The End of African Socialism?

By George B.N. Ayittey

In most places in Africa, telephones don't work; they bite back. What are called "roads" are cartways truncated with crevasses large enough to swallow a truck. Vehicles move in a crab-like fashion: pointing sideways but moving perfectly straight. These, in short, are a few of the manifestations of the deepening crisis gripping Africa.

Once a region with bountiful stores of optimism and hope, the African continent now teeters perilously on the brink of economic disintegration, political chaos, and institutional and social decay.

The decline in income per capita has been calamitous for many African countries. Agricultural growth has been dismal, with output growing at less than 1.5 percent since 1970. Industrial output across Africa has also been declining, with some regions experiencing *de-industrialization*. Export volumes for many African countries have faltered, leading to a fall in Africa's share of world markets by almost half.

To maintain income and investment, African governments borrowed heavily in the 1970s. Total African foreign debt has risen nineteen-fold since 1970 to a staggering $230 billion, equal to its Gross National Product (GNP), making the region the most heavily indebted of all (Latin America's debt amounts to around 60 percent of GNP). Debt service obligations absorbed 47 percent of export revenue in 1988, but only half were actually paid. The arrears are constantly being rescheduled.

With scarce foreign exchange increasingly being devoted to service debt obligations, less became available for imports of spare parts, drugs, textbooks, and other essential supplies. Infrastructure began to crumble for lack of maintenance. Roads started to deteriorate and telephones refused to work. Even hospitals in many African countries had no running water. At the Akomfo Anokye Hospital in Ghana, patients were asked to bring their own bandages, blankets, and food.

"Harvard" in Ruins. Educational facilities soon began to disintegrate. Makerere University in Uganda, once called "The Harvard of Africa," is now in total ruins. The University of Ghana at Legon, once a world-class institution, has not seen a single coat of fresh paint since the colonialists left in the fifties.

In sub-Saharan Africa (or black Africa), the economic deterioration has been so severe that this region now has the dubious distinction of being home to 24 of the world's 36 poorest nations. Economic performance of this region, measured crudely by the rate of growth of income per capita, has been pathetic, as the following table indicates:

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GNP PER CAPITA: AVERAGE ANNUAL RATES OF GROWTH			
	1965-1973	1973-1980	1980-1987
Black Africa	2.9	0.1	-2.8
Excluding Nigeria	1.2	-0.7	-1.2
Exceptions			
Botswana	9.3	7.3	8.0
Mauritius	0.8	3.9	4.4
Cameroon	-0.4	5.7	4.5
Senegal	-0.8	0.5	0.1

Source: World Bank Report, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Substainable Growth, November, 1989*

The overall picture is even more depressing when compared to the performance of other regions of the Third World. Social and economic indicators of development, such as output growth, health, and literacy, have shown persistently weak performance in black Africa. For example, black Africa's rate of growth of GDP per capita for the two periods, 1965-1987 and 1980-1988, were O.6 and -2.5. For Asia, these were 4.0 and 5.5, while those for Latin America and the Caribbean were 2.1 and-0.6. While all other regions of the Third World advanced, black Africa retrogressed.

The exceptions to the general economic atrophy in black Africa have been few. Botswana continues to serve as a shining black success story, followed by Mauritius and Cameroon while Senegal struggles to keep its head above water. In the early 1980s, Ivory Coast and Kenya were members of this select club, but now suffer from serious economic crises.

The worst performers have been Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Sudan, Uganda, Zaire and Zambia – all of which are characterized by civilian or military dictatorships.

Worse than at Independence. Back in the 1960s, euphoria punctuated much of Africa. Freedom had been won; the colonial "infidels" had been driven out of Africa. There was a perfervid desire to prove to the "racists" that Africa too was capable of charting its own course in its own image. But today most Africans are worse off than they were at independence. What happened?

The new leaders faced the daunting task of developing Africa and delivering the goods to their people. There was widespread belief among African leaders, intellectuals, and even American development experts that the state had to assume a predominant role in economic development. It was argued that markets were underdeveloped; infrastructural facilities were inadequate; capital or funds were insufficient; the middle class was non-existent; the colonial economic structure had to be transformed, and so forth. Africa could not rely on free markets and private enterprise. The state had to spearhead economic development. U.S. AID, the State Department, and even development experts from Harvard University supported these arguments and channelled much aid resources to African governments.

To initiate development, it was widely held that the state needed wide-ranging powers to marshall resources. Extensive powers were conferred upon African heads of state. Other heads simply arrogated unto themselves additional powers. If a piece of land was needed for highway construction, it was simply appropriated by the state. In this way, *all* African governments, regardless of their professed ideology, came to assume immense powers.

Socialist vs. Capitalist Route. It can be argued justifiably that they indeed needed these powers to spur development. But almost everywhere, the mistake or pernicious oversight was *the failure to attach countervailing checks or safeguards* to prevent the abuse of those powers. That failure led to the rise of tyranny in Africa. There are tyrannical regimes on *both* the left and the right. But the leftist ones are more numerous since most African countries took the "socialist" route after independence. A few countries such as Ivory Coast, Kenya, Malawi, and Senegal went the "capitalist" route.

In many places in Africa, capitalism was identified with colonialism, and since the latter was evil and exploitative so too was the former. Socialism, the antithesis of capitalism, was advocated as the only road to Africa's prosperity. The socialist ideology, copied from the East, was widely adopted, and in its wake followed economic atrophy, repression, and dictatorship.

This process began in Ghana, the first black African country to gain its independence from Britain on March 7, 1957, under Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, who is generally regarded as "the father of African socialism." After independence, he faced herculean tasks. He had declared in the 1950s, "We shall not rest content until we demolish this miserable structure of colonialism and erect in its place veritable paradise." Independence had been achieved. The question was how to build that paradise.

Nkrumah urged Ghanaians to know their "enemy," which was "collective imperialism in which the USA occupies a leading position." He also exhorted his fellow Africans to beware of a number of imperialist dogmas: "that western democracy and the parliamentary system are the only valid ways of governing; that capitalism, free enterprise, free competition, etc., are the only economic systems capable of promoting development." These were fallacies, Nkrumah asserted.

African "Isms." Socialism, therefore, was to be his ideology. His choice of socialism was "based on the belief that only a socialist form of society can assure Ghana of a rapid rate of economic progress without destroying that social justice, that freedom and equality, which are a central feature of our traditional way of life." Many other African leaders followed suit. While President Kaunda of Zambia was espousing "humanism," Nyerere of Tanzania was instituting "*Ujaama*," drawing vague references from the African tradition of "socialism."

In Africa, socialism was implemented through the one-party state apparatus. The state would "own everything" and direct economic activity *(dirigsme)*. There would be only one political party. The head of that party would also be the president – for life. Clearly, any individual with ambitious political designs and lust for personal power would be seduced by such a system.

Accordingly, under Nkrumah socialism as a domestic policy was to be pursued toward "a complete ownership of the economy by the state." A bewildering array of legislative controls and regulations were imposed on imports, capital transfers, industry, wages, the rights and powers of trade unions, prices, rents, and interest rates. Some of the controls were introduced by the colonialists, but they were retained and expanded by Nkrumah. Private businesses were taken over by the Nkrumah government and nationalized. Numerous state enterprises were acquired.

March Toward Dictatorship. Nkrumah was in a hurry to transform Ghana into a socialist state. "We must achieve in a decade what it took others a century," he asserted. He was intolerant of criticism. Opposition members were traduced in the media as the "party of divisiveness" bent on a course of deliberate sabotage of Ghana's construction efforts. They were to be eliminated. Accordingly in July 1958, Nkrumah passed the Preventive Detention Bill, which gave his government sweeping powers "to imprison without trial, any person suspected of activities prejudicial to the state's security." With this vague definition, anybody could be picked up since *any* private activity could be interpreted as prejudicial to the interests of the state. The insidious march toward dictatorship thus began.

The news media next came under the complete control of Nkrumah's party. Journalists were gagged, censorship established, and editors who criticized the government were hauled off to jail. Any opposition to Nkrumah's dictatorship was brutally suppressed. Finally in 1964, Nkrumah declared Ghana to be a one-party state and himself "president-for-life."

Ghanaians soon tired of Nkrumah and his rhetoric. In 1966 when he was overthrown in a military coup, there was much joy and jubilation in the streets of Ghana. His "socialist" experiment was a miserable fiasco. Worse, his ideology had degenerated into "Swiss bank socialism." While he was preaching socialism, his ministers were busy importing Mercedes Benzes and gold beds into Ghana and stashing millions into Swiss bank accounts. Back in 1962, a member of Ghana's National Assembly, B.E. Kusi, excoriated these so-called socialists:

> Many children go about in the streets because they cannot get accommodation in secondary schools, while those ministers who are in charge of the money send their children to international schools and to university. Most of them ride in Mercedes Benz 220s and yet call themselves socialists. This is very bad. If we want to build a socialist country, then we must let the president know that we are serious about the use of public funds and that we do not pay mere lip service to socialism.

Ghana's Disaster. When Ghana gained its independence, it boasted foreign exchange reserves of $400 million. In 1966, there was a foreign debt of $858 million in its place. The state farms Nkrumah set up could not produce enough food to feed their own workers, let alone the nation. Between 1960 and 1966, food shortages appeared and local food prices doubled. Ghanaians were suffering.

Nkrumah's policies were emulated by many African countries. Predictably, in one country after another, economic ruin, dictatorship and oppression followed with deadly consistency: Angola, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mozambique, Zambia, and now Zimbabwe.

State-Sector Albatross. By 1980, almost every African economy was dominated by one large sector — the state sector – created by a maze of laws, controls, and regulations. Public sector expenditures in 1986 were more than 27 percent of GNP, compared with only 19 percent in low-income countries outside Africa. The state sector had become an albatross, characterized by a huge civil service, overlapping bureaucracies, stifling red tape, hideous waste and corruption, and hopelessly inefficient state enterprises (SEs). Many of these enterprises were acquired haphazardly with little planning and foresight and overstaffed with party functionaries.

In the early 1980s, there were more than 3,200 SEs in Africa whose collective performance was nothing short of the scandalous. A state-run shoe factory in Tanzania continues to operate at no more than 25 percent of capacity. Here are some other examples:

- ♦ ♦ For 14 months, from November 1978 to January 1980, the State Jute Bag Factory in Ghana was closed due to a shortage of raw materials. Yet the 1,000 workers received full pay for the entire period of closure.
- ♦ ♦ In Niger, the cumulative deficit of 23 loss-making SEs exceeded 4 percent of Niger's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1982.
- ♦ ♦ In Tanzania, between 1976 and 1979, one third of all SEs were losing money.
- ♦ ♦ In Togoland, the losses of just eight SEs reached 4 percent of GDP in 1980 while in Ghana 75 percent of SEs made losses.

Many of the SEs were set up with foreign loans and aid. But in many cases, the investment decision was poorly appraised and riddled with graft and corruption. For instance, a cement plant serving Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Togo was closed in 1984 after only four years in operation. A 1987 evaluation of rural development projects in Africa financed by the World Bank revealed that half had failed. After Somalia built a plant to box bananas in 1976, it was discovered that the production level needed for the plant to break even exceeded the national banana production. In 1975, Tanzania built a $2.5 million semi-automatic bakery in Dar-es-Salaam with Canadian aid. But there was no flour to make bread. When Ghana's state-owned Sugar Factory at Asutsuare was built, it stood idle for more than a year because somebody forgot to include a water supply system. Ghana's state-owned shipping line, *Black Star Line*, had so many redundant employees that 254 workers were paid for three years (1981-1984) to simply stay home.

Railways in Shambles. The railways, state-owned, which were once the backbone of Africa's transportation system, are now in shambles. Between 1985-87, only two black African railways out of 22 derived any modest financial surplus. In 1985, out of nine railways for which reliable data sare available, one had operating costs of 90 percent, another, 50 percent of revenue.

Ghana Railways used to carry 2.6 million tons of freight in the early 1970s but only 0.4 million tons by the middle of the 1980s. Nigeria Railways lost 33 percent of traffic from 1979 to 1986. In Sudan, 40 percent of exports were carried by rail in 1980 but by 1986, the railway's share had fallen to 5 percent. Staff costs of railways absorb up to 75 percent of revenue in some cases. Nigerian Railways for example had six times the staff per traffic unit of European Railways in 1987.

The civil service is one segment of the state sector that has experienced the most phenomenal growth. In Ghana, the civil service increased at a rate five times the growth of the labor market – 14 percent each year between 1975 and 1982. In The Gambia, the civil service doubled between 1974 and 1984. By 1986, Guinea's 75,000 civil servants' wages accounted for 50 percent of current expenditures. In the Central African Republic, civil service salaries absorbed 63 percent of current revenues. More than 20 percent of Ghana's civil servants were declared superfluous. In February 1987, some 30 percent of the staff in all the ministries in Sierra Leone were considered useless.

Cleaning House. Reform of the hideously inefficient state sector began in the latter part of the 1960s when the military seized power and threw out kleptocrats. The soldiers embarked on a "house-cleaning" drive to inject discipline and efficiency into the public sector. Many Africans applauded enthusiastically.

The military also claimed they needed even greater political powers for "house-cleaning," national "redemption," and "reconstruction." Constitutions were suspended, curfews were imposed, political parties and associations proscribed, etc.

The military regimes did not ask for these powers; they simply usurped them. But all these were exercises in futility. First, since there were no checks or safeguards, the military too abused their powers. As Lord Acton once observed, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Second, the military itself succumbed to the sweet taste of power and overstayed its welcome. In most countries, they turned out be far worse than the civilian governments they replaced. They looted national treasuries with "discipline" (Liberia, Nigeria, and Zaire) and ruined one African economy after another with brutal "efficiency" (Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Somalia, and Uganda).

A new breed of "dedicated" military officers, such as Rawlings of Ghana and Sankara of Burkina Faso, emerged and overthrew the corrupt stratocrats. But this new breed was not significantly better. They resorted to draconian measures, stringent controls, and harsh enforcement as if more of the wrong medicine would cure the patient. By 1984, the situation had become hopeless.

Economic Restructuring. In a rare moment of courage and forthrightness, African leaders admirably admitted before the 1986 United Nations Special Session that defective policies and economic mismanagement were also significant in precipitating the crisis. Subsequently, economic reform and restructuring programs were drawn up and courageously implemented. By the end of 1988, more than half of the black African nations had signed a Structural Adjustment (SA) agreement with the IMF and the World Bank.

Typically, an SA agreement provides loans to a developing country to revamp its economy and re-orient it toward greater reliance on markets and private sector participation. Such programs entail sale of inefficient state enterprises, removal of price controls, exchange rate devaluation, and a dismantling of the state interventionist behemoth. A few of the reforming countries, such as Ghana, Malawi, and Tanzania have shown impressive results. For example, Ghana, after years of economic decline, has registered a stellar 6.2 percent annual rate of GDP growth over the last four years. Overall, however, the experience with economic restructuring in black Africa has been disappointing. Controversy erupted when an April 1989 World Bank study concluded that "strong reforming" countries had raised their GDP growth on average from 1.2 percent a year to 3.8 percent between

1980-1984 and 1985-1987, whereas growth in non-reforming countries had risen only from 0.7 percent to 1.5 percent. The Economic Commission for Africa, a United Nations agency, using the same figures, reached the opposite conclusion: that the strong-reforming economies actually shrank by 0.5 percent a year between 1980 and 1987, whereas weak reformers grew by 2 percent and non-reformers by 3.5 percent. Whatever the conclusion, the controversy only served to heighten skepticism about the efficacy of the Structural Adjustment (SA) in reversing the economic slide of Africa.

Structural Adjustment Flaws. Western governments may think economic restructuring supported with generous loans will save Africa. But Western taxpayers should demand better uses of their money. In most cases in Africa, SA amounted to reorganizing a bankrupt company and placing it, together with massive infusion of new capital, in the hands of the same incompetent managers who ruined it in the first place.

Second, SA assumes that development takes place in a vacuum. Never mind senseless civil wars, environmental degradation, infrastructural deterioration, a generalized state of violence and terror in Africa. These supposedly have no effect on economic development. In Mozambique, for example, the twelve-year-old civil war has cost at least $8 billion and an estimated 900,000 civilian lives. Over a third of its population have been displaced.

Nor do other features of the policy environment matter: despotism, perverted systems of priorities that stress prestigious projects, arrogant incompetence, a generally dysfunctional perspicacity of the process of economic development, and naked looting by "Swiss bank socialists."

Third, economic reform without a concomitant political reform is meaningless since economic reform under dictatorships is generally not sustainable. Black Africa is characterized by dictatorships or weak authoritarian regimes that maintain their authority through personalistic patron-client relations. (Of the 45 black African countries, only four — Botswana, Mauritius, Senegal, and arguably The Gambia — allow their people the right to vote and choose their leaders.) These relationships are prone to sudden and erratic changes, producing political instability. Africa's own history reveals that this instability impedes the correction of structural imbalances. It is no wonder that its record of economic reform has been spotty.

Saving Regimes. The sad truth is that African governments restructure not to save their economies but their regimes. Further, restructuring proceeds in cycles: aborted when the crisis abates and reinstated upon reemergence (Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, Zaire, Liberia). Even during restructuring, measures are often implemented perfunctorily without the conviction and the dedication needed to carry them through. In many cases, public confidence in the program was shattered by government dishonesty and tomfoolery. For example, believing that economic development occurs in a vacuum, the Marxist government of Angola drew up a grandiose Investment Code (Law 13/1988) to attract foreign investors. Even the *West Africa* magazine was perplexed: "Why should the foreign investor put money into agriculture, trade or manufacturing in war-torn Angola (or much less Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, Sudan or Uganda) when a host of apparently stable, structurally-adjusting African countries (or better yet, Asian and now Eastern European countries) offer opportunities in the same sector and more?" (March 13-19, 1989; p. 407).

In Sierra Leone, President Momoh declared to Parliament on June 2, 1989, that austerity and self-sacrifice must prevail – but not for his government. Large, uncontrollable expenditure items had rendered the budget meaningless. "He explained that the government had continued to fund its activities by printing money, spending in excess of tax revenue, and borrowing from the Central Bank, while the nation's meager resources were used for imports that were irrelevant to the needs of the economy" (*West Africa*, June 12-18, 1989, p. 958).

Incongruous Actions. In Ghana, the military government declared its willingness to allow private sector participation in the economy after decades of socialist management and ruin. But its actions proved incongruous with its pronouncements. The commercial properties of burgeoning indigenous entrepreneurs were arbitrarily seized without due process of law. Three such cases were reported in 1989.

In one case involving Dr. Kwame Safo-Adu, an African Development Bank and World Bank credit facility was secured to establish a pharmaceutical factory at Kumasi that employed about thirty Ghanaians. Strangely perceived as a political threat, his home was attacked by two brigades of military personnel in February 1988. Both groups were disguised as "armed robbers" and apparently mistaking the other as real robbers, shooting erupted between them. Before it was over, two of them lay dead. Subsequently on November 3, 1989, the pharmaceutical factory was cordoned off and closed by a battalion of 400 armed soldiers.

Ghana, incidentally, has also drawn up an elaborate Investment Code to attract foreign investors with guarantees that their commercial properties will be safe. It is also the same country whose economic reform program is being touted by the World Bank as "the role model for all of Africa."

In Tanzania, ex-president Julius Nyerere continues his frontal attacks on the SA program, sowing confusion and much uncertainty. After ruining the Tanzanian economy with "*Ujaama*" socialism, he "retired" to be the chairman of Tanzania's ruling and sole legal party, Chama cha Mapindzi (CCM).

In July 1988, the Tanzanian government under Mwinyi licensed six private companies to set up breweries. Here, too, private sector participation was to be allowed to break the decades-old state monopoly on breweries in a restructuring program. But after some of the companies had conducted feasibility studies and arranged financing, the industry and trade minister suddenly abrogated the licenses, claiming that the private breweries would falsify output data and evade taxes.

Dictator Bailouts. These inconsistencies and policy acrobatics have done a great deal to spell doom for structural adjustment in most parts of black Africa. *Blacknost* has proven to be no *perestroika*. In fact, by 1988 the Nigerian newspaper, *National Concord*, had written an obituary on structural adjustment midway through its country's program, claiming its operation has in some very critical respects been flawed (June 30, 1988). Furthermore it seemed, where adopted, SA rather served to impede the democratization process by bailing out failed dictatorships. Writing in *New African* (November 1988; p.47), Stephen Duah stated with elegant simplicity: "If Western governments and the IMF would stop giving loans to dictators in (Africa), they would not survive to terrorize their nations, let alone extend their acts into the international arena."

Breaking Taboos. Recognizing the futility of loans solely to support economic restructuring, the World Bank, which characteristically refrains from political commentaries, courageously broke its own taboos. In its new Report (*Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*, November 1989), it ventured into sacred territory by berating corruption, patronage, and waste that stymie development and stressed the creation of "an enabling environment."

"Ultimately, better governance requires political renewal," the Report said.

Without "political renewal" in the 1990s, Africa will be abandoned for greater emphasis on Eastern Europe. It is true a few African countries attempted "political renewal" and reform in the 1980s. But much of it was a performance of the "Lenin boogie": one step forward, two steps back, a sidestep, and a flip to land at the same place as before.

In 1988, for example, Kenya's only legal party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU) suddenly "reformed" its political system by adopting a peculiar system of voting. Prospective candidates — only life-members of KANU were allowed — had to be cleared by local branch committees before they could stand for elections.

On election day, candidates put up their pictures in the voting areas and voters, who must also be KANU members, "voted" by queueing behind the portraits of their chosen candidates. For their "votes" to be valid, they had to stay in line from 12:00 noon till 6:00 pm when the polls closed. Those not wanting to line up had to stay 100 meters away from the polling station. Professionals and businesspersons were effectively disenfranchised by this absurd "democratic" system.

In Nigeria, preparations feverishly began in 1987 to return the country to civilian rule in 1992. A constitution was drafted under the watchful eyes of omniscient soldiers, and by a 1989 military decree only two parties — the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention — will be allowed to exist. To give more substance to this form of democracy by fiat, the military government went further and drew up the constitutions and manifestos of the two parties it had created.

Exams for Politicians. Much effort and emphasis were placed on "educating" civilians on how to rule themselves. A Center for Democratic Studies (CDS) was established for this purpose, and its director, Professor Omo Omoruyi, disclosed that aspiring politicians will have to pass two examinations for certificates leading to "competence in the Nigerian Constitution" before they can hold public offices. "There must be a way of ascertaining whether they know how Nigeria is governed," he explained. Naturally, there will be no such certificates for aspiring military heads of state, despite the fact that the military has held power for twenty out of thirty years of Nigerian independence. (In Benin, Congo, Ghana, Somalia, Togo, Uganda and Zaire, the military has ruled much longer than civilians).

Meanwhile in Ghana, elections were held in earnest from October 1988 to February 1989 in the country's 110 newly-created districts to institute what was officially dubbed as "participatory democracy." Candidates had to have their "revolutionary credentials" vetted by the government-appointed Electoral Commission. In addition, the government reserved to itself the right to appoint a full third of the representatives of the District Assemblies.

This "grass-roots" democratic system in Ghana was drawn up with the assistance of a Bulgarian expert in 1988. There were no provisions for national, or even regional, elections.

Nor were such issues publicly entertained. Participation in the decision-making process was to occur only at the district level. Ghanaians, by implication, were not yet ready to choose their heads of state in national elections.

One would think that black African leaders who rail about "freedom," "majority rule," and "one man, one vote" themselves understand what these concepts mean. If a Kenyan or Ghanaian had challenged these infantile "democratic" exercises, he would have been rewarded with a jail term or death. But if Pretoria had declared South Africa a one-party state and insisted that blacks vote by queueing behind portraits of candidates; or had decreed that only two black political parties, of its own choice and manufacture, would be allowed to exist in the post-apartheid era; or had insinuated that blacks were not yet ready to choose their president in national elections; or that blacks must be "educated" and must pass two examinations to ascertain whether they know how South Africa is governed before holding public offices, the governments of Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia would have leapt 4,000 feet into the air to denounce these measures vehemently as racist arrogance and a palpable effrontery to black Africans.

Recovering a Lost Legacy

To survive in the 1990s, Africa needs to take a quantum leap back to its own indigenous political and economic roots. It is true that in the native system of government, the African chief rules for life, but he is appointed with the advice and consent of the Queen Mother and the Council of Elders. He does not appoint himself. There is a fundamental difference. Nobody just gets up and declares himself "chief-for-life" and his village to be "a one-party state" in indigenous Africa.

Most African societies have a Queen Mother whose duty is to select a candidate and present him or her to the Council of Elders for approval. This Council is a representative body made up of the heads of the various extended families in the community. The families choose their own heads. Among the Asante of Ghana, the Queen Mother has three chances to produce an acceptable candidate or else the Council makes the choice itself. The Igbo of Nigeria has no Queen Mother but any prominent person can seek to become a headman or ward chief.

The chief rules as long as his people allow it. Sanctions can be brought against any chief who flouts the will of his people. He is first admonished privately by his advisers and then publicly. If he persists, his people can resort to several remedies. The Igbo people go on a village strike, bringing life to a halt. That usually forces the authorities to mend their ways. In other societies, the people simply abandon their chief and move elsewhere. The history of Africa is full of migrations of people to escape oppression. Nobody loves freedom and independence more than African natives. That explains why there are more than 2,000 different tribes in Africa today. Rather than submit to despotic rule, the natives moved somewhere else to preserve their culture and independence. This course of action is still evidenced today by Africa's growing number of refugees.

In other tribes, an erring chief or king is simply "destooled" (removed). According to the Ghanaian historian, Dr. Kwame Arhin: "The people of Asante destooled three kings in 1799, 1874 and 1883. They destooled Osei Kwame in 1799 for absenting himself from Kumasi and failing to perform his religious duties during the Adae festival. They destooled

Karikari in 1874 for extravagance. They destooled Mensa Bonsu in 1883 for excessively taxing his people."

With the Asante, divestiture proceedings begins when disaffected members of the community file grievances against the king before the council. The king is given the opportunity to defend himself. If found at fault, he is asked to pay *mpata*, a pacification fee. If the aggrieved party refuses to accept this, the king is "destooled." The Yoruba, however, remove their *ona* differently by a process known as *kirikiri*. If he is incompetent or abuses his power, a mob will surround his residence, loudly abusing him and pelting his hut with rocks. He would be given three months to leave the village. If he refuses, then a select band of men would seize him and dispose of him. The Gikuyu of Kenya remove their rulers by a process known as *itwika* — a genuinely indigenous African people's revolution.

Decision by Consensus. In governance, the chief and his councillors sit under a tree and debate issues until they reach unanimity. Any adult can participate in council meetings, called *indaba* among the Zulu of South Africa. One does not have to belong to any particular one-party state to participate. In 19th century Angola, the African king, Alfonso, allowed the Portuguese merchants to send their own representative to his court. The Asante of Ghana also permitted foreign representation. No one was "locked out" of the political decision-making process. Even slaves could also participate. In Senegal, slaves, *djam*, elected their own representative to the king's court. In most places in traditional Africa, slavery as a social class was of no economic consequence. Slaves could own property and had full political rights. In fact, the Jaja of Bonny of Niger Delta (Nigeria) rose to become king from a slave origin in the 19th century.

In the political process, if the chief and the councillors are deadlocked on a verdict, a village meeting will be called and the issue placed before the people for a *consensus* to be reached. The Khosa of South Africa call one of these village meetings *pitso*.

When the colonialists came to Africa, they did not find a box with "ballot" written on it. Nor did they find a building with "Congress" or "Parliament" written on it. So they concluded the indigenous African system of government was "undemocratic" and "despotic" because the chief ruled for life. But Chancellor Williams, an African American (or Aferican, for short), was highly impressed by the Mossi indigenous system in northern Ghana: "Their political system, highly democratic, was unsurpassed by any state anywhere in the world. That system was developed by Africans." He may have been overly effusive in his praise. But the fact is Africans had their own indigenous system of government.

They sat under a tree and talked about issues affecting the community. The Europeans put up a building and called it "parliament," which literally means a place to talk. What's the difference? Africans had *participatory* democracy which reached a consensus. The Europeans introduced *representative* democracy based on majority vote. Never mind how "primitive" or "backward" the tree but the institution of reaching a consensus was there in indigenous Africa before the colonialists arrived on the continent.

Hearing Minority Positions. Consensus means that minority positions are not only heard but also taken into account in the decision-making process. Majority vote, on the other hand, means that a minority position can be ignored. Consensus is far more difficult to reach on many issues, and that was one reason why African political tradition is noted for the length of time; it took sometimes days – and even weeks – to reach a consensus. But once reached, there was unity of purpose since *all* participated in the decision-making process. Unity was achieved through this process of consensus building. It was not achieved by the chief demanding blind allegiance to his leadership and the suppression of alternative viewpoints. All historians, experts and African leaders agree on this. But then the same leaders fail to realize that consensus, by its very nature, is the antithesis of autocracy. One cannot impose one's will in a system that is traditionally structured to reach decisions by *consensus*. Clearly, despotism does not inhere in the African political tradition. As the late Dr. K.A. Busia, ex-president of Ghana observed: "Authoritarianism cannot be justified on the basis of African tradition." The African chief or king is powerless without the council of elders. He cannot pass any law or reach any decision without their consent. The chief cannot remove the councillors since they are chosen by the extended families they represent.

Many African leaders such as Nkrumah and Nyerere also argued erroneously that the indigenous African economy was fundamentally "socialist." Socialism, as understood and practiced, entails government ownership of the means of production; the operation of state enterprises to the exclusion of privately-owned businesses; price fixing by the state and a plethora of state regulations and controls. In other words, there is an absence of private ownership or property, free enterprise and free markets. Africa's indigenous economic system may be "backward" and "primitive"; but it is not characterized by these absences and is therefore not "socialism."

Controls, Regulations Absent. The means of production in traditional Africa are not owned by the chief or the tribal government. Certainly, all the cattle in Zululand do not belong to the Zulu chief. Nor do the huts, hunting gear, machetes and other agricultural implements, or farm produce. Even land, erroneously characterized as "communally-owned," is not owned by the chief. He only holds land *in trust*. Every black African will affirm that chiefs do not fix prices on village markets. One *bargains* over prices. Nor do African chiefs operate tribal government enterprises to the total exclusion of their subjects. Businesses and commercial enterprises (goldsmiths, bakeries, sculpturing, trade houses) are privately owned. Africans do not ask for permits from their chiefs to operate them. In fact, one notable feature of the indigenous African economic system is *the absence of pervasive economic controls and regulations*. So why impose on black Africans an economic system which is alien to their culture?

True, African peasants are *communalistic* and *socialistic* in the sense that they pool their resources together to build and care about their neighbors and family members. But so, too, do many rural folks in the West who pool their together to rebuild after a calamity (earthquake, tornado, flood). But that hardly makes them "socialists." *Communalism* does not necessarily imply communism or socialism. Failure to make this important distinction led many African leaders and experts astray.

Profit, for example, is not an alien concept to Africa. The Asante call it *mfaso*. But the traditional practice is to share it. Under the *abusa* system of the cocoa farmers of West Africa, profit is divided into three parts: a third to the workers, another third to the owner of the farm and the remaining third set aside for farm maintenance and expansion. In the West, profit is appropriated by capitalists; in the East, by the state. In Africa, the natives share it in a system which exploited no one. This is this same profit-sharing scheme that the Japanese successfully used to engineer their economic miracle. The so-called "backward" peasants of Africa have been using this scheme for centuries.

Misreading Africa. But because profit was shared in Africa, some Western writers dismissed African natives as "primitive communists." And looking at the same scheme, many African leaders concluded that Africans were ready for socialism. Both groups were wrong.

Instead of copying foreign systems to impose upon their people, African leaders should build upon their own indigenous (political and economic) heritage. Black Africans are not lazy or unresponsive to market incentives. Their indigenous institutions may be "backward and primitive," but they used these same institutions to prosper in the late 19th century.

The period 1880-1950 stands out in Africa's history as one of unparalleled peasant economic advancement. During this period, the natives of Africa proved themselves to be remarkably industrious and enterprising in spite of their "backwardness" and "primitive implements."

In his book, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, Colin Bundy opens Chapter 3, appropriately titled "Expansion of the Peasantry: 1870-90," with a letter by Mr. J.J. Hemming in 1881 describing the African natives:

> All these people are in the strictest sense agriculturists; I believe there are but few heads of families in all this large population who are not cultivators of the soil; they are the largest producers of grain in the division; without them the trade of Queenstown would not be anything like what it is at present. It is an indisputable fact that comparing them with Europeans, taking man for man and acre for acre, the native produces from a smaller extent of ground, and with more primitive appliances, more than the Europeans.[1]

The industriousness of the Mfengu of South Africa is now legendary. In 1867, according to Bundy, just under 4,000 Mfengu migrated to Fingoland. Within a year, they chalked up an impressive economic advance. Percy Nightingale, the Civil Commissioner, was explicit:

> It should be conceded that the people in this neighborhood who have in one year raised 250,820 lbs of wool of a superior quality and excellent get up, besides 7,484 muids of corn, who attend 77 wagons, which are mostly employed in the transport business, to say nothing of the labour they undertake...cannot fairly be charged *en masse* with indolence.[2]

Bundy continued that:

> From other Ciskei districts came similar reports of peasant enterprise and trade. The Civil Commissioner of Peddie wrote in 1875 that "many cattle are fattened here for the markets...Dealers and purchasers procure large quantities of slaughter animals from this district. The wheat and other cereals rendered excellent crops." The

1 Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry.* Cape Town: Blackshaws (Pty) Ltd, Chapter 3, p. 65.
2 *Ibid*, p. 70.