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# COMMUNISM AND NATIONALISM IN TROPICAL AFRICA

*By Walter Z. Laqueur*

ALMOST overnight Communism in Africa has become an international problem of the first magnitude. Ten years ago, or even five, all that was known, or needed to be known, about the subject could be stated in two or three sentences mainly of a negative character. Now, in 1961, Africa has replaced the Middle East as the world's chief trouble center, and it is likely to remain the main area of contest between West and East for many years to come. On the African continent the Soviet bloc and China have succeeded in gaining important footholds within a very short space of time. The Communist states are represented in most of the newly independent countries and their envoys are untiring in their exertions. There is a constant stream of cultural and trade missions and other visitors between Moscow, Peking and some African capitals. These activities undoubtedly constitute a serious challenge to the West; but even more important are the efforts of local pro-Communist or national Communist groups to gain the upper hand in the struggle for the future of Africa; one can hardly exaggerate the implications of the outcome of this struggle.

Discussion of the problems facing Communism in tropical Africa (meaning Africa south of the Sahara excluding the Union of South Africa) is frequently hampered by the absence of reliable facts. To give but one example: On August 2, 1960, the existence of a Congolese Communist party, with a central committee headed by M. Mwamba-Mukanya, was announced in Leopoldville; it was said to have been in existence for the past decade. This was the first and the last to be heard about this party and its central committee. Shortly afterwards M. Mwamba-Mukanya was introduced to the Soviet public as no more than a Congolese public figure; his party had apparently vanished into thin air. It would be unwise to assume that such practices are designed merely to confuse the outside observer. There are good reasons to believe that Russian, Chinese and other Communists are at least as bewildered as everybody else by the frequent upheavals and the changing allegiances on the African scene.

But it is hardly less difficult to arrive at a realistic appraisal

of the political forces in Africa that are commonly defined as "Communist" or pro-Communist. If Soviet and other official Communist sources have so far applied this term in Africa only sparingly, perhaps more so than was really warranted, it has been bandied about rather freely by some Western observers, for whom a trip to Moscow or Peking undertaken by some African leader has seemed sufficient evidence to that effect. Since Communism and nationalism (and/or Pan-Africanism) are very closely intermingled in the political make-up of most of these African groups, it is not at all easy to find a fitting label for their aims and general political orientation. To stress these distinctions is not mere hair-splitting; a correct analysis of African political movements is of the greatest importance for the appraisal of their future development, and, of course, for the shaping of any effective Western policy.

According to official Communist sources, there are no "Marxist-Leninist mass parties" at present in Africa south of the Sahara—with the sole exception of one on the island of Réunion.<sup>1</sup> The only political party considered to be very close to Leninism is the P.A.I. (Parti Africain d'Indépendance) in West Africa; it is headed by Majhemout Diop, a Dakar bookseller who has spent several years in Eastern Europe as a member of the secretariat of the International Union of Students (I.U.S.). There are, of course, individual Communists in many African countries, and the intention to establish Communist parties at some future date is clear. It is apparently thought, however, that at present Communists should work through other political movements as well as through front organizations and trade unions. In present circumstances, the existence of official Communist parties would probably be more of a handicap than an advantage, given the reluctance of Africans to get involved with super-national movements and ideologies. Moreover, there are probably no more than a handful of Communists in the whole African continent whose political education and judgment come up to Moscow's requirements. In view of the many past disappointments with African fellow travellers, who for a while coöperated with the Communists but then turned against them, or simply drifted away, it is thought preferable to delay the recognition of official Communist parties until more evidence has been received about the quality of the candidates for Communist representation and leadership.

<sup>1</sup> *Afrikanische Gegenwartsfragen*, (East) Berlin, 1960, p. 12.

Communism in 1961 means different things to different people. Afro-Communism as it now emerges has not very much in common with the theories of Karl Marx, not even in the modified form in which they have been applied in politically and economically backward countries. Afro-Communism represents above all a means of gaining political power for a small group of intellectuals. In foreign policy its protagonists stand for close collaboration with the Soviet bloc and/or China. On the domestic scene it implies agrarian reform, frequently a foreign trade monopoly and central planning, a one-party dictatorship and the gradual indoctrination of the population with some kind of official ideology. It hardly needs to be demonstrated that such revolutionary technique may be very efficient both in gaining power and in maintaining it; of this China will serve as an example. But it is equally obvious that the net result is a system that has very little in common with Marxism as it was originally conceived. It is in effect a new political phenomenon that can be only partly explained by reference to developments in the past, or in other parts of the world.

Clearly Afro-Communism cannot be equated with Communism as known in Russia or the West, but there are also important differences between Afro-Communism and Communism in Asia. The leaders of the Chinese, Korean or Indonesian parties were closely connected with the Comintern or Cominform for decades; they have had a thorough training in the essentials of Leninism, they have acquired the specific mental make-up of leading members of a very powerful sect, and they subject themselves to party discipline and "proletarian internationalism." In short, leaders like Mao or Ho Chi-Minh modelled themselves on the "ideal type" of the Russian Bolshevik of the 1920s.

The representatives of Afro-Communism, on the other hand, belong to a much younger generation. They grew up at a time when Communism had become much more powerful, but its ideological and psychological impact much lighter—and when various centers of Communist power had come into being. Their familiarity with the theory of Marxism-Leninism is often superficial, restricted in most cases to some knowledge of its more practical aspects such as political organization and planning, and of course a nodding acquaintance with the Leninist theory of imperialism. These are not the strong and silent heroes who had to fight for many years in conditions of illegality. Independence and

power came to them on the whole rather easily; as in Guinea, they sometimes received it on a platter. Their beliefs are, in short, less deeply rooted and they are very unlike the intransigent "Old Bolsheviks" with their iron discipline and their unending ideological squabbles. The rudimentary political training they have received may give them an advantage over their political rivals and competitors, but it does not make them Communists in the sense of the word accepted in the West; at most they are Communists of a new type. This is not to split theoretical hairs or to stick unduly to ideological niceties; it has important and far-reaching implications.

It means, for instance, that nationalism, Pan-Africanism and even racialism play an important part in the attitude of these leaders. In Moscow their *nationalisme communiste* is regarded with great indulgence as a transitional phenomenon that will in due time give way to the real thing. (No such tolerance is shown to Tito, an old Comrade who ought to know better.) But it is highly doubtful whether this "transitional phenomenon" will really end as the Communists expect. The Afro-Communists have their own ideas about what ought to be done in their continent, and they are not overawed by the authority of Lenin or the experience of Communist régimes outside Africa.<sup>2</sup> They regard themselves as the founding members of a new third group, the African ex-Colonial International; "People of the Colonies Unite," Kwame Nkrumah wrote in one of his articles.

The name of a half-forgotten precursor of this ex-Colonial Communism, Sultan Galiev, has frequently been mentioned in recent years in this context. He was a Soviet leader of Tatar origin, at one time Stalin's deputy as Commissar of Nationalities. He was expelled for "nationalist deviations" and disappeared in the purges. His theories were, briefly, that Marxism had been mistaken in concentrating its hopes on the industrialized people of the West rather than the colonial peoples of the East, who are progressive, in as much as they constitute the proletarian nations on the world scale. Since all classes in these countries had been subjected to Western rule and exploitation, the class struggle there is of much less importance. His ideas culminated in an appeal for the establishment of a new Colonial International. On

<sup>2</sup> As Sékou Touré once put it, discussing dialectical materialism: "Philosophy does not interest us. We have enough concrete tasks." Sékou Touré, *Texte des Interviews accordées aux Représentants de la Presse*. Conakry, 1959, p. 108.

some points Sultan Galiev went even farther, as in his demand for the establishment of the dictatorship of the ex-colonial peoples over the metropolitan nations.

Some of Sultan Galiev's basic notions are now generally accepted throughout Asia and Africa; to a certain extent they have even superseded the Leninist theory of imperialism, though Lenin is remembered and the name of Sultan Galiev forgotten. There is abundant evidence that the Communists are perfectly aware of the dangers involved. Commenting on the general attitude of some of his compatriots, M. Achufusi, an African Communist now teaching in East Germany, recently wrote: "Their experience in the capitalist world has strengthened the Africans in their belief that world political problems have a racial character. . . . They think that Africa is the proletariat while Europe constitutes the bourgeoisie. They demand a specific African philosophy and ideology in order to liberate the Africans spiritually. . . . They equate the workers of Europe with the exploiters and thus violate the canon of proletarian internationalism. . . . Such a trend leads to playing down the class conflicts inside Africa."<sup>3</sup>

Afro-Communism is taking only its first steps, and predictions about its future developments are probably premature. In view of the conflict of ambition and interest between its leaders, it seems rather doubtful whether any unity of action will be achieved in the near future. What can be stated now with near certainty is that, though strongly influenced by some tenets of Soviet ideology, Afro-Communism is showing marked political independence. This does not make it more friendly toward the West. But it is not willing to take orders from the East either; its apparent ambition is to emerge as an independent factor in world politics.

## II

The observations made so far apply in varying degree to most supporters of Communism in Africa. But supporters of Communism in Africa are a very heterogeneous group—among them left-wing nationalist elements and orthodox Communists, with the great majority somewhere in between. It is doubtful whether much significance should be attributed to vaguely pro-Communist declarations made from time to time by leading nationalists. Most African political parties are in favor of some form of social-

<sup>3</sup> *Geschichte und Geschichtsbild Afrikas*, (East) Berlin, 1960, p. 222.

ist planning, all are anti-imperialist, and traces of the Leninist theory of imperialism can be recognized in their views. This hardly makes them Communists, for the theory has in the past and present found many adherents (including Chiang Kai-shek) both in Asia and Europe, in circles otherwise very much opposed to Leninism. Such leaders may frequently follow the Soviet lead in the United Nations or participate in conferences convened by Communist-front organizations, but a closer analysis usually shows that they are radical nationalist rather than Communist in character.

Of greater interest in this context are such para-Communist groups as Sékou Touré's P.D.G. (Parti Démocratique de Guinée), one part of the Camerounian U.P.C. (Union des Populations du Cameroun), as well as the more radical sections of the ruling parties in Ghana and Mali. That these groups have certain features in common with the Communists is well known and need hardly be elaborated in detail. Apart from their enmity to the West (particularly pronounced in the case of Guinea and the U.P.C.), they have borrowed from Leninism the concept of "democratic centralism" and of the state party as a revolutionary vanguard. According to Dr. Nkrumah, "Once a majority decision is taken we expect such a decision to be loyally executed, even by those who might have opposed that decision. This we consider and proclaim to be the truest form of Democratic Centralism. . ."<sup>4</sup>

The adaptation of Communist ideas and methods has been in some cases very extensive. Guinea has been called the country in the world closest to Communism without actually belonging to the Soviet bloc, and Dr. Félix Moumié, the late leader of the Cameroun U.P.C., is said to have been criticized by Mr. Khrushchev for "infantile extremism." The U.P.C. has taken much of its inspiration and guidance from China in its six-year-old guerilla war. In conversation with a Swiss journalist, Dr. Moumié stated that he had discussed with Mao at great length the Chinese leader's writings on the strategy and tactics of partisan warfare. Moumié then produced a copy of Mao's book, first published in 1936, with a personal dedication by the Chinese leader, and said, "Here you'll find out what is going to happen in Cameroun."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Accra Evening News*, June 16, 1959, quoted in Thomas Hodgkin, "A note on the language of African nationalism," in *African Affairs*, No. 1, London, 1961, p. 34. The "majority decision," needless to say, is more often than not the decision of the leader or leaders of the party.

<sup>5</sup> *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 13, 1961.

All these groups have received Soviet bloc support but none has been recognized as a Communist party. While Sékou Touré has called his country the "most advanced democracy on earth" and pointed to a specific Guinean road to socialism, Communist observers prefer to talk about "the Guinean experiment." They think that Sékou Touré's party has a "proletarian kernel," but not more than that, and they see a danger in the "swollen-headedness of the leaders as a result of imperialist flattery and the respect shown and homage paid to Guinea by the great powers of America, Europe and Asia" (sic). Another possible pitfall in Communist eyes is the reluctance of the Guinean leaders to "arm the working classes and the masses of the people generally with the knowledge and understanding of Marxist-Leninist theory." In order to leave no doubts of any kind, it is added that only with the emergence of a strong Communist party could a return to capitalism be definitely ruled out.<sup>6</sup>

President Sékou Touré, on the other hand, has more than once asserted his belief in a specific African socialism and his objection to any interference by Russia and China in what he considers his own parish. In a declaration in April 1960 he said that he refused to allow his party to follow the ideological line of Communism. If certain people wished to found a Guinean Communist party they should realize that the P.D.G. would oppose them under Sékou Touré's leadership, for Communism was not the way for Africa. The class struggle was not possible for there were no classes, only social strata. The fundamental basis of Guinean society was the family and the village community. On yet another occasion Sékou Touré expressed the view that, while dialectical materialism denied the existence of God, one would not find anybody in Africa, and particularly in Guinea, who did not believe in God. Mr. Sékou Touré has recently been to Mecca as befitting the head of a predominantly Muslim country.

Guinea has been praised in Communist publications as an example to all the oppressed and exploited; and yet there are, as these illustrations have shown, considerable differences of opinion between the Communists and the African régime considered closest to them. There are other dividing lines between orthodox Len-

<sup>6</sup> *The African Communist*, April 1960, p. 26. This is the (clandestine) periodical of the (illegal) South African Communist Party, formerly published in Capetown, now in London. It is of particular interest because it is the only periodical in Africa that deals with African affairs in an orthodox Leninist spirit; it is written by Communists and for Communists.



inists and the Afro-Communists. Many of the latter hold strong opinions about the central role of the African intellectuals as the pioneers and leaders of the national liberation movement; the orthodox Communists, on the other hand, disparage the role of the intelligentsia. But the central issue on which opinions widely diverge is the question of the specific character of Africa. The Leninists do not deny the existence of peculiarities in the historical development and present state of Africa, but they maintain that all the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism are applicable in Africa and that to disregard them would lead to dangerous nationalist deviations. The Afro-Communists, on the other hand, are much more selective in their approval of Leninist theory; while borrowing with much enthusiasm some of the tenets of this body of doctrine, they have emphatically rejected others. Some of their more sophisticated spokesmen who have read the young Marx consider Communism in Europe the natural reaction against a society in which the individual has been alienated, in which money is the supreme good, and in which spiritual values count for little if anything. Africa, in their view, is different; it may be economically backward but it is not a society with its values in process of disintegration; it still has a human richness, warmth and spontaneity sadly lacking in both West and East. These convictions are shared by a majority of African intellectuals and incidentally by quite a number of White missionaries who have called for the "Bantuization of Christianity." On the cultural level these convictions have given rise to the concept of *négritude*; on the political level they have found their reflection in the movement of Pan-Africanism.

Orthodox Leninists are bound to reject both *négritude* and Pan-Africanism as romantic petty-bourgeois nationalist deviations. They try to do so with the maximum of tact, for they realize clearly that this rejection brings them into conflict with the great majority of African political leaders and intellectuals, who all share these views to some degree. For obvious tactical reasons, the orthodox Communists want to prevent a split with the Afro-Communists, but in the long run they cannot afford to compromise, for without clearly defining their own views they cannot hope to make much headway in the future. They face a dilemma which they probably will not be able to resolve, for the prevailing political climate is overwhelmingly in favor of nationalism and Pan-Africanism. The situation in this respect is not dissimilar to

the state of affairs in the Middle East a few years ago. The Arab Communists tried very hard to evade, or at any rate to delay, a head-on clash with Pan-Arabism as represented by President Nasser. It is doubtful whether orthodox African Communists will be more successful in postponing the outbreak of what seems otherwise an inevitable conflict.

## III

The orthodox Leninist camp, to which reference has so far been made only in contradistinction to the Afro-Communists, includes a handful of party stalwarts who underwent training in East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, as well as the P.A.I. mentioned above. Founded in 1957, the P.A.I. publishes a daily newspaper, *La Lutte*, in Dakar, but its influence in terms of votes is as yet minute; at last year's municipal elections in Senegal it received 300 votes. It is debatable whether to include in this category also the radical wing of the Camerounian U.P.C., founded by Ruben um Nyobe, a trade unionist trained in Prague who was shot during a guerrilla engagement. His successor, Dr. Moumié, was poisoned last year in Switzerland; one faction of the U.P.C. under Matip seceded, renounced terrorism and became the Cameroun parliamentary opposition, but another section still fights on. This wing of the U.P.C. seems, however, to be under the influence of Peking rather than Moscow. A third, comparatively orthodox group is the P.I.M. (Parti de l'Indépendance Malagache), founded in 1959 originally as a coalition of radical-nationalist and left-wing groups which quickly fell under the influence of its Communist wing. This Leninist party has the unique distinction of having a priest as its president—the Reverend Richard Andriamanjato. It has gained control of the town council of the capital of Madagascar, Tananarive, but has done rather badly elsewhere. Communist factions are also reported to exist in the Congolese “Parti du Peuple” (headed by Alphonse Nguvulu, who was minister of planning in the Lumumba government), and in PUNGA (Parti de l'Unité Nationale Gabonaise), an opposition party in Gabon. By no stretch of the imagination, however, can any of these parties be regarded as a Leninist mass party.

The main problem that has faced all these groups during the past decade, and their main dilemma at the present time, is the stand to be taken vis-à-vis the national movement in their respective countries, or, in Leninist parlance, the problem of the “na-

tional bourgeoisie." Up to about 1955 the Communist attitude, briefly summarized, was that the leaders of the national movement could not be trusted, that their struggle against colonialism was a sham, and that sooner or later they would betray the national cause. They were incapable of any consistent struggle and inclined towards compromise and collaboration with the imperialist enemy.<sup>7</sup> There was considerable mistrust of the movements that had won, or were about to win, independence for their countries. Such independence, it was argued, could not possibly be genuine; it was "only a more skillful hidden form of continued association with imperialism," as the leading British Communist theoretician, Palme Dutt, put it at the time.<sup>8</sup> Among those attacked were Dr. Nkrumah's Convention People's Party in Ghana and Dr. Azikiwe and his supporters in Nigeria. The R.D.A. (*Rassemblement Democratique Africain*), the leading political party in French West Africa, fared no better; it had "unmasked itself," made a "shameful deal with the colonizers," and its "treason" had allegedly caused tremendous anger among the toilers of Africa. It would be tedious to prolong this list, which included virtually every political leader and party in Africa at the time.

In 1955, however, attitudes towards the African national movement were substantially modified, and for a while it seemed that the Communists were willing to collaborate with practically everybody in Africa. The general assumption was that the West was the main enemy and that anti-Western sentiment in Africa should be used to constitute a common anti-Western front. But it is doubtful whether the basic attitude towards the African nationalists has really changed. African Communists believe that the support of the "patriotic elements" is essential for a speedy victory over colonialism, to quote a recent authoritative comment. But, they argue, the "national bourgeoisie" is a very unsatisfactory leader of the national movement: "They are apt to be narrow, selfishly hidebound and conservative. They are apt to be guided not by the interest of the masses but by their own special, minority class interests. Often they are parochial, chauvinistic, tribalistic, and lacking a broad vision. They are usually opportunistic, tend to compromise with the colonialists for small gains at the sacrifice of principle, because they fear the revolutionary

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed review of Soviet and Communist attitudes towards the African national movement see my "Soviet Views on Africa" in *Soviet Survey* (London), April 1959, p. 37 *et seq.*

<sup>8</sup> *Allies for Freedom*, London, 1954, p. 25.

activities of the masses of workers and rural people.”<sup>9</sup> According to a more recent statement, the “national bourgeoisie” is a “counter-revolutionary force to socialism.”<sup>10</sup>

Do these formidable strictures apply to left-wing intellectuals such as Dr. Nkrumah or Sékou Touré, who cannot possibly be regarded as representatives of the “national bourgeoisie”? The Communists are willing to give them their due: “They have been the founders of our national liberation movement and have carried the spark of enlightenment and rebellion from one end of Africa to another.”<sup>11</sup> But handsome compliments are about all these revolutionary nationalists can expect, for in the future, as the Communists envisage it, there will be no room for them at the top of the national movement. “In conditions of modern society, the intellectuals occupy a middle position between the rulers and the ruled, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. . . . Many of these intellectuals vacillate between one camp and another, are always swinging helplessly between the oppressors and the oppressed. . . . We must remember that it (the intelligentsia) as a group is inherently unstable and unfit for leadership.”<sup>12</sup>

The intellectuals, in other words, cannot be relied upon, unless they join the Communist movement. If this is the comparatively restrained language of ideological analysis, there is no reason to be surprised by the much sharper attacks, in propaganda organs, on African leaders such as Tom Mboya, Alioune Cisse (Senegal), or Macrae (Uganda), all leading trade unionists, or on leading West African Socialists such as Léopold Senghor and Mamadou Dia. Clearly, for the orthodox Leninist, there are narrow limits to collaboration even with “progressive intellectuals” of the Afro-Communist brand; their leading position in the national movement is apparently to be challenged in the not-too-distant future.

It has been attempted in the present article to review the problems now facing Communism in Africa; a systematic survey of Communist activities in the trade unions and various kinds of front organizations would require lengthy and detailed studies of a specialized character. But even a cursory examination of the African scene establishes a number of facts of considerable political importance: above all, perhaps, the great difference be-

<sup>9</sup> N. Numade, “Marxism and African Liberation,” in *The African Communist*, April 1960, p. 32-40.

<sup>10</sup> F. Kumalo, “Socialism in Africa,” in *The African Communist*, January 1961, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *The African Communist*, April 1960.

tween, on the one hand, radical leaders and groups who have adopted some of the ideas and much of the language of Communism, but who have remained essentially left-wing nationalist and Pan-Africanist; and on the other, the orthodox Leninists whose number and influence are quite small. The former, the "Afro-Communists," may be as extreme as the latter in their hostility to the West; they may even on occasion be more intransigent. Nevertheless, there are basic differences and it would be a great mistake not to differentiate between them. There certainly is a great temptation to judge them all alike, because of the widespread and indiscriminate use of quasi-Leninist slogans among the radical nationalists in Africa. It is a temptation that should be resisted.

It could be argued that some Afro-Communists may move at some future date towards full acceptance of the Leninist credo. This, of course, is not unthinkable. But it is equally possible that the orthodox Communists will become "nationalist deviationists." Ten years ago there could be no doubts and hesitations for a Communist: there was but one center for the faithful, Rome and Mecca in one. The situation in 1961 is much more confusing from the point of view of the orthodox believer; this is the age of polycentric Communism—the time of infallibility and of the Russian monopoly of the means of grace has irrevocably passed. If Moscow and Peking proclaim rival truths, and if Belgrade preaches yet a third way to paradise, there will have to be room ultimately for a fourth and fifth independent center. In the transition from the age of proletarian internationalism to the era of schism, we will do well to encourage independence of mind and to avoid confusing radical nationalism or Afro-Communism with orthodox Marxism-Leninism.