THE BALANCE-SHEET OF AFRICANIST HISTORIOGRAPHY.

(A Review of Eriksen's Modern African History: Some Historical Observations. Research Report No. 55 Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala 1979).

It would have been impossible a generation or so ago to write the history of Africanist history. There was simply nothing to talk about. Institutions which were allegedly concerned with the teaching of Africanist history had very little to profess. As Professor J.D. Fage, one of the early professional Africanists has admitted, a few historians at 'Legan, Ibadan and Makerere were obliged at this time to turn 'the Expansion of Europe' inside out for the benefit of African students', and that was all.[1] The first historian who had gone through a doctoral apprenticeship to teach at Makerere admitted on his appointment in 1950 that he 'knew less about Africa than did Herodetus'.[2] A Greek historian of the fifth century, B.C., Herodetus, speculated a good deal about Africa but he saw its inhabitants as impulsive children of nature who scoured the length and breadth of the continent in a manner comparable to beasts. This picture was perpetuated by imperial historians who, in any case, had very little to say about Africans save as victims of history. The emergence of postcolonial African social formations, however, changed this attitude. Thus too appeared post-colonial Africanist historiography which sought to recover African agency in the making of history not only in Africa but also in other continents. Changes in African concrete reality have induced a revision of the manner in which the African past has been conceptualized. Thus has emerged, amongst others, the development of underdevelopment school of Africanist historiography which has attempted to throw new light on the continent's recent past.

With such developments, efforts to 'draw up a historiographical balance-sheet' of African studies have become feasible. Studies of the history of Africanist history, historiography, is therefore in vogue.[3] T.L. Eriksen's booklet, Modern African History: Some Historiographical Observations, which is the object of this review falls into this category.[4] But stock-taking especially when applied to academia has problems. While the balance-sheet which emerges in this process describes the terrain already traversed, showing inter alia the faults and strengths of the efforts which have gone into the endeavour, it is bad at explaining. Such is what has been termed academic internalism which forsakes social explanation of

the development of knowledge, and sees changes in academia solely in terms of the interplay of ideas. Whenever practitioners of this kind of enterprise are asked to show the historical specificity of this kind of interplay of ideas, they bridle and accordingly invoke the tin god of pragmatic externalism.[5] It is into the pitfall of academic internalism coupled with pragmatic externalism that Eriksen's work should be relegated. Doubtless, as balance-sheet of some of the recent trends in postcolonial Africanist historiography, Eriksen has performed a useful task. As a guide to show why Africanist historiography has taken this trend, however, the booklet is off the mark.

Two themes in postcolonial Africanist historiography provide the basis of Eriksen's enterprise: the ecological - historical approach, and the articulation of precolonial African social formations under imperialist hegemony. For the former Eriksen largely relies on the work by Kjekshus which is devoted to the study of ecology and economic development in East Africa:[6] for the latter he depends on Basil Davidson's recent work, Africa in Modern History. An ecological catastrophe, Eriksen observes, bedevilled Africa, especially Eastern and Central Africa, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Introduced by the increasing contact between Africa and the capitalist world economy, trypanosomiasis, rinderpest epidemic, plague, jiggers, and so forth attacked Eastern Africa in the 1890s. Into this were added other natural disasters like the locust plague and drought which brought famine in their train. The situation, it has been alleged, was worsened by colonial penetration. Colonial rule entailed the control and subsequent transformation of the precolonial African economies. Such changes, most of which were extremely violent, brought about resistance of the colonial peoples. Call them colonial Wars, rebellions or what you may, the resistances were staged against the changes in the relations of production which were being effected with the imposition of colonial rule.

Around the theme of resistance a formidable debate has grown. Some of the riddles embedded in this debate have been resolved, but others still persist.[8] Yet Eriksen argues that too much attention has been placed on the well-organized, large-scale uprisings. 'The concentration', he observes, 'was clearly intended to counteract the tendency of the more conservative historians of colonialism to dismiss African resistance and rebellion for ideological reasons. However, some reservations should be made about this approach since it gives insufficient attention to the different acts of resistance in the periods that preceded the uprisings', as well as those which followed subsequently.[9]

One such neglected theme is that of social banditry coupled with the 'rather more localized reactions of workers and peasants whose efforts were often short-lived and rarely produced tangible results'.[10] Many localized revolts of this kind have been considered criminal by those in control of state machinery. But as Engels observed with regard to the English working class:

> The revolt of the workers began soon after the first industrial development, and has passed through several phases.... The earliest, crudest and least fruitful form of this rebellion was that of crime. The working man lived in poverty and want, and saw that others were better off than he. It was not clear to his mind why he, who did more for society than the rich idler, should be the one to suffer under these conditions. Want conquered his inherited respect for the sacredness of property, and he stole.

We have seen how crime increased with the extension of manufacture; how the yearly number of arrests bore a constant relation to the number of bales of cotton annually consumed.

The workers soon realized that crime did not help matters. The criminal could protest against the existing order of society only singly, as one individual; the whole might of society was brought to bear upon each criminal, and crushed him with its immense superiority.[11] Theft and 'other forms of individualized types of resistance to the iron rule of property dominated early forms of proletarian class consciousness, but gave way subsequently to collective organization and more challenging industrial and political struggles.' Engels' analysis has been amplified by the work of E.J. Hobsbawn who has 'coined the notion of "primitive rebel" for bandits, mafioso, and other bold men who robbed from the rich to help the poor or appeared to protect communities against the predatory ravages of an emergent capitalism, but gave way ultimately to collective and rational forms of protest that could hope to meet capital head on'.[12] Eriksen suggests that such a notion should also be introduced into the study of African protest movements against colonial rule.

Yet if colonial protest has to be analyzed in such nuanced terms, the notion of collaboration, Eriksen warns, should not be overlooked. Thus Eriksen urges:

> Any consideration of this problem raises a great number of questions. How was the process of colonization possible when it was supported by a small administrative apparatus and such comparatively limited armed forces? Why did some tribes and chiefs resist while others cooperated? How were the decisions concerning the forms of resistance to be adopted reached? To

> what extent was popular pressure from below applied in favour of resistance or cooperation? What for example, lay, behind the pressure which 'the masses' applied before the Zulu rebellion in South Africa in 1906 and which the leadership yielded to.(13)

The notion of collaboration was coined by imperial historians with a view to humanizing colonialism and all that it stood for.[14] The notion of resistance was intended to counter this and so lay bare the activities of colonial barbarism and so to establish the legitimacy of petty bourgeois nationalism.[15] Thus 'like Kant in the Antimonies of Pure Reason' postcolonial historians 'have made particular use of their own form of dialectic' to criticise 'the presuppositions of Western imperial historians and apologists in general 'by exposing the inadequacies of these presuppositions.....by asserting their contraries'.[16] Thus Rene Maran writes: 'Civilization, civilization - the Europeans pride and their charnelhouse of innocents. The Hindu poet, Rabindranath Tagore, one day in Tokyo said what you (Europeans) are: You build your kingdom on corpses.'[17]

But counter-assertions of this kind have their dangers: A product of counter-questions, counter-assertions in their 'reflexive inversion of the original' tend 'to repeat the original assumptions, faults and all, and thereby perpetuating the error.'[18] The idea of race comprised the organizing theme of colonial historiography.[19] Thus it has been asked time and again: 'How come that such a small minority group of white colonial administrators controlled such a vast population of non-Europeans'.[20] Embedded in such a question is the assumption that the colonial state's area of contact with colonial peoples was the district office and that the state was a neutral entity intended to protect the native populace. But the colonial state, it should be emphasized, was established with the view to laying the conditions favourable to capital penetration and super-exploitation of the colonial peoples. Such a task entailed the transformation of the local economies to an extent commensurate with the dictates of the process of super-exploitation. But a policy of this kind necessarily brought about the alienation of some social groups in the societies so affected. Alienation brought resistance which had to be countered not only by using the small colonial army of invasion around but also through the process of dampening such resistance by winning local support of the would-be collaborators. This entailed the exploitation of the frictions and animosities in situ. Thus one fraction of the local ruling class was set against another, and subsequently incorporated into the colonial state.[21] The active part played by the colonial state to create conditions

favourable to the emergence of collaborative mechanisms should not be overlooked for the sake of trying to imagine how the colonial peoples chose to collaborate or resist. If people choose to resist or collaborate, as Eriksen alleges, the conditions attendant to such choices should be located and examined. Short of this the debate of collaboration versus resistance will continue to be as metaphysical and schizophrenic as it has always been.[22]

The issue of resistance and collaboration apart, Eriksen attempts to extend his historiographical overview of African history to the modern period of mass nationalism. Not that the author extends the debate any further. But he nevertheless, attempts to alert the reader of the social tinge which the discussion of nationalism has acquired. Yet to show the important benchmarks of the development of postcolonial Africanist historiography is one thing; to explain why the contours have acquired this kind of shape, however, quite another. Moreover postcolonial Africanist historiography is now engulfed in a crisis.[23] Such a phenomenon, one would have imaged, should have been included in an historiographical balance-sheet of this nature, but it is not.

A particular kind of class struggle brought about the birth of postcolonial Africanist historiography: the emergence of African petty bourgeoisies whose leadership resulted in the realization of postcolonial social formations. Postcolonial Africanist history, according to the many preambles adopted in many conferences held to discuss the progress of this discipline,[24] was intended to be liberatory. Time has proved that this aim cannot be fulfilled. It is Lord Rosebery who said with regard to the Irish question that 'it has never passed into history, for it has never passed out of politics'.[25] A similar observation could have been said about the African question. Yet if this observation is intended to imply that objective history can only be written about the past when it has passed out of politics, this has not been so with regard to African history. An objective history of Africa, it has been observed, has yet to be written.[26]

Yet the prevailing class struggle in Africa has induced a re-examination of the manner in which the African past has been studied so far. Much of the enterprise, it has been found, has been extremely ideological. This is so not because professional historians have consciously attempted to be ideological, but owing to the fact that they have failed to go beyond the World views of the ruling classes.[27] Any realistic African historiographical balance-sheet should traverse such a territory, if it is to be considered a useful summary of what has been achieved and what needs to be investigated further. Eriksen, however, chooses to terminate his over-view of African historiography with the debate

of development of underdevelopment. The useful Marxist work now being done in Southern African history is hardly mentioned.[28] The outcome in any case could not have been otherwise since he relies for guidance so heavily on Basil Davidson.

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FOOTNOTES:

1. Quoted by B.A. Ogot, 'Three decades of historical studies in East Africa 1949-1977', The Pan-Africanist, 8, 1979. p. 24.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid. See also L. Kapteijus, African Historiography written by Africans 1955-1973, Leiden 1977.

4. T.L. Eriksen, Modern African History: Some Historiographical Observations, Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1979.

5. H. Rose and S. Rose, 'The incorporation of science', H. Rose and S. Rose, eds. The Political Economy of Science, London, 1976.

6. H. Kjekshus, Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History, London 1977. See also J. Iliffe, A Modern History of Tanganyika, Cambridge 1969.

7. T.O. Ranger, The Recovery of African Initiative in Tanzanian History, Dar es Salaam 1969.

8. A.J. Temu and Bonaventure Swai, Historians and Africanist History: Postcolonial Historiography Examined, London: Zed Press, forthcoming. Bonaventure Swai, Antinomies of Local Initiative in African History, Dar es Salaam 1969.

9. Eriksen, Modern African History, p. 16. See also M. Tsomondo, 'Shona reaction and resistance to the European colonization of Zimbabwe 1890-1898: a case against colonial and revisionist historiography', Journal of Southern African Affairs, 2, 1977.

10. A. Issacman, 'Social banditry in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) and Mozambique 1894-1907: expression of early peasant protest' Journal of Southern African Studies, 2, 1977. Quoted by Eriksen, Modern African History, p. 18.

11. F. Engels, Conditions of the Working Class in England, p. 240. Quoted by W. Freund, 'Theft and social protest among the tin miners of Northern Nigeria', Dar es Salaam 1979 mimeo, p. 1,

12. Ibid.

13. Eriksen, Modern African History, pp. 19-20.

14. R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, Africa and the Victorians, New York 1962.

15. T. Hodgkin, 'Some African and third world theories of imperialism', R. Owen and B. Sutcliffe, (eds). Studies in the Theories of Imperialism, London 1972.

16. Ibid. p. 102.

17. Ibid. p. 103.

18. D.H. Fischer, Historians' Fallacies, London 1971.

19. W. Freund 'Conflict and challenge in the historiography of South Africa', Zaria 1978 mimeo.

20. D.A. Low, Lion Rampant, London 1974.

21. Bonaventure Swai, 'Notes on the colonial state with reference to Malabar in the 18th and 19th centuries', Social Scientist, 7, 1978.

22. A.J. Dachs, 'Politics of collaboration: Imperialism in practice', B. Pachai, ed. The Early History of Malawi, London 1972. R.H. Palmer, 'Johnston and Jameson: a comparative study in the imposition of colonial rule', ibid. D. Denoon and A. Kuper, 'Nationalist Historians in search of a nation: the 'new historiography' in Dar es Salaam', African Affairs 69, 1970. G.C.K. Gwassa, 'The German intervention and African resistance in Tanzania', I.N. Kimambo and A.J. Temu, eds, A History of Tanzania, Nairobi 1969.

23. Bonaventure Swai, 'Crisis in Africanist historiography', Tanzania Zamani, Special Issue, 1980.

24. See for example T.O. Ranger, ed. Emerging Themes of African History, Nairobi 1969.

25. Quoted by R.P. Dutt, India Today, Calcutta 1970, p. 79.

26. J. Depelchin, 'Towards a problematic history of Africa', Tanzania Zamani, 18, 1976. H. Bernstein and J. Depelchin, The object of African history: a materialist perspective', History in Africa, 5, 1978.

27. M. Shaw, 'The coming crisis of radical sociology', R. Blackburn, ed. Ideology in Social Science, London 1972.

28. A number of articles along these lines have been published in the Review of African Political Economy and in the Journal of Southern African Studies.