is the principle of *egalitarianism*, which is deemed a theory

of good life from which the good society could develop and be sustained.²³ It is through egalitarianism that the society Nkrumah envisaged can be brought into being. According to Moses Oke,

The objective of consciencism then, is to bring about a revolutionary change in Africa. The goal of such a change is to transform Africa from a neo-colonial dependent capitalist society into a true society. To effect this, the capitalist's exploitative ethics of egoistic individualism must change to that of egalitarian communalism which Nkrumah takes to approximate the correct ethics for contemporary African society informed by its history.²⁴

In order to achieve all this, Nkrumah proposes positive action which 'represents the sum of those forces seeking social justice in terms of the destruction of oligarchic exploitation and oppression'. This positive action is to be backed by a mass party, with no one left out. This is meant to be a way of uniting against the common enemy capitalism that capitalism is rather than splitting up into various parties (i.e., multi-party political system) thereby pursuing selfish interests which would become an arena for neo-colonialism.²⁵ Nkrumah therefore suggests a one party system. Some critics have suggested that Nkrumah's ideological preference for one-party system was motivated by a selfish desire to perpetuate his control of affairs in Ghana.

Julius Nyerere; Ujamaa

Ujamaa is the name of Nyerere's principle of African socialism. Ujamaa literally translates to familyhood.²⁶ Nyerere made Ujamaa the bedrock of socialism— a socialism strictly rooted in African communalism. According to Nyerere, the foundation and the objective of African socialism is the extended family.

According to Nyerere, socialism is an attitude of mind, like democracy. For him a millionaire can be a good socialist and destitute people can be potential capitalists. Socialism for him is distributive and not acquisitive.

An important element in Nyerere's Ujamaa is the place of labour. He wanted every man and woman to work, to contribute to the collective welfare of society. According to Nyerere:

In traditional African society everybody was a worker... There was no other way of earning a living for the community.²⁷

Nyerere believes each man must work to foster the good of the society; i.e. to build the wealth of the society. In this way each person will also have equal access to the wealth of the society.

Nyerere's emphasis on work suggests his perception of work as a worthwhile and dignifying element in African social life. Rather than conceive of work as dehumanizing and alienating (as in Marx's theory of labour), work is honourable and important in African communal past. 'Everybody was a worker' in the traditional

community. This is unlike Marx who claims that work is alienating, objectifying and distancing man from the value of himself, his product, nature and the enjoyment of life.²⁸

But then, it is apposite to state here that Marx's characterization of labour as an alienating factor is within the framework of capitalism. This implies that such characterization is not likely to be present in Nyerere who holds that capitalism is alien to Africa while communalism is native instead. After all, Nyerere emphasizes that there are no classes in Africa, noting that his own use of the term 'worker' should not be construed as opposite of 'employer' but rather as opposed to 'loiterer or idler'. Therefore, for him, socialism needs not to be taught to Africans just as democracy needs not. To achieve the socialist aim, the first step must be that Africans re-educate themselves to regain their former attitude of mind. According to Nyerere, 'In our traditional African society we were individuals within a community. We took care of the community and the community took care of us'.

In a nutshell, the socialism of Nyerere is one in which the tribal community and its value is expressed. He never believed that socialism is a result of capitalism and the conflict it generates as the case is in the European sense of capitalism. In fact he says he doubts if the equivalent for the word 'class' exists in any indigenous African language. He says the foundation and the objective of African socialism is the extended family.²⁹ What should be a class is the colonialist, thus Africans are to unite for the purpose of familyhood. The family is to be extended even beyond the African landscape.³⁰ In what follows, I look at the basic points of convergence and divergence between Nyerere and Nkrumah.

Nkrumah and Nyerere

The major point of convergence between philosophical consciencism and Ujamaa is their erection of socialism on African communalism. As we have seen, both of them posit that communalism is the socio-political ancestor of socialism.

However, Nkrumah departs from Nyerere in what constitutes African socialism in certain regard. First, while it could be safely said that Nkrumah provided a metaphysical grounding for his philosophy and ideology of change (I.e. dialectical materialism), Nyerere did not do any rigorous metaphysical philosophy to that effect. This become clearer when we realize that Nyerere himself stated that there is not the slightest necessity for people to study metaphysics and decide if there is one God or many Gods or no God before they can be a socialist. Such questions are important to man and irrelevant to socialism.³¹ To this end, we can say that Nyerere's approach falls within philosophical anthropology. Second, Nyerere took no departure from Marx while Nkrumah shares from Marx's idea of historical materialism where he draws his idea of material dialectic. Yet, both of them would not agree with Marx that social change require that God be removed out of the scheme of things.

Lastly, while Nkrumah's socialism tilts towards political action far more than mere socio-economic attitudes, Nyerere is concerned about how to use socialism to distribute resources not how to put a government in power and support it (for the sake of emancipation and development). This seems to be one of the cardinal goals of consciencism. To make this point more succinct, let us say that Nyerere does not make the state instrumental to socialism whereas the case is in Nkrumah, with Nkrumah even making socialism instrumental to political action.³² This is akin to the common criticism of Nkrumah that his ideology tilts toward perpetuation of rule. It is nonetheless not unknown to us that Nkrumah eventually declared himself the 'life president' (Osagyefo) of Ghana.³³

Communalism and African Socialism

Generally speaking, the difficulty in African socialism concerns its theoretical basis, the African communal past and the romanticisation of it. It has been held for example that African traditional communities were not peculiarly communal; that communality is characteristic of traditional societies. Thus, if African traditional society is not peculiarly communal, then the foundation of any social theory based on that African personality is shaken.

In a related connection, one cannot really say whether in the real sense, it was western presence in Africa that gave the gift of individualism to post-communal Africans, or that Africans, even in the clans, had the potential to get wild if freed from the close censure which the close framework of the small, compound arrangement afforded. If the latter, then it is normal that Africans in larger societies and corresponding need to exploit resources for survival would no more operate within that close framework, because it would not be able to support them. Meanwhile, the notion that Africa before western influence was communal and based on the family indicts the people, for it suggests that African personality is very pliant and African value system weak and porous to such extent that it could not resist the greed and selfishness that characterised colonial exploitation.

I suggest, however, that African socialism is possible, apart from being laudable. There are, of course, at least two ingredients that would make a socialism African; the nature of the reality that it is to address i.e., its socio-political and historical context, and the tenets on which it is based. On the former, African socialism has a laudable vision, and the absence of parameters by successive governments in African nations to carry out the socialist vision of an egalitarian African society have its far reaching results manifesting in the large-scale poverty of the African masses, where the few in politics and their allied in business continue to wallow in excess wealth. On the latter, communalism needs not be rooted in the African past for it to be applicable to contemporary African socialist visions. Rather, it can be developed as a scientific theory necessary for socialist politics. By defining and defending communalism as an ideal, we

focus on the future, and we are able to construct it from present realities. This is a process that allows us to engage our present situation as our situation, to unite with it, analyse it, and design a theory from it, not for it. As such, a communalism that is a social theory and vision, rather than a memory, can be subjected to criticism and tested against possibilities, and it can become a universal human approach to social analysis rather than a tribal property.

Lastly, considering its vision, African socialism teaches Africans to consider one another. All Africans need to take their dose from this. The current state of mind in which greed and corruption is the chief motivation of acts offends the spirit of growth and development. Aren't Africans supposed to learn that social good is a product of sharing and co-operation? Many African states are not only backward but are in squalor and terrible blood-drinking conflicts; insecurity, unemployment, corruption, inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic wars are the characteristic banners of these states. African socialism has given egalitarianism to Africa; it is left for Africa to choose between divisive capitalism and the beauty of cooperation.

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