The Effects of Colonialism on African Society

by JEAN SURET-CANALE

In his article "Tropical Africa Before the Colonialists" ("African Communist" No. 8) Professor Suret-Canale showed how the conditions created by the slave trade arrested and set back the normal development of African societies. The present article continues this study by examining the impact of modern colonialism in Africa. It is translated from the original in "Recherches Internationales".

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, imperialist colonisation introduced a new, disturbing element into the development of African societies. Colonisation came to West Africa against the particular background of a land already depopulated and ruined by several centuries of the slave trade.

Before going further, it is necessary to briefly restate the characteristics of contemporary imperialism. The role of the colonies in the imperialist system is to supply raw materials to the industries of the industrial metropolis, and to serve as an outlet for the manufactured goods of the metropolitan industries. This was also the role of the colonies in the period of mercantile colonisation, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, which in Africa appeared almost exclusively in the form of the slave trade. To this role and functions, not in themselves new, contemporary imperialist colonialism brings new elements.

Firstly, the exploitation of the colonies is no longer for the benefit of certain special groups of merchants, but for the benefit of the monopoly capitalists who dominate the political and economic life of the industrial metropolis. Instead of the simple creation of settlements, there is the political possession of territories, with the aim of imposing on the population of the conquered territory exploitation by the monopolies with protection from foreign rival imperialists.

But above all, contemporary imperialism gives a new function to
the colonies—that of a market for the placing of surplus capital. The purpose of the colonial regime is to create conditions which will bring exceedingly high profits on this capital, such as the granting of free or semi-free land, and cheap or even free labour through a system of forced labour.

CASH CROPS AND CAPITALIST RELATIONS

In the lands of tropical Africa where natural economy predominated (e.g. weakness of systems of exchange, characterised by a lack of money), the first effect of imperialist colonisation was the development of cultivation of cash crops for the market, and particularly the introduction of money forms. We must note that, with some exceptions, this cultivation for sale is materially different from production for self-consumption. We call the first “export cultivation”, and the second “consumption cultivation”.

Lacking economic incentives, the colonisers fell back on administrative methods to push cultivation for export—such as a money tax, which obliges the peasants to grow cash crops in order to earn the necessary money, and also the compulsory delivery of crops. Thus until recent years, the peasants of Oubangi (now Central African Republic) were obliged to deliver a fixed quantity of cotton annually to the societies which had the buying monopoly. Monitors, known as “cotton-boys”, who were in the service of these private societies but who had administrative powers, were charged with the job of delimiting the areas where it was compulsory to cultivate cotton. Elsewhere the system varied a little, but the principle remained the same.

The development of cash crop cultivation accentuated the contradictions within the patriarchal community; it introduced into it the germs of its decomposition and in some cases led to its dissolution. The patriarchal community was founded on self-consumption of the produce it cultivated; exchange or sale of the surplus was infrequent and limited. Goods acquired and accumulated as a result of these rare transactions—such as gold, cattle, loin-cloths etc.—were managed by the head of the family, and only spent or consumed for collective purposes such as festivities or ceremonies, dowries, and supplies in times of scarcity.

As the head of the family now, in the period of cash crops, has this supplementary product at his disposal in the form of money which is more easily handled, he is led to use it for personal ends. On the other hand, the members of the community—particularly the youth—will kick against having to work for the head of the
family, when they would be able to buy some sort of imported merchandise if they sold the products of their labour on their own account. They will object even more when the products of their labour are used to satisfy the caprices of the old who no longer respect their traditional obligations, as, for example, when the old buy extra wives for themselves, while the young for whose they should have paid, remain celibate.

**FROM OLD TO NEW**

As long as the traditional economy of self-consumption remains predominant, the patriarchal community—though shaken—exists as an economic reality. Only in some of those areas which were the first to be affected by colonisation has the process of dissolution of the patriarchal community been completed. Here the patriarchal community has disappeared as an economic reality, and made way for small-scale, individual cultivation.

A second result of colonisation is the introduction of capitalist relations. The exported capital is intended to create capitalist enterprises, great commercial firms, plantations, mines, public works and so on. But we should note two interesting points. At the beginning, this capital remains outside African society; the Africans supply only the labour; capital is in the hands of the colonisers. The second step—the introduction of capitalist relations—was only carried out on an extremely limited scale in the case of West Africa, for reasons we will discuss later.

A third result of colonisation was the progressive destruction of the old forms of class antagonism of pre-colonial society which was based on patriarchal slavery or elementary feudalism. Colonisation did not use brutal suppression of the former social relations because its conduct was based on contradictory motives. Economically it stood to gain by liquidating slave or feudal relations; politically, it could be in its interests in some regions, or in some particular circumstances, to maintain these relations as a means of dividing the population. In practice, economic pressure destroyed these relations, except in regions scarcely touched by modern economy, such as Mauritania and the Sahara regions.

As far as slavery is concerned, things were quite clear. Supported by the humanitarian sentiments of the peoples of Europe, the colonial businessmen opposed and actively worked against slavery—often in opposition to the politicians, soldiers and administrators. Some explained crudely, departing from the usual humanitarian prattle, that slavery as practised in West Africa (i.e. patriarchal
slavery) "breeds laziness". Slaves worked for their African masters who were thus more or less exempt from productive labour. Slavery should be abolished, not to help the slave, but to force everybody—ex-slaves and ex-masters—to work for the benefit of the colonisers.

In so far as feudal relations were concerned, we see the same phenomenon. Relations were altered and transformed because the colonisers sought to keep the entire surplus for themselves, leaving only the crumbs to the African privileged class, and only to the extent that these latter were reduced to the role of auxiliaries of the colonial regime. Other colonial countries have known a lasting association of feudalism and the colonial system—namely the consolidation of feudalism by colonialism. British India is a good example. But in those territories under French domination, for political reasons, the traditional feudal rulers were not consolidated to form a class of great landowners. The principle of the administration was usually to destroy the great chieftainships, and reduce the former chiefs to such purely administrative roles as, for example, district heads—positions that could be revoked at any time by the administration.

NEGATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF COLONIALISM

We have said that colonisation, for economic reasons, tends to bring about the disappearance of pre-colonial class relations, but that this tendency is hindered by the slow rate of growth of an economy based on the sale of commodities. It is also hindered for political reasons. Thus in West Africa, the colonial regime banned the slave trade (i.e. the buying and selling of slaves) although belatedly; but the institution of slavery itself was never formally suppressed. It continues to exist today, protected by the colonial administration in Mauritania and some other regions. Feudal relations were debased; rents became the chief's recompense for his services to the colonial administration.

The development of cultivation of cash crops and the very limited introduction of capitalist relations, did not have the progressive character in Africa that it had in Europe. In its imperialistic phase, capitalism has ceased to meet the demands of man's economic and social progress; it is unable to solve the problems which confront it, and has become an obstacle in the way of progress. As the aim of colonisation is to enable monopoly capitalism to overcome, at least temporarily, the contradictions in which it finds itself, all its negative aspects are emphasised in the colonial countries.

In Europe, despite its negative results which were less important,
the development of capitalism and the accumulation of capital gave a tremendous stimulus to production, and created conditions in which socialism becomes possible and necessary. The colonial system, however, does not allow the accumulation of capital in a colonial country. The total surplus, and sometimes even a part of what is necessary for the physical existence of the population, is confiscated by monopoly capital.

Capitalist production is usually born and develops out of small-scale, individual cultivation. But the individual peasant in Africa has no possibility either of accumulating capital, or of improving his farming methods. He is obliged to sell his produce at prices fixed by the monopolies; and these prices often do not even enable him to re-plant what he has reaped. His land becomes exhausted, and he does not have the means to preserve its fertility. Colonisation has made Africa a "dying land".

The breakdown of the patriarchal system, and the absence of any hope of improvement in the conditions of the peasants (except in some privileged areas), has caused a mass exodus from the countryside. But this exodus is without its usual complement, which is the development of an urban industrial population. In Africa, the uprooted peasants flock to the cities which are growing out of all proportion; they live in shanty towns without any productive work. As in all periods of social crisis, the breakdown of the traditional framework of society—in this case the patriarchal community—makes nonsense of the moral code that has grown up with it. There is created an atmosphere of unbridled individualism and unscrupulousness, without, however, any real prospect of success.

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY

From what has been described above, it can be seen that amongst the population of black Africa—at any rate amongst those who were once part of the French Empire—social differentiation is not very highly developed. The class antagonisms which existed in the pre-colonial period have been debased and pushed into the background. The antagonisms which have been produced by colonialism are mainly on the level of contradictions between imperialist capital and the mass of the population of the colonial countries. Let us look briefly at the classes and social strata which make up present-day African society.

The working class, the most direct victim of colonial exploitation, is still very small because industrial development is extremely limited. The peasant masses, victims of the commercial monopoly
of the big companies, are also directly interested in putting an end to colonial exploitation. They form 80 per cent to 95 per cent of the population. The majority of them are still organised within the economic and social framework of the patriarchal community. Internal social differentiation is generally not highly developed.

It must be clearly understood: among the African peasants, whether they are still within the framework of the traditional patriarchal community, or whether they have become small-scale individual cultivators, there are differences in wealth according to regions, and also as between families and individuals. But as a general rule, these are differences only of wealth, not differences of class.

The feudal elements or their remnants do not form a socially important force. Before colonisation, such feudal elements only existed in certain regions, and their importance varied greatly. The French system of direct administration deprived them of all independence. The chiefs, whether they were descendants of the old feudal families, or whether they were the creatures of the French Colonial Administration, soldiers, interpreters or cooks of an influential governor, were all only the passive tools of the colonisers. Their income did not come from ownership of the land, since the system of collective ownership of land remained in force almost everywhere.

The chiefs drew their income from feudal dues and from forced labour done by the peasants on village lands. These dues and forced labour were tolerated by the colonial administration, although theoretically they were forbidden by law. Officially the chiefs lived on their salaries as civil servants, and on a percentage of the taxes they collected for the government. This explains why the abolition of the administrative functions of the chiefs in Guinea also did away with them as a social force; deprived of the force which permitted them to demand dues and forced labour without any recognised legal basis, they lost both their legal and their illegal sources of income.

The institution of chieftainship is declining everywhere. In Niger, where chiefs played a decisive role in imposing a “Yes” vote in the referendum, they are no longer allowed to collect their traditional dues. In Senegal, chiefs still receive their salaries but their administrative functions have been removed. The chiefs are thus isolated from the masses of the population, because for more than half a century they have been the instruments of colonial exploitation. They are therefore cut off from the economic base on which
they could have built land-owning empires. (To this there are some exceptions in particular areas where the chiefs have become identified with the planter class.) Only in some economically undeveloped regions, such as the North Cameroons, have the feudal structures been preserved intact, and are used by the colonialists to maintain their hold on these countries.

AFRICA’S BOURGEOISIE

To what extent can we talk of a bourgeoisie? We have seen that colonisation, by developing cash-crop production, sowed the seeds of the breakdown of the patriarchal community, which disintegrates and gives way to small-scale, individual production. It is from this that capitalist production normally develops. But the capitalist monopolies have prevented any real accumulation of wealth by individual peasants; they have taken for themselves all the agricultural surplus and even a part of the minimum necessary for survival.

Only after the Second World War, in some particularly rich areas (e.g. the forest regions of the Ivory Coast and the Cameroons) did a class of African planters employing hired labour develop. This class is geographically localised. Most of them employ only seasonal labour, and even among the big landowners workers are paid not in money but in kind.

In the commercial sector, the monopolies have left little place for Africans. Trade is in the hands of Lebanese immigrants (or Greek, or Portuguese in East Africa). Peddling is the only thing that is left for Africans. Some pedlars, mainly in the Ivory Coast, have become rich and own shops and lorries; but their role is limited, as they only sell goods on behalf of the Lebanese or the large companies which allow them the necessary credit.

As for industry, the little that exists is entirely in European hands.

For the moment, the African planters and pedlars are only the embryo of a national bourgeoisie; the petty-bourgeois elements predominate, and their ties with the peasant masses are still strong. In so far as a feeling of class identity exists, it is directed mainly against the great capitalist monopolies. There are, however, some conflicts of interests between this class and the peasant masses; the colonial regime tries to use these differences in its own interest, although the possibilities are limited.

Some observers say that the new class which will be called on to take over from the colonial regime will be the neo-bourgeoisie, the civil servants and intellectuals.
Under the colonial regime, when 95 per cent of the population was illiterate, the main if not the only purpose of the schools was the training of clerks for subordinate positions in the colonial administration and in commercial firms. This group of intellectuals and civil servants—those who are able to read and write—supply the present political cadres. But this group does not form a class. It is a social layer of relatively well-paid workers. They are subject to conflicting influences; on the one hand most of them come from the peasant class and are attached to it by family ties. Because of their subordinate position in the colonial administration or business firms, they have also been subjected to the humiliations of colonial oppression. Many of them have become devoted and enlightened members of the anti-imperialist mass movements, and also trade unionists. On the other hand, their purely French education has uprooted them from their environment; their role as officials of the colonial regime has helped to cut them off from the masses, and to make them susceptible to pressures and corruption.

SUMMING UP

We have briefly described the categories which existed in those parts of black Africa which were part of the French colonial empire. It would be unwise to generalise our conclusions. Without going into detail, we can say that the situation in many other countries is very different. In those areas of West Africa which were, or are, under British domination, the policy of indirect administration consolidated the feudal elements. These elements form a fairly important social force, and tend to become a land-owning class with some feudal characteristics. Examples of this are Ghana and Nigeria. In addition to this, the early development of export crops—such as cocoa in Ghana—has emphasised social differentiation and has created an African bourgeoisie of planters and merchants. We are not able, however, to estimate the numerical importance or the economic role of this class.

In the former Belgian Congo, the situation is again different. Here capitalist relations were introduced on a very large scale. In the Congo basin and the mountainous regions of the east, there are large plantations belonging to colonial capital or to private European settlers. In the south—South Kasai—monopolies have developed the mining industry. Because of this development of capitalist relations, we find a large working class. Thus we have peasants and a proletariat, but, as in the ex-French territories, no
real development of an African bourgeoisie. Almost all capital remains in the hands of the monopoly societies or the European settlers.

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