

African Political Philosophy

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Chapter 7

AFRICAN SOCIALISM

By

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Introduction

Ideas cannot be divorced from the society in which they flourished, and they are not completely dependent on social structure. Political ideas can legitimize the political structures, and consequently increase political stability...when certain ideas are widely accepted and agreed upon in the political system, we speak of a consensus (Ball, 1979: 31); thus, philosophy occurs wherever there are people with inquisitive minds agitated by the events in the environment. Therefore, it was so that Africans thought of the beauty of their past

and overvalued it in what Professor Ali Mazrui termed 'primitive gloriana'. Many scholars also basked in the euphoria of earlier period in a manner of 'primitive romanticism'. Sevin Hirschbein (1978) termed these as 'appeals to a golden age of the past to serve as a model for the present', which was obtained in the state of communality and sought to develop further into a form of governance in the colonial and post colonial years. As scientific or Marxian socialism is subjected to considerable revisionism and versions, African socialism would have been refined to a near perfect stage for application today. It is therefore not uncommon to find its variants such as, Tom Mboya's African socialism (1963), L. S. Senghor's Senegalese socialism, and Nwalimu J. K. Nyerere's *ujamaa* – the non-Marxist path to socialism, etc.

Scientific socialism grew out of two major antecedents; the agrarian reforms in Europe, which created the class of land owners, landless population, and the industrial revolution of the early 19th century, which produced the antagonistic classes of the proletariat – industrial wage earners and the bourgeoisie, the industrial owners who are locked in an aggressive relationship. Thus, these two opposing classes are brought together because of the industrial background hence connected to one another by 'social solidarity.' African socialism on the other hand grew out of the sanguinary blood ties, which existed between the people of African descent, who often came from the same patriarch, thereby constituting family ties. Mechanical rather than social solidarity informed African socialism. This was the basis to avoid exploitation as much as possible in the African socialist context. The intention of this piece is not to compare the two and condemn one as being unprogressive as many have

done before now. This analysis is however to examine the contribution of Africans to political theory by evolving the philosophy of African socialism. It would in addition discuss the problems besetting further development of the concept in Africa. This subject-matter is dealt with in three parts; introducing the point of departure, dealing with the values and norms derived from African tradition and custom which informed the theory of African socialism, and the structure, power organization, the economy and the problems which confronted the concept and practice of African socialism.

African societies emerged like all others through the stages of growth. Like western and Greek societies, it was once at the pre-civilization stage, which Thomas Hobbes described as the 'state of nature'. It was the stage that was characterized by the absence of the 'Leviathan' (political authority). Men exercised their fundamental human rights without restriction. These rights conflicted with one another, which resulted in excessive conflict in the society. The persistence of conflict and the inconveniences it created, led Hobbes to describe life in such a primitive state as being 'short, nasty brutish and solitary' (Sabine, 1973: 425). Man being a reasonable, community building and a gregarious animal, sought order to rule his relationship with another. Thus, man entered into social contract with other men to institute order in their relationships, this created to Africans, and men elsewhere, communal society with social order, which formed the basis of the political theory.

A detailed and comparative study of facts made available by archeologists, pre-historians, historians, social geographers and anthropologists reveals that there have existed in history six broad kinds of social systems. These are; the communal, the slave-based, the

self-based, the mercantile, the capitalist, and the nascent socialist systems. Human society everywhere started with the communal type. The social order, which prevailed in the African communal society, which defined the rights, duties and privileges of everyone, was that of communal ownership of land, the major means of production. Land in the African communal society was owned by the community, or by extended families. Each family owned land and there was no landlessness. Every family worked for its own upkeep, and no individual worked permanently for another outside the family. Its members according to rights derived from age, sex and work used the product of the family. Communal work was common (Toyo, 2008: 3). It is instructive to note at this point that African communal society was concerned with everybody within the inclusive community. The society was structured along patriarchal lineages. Each lineage head had a duty not to allow anyone within his fold go hungry. Pursuant to this objective, the only means of production being land was held in common for all. Whenever anyone came of age, a piece of land was made available to him, and his age grade would contribute labour to cultivate his land and during harvest. This sharing of the major means of survival was for lack of another term referred to as African socialism. It comprised production, ownership, distribution, and consumption. This is the issue highlighted in detail in the subsequent sections of this paper to indicate that Africans also contributed to the development of political philosophy.

The Philosophy of African Socialism

The philosophy of African socialism radiated from the communal background of African society. This is

because every philosophy is masterminded by the objective physical conditions in which the bearer of the philosophy finds himself. It is important to outline the norms and values that prevailed in communal African societies, which were coalesced into the concept of African socialism.. In this system, the main item of property was land. Communal work was common. All other rights; political, economic or cultural, were related to these. Life, as anthropologists report about such societies that existed in the 19th and 20th centuries was egalitarian. This means that the families had the same rights and no one within the family had superior rights to another that did not derive from age, sex, or nature and amount of work (Toyo, 2008: 4). This is where the following principles were derived which included;

- i. Africans are all related by blood in every settlement hence the patriarchal nature of African societies, arranged in clans and lineages. As a result, it was an abomination to be instrumental to the hunger or poverty of one's relations. This explained the essence of communal ownership of the means of production, land.
- ii. The idea of planning, direction, control and cooperation. It was a common phenomenon for the family-head to decide which of the farmlands would be cultivated with what type of crops and which would be left to fallow for the next cultivation season.
- iii. The African communal society guaranteed political equality and democracy in whatever crude form. Issues were freely debated and resolved and everyone was equal in his contribution within his/her social class.
- iv. Social justice was also upheld in African communal setting. According to Professor Dudley Seers; the

question to ask about a country's development are three; what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. He reviewed this and added 'self-reliance' and ownership as well as output in the leading economic sectors (Gana, 1983: 91). This is because in the African setting everyone had access to the means of production and appropriated the product of his labour maximally, hence there was no exploitation.

- v. There was communal labour where an age grade would all go to a member's farmland and contribute labour to tilt his land and at other time it was another's turn to also help tilt his land. This was distributive justice. Human dignity was thus upheld in African communal society.

These are some of the determinants derived from the African traditional practices, which informed the later philosophical postulation of African socialism. It is instructive to note that just as scientific socialism (Marxism) had several brands, so it was with the concept of African socialism. The common denominator of all these, were the norms and values prevalent in the African communal societies. Be mindful that the use of the term 'socialism and communism' is not original to Karl Marx nor Lenin or Hegel, but borrowed from Moses Hess, hence Africans could adopt it without meaning scientific socialism.

The conceptualization and articulation of African socialism was derived from the sociology of communalism, which made Africans to believe that

everyone in the family, lineage, village or clan originated from the same putative ancestor (patriarch). Thus, everyone was connected to one another because of sanguinary blood ties, termed 'mechanical solidarity' by sociologists. This explicates extensive political behavior in Africa and subsequently informed African socialism based on the belief that 'we are all sons and daughters of the soil'...From this belief springs the logic and the practice of equality, and the acceptance of communal ownership of the vital means of life, the land (Mboya, 1963: 603). This philosophy gave primacy to material condition, particularly economic factors, in the explanation of social life, for man is '*homo-economicus*', an economic man. It is true today as it was in the African communal society that economic need is man's most fundamental need; man must eat before he can do anything else – before he can worship, pursue culture or become an economist. When an individual achieves a level of economic necessities, particularly his daily food, for granted, the urgency of economic need loses the edge; in short, man must eat to live but he must work in order to eat (Ake, 1981: 1). This attitude of the mind of Africans remained the foundation of *ujamaa* and indeed underscored all brands of African socialism. In the words of Nwalimu J. K. Nyerere, socialism is an attitude of mind, which ensures that the people care for each other's welfare.

Democracy: The governance and the power structure in African socialism rested with the elders who represented the families, lineages, or clans. They held the power and the means of production in trust for the people. They meet together to take decisions, contribute warriors from the clans, lineages in defense of the territory. The leaders of the various groups decide who

becomes the overall head or king based on the seniority of their progenitor. This explains why the practices of the ruling house are rotated among ruling houses in most African states.

The Economy: The nature of the economy under African socialism is essentially distributive and in accordance with one's inputs. You appropriate what you sow and contribute proportionally to the commonwealth for the sustenance of those who suffer from an act of God such as famine, drought or fire disaster as jointly recommended by the family head, lineage or clan. For instance, when a hut had to be built, everyone was expected to go out cut the trees and erect the frame. The women would bring the cow-dung and the earth to make the floor, and drew water and make the plaster for the walls. Then the men would bring the grass for the thatching, and the work would be done together. The owner of the hut would cook food for everyone and the work would finish in a day. If someone refuses to take part, then he would find that when his time came to build a hut, few people came to help him and he might be completely boycotted. This was the kind of sanction, which operated against the lazy man (Mboya, 1963: 604). Other sanctions range from ostracism to many others.

Scientific and African Socialism: Their Relationships

Too often, the philosophy of African socialism is not given a place in the discourse of political thoughts. This part of the paper presents the relationship between the two concepts in comparative terms. Scientific socialism

is at the same time a theory and practice. Engel defines it as a method, not as a dogma; it is a series of steps that the mind takes to discover and demonstrate the truth', or preferably 'a series of reasoned steps to reach an objective in any field whatsoever. In other words, method as at once theory and practice, more precisely a theory conceived to be applied towards a definite objective. Engel was perfectly right to define socialism as a method (Senghor, 1964: 1). African socialism on the other hand is not an end in itself, but a 'means' to an 'end' of a good life. It is where the worker owns the means of production, and appropriates the benefit thereof maximally, thereby eliminating exploitation and alienation from the product of his labour. To this extend, both are/were 'means' to an 'end'.

One of the ends of Marxism is the destruction of capitalism, the major instrument of alienation and exploitation and the taking over the power of the state, which is sustained by the state apparatus (bureaucracy, justice, army, and police). African socialism by its nature abhors capitalism, and subverts this by its basis which rests on 'mechanical solidarity' by which every person is related by blood ties through the community or clan's patriarch. This created an attitude of mind towards one another, which repudiates exploitation through pursuit of profit. Karl Marx distinguished between socialism and communism. Socialism is not communism, it is the preparation for communism, a temporary stage on the road to communism both involve dual task - political and economic - but of a different type. Politically, socialism retains the apparatus of the state in order to transform it (Senghor, 1964:1). African socialism is a stage towards high socio-political formation; a stage which one cannot predict what it would have been if 'colonial - capitalism', did not distort it. This is because all human

social organization is subject to changes. It was in the hands of workers of the land and leaders of the clans.

One of the goals and objective of Marxism will be the age of abundance where each will receive according to his needs, because the division of labour into manual and intellectual pursuits will vanish. Nwalimu J. K. Nyerere a theorist par excellence of African socialism averred that when a society is so organized that it cares about such individuals within that society, the individual would not worry about what will happen to them tomorrow if it does not hoard wealth today. Society itself should look after her widow and orphans. Both the rich and the poor individually were completely secured in African society (Wikipedia, 2006). Scientific socialism establishes democracy at the stage of the violent takeover of the state and at the level of eschatology. Power organization under African socialism was a collegiate system, where the leaders of the clans came together to take decisions and execute it democratically. In some traditional African societies such as the old Oyo Empire, it was known as the 'Oyomesi'. This was replicated all over Africa. Democracy was embedded in African socialism.

In a capitalist society, like great Britain, for instance, the owners of capital will similarly, predominantly determine the substance of law. In a socialist society, like Soviet Russia, the substance of law will be determined by the fact that the common ownership of the means of production subordinates the interest of a class to the interest of the society as a whole (Laski, 1966: vii). This is precisely what African socialism did in pre-colonial Africa. Lastly, the motive, and the force in Marxism consisted in the thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. By this progressive process, socialism breaks down into its contradictions and glide

towards communism. It is a possibility that communism could not generate its contradictions and give birth to what neither you nor me nor Karl Marx could predict. Similarly, because no human society is ever static, for forces of social intervention would have generated a new form of African socialism, which this author would, be playing god if he attempts the prediction of the nature of what it would have turn into. Finally, while Marxism rests on the existence of antagonistic classes in the society, African socialism was founded on the extended family system. Thus, they both need different framework for its analysis.

Ujamaa: The Practice

African socialism like Marxism was subjected to several interpretations and brands. It is only the ujamaa brand, which created social structures for its realization in Tanzania based on the principles enunciated in the Arusha Declaration of 1967. It is within its created structures and functioning that we herein examine the policies, programs, achievements and challenges in a bipolar world with rising capitalist influence. It should be recalled that the global socio-economic system in which 'ujamaa' operated consisted of scientific socialism in the Eastern bloc on the one hand and the liberal capitalist system in the Western hemisphere on the other, all of which were searching for converts. Sandwiched between these two extremes Ujamaa in practice observed it principles contained in the Arusha Declaration strictly. The principles as derived from Arusha Declaration included: self-reliance, absence of exploitation where all people are workers, these were wrapped in the mega principles of the 'people, land, good policies and good leadership' (Nyerere, 1968: 520). The Tanzania

leadership decided to do this by a system of village communities engaged in a group work. These villages were subsequently called ujamaa villages and the aim was to place the entire rural population in these villages. The 1978 villagization programme was explained in 'The Development Plan of 1969-74 as follows: 'the objective is to farm the village land collectively with modern techniques of production and share the proceeds according to the work contributed. People who are farming together can obtain the economic advantages of large-scale farming in the better utilization of machinery, purchase of supplies, marketing of crops, etc. It becomes easier to supply technical advice through agricultural extension officers who can teach a group more easily in one place, rather than traveling from one small shamba to another. It is also easier to provide social facilities such as water supplies, medical and educational services, to farmers who live in groups rather than in scattered holdings (Ake, 1981: 116).

The Tanzanian government had refused West German aid when it was tied to the non-recognition of East Germany, which Tanzania eventually recognized. It pursued non-aligned development. It opens its economy to gifts, loans and private investment as long as it was not tied to any condition that may interfere with Socialist Development in Tanzania (Hirschbein, 1978: 1). It is instructive to note that the principal strategy of ujamaa was to avoid profit, which arose out of the exploitation of one man by another. It was rather to be attained by all men working and producing; the surplus would then be exported to accommodate capital for development. Nevertheless, this was difficult to be attained.

The Challenges

Is it possible to develop socialism while subject to the imperative of international capitalism and its international credit institutions (WB and IMF)? It is possible to withstand the forces of both Western and the Eastern blocs, which were searching, for allies? These posed grave challenges to ujamaa. These problems arose because socialism in ujamaa is equated with Marxism. Nevertheless, it is at most a brand of it. The pitfall of comparison with Marxism must be avoided. The other is being the natural poverty of the state of Tanzania and its underdeveloped nature, which made it near impossible to generate and accumulate enough surpluses from the inputs of the peasants. While attention was focused on cash crop production to earn the desired foreign exchange, a gap was created in the production of food crops, leading to subsidies in the ujamaa villages. This was a function of management, technology and the vagaries of the weather because most of the east African countries had a bout of drought.

Success of Ujamaa

The invention of the concept of ujamaa, a brand of African socialism is in it a contribution to political theory and philosophy by an African, based on African value system. It was a means to an end as Marxism. Nevertheless, because of its substantial pressure experienced by the phenomenon in the post-colonial era, none of us is able to foretell what would have been its level of development now.

Considerable state farms were set up which served as models for the ujamaa village cooperation to learn techniques and other skill there from. Employment was thus created and the commanding height of the economy passed to the state. The logic was that of self-reliance for as Nyerere averred: if every individual is self-reliant, the the house cell will be self-reliant; if all the cells are self-reliant, the whole ward will be self-reliant, and if the wards are self-reliant, the district will be self-reliant, if the districts are self-reliant, then the region is self-reliant, and if the regions are self-reliant, then the whole nation is self-reliant and this our aim (1967).

It is worth submitting that because of the practice of ujamaa, the public sector has now become very dominant in the Tanzanian economy. To illustrate this, in 1973 public sector capital stock had risen to Sh. 2,077 million or 70.7 per cent of the national capital stock, while the public sector's share of wage employment had risen to 64 per cent of total wage employment. Thus, enormous expansion of the public sector has meant a radical change in the distribution of ownership in factor of localization (Ake, 1981: 118). It is the opinion of this paper that if aggressive ujamaa was insulated from capitalism for independent development, it would probably have attained the level, which other development theories had attended.

Conclusion

The practice of ujamaa or African socialism, brought to the fore, the centrality of the principles tangential to development as self-reliance, the people, land, good

public policies and good leadership. An evaluation of development in post-colonial African states indicated that these central elements are often missing hence vicious underdevelopment. Ujamaa if nothing else has set the agenda for independent development in post-colonial state. African socialism would perhaps have done much more than Marxism.

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