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Marxism, Communitarianism and Communalism in Africa

1

Over one hundred and fifty years after its initial publication, it is difficult to read the effects and influence of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* in the West African region or even in most of the geographical entities that experienced colonialism. Historical materialism is central to Marxist epistemology, but, especially in countries that have experienced colonisation, it needs to be viewed through categories of race and imperialism as well as gender, religion, and nationality. When mediated by these other categories and concepts, historical materialism and Marxist epistemology become less provincial and consequently more universal.

Traditionally, in West Africa, Marxism has been read alongside processes of decolonisation and nation-building. In other words, it has always been assimilated through other seemingly unrelated conceptual lenses which then grant it a distinctive tenor and import quite separate from its original Western location and trajectory.

Nonetheless, Marxism usually holds an allure in most parts of West Africa because of the obvious preference it bestows on a wide variety of subaltern struggles; struggles against colonialism, imperialism, internal economic exploitation, and most recently, corporate globalisation.

There are currently no known translations of *Das Kapital* in any indigenous West African language and yet local histories and conditions are quite receptive to Marxian analyses, transformation, and development.

This essay traces the development of Marxist thought largely in West and East Africa. However, there is also a brief focus on the South African context in addition to the West African communal practice of pawnship. What emerges from this specific trajectory are the slight alterations in praxis that are evident on the two regions of the continent. For instance, in East Africa, there is an evident deployment of the concept of *ujamaa* which may be regarded as an endogenous form of communitarianism and its eventual utilisation in the larger nation-building project, particularly in Tanzania. As mentioned earlier, South Africa also has a strong tradition of Marxist and leftist thought, including the Southern African concept of *ubuntu*, which is highlighted to demonstrate its similarities to *ujamaa*.

Modern African forms of socialism were fashionable during the unravelling of colonialism and the advent of the postcolonial era. It promised a decolonial

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future and possibilities that connected a widespread African communal ethos with a decolonising consciousness. In addition, socialist ideology, generally speaking, appealed to formerly colonised African countries intending to break away from their subaltern and neo-colonial status. The former Soviet Union and China did not possess any African colonies and this proved to be in their favour during the Cold War epoch. Socialist thought and ideology not only had similarities with African communal sensibilities but also served the decolonial aspirations of many Africans.

Communalism, communitarianism, and Marxist thought and practice are all addressed in varying degrees to underline the significance of the collective ethos in the organisation of everyday life, formal political practice, and ultimately, in defining the political economy of need. But these general preoccupations are mediated with wide-ranging scenarios depicting important African historical events (such as imperialism, political liberation, decolonisation and neo-colonialism) and significant political actors like Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Patrice Lumumba, Sekou Touré, Amilcar Cabral, Julius Nyerere and Walter Rodney amongst others. Discussions also revolve around the theories of Ifeanyi Menkiti, a noted African philosopher. Given the diverse and haphazard nature of these various historical events, no attempt is made to develop a neat chronological narrative, and, instead, attention is devoted to the concepts and theorists that are relevant to this discussion. Indeed, rather than chronological predictability, the postcolonial theory trope of hybridity is more appropriate to this context.

This receptivity to Marxian transformation is even more evident in the age of corporate globalisation that forces so-called Third World nations into direly unequal relations of economic organisation and development as producers of cheap raw materials (a heritage of the colonial era) for the post-industrial world, which exports finished products at extortionate prices to the same impoverished Third World countries.

Arguably, apart from African nations with notable settler populations such as South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, and perhaps to a lesser extent Kenya, the capitalist transformation of social and economic relations has not been extensive on the continent. In other words, unlike many parts of Latin America where vibrant peasant and workers' organisations exist, sizeable parts of Africa continue to enjoy the good fortune of being exempt from intensive capitalist development, which makes them better equipped to embrace non-capitalist economic institutions and thus to develop outside the capitalist growth-paradigm.

In most rural communities (the majority of Africa's population continues to reside in rural areas), not the entirety of human existence is monetarised.

Age-old agricultural practices based on seasonal planting and harvesting of basic household crops continue to thrive.

In the context of such subsistence economies, the well-being of the collective (a Marxian leitmotif) is deemed important, which is why a premium is placed on ceremonies such as weddings, burials, and name-giving at birth. Rather than the individual investing significantly in future financial security, the collective takes pride of place as a site of investment.

Land in many rural African communities remains held in communal trust. As long as one needs it and works upon it, it remains in one's possession, but once it falls into disuse, it reverts back to its status as communal property pending its re-allocation to a needy individual.

In 1978, Nigeria's military regime promulgated the Land Use Decree in order to create a uniform system of land allocation and use for the entire country. Through this decree which came into full effect the following year, all the land within the country was, in theory, nationalised.

Timothy, my 88-year-old uncle, had been a subsistence farmer all his life and gave it up some years back due to his advanced age. To my question of who was now farming the land, my late father responded: no one. I then asked who the land would be bequeathed to, and he replied, anyone within the community who needs it. I was gratified with this concept of ownership, which remains largely outside the orbit of capitalist production, marketing and commodification. It also seemed to be devoid of the influence of the country's established nationalisation policy; it also offers a succinct and basic understanding of the concept of need.

This reality could be contrasted with the entry of Cecil John Rhodes into the Southern Africa socio-political context in the 19th century.[1] In his livid search for lucrative mineral deposits such as gold and diamonds, Rhodes embarked on a relentless campaign of rapine that dispossessed countless Southern African indigenes of prime land without compensation. When an aggrieved young chief inquired where he and his people were to live now that their land had been taken from them, he was informed that settlements would be parcelled out to them – to which he could only wonder, how was it possible they would be granted land by foreigners in their own territory?

The effects of Rhodes' concerted campaign of dispossession can still be perceived in Southern Africa, where land reform policies have wreaked untold economic havoc in Zimbabwe and have started having grim repercussions in neighbouring South Africa. The truth of the matter is that those two countries of Rhodesian socio-political design have been constructed on massive dispos-

1 Nyamnjoh 2016.

session, exploitation, inequality, and legalised authoritarian violence. Key to nation-building and decolonisation is how to revisit the wrongs and the traumatic reverberations of the colonial encounter by addressing the unresolved land question. Apologists of colonialism defend a "let sleeping dogs lie" solution. A decolonising perspective suggests that a nation cannot be built on gross inequalities, dispossession and a blasé acceptance of historical niceties that yield easy and superficial comfort.

The severance from a subsistence culture to one based on extraction and super-exploitation also entailed a devaluation of social life which for decades has increased the commodification of everything from basic amenities such as housing and healthcare to water. Perhaps a case in point is the chaotic scenario of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in which, amid untold amounts of mineral resources, mercenaries from all parts of world wage constant war against competitors and locals in a bid to maintain and control access to those resources. In so doing, they simply leave carnage, misery, squalor and death in their wake.

For a considerable period of time now, scholars have been hammering upon the fact that the state in many African contexts is in steady retreat.[2] Accordingly, the phenomenon known as "the exit of the state" or "failed state" has been widely reported in regions blighted by insensitive structural-often International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank-induced-adjustment programmes, war and chronic poverty. The reduced capacities of the state have in turn created a gaping institutional vacuum that calls for alternative economic systems quite distinct from global capitalism which is evidently failing.

2

As noted earlier, despite the fact that no translations of *Das Kapital* have been found in West Africa, there exists a strong tradition of Marxist thought in the region, primarily developed during the Cold War era. African Marxists developed their thought and praxis in the crucible of decolonisation and the nation-building project, and this history marked African traditions of Marxism with quite specific accents.

Some West African independence leaders such as Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal opposed Marxist ideology as a basis for nation-building although some critics would argue that his *On African Socialism* is fairly Marxist in its outlook

2 Bayart 1999; Ihonvbere 2001; Joseph 1988; Maier 2000.

and intent.[3] Other leaders such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who is a central figure in African socialist thought, modified scientific materialism in consonance with the ethos of African communal living.

However, West Africa has arguably produced the most rigorous Marxist activist of the postcolonial period in the figure of Amilcar Lopes Cabral (1924–1973) of Guinea-Bissau. Cabral founded the *Partido Africano da Independencia da Guine e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC) in the 1950s to rid the West African coast of Portuguese colonialism. Cabral was not only a theorist of liberation; he was also an indefatigable activist who lost his life in the struggle for freedom. Notably, Marxist thought in the struggle for African liberation was promoted in varying degrees by Modibo Keita of Mali, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana,[4] Julius Mwalimu Nyerere of Tanzania,[5] Gamel Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Sekou Touré of Guinea, Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria and possibly early Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. However, African leaders of Marxist persuasion – particularly Nkrumah of Ghana and Touré of Guinea – encountered serious problems in instrumentalising Marxist principles, as Ghanaians and Guineans respectively were headed in a different direction from their renowned leaders.

Ghanaian and Guinean citizens demanded improved market conditions to advance their business and agricultural interests based on established patterns of interregional commerce while these two leaders (Nkrumah and Touré) opposed them and yet imposed taxes and levies on them. Evidently, the difference in outlooks and expectations between the leaders and their citizens posed a conceptual and practical difficulty. Another difficulty arose from the leaders' attempts to synthesise Marxist principles along with African dynamics. First, there was resistance to Western ideas within the context of fractious decolonisation and nation-building processes, and so it was sometimes difficult to separate Marxism from its historical reality as, when all was said and done, it is a foreign-inspired ideology. Nonetheless, given these challenges, Marxist thought was often employed in the struggles against imperialism, since virtually all colonisers in the African continent adhered to, or rather were conscripted to, forms of peripheral or metropolitan capitalism.

Other challenges were posed by the entrenchment of Islam and Christianity in most parts of the continent, which often conflicted with Marxian modes of analysis and development. Indeed, the African intelligentsia encountered a host of

3 Senghor 1964; Senghor 1998.

4 Nkrumah 1962; Nkrumah 1963; Nkrumah 1964; Nkrumah 1970.

5 Nyerere 1962a; Nyerere 1962b; Nyerere 1963; Nyerere 1967a; Nyerere 1967b; Nyerere 1968; Nyerere 1969; Nyerere 1973; Nyerere 1976.

problems in implanting Marxist ideology in African soil. In institutional terms, the one-party structure favoured by communist states appealed to African nationalist leaders due to its relatively easy accommodation of state authoritarianism.[6]

Authoritarianism was deemed the most convenient way to foster national unity amongst rival ethnicities, religions and competing nationalist visions. Also, it was believed that it provided the most suitable structural base for the advent and functioning of a 'messianic' strong man. However, not unexpectedly, this approach frequently resulted in gross abuses, repression, and arbitrariness as in Nkrumah's Ghana and Touré's Guinea, which some far-sighted leaders came to understand to be a flawed approach.

Instructively, Polycarp Ikuenobe advocates a gerontocracy instead of modern democratic norms.[7] If authoritarianism has a positive veneer within the space of "conventional" traditionalism, it obviously does not when viewed alongside the contemporary politics of governance in Africa or anywhere else for that matter. Indeed, it is often argued that the notion of authoritarianism itself is antithetical to the democratic project. Interestingly, some Confucian and Islamic thinkers approve of political meritocracy.

3

When discussing the articulation of Marxist theory and practice across the African continent, it is possible to take a broad view, since African nations experienced similar histories relating to slavery, modernity, colonialism, imperialism, decolonisation and nationhood. These various processes and histories depart from the Western experiences of Marxism. African socialist leaders have thus modified Marxist theory and practice to suit local African conditions.

In addition, the penetration of global capitalism in Africa has been quite uneven and, in regions of resource scarcity, has sometimes been remarkably minimal. This situation has left many parts of the continent hanging on a precipice between potential Marxian re-definition, on the one hand, and a definitive capture by global capitalism, on the other.

Earlier, we noted that in many parts of Africa, a far-reaching monetarisation of rural economies has not occurred and so there exist forms of exchange that are presently outside the strictly capitalist orbit. At independence, this state of

6 Murove 2009.
7 Ikuenobe 2006.

affairs did not translate into a genuine institutionalisation of indigenous modes of governance. Instead what occurred was a wholesale adoption of the ambiguous structure of the colonial state – the central feature of colonial administration – as the main instrument of postcolonial governance.

Marxists and socialists favoured this approach to governance because in several ways, it resembled the one-party state formations of communist countries of the Eastern Bloc. It also provided an ideological alternative to Western liberalism. As mentioned earlier, these one-party state structures often led to abuses of power in stifling dissent and the repression of populations. These abuses notwithstanding, the socialist vision of society was a welcome relief to many peoples of African descent both on the continent and in the diaspora, as it provided a vision of hope and liberation from centuries of European imperialism and degradation.

The emergence of the Soviet Union as a global superpower after World War II had a considerable impact on Third World nations embarking on the course of decolonisation. Soviet scholars invested immense intellectual energy in analysing the historical transition from anti-colonialism to a supposedly class-less society. In other words, processes of African decolonisation resonated resoundingly with rigorous Marxist analyses.

Nonetheless, these communist readings of African history and developmental processes proved fallacious. All over the continent, pockets within the bourgeoisie arose in the place of colonial administrations and largely extended the dialectic of colonialism, paving the way for what was termed neo-colonialism by Nkrumah.[8] The expected emergence of a vibrant proletariat to act as an advance guard of the forces of change and revolution did not occur. This development perplexed Soviet scholars who had pontificated on African historical processes.

However, the Soviet scholars were correct in one crucial regard.[9] They predicted the advent of neo-colonialism even before Nkrumah. Neocolonialism means a more refined stage of colonialism in which African countries continue to suffer economic – and often political – dependency through the dominance and manipulation of international trade and monetary systems by the West. The ploy, it was argued, was to keep African nations in a state of underdevelopment via a prefabricated system of patronage and inequitable economic exchange.

Visionary and progressive African leaders who resisted this unequal international economic order were viciously attacked and sometimes killed, as in the case of Patrice Lumumba of the Republic of Congo. Lumumba met his demise in

8 Mudimbe 1988.

9 Cf. Mudimbe 1988.

the hands of Joseph-Desire Mobutu aided by United States-owned Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Mobutu eventually headed one of the most kleptomaniac and most brutal regimes in Africa.

The unfair global economic order elicited Marxist-Leninist critiques everywhere. African leaders such as Senghor of Senegal came under harsh criticism for not being adequately rigorous. Senghor, in particular, was criticised for his mild variant of socialism which sought to equate African communal ethos with scientific socialism. He was also vilified for his apparently romantic essentialisation of the African subject, whom he projected not as an agent of history but rather as a victim of historical stasis.[10]

Nkrumah, on the other hand, was recognised as a more authentic socialist in promoting anti-colonialist struggles all over the continent (unlike Senghor) and accepting the centrality of class struggle as a critical factor in historical processes and the emancipation of the individual.

However, even Nkrumah encountered enormous difficulties in achieving the socialist dream as a result of a variety of conceptual challenges. First of all, there was an unresolved tension between pursuing a pan-Africanist project, on the one hand, and focusing solely on Ghana's national interests, on the other. Nkrumah also complained that Ghana lacked a sufficient number of committed socialists to effect radical socioeconomic transformation. Finally, his rigid authoritarian posture eventually alienated him from the mass of the Ghanaian people and subsequently paved the way for his overthrow. The collapse of the Nkrumah administration in the 1960s caused widespread disillusionment in relation to the burgeoning pan-African dream and in African Marxist circles.

However, Nkrumah's understanding of Marxist and socialist thought was mediated by an equally robust familiarity with African American political theory, notably Marcus Garvey's *Philosophy and Opinions* and of course George Padmore's conception of Pan-Africanism.[11] Indeed, his rather eclectic temperament led him to study the lives and careers of political figures such as Hannibal, Cromwell, Napoleon, Mazzani, Gandhi, Mussolini and Hitler.

V. Y. Mudimbe agrees that the brutality and great disillusionment caused by World War II made African political thinkers re-examine Western notions of progressive humanism. Between the 1930s and 1950s, Mudimbe claims that Marxism was the single most important influence on African political thought.[12]

10 Soyinka 1996; Soyinka 2012; *International Socialist Review* 2001.
11 Mudimbe 1988, 88.
12 Ibid., 90.

As for Senghor, in spite of the fact that he had numerous critics, he can be said to exercise considerable intellectual influence in Francophone Africa. Senghor attempts to synthesise negritude with Marxist humanism in a markedly dialectical manner in order to arrive at a universal civilisation.[13] In pursuing this particular intellectual operation, Senghor draws on the ideas of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Mudimbe asserts that Senghor's ideas deserve more sympathetic critical reception. The cause of his constant vilification by his intellectual contemporaries stems from his contrasting black emotion (rhythm) with ancient Greek rationality as exemplified in the famous axiom, "I am the Other...therefore I am."[14] This Senghorian negritudist formulation is strikingly similar to the Southern African concept of *ubuntu*, which posits, roughly, "I am because of you."

Mudimbe also points out that "Nyerere's socialism is probably the most pragmatic of all African socialisms."[15] On his part, Nyerere argues that socialism and democracy are central in traditional African existence. *Ujamaa*, which translates as "family-hood" defines African socialism. But furthermore, "*ujamaa* means above all that a nation based on the socialist project would imply a constant development of communalism for all peoples.[16] Nyerere, through his political party, formally launched his socialist agenda via the *Arusha Declaration* in 1967. In relation to Tanzania's socialist political project, Mudimbe notes:

> The creed presents the rationale of *ujamaa*. In the first part, it describes the major values (sharing, equality, rejection of alienation and exploitation of man by man, etc). In the second part, it offers as ideological deductions its main political objectives. These are: first, the independence of the nation, but a socialist nation governed by a socialist government; second, cooperation with African countries and commitment to the liberation of Africa and her unity; and third, improvement of the conditions of equality and life in the nation and, therefore, nationalisation of the means of production and the political control of the fields of production.[17]

Indeed, African Marxists have had to discover ways of fusing Marxist thought with African historical realities and future political objectives. It always seems necessary to indigenise or 'traditionalise' Marxism according to African aspirations. And fortunately, there have been practical instances where this task seemed feasible. As such, "Africa seems to hesitate between two principal

13 Mudimbe 1988, 94.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 95.
17 Ibid.

sources, Marxist and traditionalist, and to worry endlessly about the evidence about the superiority of the Same over the Other and the possible virtues of the inverse relationship."[18] This seemingly implacable relationship between Marxism and traditionalism has found varying expressions in Padmore's *Panafricanism or Communism*, Nkrumah's critique of neo-colonialism, and various formulations of Islamic humanism. As noted, Nkrumah encountered disastrous consequences in finding practical expression for his peculiar blend of socialist principles and Africanism, in part because of his counterproductive political choices.

4

During the 1970s, a new crop of Afro-Marxists emerged.[19] This group of socialists, emerging in the wake of the attainment of independence from Portuguese colonial rule by five Lusophone nations, were to be found principally in Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cabo-Verde, Sao Tomé e Principe and Angola. They believed that in order for the socialist project to succeed in Africa, there must be a two-pronged attack on the local bourgeoisie and their external allies. Nonetheless, this generation of African socialists was just as authoritarian and as repressive as the Nkrumah or Touré regimes. Under the guise of so-called 'scientific socialism,' gross human rights violations were committed and shades of political pluralism were suppressed.

If the school of Afro-Marxists faltered on the question of praxis, at least one figure accomplished considerable success in conceptually synthesising a vision of pan-Africanist struggle, a notion of the Global South (although this might not have been a popular term then), a history of slavery and African underdevelopment, and a radical critique of the present by employing primarily a Marxist mode of analysis. Walter Rodney's landmark work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, continues to serve as a potent blueprint for decolonisation.[20]

As we have observed, for Marxist thought to resonate with African political aspirations and the masses, it must be able to factor in the history of slavery, rigorous critiques of imperialism and global capitalism, an alignment with African pre-capitalist modes of production, and finally, a decolonised historiography of the present. Only when these particular local conditions are accepted

18 Mudimbe 1988, 96.
19 Falola 2001.
20 Rodney 1969; Swai 1981; Swai 1982.

does the Marxist project of a class-less society become attractive and ultimately realisable.

Having provided sketches of prominent West African nationalist leaders with a notably socialist persuasion such as Nkrumah, Touré, Cabral and Senghor, it can be argued that the most effective laboratory of Marxist thought on the continent was the famous Dar es Salaam school of radical history. This school of history attempted to invent a historiography based on subaltern ideology and aspirations away from prior colonialist – and evidently bourgeois – orientations which were perceived as an undeniable extension of the European imperialist project.[21]

In fact, the entire idea of a decolonised historiography of the present in Africa can be traced to the Dar es Salaam collective of radical history which spawned vigorous debates on neo-Marxist epistemology. Central to these debates were of course Rodney – radical Guyanese scholar and activist – Issa Shivji,[22] Mahmood Mamdani,[23] Dani W. Nabudere,[24] and perhaps to a lesser extent, Claude Ake,[25] the late Nigerian social scientist. Undoubtedly, under the inspirational shadow of Nyerere, the Dar es Salaam School went on to have a profound intellectual impact on various schools of African decolonisation that emerged in Dakar, Ibadan, Makerere and Nairobi.

Unfortunately, this influence has been vitiated by neo-colonialism, structural adjustment programmes, virulent conflicts in different regions of the continent, and the venality of various corrupt political leaders, all of which combined has resulted in what has been defined as 'the retreat of the state,' the general evisceration of civil society, leading to the unhealthy disconnect between state, society and market in sites undergoing the problems just enumerated. In instances where the state has been rendered ineffective, various formations of civil society with varying levels of efficacy have developed, and increasingly it is to them that citizens look for guidance, succour, and community. And perhaps more than atrophied states, they provide the foundation for the re-education and reconstruction of African communities.

For instance, in South Africa, where there is long history of socio-political activism, civil society plays a prominent role in initiating and pursuing a wide variety of causes, ranging from HIV/Aids activism to agitations for decent basic

21 Falola 2001.
22 Shivji 1970; Shivji 1973.
23 Mamdani 1976; Mamdani 1990; Mamdani 1996; Mamdani 2001; Mamdani 2004; Mamdani 2006.
24 Nabudere 2004.
25 Ake 1979; Ake 1983.

housing to struggles for portable water. Similarly, in Senegal, people are finding alternative ways to solve the problem of urban refuse disposal or the challenges of accessing the larger world through commerce and trade. These efforts and activities are often pursued without recourse to government channels, consequently creating unconventional – often heretical – sites of capital, power, agency and mobility.

Indeed, a discussion of communism or Marxism has to include an account of the South African Communist Party (SACP), which attained its centenary in 2021. Tom Lodge's *Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party* (2021) traces the formation, travails, triumphs, and setbacks of the organisation over the course of its varied history, beginning in the era of *rooi gevaar,* when the South African regime was convulsed by anti-communist hatred. For the most part, the SACP was illegal, and its records were kept secret. Lodge claims he encountered "a wall of silence" when he first attempted researching its history.[26]

After being unbanned in 1990, the SACP entered the era of *glasnost* and the shroud of secrecy gradually evaporated. Lodge was then able to understand the role the SACP played in nudging the African National Congress (ANC) towards a stance of non-racialism. However, just a year after its formation in 1922, the SACP had been compelled to support a mass of all-white striking mineworkers in a bid to foster a militant insurrectionist movement. Lodge is unable to conclude that Nelson Mandela was ever a registered communist even though he attended meetings of the party between 1960–62 as a member of the central committee.

Regarding some of the setbacks of the SACP, Lodge argues that more could have been done in reducing chronic inequality and integrating South Africa into the industrial milieu of the post-apartheid era. More also could have been accomplished in creating better employment opportunities and addressing the urgent demands of land reform. In addition, in a way, the SACP's alliance with the ANC has imposed a nationalist ideology that may not always work to its advantage in securing its legacy as a veritable political force. All of this became apparent as the party celebrated its hundred-year anniversary.

5

It would be interesting to trace a political economy of need and desire in its early capitalist forms in West Africa (a region I am most familiar with), more speci-

26 Lodge 2021.

fically among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria and the eastern parts of the Republic of Benin. However, it ought to be noted that the Yoruba can also be found in Sierra Leone and a few other West African countries due to migration and the transatlantic slave trade.

Before the advent of full-blown westernisation in their territories, an established mode of socio-economic relations was already in place. The Yoruba, for instance, placed a premium on material wealth, numerous children and good health and longevity as the ultimate criteria for the attainment of the good life. And so they expended most of their energies in attaining those goals.[27]

Nonetheless, the acquisition of material wealth is underpinned by a strict moral code. The pursuit of material gain had to be done honourably and not in an unscrupulous manner. As such, no one ordinarily, would approve of *owo igbo* (dirty money or ill-gotten gain) or conduct unbecoming of an *omoluabi* (a fundamentally well-bred person). In order to gain possession of material wealth there were a number of trades and professions the Yoruba were known for; agriculture, fishing, hunting and blacksmithing were some of the more widespread pursuits. However, for most, the acquisition of the requisite levels of wealth was not always attainable. And so there were other social measures and instruments to cushion financial hard times. There was the institution of pawnship – indeed a communal practice – for instance, whereby poor households handed out their children to wealthier families as guarantees for loans. In several instances, these loans were not repaid and so the pawned children could be retained indefinitely. The colonial authorities frowned upon this practice, viewing it as akin to slavery or as an undeniable form of child abuse and eventually abrogated it in the 1920s.

However, most Yoruba viewed the institution of pawnship differently. Instead, they argued that pawnship often led to the acquisition of much-needed skills and professional experience. Furthermore, it also promoted widely accepted methods of socialisation for the child into the culture. Under the practice of pawnship, the fostered child could learn the intricate mysteries of the Yoruba language and traditions.

It ought to be stressed that pawnship was not as severe a practice as slavery. Slaves were treated much more harshly and enjoyed fewer (if at all) rights and privileges. However, both pawns and slaves were employed by powerful households to further develop their socio-political status and economic muscle. The point being that, pawns and slaves were employed by dominant families to augment their socioeconomic status in precolonial times. In quite distinct ways, this defined a certain political economy of need and financial desire. It also deline-

27 Falola and Akinyemi 2016.

ated the modes of social stratification at crucial historical moments. These were arguably during simpler economic times when the political economy of need, want and desire were considerably less complexified or rather less diversified.

The advent of the colonial economy, on the other hand, introduced a new element of economic activity into the scene: the cash crop meant for export. Agriculture was still the mainstay of the economies of Yoruba land. Cocoa had been introduced by colonial adventurers, and Yoruba agriculturists were strongly encouraged to undertake its commercial cultivation for export. Palm oil was also adopted as an export crop. In exchange for the export of those crops, Yoruba agriculturists and merchants were able to gain access to European products, which obviously impacted heavily on the political economy of need, want and desire in both direct and implicit ways. Furthermore, it sparked a scramble for new economic possessions, many of which were not available locally.

In addition, the European encounter had led to the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, which radically transformed the local economic arena in not only re-drawing the parameters of individual and collective desire but also the range of products that were desirable for both import and export. Yoruba land and indeed the whole of the West African region were hurled into a destabilising vortex of global pillage, looting, human theft and generalised immiseration that changed forever the course of history including entire economies, agricultural practices, commercialised industry, and epistemic paradigms. Many local economic activities became directly linked to the global trade in slaves and its multiple ramifications.

Nonetheless, some pre-existing forms of socioeconomic relations and sociality still prevailed. As such, there was an underlying philosophy of sociality still at work even as an externally engendered socioeconomic transformation was occurring. The social bond was essentially created through the centripetal movement of various assorted parts towards a nucleus of consummation and ultimately, psychic fulfilment. In other words, the individualised, disaggregated self or unit, as the case may be, does not amount to much unless united with the larger social network. This epistemological, sociological and ethical paradigm, as noted previously, is enshrined in many African folk philosophies such as the *ubuntu* principle which simply states, "I am because we are."

6

Polycarp Ikuenobe writes that "the idea of communalism in African traditions as analysed here represents a normative theory about what a moral person, commu-

nity, and their connection ought to be according to African thought systems."[28] He then proceeds to reiterate the famous Africa proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child" which is increasing becoming a problematic axiom given the processes of rapid urbanisation and informalisation occurring in many African contexts.

Due the often unsettling dynamics of change, social and political transformation, the typical African village can no longer be regarded as being stable and immune to violent transitions and disruptions wrought by capitalism and globalisation. In this regard, Ikuenobe's almost romantic characterisation of the typical African rural setting fails to account to processes of urbanisation and transitions that accompany them. This drawback stems from seeking to ascribe a normative standard to what would be regarded as a typical African village based on gerontocracy, rusticity, and relative cultural stasis.

Ifeanyi Menkiti, in turn, points out that the idea of community in the current era can be defined from two basic perspectives.[29] The notion of community as a primordial construct in which blood ties, more than anything else, constitute the basis of identity, belonging and conviviality. In other words, the community rather than the individual assumes precedence in the formation and consolidation of the social bond. In the other perspective, which is arguably postmodernist, the individual assumes sole responsibility in the constitution of personal identity and in time, an accumulation of multiple private identities is able to form a new autonomous community devoid of a primordial foundation or undue ethnic-related sentiment.

We may, however, further complicate the notion of community by introducing yet another element: the socialist imperative. In this regard,

> communism, we understand as a political ideology, stretching out the idea of the communal, with governance as its focus. Communitarianism is a word that is often mentioned. Communitarianism, although it also plays with the idea of the communal, is not itself a political ideology. It could become a political movement if the right conditions arose in which case communitarianism and communism would become very much the same thing.[30]

Menkiti goes on to identify two different philosophical traditions, with

> European philosophy, it seems that the idea of the dignity of the human person continues to be an abstract idea, a sort of arithmetical affair, having to do with the individuated spaces

28 Ikuenobe 2006, 53.
29 Menkiti 2017.
30 Ibid., 469.

> discreet individuals occupy. For African philosophy, on the other hand, it tends to be lived in dignity, an affair of experience, connected to the ongoing activities of the social whole.[31]

Arguably, the sanctity of the human person tends towards abstraction, improbably objectified, perhaps, in the similar manner as the state as an entity would tend to be. The evidence of this proposition is to be found in Eurocentric philosophy generally. In African philosophy, a different picture emerges whereby the sanctity of the human person struggles to maintain a continually (re)affirmed relation to the social compact in an ongoing experience that tends to be continually re-lived as if to underscore its innate and ever-mobile vitality.

Menkiti proceeds to stress that modern nation-states are not really nations in the sense that they are more or less artificially created geographical constructs devoid of the common lived originary experience of their inhabitants. He goes on to state that the ancestry of the so-called primitive 'tribes' of Africa contain and maintain deep sources of identity that are unique and probably unmatched, as regards to the depths of their purity, by other nations groups from elsewhere.[32] However, Menkiti also avers that colonial constructs such as Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania or the Congos are not by any stretch the ideal examples of what could be called nations in the lived or experiential sense of the term.

Nonetheless, one could argue that Menkiti's notion of a nation lacks adequate empirical evidence or sufficient historicity. Even during the protohistoric epoch, identity-formation processes were always likely to be undergoing centripetal and centrifugal proclivities depending on the prevailing circumstances. An identity is not formed against a background of a historical, political, or cultural vacuum. Instead, it is created in relation to other contesting myriad identities (dominant or otherwise) and social and political factors and forces that simultaneously accentuate and impede the formation of such an identity.

Menkiti faults the ideologies of both Soviet Russia and capitalist America as being counterintuitive to the idea of community. Communism had sought to construct a notion of utopia out of an artificial abstraction of social classes and workers minus the ever-persistent centrality of the individual, that is, the physical presence that ultimately makes the idea of community even possible in the first place. Capitalism assumes that the individual is merely an agglomeration of private appetites, essentially self-sufficient and intrinsically to be valued above the community. In this sense, both communism and capitalism are unable to strike a balance between the individual and the community. In other words, if

31 Menkiti 2017, 468.
32 Ibid.

communism fabricates a utopian abstraction of community devoid of the inherent centrality of the individual, capitalism, on the other hand, situates the individual on a pedestal as an almost absolute singularity. Under both ideologies, therefore, and in differing ways, both the individual and the community are most certainly artificial or quasi-artificial constructs. Menkiti then concludes that for more accurate examples of both the individual and the community, the rest of the world ought to look within Africa. Of course, such an assertion needs to be supported by conclusive findings of sociological research which, being a philosopher, he neglects to supply.[33]

Conclusion

We may then conclude by stating that the question of survival defines our most basic of needs: food, shelter, health, and clothing. As the abilities to cater to these needs and demands increase, layers of economic and social stratification emerge which in turn make societies supposedly more complex. However, this may not necessarily be for the better but rather at the cost of blurring the lines between need, want and desire. Indeed, the ultimate capitalist revolt may in fact be the blurring of the lines between need, want and desire.

In focusing on the institution of pawnship in precolonial Yoruba society, we are, hopefully, able to identify a certain political economy of need before a complete immersion into the global capitalist economic system. Within this given epoch, human needs were arguably less complexified and perhaps encountered less social stratification. However, in the postcolonial dispensation after a more direct entry in the phases of late capitalism, far-reaching socioeconomic transformations have since occurred.

But unlike in the West, where the state remains relatively stable and entrenched, vast areas of the African continent are insufficiently governed, subject to subversive and arbitrary configurations of power and the unfortunate realities found in failed states. And so, under these exceptional circumstances, the political economy of need would necessarily be defined by contingencies pertaining to security of life and property, adequate and reliable healthcare, access to food, water and shelter, after which other needs of modern human existence may follow. Clearly, a stark survivalism is present in everyday life and often mediates the nebulous divide between life and death in a startling context replete

33 See Menkiti 2017.

with colour, vibrancy, conviviality, unpredictability and ultimately, hybridity. These basic realities are evident in the contestations between African forms of communalism and Marxist principles, peripheral and metropolitan economies, westernisation and endogeneity, science and technology versus mysticism etc. Furthermore, this much is clear after such an eclectic discussion of Marxism, socialist praxis, communalism and communitarianism, the concepts of *ubuntu* and *ujamaa*, histories of West African pawnship amongst others, including the basic imperatives of human need.

This discussion has attempted to focus on a multiplicity of epistemic strains dealing with the communal or collectivist ethos in their precolonial and modern variants. This discursive and ideological terrain is often marked by considerable hybridity, transition, and the dynamics of change. It also borders on processes of imperialist onslaught and the kinds of resistance they elicit. African communities were hurled into matrices of global capitalist expansion in both involuntary and voluntary modes and the outcomes of these transitory scenarios have been shaped by different degrees of social acceptance and resistance. This account has also attempted to highlight the levels of complexity involved in these socio-political and economic transitions from a hybrid and, hopefully, decolonial perspective which further complicates prevailing views on supposedly peripheral forms of capitalism.

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