

WHAT IS AFRICAN SOCIALISM?

BEDE ONUOHA

By arrangement with Andre Deutsch Ltd., publishers of The Elements of African Socialism, by Father Bede Onuoha, selected extracts from this important contribution to thought on the subject of African Socialism are reprinted here.

Inevitably only a sketchy outline of Fr. Onuoha's argument and statement of principles can be presented. The comparison of African Socialism with Marxist-Leninist Communism and with European Socialism has been entirely omitted, as has the chapter on "African Socialism and Religion". The references to vital matters such as education, leadership, trade unionism and many more have been sparing in the extreme. The importance of presenting Fr. Onuoha's case appeared to outweigh the risks of its being misunderstood as a result of this unavoidable condensation.

The sub-human condition in which most Africans live, today, haunts their educated compatriots and makes them blush. In the face of the challenge posed by the situation, ideologies and abstractions leave them cold. Solidarity with the dispossessed members of their race compels African leaders to adopt a highly pragmatic approach to structures and dogmas which the well-to-do people of Europe hold dear.

The starting point, therefore, is the reality of underdevelopment in Africa, the reality of poverty, hunger, disease and ignorance, of mendicity, raggedness and unhygienic surroundings. The squalor and promiscuity in which people live in African villages, the ugliness of under-fed children, the sheltered life of women who cannot leave their homes for lack of decent clothing, the destitution in which the aged die, the sufferings of the sick, the unbearable drudgery of farm work with primitive tools under the tropical sun and, above all, the humiliation attached in world consciousness to the colour of his skin, involving his culture and dignity as man — these are the premises from which African thinking and politics set off.

Political independence secured, all African leaders are deeply committed to a revolutionary recasting of traditional structures and a total revision of institutions inherited from the colonial past. An intense process of decolonisation, affecting not only public institutions but also people's minds and social relationships, must be backed by a firm will to resist any form of neo-colonialism in the economic, cultural and political fields. The objective is both positive and negative: negatively, to get out of old-time humiliation and alienation and, positively, to build a new nation.

To bridge the gap, both ideological and structural, between

expectation and realisation, between independence and national goals, African political leaders have cast around for a suitable instrument or mechanism, and, one after the other, throughout the length and breadth of the continent, from Algeria to the Congo and from Senegal to Malagasy, as if by some common intuition, they have unequivocally declared themselves in favour of what they call "African Socialism".

It is beyond doubt that traditional African society was based on a profoundly socialist attitude of mind, and governed by indigenous socialist rules, customs and institutions. But these were not the product of Marxist thinking.

This is the justification for the attribute "African" standing before the word "Socialism". It points to the originality of African Socialism. African Socialism is an expression of the desire of all Africans to *find* themselves, *be* themselves, and *assert* themselves. It is a crystallisation of the African genius and a declaration of ideological independence in a world flooded with learned masters.

Implied in this standpoint is, first of all, a realisation that traditional African society has a message for the modern world. In spite of its many limitations, it had a beauty all its own. It was highly integrated in a peculiar way and embodied those traits by which Africans are to be distinguished as a people. Secondly, there is a regretful awareness that exposure to European education, culture and institutions had almost completely voided the African of his true self, alienated him from his own culture and broken the continuity of his development; and thirdly there is a belief that it is possible for him to recapture the traditional values and outlook of his race and to adapt these to the needs of the twentieth century, namely, the need for scientific progress and international co-operation.

It seems possible to identify eight practical principles related to the organisation of society which are inherent in the concept of African Socialism namely, of (1) Fraternity, (2) Leadership, (3) Dialogue, (4) Planned Development, (5) Harmony, (6) Autonomy, (7) Positive Neutrality, (8) Pan-Humanism.

In Africa, in ancient times as today, *the common good* should be supreme. This "good", is the socialised Africa of our dream, will be presided over by a single man who will be "leader" by reason of his ability, dedication, and popularity. This man will not work in isolation but will be in perpetual contact and interaction with the rest of the community through their elected representatives; out of this interaction will evolve a great enthusiasm for progress and a rational plan for achieving it. The role of this plan will not be to concentrate power in the hands of the leader but rather to stimulate life among the people and regulate and co-ordinate their initiatives in the traditional spirit of equity and fairness to all.

Our first three principles are derived from African tradition, from the African concept of familyhood or community. The fourth principle is derived from world Socialism, the idea that society should evolve on the basis of a plan. (The first development plan on a national and long-term scale ever drawn up was in Russia

FATHER BEDE ONUOHA is a Nigerian priest who has studied in Rome and at Antigonish, Canada.

following the October Revolution, 1928-1932.) The fifth principle — that of harmony — is the corrective which Africans would bring to the experiences of the economically developed countries, whether Socialist or Capitalist. The last three principles regulate our foreign policy.

Our treatment of African Socialism here is in the realm of thought. The practical application of the principles will be the business of political and economic technicians on the spot in Africa. However, our study will be incomplete if we do not suggest in broad outline what type of institutions, in our opinion, will best crystallise the ideals of African Socialism.

[The succeeding extract consists of a number of condensed passages. EDITORS.]

1 AN EXECUTIVE HEAD OF STATE. Granted that he will be truly socialist, populist and African at heart, our principle of "leadership" demands that the national leader be vested with executive powers.

2 A SINGLE NATIONAL PARTY. We submit the following conclusions:

(i) Political freedom and democracy are perfectly reconcilable with the one-party system *provided* this party is not partisan but actually embraces the entire nation.

(ii) With the single mass-party system a people *who wish to govern themselves democratically* can achieve their end more fully than with a multi-party system in which each party represents only a section of the population.

3 A RESPONSIBLE TRADE UNIONISM. There is so much hardship, unemployment and under-employment in Africa today, that workers are easily content with things that fall far short of justice. An unjust wage is better than no wage. It may, therefore, be difficult to convince Labour Unions that they should be more radical than they are or think they are. Where our programme of African Socialism has not been introduced, or where there is no Socialist-orientated Economic Council regulating investment, prices, wages and rent, a strong Labour Union movement is *the next best thing*.

4 A MIXED ECONOMY. All authorities on African Socialism hold that African Socialism will not make a principle of State ownership and direction of all productive wealth. Statism is too simple a solution for a complex problem. Africans think that Socialism is quite compatible with the rich variety and healthy competition resulting from the so-called "mixed economy".

(i) *The Co-operative Sector*. Since co-operatives foster the community spirit and modernize village life, agriculture should become our co-operative sector *par excellence*. And since co-operation is the embodiment of distributive justice in business life, it should have a handsome share in the production and distribution of the national wealth, beginning with the basic needs of the family.

(ii) *The Private Enterprise Sector*. If our blue-print is the traditional African economic structure, then there is no doubt that African Socialism has for its objective *the widest possible dispersion* (as opposed to concentration) of ownership. The aim is to establish an economic order in which every active citizen, whether he is a farmer, civil servant or factory worker, will enjoy the

Rev. Father John Francis Maxwell, Diocesan Director of the Catholic Social Guild, Diocese of Southwark, England, suggests a beautiful plan for the radical restoration of justice: he proposes an employee stock-ownership programme to be made obligatory by law after a successful period of trial, as follows:

1. Small family enterprises should enjoy legal protection.

2. In all incorporated enterprises, employment and investment contracts should be so arranged by law that (a) investors receive a *limited* cumulative dividend or fixed interest on their investment; (b) workers cease to be merely wage-earners and, in due course, under conditions, become company members.

3. There should be created a National Bonus Share Pool in

which the benefits of national capital growth deriving from self-financing arrangements are pooled in the form of bonus shares available to every working person in the nation including civil servants. This demand is made on the grounds that the larger part of the growth or appreciation in fixed assets is due to the work of employees including management, and that those who have been the physical causes of this growth should, in strict justice, be its beneficiary owners. Investors have done nothing to cause this growth. They are entitled to no more than a limited, cumulative dividend on their investment. Employee stock-holding should, therefore, be mandatory on the part of business. After a period of trial during which membership should be voluntary, all corporations and companies should be required by law to be members of the national share pool.

4. Every five years, companies should be required to value their tangible fixed assets by some general standard of valuation and to issue a correct report on it.

5. Each year, companies should be required by law to value and report the increase in productivity per man-hour and the increase in average real earnings of workers.

6. Wages and salaries should rise in proportion to productivity.

7. Finally, "there must be controlling bodies, higher than the individual corporation or company, but subordinate to the government of the country, whose function is to control salaries and wages, to limit dividends according to the degree of risk, and to control expansion of tangible fixed assets. . . . There is need for some professional quasi-judicial and directing council or court which could, if necessary, exercise equitable and authoritative judgment and control over certain activities of even the largest and most powerful corporations."

This programme might well form the cornerstone of African Socialism. It satisfies all our desires: it provides us with a brand new approach to socialism, away from class conflict and totalitarianism; it is a replica of the old African system: the Maxwellian programme is a perfect application to modern industrial business of the traditional African economic order — "private enterprise under effective control"; it destroys capitalism, the arch-enemy of all socialism, but saves private enterprise, the guardian of human dignity in economic life; in a short time it will eliminate the rootless, propertyless, second-class citizen from our society and abolish the exploitation of man by man.

There is no suggestion that the reform of the corporation is a panacea or the end of all our problems. It should be regarded merely as the most strategic platform from which African Socialism can best resolve the numerous challenges facing it.

(iii) *The Public Enterprise Sector*. State enterprise there will necessarily be, but only for *empirical* reasons, such as to remove from individuals enterprises that, of their very nature, carry dominating power in society; to control enterprises that would otherwise be controlled by expatriates: or to supply public services which private enterprise avoids because they are not lucrative.

5 AFRICAN SCHOOLS. Immediately after political independence, every country in Africa feels the need to revise the system of education inherited from the colonial past in order to inculcate a

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social conscience in the younger generation, to de-colonize and Africanize all branches of study, to meet the technical and spiritual demands of all-round development, and to unite the citizens and hasten the movement towards the formation of *one* nation out of so many tribes, sects and factions.

It is futile to talk about African Socialism if we do not have African Socialists. Socialism is not like a political party to which one can belong just by casting a vote. To use the words of Dr. Nyerere: "Socialism — like Democracy — is an attitude of mind. In a socialist society it is the socialist attitude of mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern, which is needed to ensure that the people care for each other's welfare." (*Ujamaa*.) This "socialist attitude of mind" does not come spontaneously in most people: it must be taught and learned. It must be given not only to school children but also to teachers, legislators, judges and lawyers, industrialists, and to the entire intellectual élite of the country.

In general terms, African Socialism is the firm and deliberate will, on the part of African nations which have effectively rid themselves of all forms of colonial conditioning, to create a new society of free but socially responsible citizens where traditional African values of human solidarity, national unity, social equality and economic democracy will be immortalized.

In terms of economic organization, African Socialism may be defined as a radical form of economic democracy dedicated to the elimination through legislation of the European system of capitalistic profiteering, but not of private enterprise; and to the revival, under modern conditions, of the traditional African socio-economic system in which literally every worker was also a proprietor, and ownership of productive property was not a monopoly of the central political authority nor of a few individuals, but was the pride of every citizen.

Expressed in psychological terms, African Socialism becomes a socio-cultural philosophy, a civilization and way of life, based on traditional African humanism and seeking to eliminate exploitation and social stratification by providing every individual citizen with equal and easy access to ownership, economic activity, cultural enrichment and spiritual maturity within a framework of political democracy.

In order to attain these lofty goals, African Socialism will utilize the following instruments *as of necessity*: a single mass-party system with a presidential form of democratic government; a scientific system of 'dialogue' between the summit and the base and all the different complementary parts of the society; a centrifugal pattern of mixed economy; a reformed and democratic system of company and labour-contract law; a system of national share pool available to all; a system of education that is free, African and socialist; and, to crown it all, a superstructure of Pan-Africanism.

Looking back at UDI

ZIMBABWIAN

LOOKING BACK on the crisis events that followed each other so hectically from 25 October to U.D.I. on 11 November, we begin to wonder whether Messrs. Wilson and Smith realise now how absurd their "solemn treaty" and Royal Commission ideas were. How could Africans have ever trusted a treaty made by Smith when all African nationalist leaders are in detention for at least the next five years, when gaols are overflowing with people who have been charged under the Law and Order Maintenance Act, when all African political parties and activities are banned, when the Land Apportionment Act, the cornerstone of apartheid, is being applied ever more stiffly, when Africans are being evicted from all "European land" and from offices in the centres of towns, when the wage system continues to be based on skin colour, when African educational facilities are being cut, when technical education is being closed to Africans, when the position of the chiefs is being prostituted and when increasingly the African is being forced into a harsher bondage than ever before?

Though indeed some of Mr. Wilson's efforts may look absurd now, there is no doubt that he was himself deeply disappointed by the uncompromising attitude

of the banned Zimbabwe African National Union leader, Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole, and of Mr. Joshua Nkomo, leader of the People's Caretaker Council (successor to the Zimbabwe African People's Union). As unhelpful as their demand for majority rule now, he found that they seemed to hate the idea of unity among themselves more than they apparently disliked white domination.

Mr. Wilson came here without a friend in Rhodesia. He had hoped to get the concurrence of the Nationalist leaders in his battle against Mr. Smith. Instead he found that the nationalists expected Britain to use force against her kith and kin for the cause of alien Africans who were themselves even failing to present a united front in opposition to white domination. Our leaders have shown themselves to be toothless lions. They are an embarrassment to everyone whose condition for assisting them is that they accept a common front against the white regime. Even the O.A.U. has failed to obtain this unity.

The main stumbling block has been the demand of the P.C.C. that ZANU should disband and join them and that the ZANU leaders should become ordinary members of their party. Few people can accept being slighted.

The truth here is that we have up to now failed to put our country before party differences. We bear a large share in the blame for the chaos in our country and among our own ranks. If we cannot stop our bickering then domination under Smith should be here for a long time to come.

ONE CAN UNDERSTAND the refusal of the nationalist leaders to compromise on majority rule now. While the leaders languish in restriction, it is inhuman to expect them to

compromise with their tormentors. Yet Britain's suggestions about promoting African education might have offered a way round U.D.I. and on to majority rule, had accepting such offers not carried with them the risk of our selling our country by allowing Rhodesia a legal minority independence.

We are actively interested in finding wider avenues of education for our people. In so far as the white settlers argue that we cannot run Rhodesia properly, and in so far as they hold the reins of education, this argument can never cease because we know that the Europeans will limit our education and expand the security forces to maintain Smith's police-dog state.

We have a vested interest in governing our country to all our people's satisfaction. We might have accepted a time period within which mass education at technical, secondary, and primary levels could be vastly increased. A period of three to five years would not have been too long, provided that we could have been certain that after that period majority rule would be assured. We utterly reject any suggestion that we should accept promises of better things after the advent of a minority rule that might be permanent.

Condoning the refusal to co-operate is the argument that U.D.I. would be advantageous to us. This gamble will only pay off if Smith's regime collapses after only a short while. Our freedom is not "round the corner". Our country is too rich and beautiful for the Katanga Lobby international capitalists in London and elsewhere to leave us in peace. Had we a humid climate, were our lands desert, we should now be free. We shall, of course, be free. Any day may be Zimbabwe Day: let it come during Mr. Smith's term of office.