

# The Right of African Nations to Self-Determination

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*"The King of the Persians sent you not with these gifts because he much desired to become my sworn friend—nor is the account which you give of yourselves true, for you are come to search out my Kingdom. Also, your King is not a just man, for were he so, he had not coveted a land which is not his own, nor brought slavery on a people who never did him any wrong. . . . Let him thank the gods that they have not put it into the hearts of the Ethiops to covet countries which do not belong to them. . . ."* (Reply of an Ethiopian King to the Ambassadors of Cambyses, ca. 525 B.C. — Herodotus.)

**M**ORE than two millennia were to pass before any non-African power had acquired sufficient resources successfully to challenge the defiance of the African peoples and their rulers. The combined onslaught of the Western European capitalist powers on the great continent took place at the very end of the nineteenth century.

Their conquest of Africa marked the elimination of the last "blank" spot on their map of the world and thereby the beginning of the end of capitalism. At the very moment of their "triumph" a new era dawned in the east, the epoch of socialism and national liberation. For most of the African peoples national independence is therefore within living memory and the struggle against the colonial conquest in Africa continued without any prolonged hiatus into the world-wide struggle against colonialism and imperialism of today.

Their mounting success in this struggle is illus-

trated in a most striking manner in the rapidity with which political maps of Africa are becoming out of date. More and more African countries have to be retinted in shades of their own instead of those of the imperialist powers.

Up until recently the future of Africa was generally regarded in Britain as a question of simply transforming each colonial territory within the existing boundaries into an African state instead of a European colonial state. The first doubts of this implicit assumption began to creep in only a few years ago.

After a journey through the Belgian Congo in 1954 Basil Davidson wrote:

"It is already possible, today, to see through the appearance of things to another central 'problem'—that of knowing whether the Belgian Congo can remain a viable unity in the eyes of its inhabitants, or whether it must break down into ethnically more consistent parts. One may note the same trend elsewhere. Are the Yorubas

of Nigeria, or the Ibos or the Hausas members of their own 'nation', of their own nationality, or are they Nigerians? Which will prevail?"

Lord Hailey, in many ways the most broadly representative writer on Africa in Britain, has found himself faced with the same problem of defining the meaning of "nationalism" and of identifying the African nations. In his massive revised *African Survey* 1956 he wrote:

"In Europe nationalism is a readily recognisable force, even though it may not be easily definable, but as a concept it has associations which make it difficult of application in the conditions of Africa. . . . The Gold Coast has developed a conception of nationhood which though artificial in its origin now has something of the quality of a genuine national ideal" (pp. 251-2).

We have to remind ourselves that his earlier, 1938, *Survey* was written with the object of providing informed guidance to the colonial administrations in their efforts to develop the African territories to appreciate the intellectual revolution implied in his even contemplating such a question. Barely was his 1956 *Survey* off the press, however, when he had already made a further step in his Address to the Africa Bureau anniversary meeting. Here he virtually put aside his hesitations concerning the use of the term "nationalism" in the African context; consequently, he had to come to closer grips with the question of the identity of the African nations.

" . . . we are almost everywhere made aware not only of a political consciousness on the part of Africans themselves, . . . but we are also continually reminded of the fact that the accidents of history have again and again joined together in a single unit of government a collection of African peoples who have no ethnic affinities and have had no common tradition. . . . Looking to the future, one, of course, realises that African nationalism will continue to press for a strengthening of indigenous representation in the political sphere. . . . But how far can we see further than this?"

In the *Survey* this discussion occupies only a few of the 1,700 pages, yet almost without exception the reviewers have concentrated on it; *The Times* gave it a whole editorial column; the *Daily Telegraph* the best part of a long main page review. F. A. Montague reviewed the work in the *Manchester Guardian* under the significant title "Trying to Keep up with Africa", where he formulated the problem more boldly than Hailey:

"Discussion of the question is also obscured by the difficulty of defining what constitutes a

tribe and what a nation. Tribalism is dead in Great Britain, but Welsh or Scottish nationalism is very much alive. Are the Ashanti, for instance, a tribe forming part of a nation of Ghana, or a nation in a supranational federation? If the Ashanti nationalism is tribalism, then indeed the latter is not on the way out, in Ghana or many other parts of Africa. But it is, surely, true nationalism?"

He called it one of the most important and controversial questions in the future development of modern Africa; he is probably right. It is certainly a question to which any progressive political party or grouping which wishes to give a lead to the British people on how to solve the problems of their relationship with the peoples of Africa will have to give an answer, including the British Communists.

### African Nationalism

Let us therefore look at the political events in Africa which have made such a profound impact on British opinion and have brought the question of African nationalism and the African nations so sharply to the forefront.

There is today no African territory without a political emancipation movement so strong as to command attention; that is scarcely in dispute. The intense efforts of the colonial powers to counteract these movements are proof of their existence. These movements are, in the nature of things, directed against the specific colonial power which exercises authority over the given colony. The forms of political organisation are dictated by the shape of the colonial boundaries.

It has therefore appeared that the aspirations of the African peoples can be met by the passing into African hands of the administrations of these territories accompanied by a measure of independence either within or without the Commonwealth (or the French Union, as the case may be). Self-government for the African countries appeared to be the form in which the right of nations to self-determination was expressed in the African context. "Country" was substituted for "nation".

The doubts expressed by the authors referred to are obviously doubts whether this substitution is legitimate, in view of the arbitrary nature of the colonial boundaries which were drawn without the slightest regard to the historically constituted communities of the African peoples. There exists in none of them, e.g., a single national language as distinct from a lingua franca, whether African or European.

One may take the view that such doubts can only hinder the advance of the African peoples, encourage "tribalism" and are thus, however sub-

consciously and unintentionally, reactionary. It is a curious and very noteworthy fact, however, that these doubts are in direct and open conflict with the Colonial Office views on the matter. One might have thought, e.g. that official circles might have welcomed the repeated appeals of the Ashanti National Liberation Movement for recognition of Ashanti claims of their own national state as a means to divide the peoples of the Gold Coast and so delay the emergence of the state of Ghana. Nothing of the kind happened, however; on the contrary, official circles made no secret of their impatience with these claims. Other examples will spring readily to mind.

What is the explanation for this official attitude which on the surface does not appear to be at all in form? For the answer we must go a little beyond the problems considered so far, from the problems of communities entirely, or almost entirely, contained within the boundaries of a given colony to those of the communities whose countries have been intersected by the colonial boundaries and who have been divided into two, three or even more parts.

Among these the Ewe people have for some years attracted public attention. Their country was at the end of the nineteenth century divided into two parts, one in the British Gold Coast, one in German Togoland; after the war of 1914 the latter was again divided into two, one French, one British, and these later became the two Togoland trusteeship territories under the United Nations.

In spite of this protracted and complex division, which hampers the communications between the members of this historic community of over a million people all speaking the Ewe language, even within individual families and villages, and places great obstacles in the way of the development of their economy, the Ewe people have never given up the desire to be reunited. In recent years this desire has found expression in the votes cast in plebiscites and elections in all three parts of Ewe country for those parties whose policies under the given circumstances promised the speediest realisation of this aim. Invariably, they have found that in the Trusteeship Council obstacles to their unity were erected by the imperialist powers, while support for their aspirations has equally invariably come from the representatives of the socialist nations.

### **The Somali People**

Equally instructive is the case of the Somali people whose country covers the Horn of Africa and stretches from the Haud in Ethiopia to the Tana river in Kenya; almost 3 million Somalis live in that great country which has been theirs

from the days of classical antiquity at least. Now, however, it is divided into five parts: the Trusteeship territory of Somalia under Italy, the British Somaliland Protectorate, the small French colony of Somaliland, the Ogaden in Ethiopia and part of the Northern Province of Kenya.

Mr. Bernard Braine, M.P., the Conservative Party's specialist on colonial questions, recently visited the country where he had some disturbing experiences of which he writes in a revealing article in *International Affairs* (October 1958). It was made clear to him in no uncertain fashion that:

"Despite the division of the Somali people among five administrations and their own intense tribal rivalries, they feel themselves to be one people. They speak the same language, share the same customs and practise the same faith. They desire unification and feel, not without some justification, that they have been held apart by the machinations of the great Powers."

Mr. Braine leaves us in little doubt that he would not object to incorporating independent Somalia in the British empire when Italy gives up the trusteeship over this part of Somali country. Nevertheless, his solution to the Somali problem in no way envisages the creation of an independent Somali state reuniting the entire country in one national state. That is, however, clearly what the Somali people want. Even the small French colony, in spite of threats (now carried out) voted against de Gaulle's constitution in the same strength as Algeria.

Under the most adverse conditions imaginable, historically formed African communities are thus proving their extraordinary cohesion and stability, their attachment to their own countries and people, the dynamic quality of their national aspirations which threatens to wipe the colonial boundaries clean off the African map. It is very understandable that representatives of the colonial powers view this prospect with less equanimity than the Africanisation of the colonial states within the artificial colonial boundaries. In fact they view the preservation and intensification of the artificial character of these boundaries as the *sine qua non* for the continuation of the colonial system under the circumstances which have placed the abolition of this system on the agenda of history.

Only thus can one understand why one and a half years after the emergence of the African state of Ghana on the territory of the former colony of the Gold Coast no appreciable weakening of the colonial system in Africa is to be observed. One might even say that at all events

Britain's grip on her African colonial empire has, if anything, become stronger. For Ghana is no exception to the rule that not one of the colonial territories in Africa represents in any sense a national state within the meaning of Lenin's use of the term:

"The formation of *national states*, under which the requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied, is therefore the tendency of every national movement. The deepest economic factors urge towards this goal, and for the whole of Western Europe, nay for the entire civilised world, the *typical* normal state for the capitalist period is, therefore, the national state." (*On the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Selected Works IV, p. 251.)

The question which Hailey posed and which has to be faced is a very real one: Since the African nations are not co-extensive with the African states, is the struggle of the African nations for self-determination—that is, among other things, for the creation of their own national states—compatible with the struggle for the transformation of the colonial states with their artificial boundaries into African states? The answer will no doubt depend on the view one takes of the African nations, whether one regards them as part of the civilised world or as mere primitive tribes, clay in the hands of the superior white race or of "exceptional" Africans to be moulded into nations by the states erected on the ruins of the "tribal system".

With much hesitation and many qualifications, the latter view has already been virtually abandoned by Lord Hailey, at least for the present period. It is a view which belongs essentially to the period of empire-building; but it is dying a very slow death and tends to be revived time and again. It was once held of India and for a very long time obscured from view the existence of the Indian civilisation of which modern India is the heir. It cannot be said to be entirely eradicated even in relation to the Asian nations; it is being kept most stubbornly in existence in regard to the nations of Africa.

### **Afro-Asian Independence Struggles**

There can be no doubt that it is the impact of the post-war successes of the liberation struggles of the Asian and African nations which is responsible for the extent to which our views on the place of Europe in the history of the world have been modified. British historians have discovered that there was a time when Britain did not lead the world but was a backwater remote from the centres where civilisation developed; that the Crusades were barbarous incursions with destruc-

tive effects on the much superior civilisation of the Arabs; that until a few centuries ago no major invention was made in Europe.

We are at the threshold of a new era of discovery: the discovery of the ancient world of civilisation outside Europe with which the European nations did not catch up until some 200 or 300 years ago, since when their capitalist classes, newly come to power, began the rapid progress of industrialisation, science and technology which was made possible largely by the capital accumulated in the slave trade. The European expansion which followed necessitated an ideology of superiority for the purpose of enlisting the masses without whose active participation it could not be accomplished. The birth of this ideology can be traced with fair accuracy to the middle of the eighteenth century. The era of socialism and colonial liberation is heralding its final collapse.

This ideology is not entirely original, of course; it had its precedent in ancient Greece. But while the Greeks contented themselves with the relatively mild disparagement of everything non-Greek as "barbarian", the modern European-Christian ideology classified the non-European world as "tribes of savage heathens". This had the advantage that it did not have to be demonstrated by any kind of acquaintance with facts; on the contrary, as knowledge increased, the facts were trimmed so as to lessen the impact of their contradiction with the preconceived notion, and when that was no longer possible simply suppressed. An astonishingly large number of Englishmen of all sections of the population to this day associate with the concept "Africa" nothing but a vast primeval jungle inhabited by elephants and pygmies and at most a fringe of savage, warlike tribes of cannibals. The dangers to the British people inherent in the preservation of this absurd caricature of Africa were highlighted when one of the most popular B.B.C. programmes broadcast an anecdote purporting to prove that "it is not so long ago that cannibalism was rife in Africa"; shortly afterwards the shocking events of Nottingham and Notting Hill occurred.

One can therefore hardly overestimate the importance for the British people of the fact that the explorers of the new era of discovery have at length reached Africa and are beginning to explode the Big Lie of the empire builders.\* With his now famous dictum that the history of East Africa was written in Chinese porcelain Sir Mortimer Wheeler started a healthy rivalry among

\* Cf. e.g. *An Atlas of African History*, J. D. Fage (Edward Arnold, 1958).

archaeologists and historians which already in the few years since has produced an impressive mass of both new and long-forgotten evidence of the fact that Africa was at all times an integral part of the civilised world ignored by Europe.

Zimbabwe no longer stands a lone enigma, as the pyramids of Gizeh once did, but as merely one of several centres of the African civilisation of the great mining district of central and southern Africa which supplied both other African nations and the world market with gold and iron from the earliest times to the very recent past. Once again we behold with amazement the cities of east and west Africa which for so long were overlooked simply because our minds were not predisposed to acknowledge the evidence of our eyes, and like Mungo Park 160 years ago discover "a prospect of civilisation and magnificence which I little expected to find in the bosom of Africa".

### Early African History

All this is, however, only a very modest beginning, only a foretaste of what future research will bring to light and what will emerge when there has been time to sift and date the archaeological and to collate it with the historical evidence. But the weight of it has already been sufficient to breach the last defence of the old view that these civilisations represent "foreign intrusions", and the view of British Marxists that the African peoples are the heirs to the great civilisations of their own past has been amply confirmed.

It would be naive to assume that this process will continue unchecked, that no efforts need to be made to encourage and stimulate further research into the history of the African civilisations before their destruction by the European conquest at the end of the nineteenth century (or earlier, in the case of South Africa). It is all too evident that the myth of the "primitive tribes", so essential for the maintenance of European domination over Africa, would suffer irreparably if the results of this research were to become widely known. It is hardly an accident that a popular journalist who falls into no known category of "undesirable immigrants" was for the first time denied access to several African territories when he announced his intention to devote his stay to research into African history.

Nor would it do to underestimate the extent to which the myth is still believed. It has been firmly, methodically and skilfully planted in the minds of two generations and has coloured the outlook of every administrator, economist, anthropologist or mere visitor before they ever had the opportunity to see Africa. It has been sanctified with the aura of scientifically established "truth".

No single person would deserve the title of chief architect of the myth more than Sir Harry Johnston, G.C.M.G., K.C.B., D.Sc. He lent to it his prestige as a botanist, zoologist and linguist and wrote the copious textbooks which relegated all the genuine knowledge of African *society* assembled in earlier periods into complete oblivion.

Johnston's talent for making his speculations seem plausible blotted the critical faculty out of the minds of Africanists to the extent that for long they disbelieved the evidence of their own eyes; every trace of African civilisation that had survived destruction was ignored: it could not be accepted because this was Africa, the home of the "lowest tribes of humanity". His influence was the more far reaching since he managed to convey the impression that he was one of the more liberally minded of his contemporaries.

How he achieved this distinction is revealed in Roland Oliver's biography *Sir Harry Johnston and the Scramble for Africa*. In instance after instance, by comparing Johnston's private diary with his printed work and with despatches from the files of Whitehall, Oliver convicts Johnston of being an habitual liar. He lied in all honesty, out of a sense of mission: "He believed in evolution as in a God, and himself as its devoted, and perhaps its only intelligent servant". The expansion of English influence (he despised the Scots) "should open the eyes of the brutish savage to the existence of a higher state of culture and prepare them for the approach of civilisation". At the age of twenty-one he made up his mind to become an active agent for the extension of the empire, before he had even a glimpse of the interior of Africa.

In the course of his short and intermittent career as a modern "Persian ambassador" he repeatedly forced the pace of the scramble and with resolution and singular lawlessness waged a personal war on the African middleman "who is resolved to prevent any intercommunication between the white traders on the coast and the industrious tribes of the interior". For the greater glory and profit of English finance capital the African capitalist class was exterminated.

Throughout, Johnston's acquaintance with African society remained superficial; the only friend he ever made, right at the end of his African career, was Sir Apollo Kagwa. One should seriously examine whether this exceptional degree of acquaintance was not alone responsible for his view of Buganda as "exceptional". Even so, he did not allow it to modify his preconceived views except to admit that the period of time

required to "civilise" the black race might be shorter than he had originally thought.

Oliver's revelations about Johnston, the more convincing because written by one who remains a fervent admirer of the man, make it imperative to subject all writing on Africa which has been under the influence of ideas like his to the most searching critical analysis. If we are ever to restore the connected picture of African history we must endeavour to penetrate to the historical truth through the appearances created by a biased presentation. We must be prepared to find this truth turning out to be radically different from what we may have thought in the past; whether, in particular, there were any genuine tribes at all in Africa a long time before the conquest is now seriously in doubt.

Naturally, this question is of the most profound significance for the question of the African nations. At present the prospect is that in progressive British thought, at least, the last obstacles and hesitations to the recognition of the African nations will, perhaps soon, be swept away. It will become clear that not the accidental conglomerations of nations and parts of nations in the ephemeral colonial frontiers, but the African communities which in the course of their long history have developed their national languages

and cultures, built up their economic links within their own national boundaries, demand recognition as nations entitled to erect their own national states.

In the conditions of Africa this is bound to mean that the African nations will inevitably have to raise the question of the colonial frontiers:

" . . . the principal question, the very question which the imperialist bourgeoisie will not permit to be discussed, namely the question of the *frontiers of a state* which is built upon the oppression of nations . . . the bourgeoisie will willingly promise 'national equality' and 'national autonomy', if only the proletariat remains within the framework of legality and peacefully submits to the bourgeoisie on the question of the state *frontiers!*" (Lenin, Selected Works V, p. 287).

But at what point in the struggle for liberation this question has to be raised, how the African nations are to co-ordinate their political movements and to combine the fight for their individual self-determination with that against the particular colonial power which is holding them in colonial subjection is a question entirely for the African nations themselves to decide. There is absolutely no occasion to express fears or doubts in the wisdom of these nations.