

THE MYSTIFICATION OF AFRICAN HISTORY: A CRITIQUE OF
RODNEY'S HOW EUROPE UNDERDEVELOPED AFRICA*

G.T. MISHAMBI**

All exploiting classes stand in need of two types of social functions to safeguard their interest; the function of the repressive machine i.e. the army, prisons, police, judiciary, and the function of ideology. The ideology is to convince the exploited either about the "good" intentions of the exploiters, or that the existing social relations are not a result of a historical process and are either natural, or stem from the supernatural being. History can be such an ideological tool, when it gets interpreted in such a way that the social relations as they exist at that particular time are absolutised. This helps to extinguish the souls of the oppressed so that they are reconciled to class rule.

When the colonialists came to Africa, they used both methods. For the purpose of this paper, we shall concentrate on ideology, and history in particular. The colonialists claimed that Africa had no history, no culture, no civilisation. In painting the picture thus, they hoped to justify their exploitation as a "civilising mission" and convince the oppressed masses of the continent about "the white man's burden".

From this, there developed two schools of historians. The first one was that which claimed that the colonial mission was completely positive for the Africans. If force and destitution followed, this was but the price the Africans had to pay. What a price! Ho Chi Mihn, gives some figures to show the price the Africans had to pay. "In Belgian Congo population fell from 25 million in 1891 to 8.5 million by 1911. The Herero and Camard Tribes in the former German colonies in Africa were completely exterminated: 80,000 were killed under German rule and 15,000 during 'Pacification' period in 1914, The population of the French Congo was 20,000 in 1894. It was only 9,700 in 1911. In one region there were 10,000 inhabitants in 1910. Eight years later, there remained only 1,080. In another region with 40,000 black inhabitants,

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** M.A. Student, History Department, University of Dar es Salaam

20,000 people were killed within two years, and in the following six months, 6,000 more were killed or disabled"¹

He goes on to show that the survivors of such atrocities were not left in peace. Their land was robbed, while traditional industries were destroyed, people even lost their animals. He shows that before the arrival of colonialists, the Matebele had 200,000 heads of cattle. "Two years later only 40,900 were left". The Hereros had 90,000 heads of cattle and the German colonial rule reduced this to half within twelve years of their rule. The economy of the people was completely distorted - famine and disease were the concomitants. In Reunion, Algeria and Madagascar "Cereals have been replaced by other crops required by French industry". Hence a rising cost of living and chronic famine.

This was written in 1924 and the figures might not be accurate to the last unit. But still they are highly revealing. Yet we are told by apologists of colonialism that this was merely the price Africa had to pay for civilisation. What a price!

The next school of historians was that one which would agree that the colonised were reduced to suffering destitution; but then this school tries to draw a balance sheet of the bad things and good things Africa achieved from its contact with Europe. This school reduces African history to moral categories that explain nothing as far as the history is concerned.

However, these schools were not to reign supreme eternally. opposed to them was another one that tried to be "Afro-centric". This school developed as a result of struggle for national independence arose in Africa. This school tried to "recover" the African past. So they came to look at African history through the spectacles of European history. They merely began to assert the opposite of what the colonialist historians had asserted. They tried to look for areas in Africa where civilisation, culture etc., also existed. The method was to look at European history and try to find similarities in Africa. For example in Old Africa Rediscovered Basii Davidson² spends all the 268 pages trying to show the achievements and civilisation of Africa before interaction with Europe. He simply looks at the movements of peoples in Africa, and then tries to show areas where civilisation grew. He goes into details trying to explain the beauty that

European, Asian and Arab Traders found in Africa. Certainly one should show developments in Africa, but the trouble with these historians, is that they operate within the same theoretical framework as the colonialist historians, and in so doing use subjective problematic which of necessity engenders the use of idealist categories of analysis. African history gets reduced to a set of morals and humanism. This approach was used to mobilise the masses of the people during the struggle for national independence. In the absence of working class leadership, it was the petit-bourgeoisie that did so. It had to find an ideology that would show national oppression and not class oppression. But in a way, we can say that this was progressive - Progressive in the sense that struggle against colonialism, even if it only led to the establishment of neo-colonialism, was progressive. After the attainment of political independence this approach served the interests of the rising petit-bourgeoisie, since by showing that there were no class differentiations in Africa before the coming of colonialists, the picture would be created that all Africans are the same, with suffering same intensity at the hands of imperialists. This "theory" of non-existence of classes in Africa was to continue after political independence so that exploitation is seen only at the level of a country. It was in fact this line that acted as a basis of what has come to use as "African Socialism". All in all, this approach to African history does not help us understand it any better.

To understand African history Depelchin says that "a defeat of colonial apologists must be grounded in a framework or methodology whose analytical concepts are entirely independent of the empirical data (emphasis mine). This shifts the debate from the empirical level to the conceptual level. Some of the key concepts being mode of production, articulation of modes, social classes, relations of Production class struggle, productive forces etc".³ This is the position of bourgeois objective idealism. In his Essay, On Contradiction Mao gives us a different world outlook which I will show below in refuting the claim.

To have categories that are entirely independent of empirical data is to impose mental constraints on real process (history). This was the position taken by Hegel. Mao shows that there are two types of bourgeois deviations (a) that knowledge is confined to concrete investigation, on understanding of isolated phenomena. This is empiricism. (b) that conceptualisation is a

mental activity totally independent of any empirical investigation. The former is subjective idealism, the latter objective idealism. Mao emphasises the fact that for a Marxist, conceptualisation is based on empirical investigation. The only proof of categories of historical Materialism is investigation. It is to emphasise the importance of empirical data that Mao in where do correct Ideas come from? gives the process of cognition. We start off with perception. An accumulation of perceptual knowledge - conceptualisation. This process leads from objective matter to subjective consciousness i.e. from existence to ideas.

The second stage in the process of cognition is from consciousness back to matter i.e. from ideas back to existence. It is at this stage that the knowledge gained in the first stage gets tested and proved right or wrong.

This is why Engles says that "The proof of the pudding is eating it".⁴ This means that (1) Concepts do not exist apriori. (2) to get these concepts one has to do concrete research.

The study of African history should not be finding facts to suit a framework superimposed on this history (as the colonial apologists and the nationalists do) but to begin with an investigation of the real life of African peoples, their production process, and from there to go on to understand the various political and ideological forms that arise on the basis of it. The point here is to understand the inner movement of African history.

In his book How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, Walter Rodney falls in the category of nationalist historians who look at African history from an "Afro-centric" point of view. A quick look through his book will show this; by so doing, we hope to show how this kind of approach to African history leads to mystification of reality.

Rodney starts off with a good analysis of historical materialism. He shows that the major factor distinguishing man from animals is labour which he uses to act upon nature for the satisfaction of his physical and spiritual needs. He then goes on to show that ultimately the moving force of history is the continuous development of productive forces, and class struggle. His book is an important contribution to the understanding of African history in that up to a point, he breaks away from the traditions of the nationalist school of thought and offers a materialist approach. At a continental level, he shows the dialectical relationship between the development of

Europe and the underdevelopment of Africa. He shows that right from when pre-capitalist modes of production got in contact with the expanding capitalism in Europe, the latter began to develop at the expense of the former. He shows the role of merchant capital and the unequal exchange in favour of Europe that followed. He further shows that from Africa, raw materials and human beings were taken away, and in return got consumer goods, mainly luxuries and guns. So we find that where other nationalist historians like T.O.Ranger, Basil Davidson, Vansina etc., had resorted to merely remanticising the African past, Rodney shows the dynamics at work that reduced Africa to a state of backwardness that she find herself in today. This process can not be understood unless one takes into account that right from the end of the 15th century, when Africa got in contact with expanding capitalism, the history of the former is very closely entwined with that of the latter.

But after showing this dialectical relationship, Rodney then sinks into idealism. He is all out to disprove the colonialists' contention that Africa had no history, culture or civilisation of its own before contact with Europe. In so doing, he reduces African history to a balance sheet of the African achievements before the contact with Europe.

He begins by showing that each succeeding mode of production is a higher stage than the previous one. It increases man's ability to control nature. Hence the increased development of productive forces helps man to liberate himself further from the limitations imposed on him by his natural environment. He then looks at the violence that characterises such developments and says "it is not all clear that a soldier serving capitalism in the last war was less 'primitive'... than a soldier serving in one of the Japan's feudal armies in the 16th century, or for that matter a hunter living in the first phase of human organisation in the forests of Brazil" p. 14. He falls in the same trap as the bourgeois historians - apologists of colonialism who reduce terms like "primitive" "barbarian" etc., to moral questions. These terms are used as moral categories precisely because the phenomena being studied is abstracted from its historical context. It is that abstraction that turns history into moralism. The bourgeois historians did this to try and justify exploitation, hence they used them as derogatories. To understand African history, there is need to get out of this. We don't get anywhere in looking at such concepts as such writers have done.

We have to see them as referring not to the humans as they appear in our imagination, but the level of their development of productive forces. Hence these concepts refer to specific levels of such developments at a given stage in the development of society.

This results from the failure to see the dialectical relationship between the development of productive forces and the concomitant social relations that develop. It is very important to bear this in mind because all the developments from the fall of primitive communalism right up to capitalism, have had this dual character. Civilisations have grown on the blood and sweat of a section of society since such developments were only possible with the development of property and the consequent exploitation that goes with it. The role of violence itself must be understood in a concrete historical context, and not absolutely. It is this that led Marx and Engels to time and again say that "force is the Midwife of the old society pregnant with a new one". Failure to see this duality leads to mechanistic and idealistic interpretations of history.

Rodney's weakness becomes more apparent when he is looking at Africa on the eve of colonialism. He looks at the role played by what he calls "either agents or unwitting accomplices" of the imperialist system that exploited the third world. He condemns such Africans but concludes that "not only are there African accomplices inside the imperialist system, but every African (emphasis mine) has a responsibility to understand the system and work for its overthrow" p. 37. But thus calling upon "every African," he leaves out the whole problem to that of colour. When looking at different reactions of Africans to the colonial rule, it is necessary to look into the production relations in the society. This will show that for those sections that saw their interests being enhanced through collaboration with colonialists they did so whereas those who saw their interests threatened resisted. Some nationalist historians like A.J. Temu see resistance in the following way. "It would be fair to maintain therefore that the way different societies reacted to this intrusion was essentially determined by their desire to maintain their sovereignty". (emphasis mine).

Gwassa⁶ falls in the same category. However, when looking at the Abushiri resistance, Temu shows that what was at stake was not abstract sovereignty but the economic interests of the ruling classes. Even the Maji Maji resistance was a

result of alliance between different classes who saw their economic interests threatened by the German colonialist. When one goes into relations of production, then he will avoid Rodney's trap of calling upon "all Africans" to resist imperialism.

Of course at a national level, one can talk of national oppression. It is due to this that we talk of wars of national liberation. But then it would be hiding reality if we concluded that therefore all people within the oppressed country have identical interests. It certainly is true that during the wars of national independence, workers and peasants joined hands with petit-bourgeoisie (except the comprador section) in resisting colonialism. This did not stem from the fact that they were all black but from the principal contradiction at that time. In his analysis of contradictions, Mao Tse Tung shows that "in capitalist society the two forces in contradiction, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, form the principal contradiction".⁷ All the other contradictions are "determined or influenced by this principal contradiction". It can thus be seen that the contradiction is between labour and capital which therefore in the case of colonies is between the bourgeoisie in the metropole and the working masses in colonies. But Mao then goes on to show that for a colony or semi-colony the relationship between the principal contradictions present a complicated picture because "all its (colony) various classes, except for some traitors, can temporarily (emphasis mine) unite in a national war against imperialism".⁸ This alliance is temporary. The coming of national independence changes the principal contradiction into that between imperialism and all those who benefit from it in the neo-colony on the one hand, and the workers and peasants on the other. At this time, it certainly mystifies reality when Rodney comes calling upon "all Africans" to fight imperialism.

On page 51, he looks at the development of the means of production. When he looks at Europe he finds a change-over from domestic industry to factory system as Europe moved from feudalism to capitalism. To him the guild system, facilitated this change. He then proceeds to show that Africa too had a guild system and would have therefore developed a capitalist system had it been left to develop on its own. Clearly, this way of looking at African history through the eyes of European history does not help us much. There is need to go back to the relations of production to get a full picture.

STRUCTURAL EXPLANATION OF HISTORY:

Instead of using the analytical tools of historical materialism, Rodney uses structural explanations for African history.

On page 16, he tries to answer why there is uneven development in society. "Part of the answer lies in the environment... and part of it in the structure of human society". However down the page he gives an example of the uneven development by comparing Europe and China. To explain why there were different roads of development he says "The explanation is very complex, but in general terms, the main difference between feudal Europe and feudal China lay in superstructure". The point is that the ultimate moving force of history is not the superstructure but the economic base. This is not to deny the fact that superstructure has an effect on the economic base. Indeed as F. Engels in his letter to Joseph Bloch⁹ noted, that all the aspects of the superstructure too have effect on the historical development especially in determining the form the class struggle is going to take. But when Rodney gives the differences as being mainly in the superstructure, he is treating it as if it was the ultimate factor in determining historical development. Hence, as we have noted earlier, a point that Rodney agrees with, the ultimate determining factor is the development of productive forces and class struggle.

In discussing the question of underdevelopment of Africa he says "African economies are integrated into the very structure of the developed capitalist economies: and they are integrated in a manner that is unfavourable to Africa and ensures that Africa is dependent on the big capitalist countries" p.34. To explain this one has got to go to the articulation of modes of production. To show the process through which the pre-capitalist modes of production were subordinated by the capitalist mode. Unlike in Europe where changes to capitalism were a result of the internal dynamics, in Africa, the causes for such a change were from outside. Hence one has to see the process as it happens. There is one school of thought which sees the pre-capitalist modes of production being destroyed, so that only elements remained. This school seems to be based mainly on the fact that when a mode of production can no longer reproduce itself internally, then it has ceased to be a mode. While this view might agree that all the elements of these modes of production (minus the capacity for self reproduction) they are

not modes. The other school holds that it is not the capacity for self reproduction that necessarily determines a mode. Hence this school would see pre-capitalist modes of production existing with, but subordinate to the capitalist mode. The basic thing that capitalism wanted from Africa was cheap labour and raw materials. This would easily be met by preserving the pre-capitalist modes of production. The use of slave, forced and migrant labour is but an example. The mode of appropriation by the local dominant class i.e. that internal class in the colony that is in alliance with the ruling class, which is the metropolitan bourgeoisie through the colonial state, which is itself a geographical extension of the metropolitan state, itself subordinate to the colonial state, was done through pre-capitalist methods and ideology. Of course the colonial system destroyed local industries and created a working class and petit-bourgeoisie. Such observations would help us understand African history better rather than just take this integration of economies as given. After all, there is need to explain how this structure came about.

Still on the question of underdevelopment, Rodney tries to explain why "genuine industrialisation" in Africa is difficult today. "It has become common knowledge that one of the principal reasons -- is that market for manufactured goods in any single African country is too small, and there is no integration of the markets across large areas of Africa".

p.119. He cannot see that industrialisation can be done without a foreign market. His arguments are similar to those of the Norodniks who could not see capitalism developing in Russia due to the absence of a foreign market.¹⁰ Lenin agreed with them that all the capitalist countries had developed the system with a foreign market. But for Lenin, this did not necessarily mean that industrialisation could only be carried out with foreign market. Among the reasons he gives for the above was uneven development not only between different areas of the same country, but also in different branches of industry. If for example the iron smelting industry develops faster than the iron and steel processing, then the surplus iron will have to find a foreign market. "If the national capital were distributed differently (emphasis Lenin) the same quantity of products could be realised within the country".¹¹ But what happens in capitalist production is that the capitalist produces for an unknown market and hence there is uneven development in

different branches of Industry (1) the preservation of Pre-capitalist modes of production due to continued imperialist exploitation means that the vast majority of producers remain peasants (small commodity producers) producing their subsistence as use - values along side their surplus as exchange values. Since imperial capital does not have to bear the cost of reproduction of labour-power totally (as is the case in the metropole) there is thus no inbuilt necessity for increased variable capital. Thus the constant capital of the small commodity producers remains low. Thus an internal market in either the products of department I or II is highly restricted.

The above observation shows that (1) Rodney's statement is correct only assuming continued imperialist exploitation, (2) that the development of productive forces requires a political struggle against imperialism and its local allies. Then there can follow national planning to ensure even development. But national planning, which can only be done under socialism, even development can be achieved. If for example a country decided to mechanise agriculture and let us say that it was decided that within a given period tractors were needed, then within the development plan, production of such would be included. This would be the duty of tractor producing industry to do so. But then the iron and steel industry would have to develop to supply the needed steel. Let us say that to produce such amount of steel, X tons of iron and Y tons of coal were needed, then these industries would develop to supply it; here each branch would find an internal market for its products. The numerical figure of the working class, and their purchasing power would increase to provide an internal market for articles of consumption produced say by the agricultural industry. Thus an internal market would be created and there would be no need for a foreign market.

Pre-Colonial Africa

Rodney highly romanticises Africa before the colonial period and before the 15th century in particular. To him, "in Africa before the 15th century, the predominant principal of social relations was that of family and kinship related with communism". p. 43. He then goes on to show that "every member of an African society had his position defined in terms of relatives of his mother's side and on his father's side. Even when he shows that there were areas where powerful states arose and even slave

labour was used, he concludes that "it can ... be noted that nowhere had there been any internal social revolution". p. 80.

Rodney looks at Africa at that time as being in a static state. He deprives history of its blood - stream - dialectics. We have to look at the life of dialectics as a continuous movement towards the opposites. Hence when looking at communalism, it is important to bear in mind that it too was divided into many stages.¹²

It is necessary to see man as he developed from the animal Kingdom to that of man.¹³ We have then got to see him living in hordes and how, with the further development of his productive forces, and the subsequent relations of production, evolved: the development of productive forces gave rise to division of labour which was at first based on natural lines i.e. between sexes. The next stage of division of labour followed natural lines too, based on age. With this, there developed the family, clans, lineages and tribes, which later led to the rise of states. This process of differentiations is characterised by the development of property, a point to which we shall return later.

If a revolution is taken in its wider context, it refers to a move from a lower mode of production to a higher one. In this case, if, as Rodney himself says, some states had arisen, representing a mode of production that was higher than communalism, then it is incorrect to say that "nowhere had there been any internal social revolution" a point he makes on page 80. The developments in Africa, with exception of coastal areas, arose from internal dynamics before contact with Europe. Hence where revolutions occurred, the causes can be found within the society in question.

On page 43, he "shows" that there was no exploitation in Africa before contact with Europe. This misconception perhaps stems from Rodney's looking at exploitation as existing only where there is private ownership of the means of production. He looks at property relations and finds that land, the major means of production at the time, was communally owned. To him, the head of the family or clan was responsible for it "on behalf of all kin, including foreparents and those yet unborn" p. 43. He shows that at the ideological level, this relation was reproduced by claiming that all residents of a given community had a common ancestor. Even when a new group immigrated, it claimed the same ancestry and settled on equal footing with the older members.

To understand African history we have to move away from the ideological category in which the social relations of production were reproduced, and look at the relations of production themselves

certainly, at the ideological level, the head of the family, clan or lineage would appear as being equal to the other members. It is not enough to look whether or not there existed private property to see exploitation. In fact, as Paul Lafargue¹⁴ shows history has witnessed three types of property - namely communal, feudal and bourgeois. Each one of these witnessed a mode of exploitation qualitatively different from the other. Since most parts of Africa up to the 15th - century were characterised by communal property, we shall look at this in details.

Means of production were owned communally. But then, division of labour brings with it exploitation. Men did the hunting, gathering and fighting, while women stayed at home food gathering and looking after the young ones. The use of an object constituted the sole conditions for its ownership, and therefore any tools developed tended to belong to the men. With the further taming of nature, the men reserved for themselves the care of flocks and herds while, where there was agriculture, women tended the fields. Side by side with these developments the family was developing and the overthrow of women's rights followed. With this, slavery, which in its latent form, made its appearance in the family where the wife and children were slaves of the family head. It was the division of labour that gave the men ownership of means of production, while women took the role of bringing up the young ones. At first, this role of women was not for their degradation, women, as the mothers of the human race occupied a high position in the society. But the development of the means of production, the concentration of these into the hands of a man finally led him to overthrow the woman and thus there began antagonisms in the society.

Rodney does not see this development so he concludes that "the labour that worked the land was generally recruited on a family basis". p.44. He sees age as the most determining factor in defining the extent of rights and obligations. He himself contradicts what he sees as absence of exploitation when he notes "the eldest members of society... (were) ... usually in authority". p.44 clearly the whoever had authority was not at the same footing as those over whom he had the authority. We shall deal with this point in more details when we come to specific examples.

Rodney's assertion that there was equality between clans and lineages mystifies reality. A quick look at the relations of production will show that contradictions and struggle over access to

land was evident. Population increase meant that with the existing level of the development of means of production, land would not be enough for everybody. This gave birth to differential access to land, a constant source of conflict between the clans, lineages, tribes within the same community. Warfare and emmigration were usually the two methods of resolving such conflicts. Clearly the lineage or clan that remained would not allow an incoming one to settle on equal footing. The latter would occupy a subordinate position that was presented as equality at the ideological level.

Indeed, at the ideological level, lineage, clan and family heads would be made to appear as merely protectors of the communal property. Yet we find that not only were the women dominated by men, but also the junior were dominated by elders. This was facilitated by the elders' control of access to the means of production, and the means of biological reproduction - i.e. women. A boy would not be considered a full member of a lineage unless he was married.¹⁵ While this was necessary for the biological reproduction of the human race, it was used also for the reproduction of social relations. If the young man was unmarried he would be deprived of certain privileges and material wealth. This forced the boy to marry. But to marry, he had to pay bride-wealth. He could not do so since he could only own property when he married. This forced him to submit himself to his father who would pay the bride-wealth.

Indeed Rodney contradicts himself when on page 44, he tries to give an example of where juniors "respected" elders. He gives the example of the Bemba of Zambia, a matrilineal society. "The bridegroom spent a number of years working for the father of the bride". Another example he gives is from Dahomey where "the Dokpwe or work team allowed a son to participate in carrying out a task of some magnitude for the father and of his wife". In conclusion he notes "In both these examples, the right of the father-in-law to acquire labour and the obligations of the son-in-law to give labour were based on kinship".

One or two examples will show what we mean. Mandelbaum Edel¹⁶ shows what the relationship was among the Baciga in Uganda. She notes that a family lived in¹⁷ a homestead and that no young man was allowed to build a house of his own without the permission of the father. It was the responsibility of the father to obtain a wife for the son and then he later gave him a

piece of land on which to cultivate. The young man was expected to obey his father and provide him with a part of his product. He would for example give him a share of beer brewed, give him part of an animal after hunting and part of agricultural produce after harvesting. This is a case of elders appropriating the surplus of the juniors. The exploitation of women was evident in the fact that she could not own property. Whatever she produced belonged to her father in her spinsterhood and her husband in her married life. She fed the children and looked after her husband.

Such relationships are also observed by Baitwababo among the Bahororo of Uganda. He notes¹⁸ that the basic unit was the family, which consisted of the father as the head, his wives, children and their wives. "The married members of the family built their houses around the main house nyarui which was for the family head" p.78. It was him who controlled everybody within the family. This point is emphasised when he notes that "In the family the father was the head and held supreme authority over everything in theory". p.81. At this point, Baitwababo falls in the same ditch as Rodney when he claims that control over everything was in theory. Indeed he shows that "It was the duty of the mother with her daughters to look after the feeding of the family. They produced food, cooked it, and served it. The work of looking after the children and entertaining visitors was hers. For a man to interest himself in the management of food was resented. This clear division of roles was emphasised by the practice which forbade a man, woman or child from doing certain things or eating certain foods. The father for instance did not eat pumpkin seeds, certain internal organs of animal, the lower jaw if his father was alive. The women and girls were forbidden to eat goat and mutton, grass hoppers, liver of a cow. They were also not allowed to hold a spear or whistle, children did not eat liver, or chest, taste uncooked salt at night, whistle at night or mention their elders' names".¹⁹

From these two examples, one sees a system of exploitation and some of the mechanisms used for the reproduction of the social relations.

In pre-capitalist Africa, besides land, another source of conflict seems to have revolved around people. The survival of a lineage, clan or tribe depended on a number of people in it. This was important because the level of the develop-

ment of productive forces was low, and hence the necessity for more labour. This point might perhaps explain why incoming groups were accepted, and for the same reason, why they occupied a subordinate position so that its labour could be appropriated. The situation is however complex because in some cases the incoming group would gradually take the upper hand and hence subordinate the original inhabitants.

After mystifying the African past Rodney proceeds to show that Africa too was developed. On page 50, he says that "one way of judging the level of economic development in Africa five centuries ago is through the quality (emphasis mine) of the products" on page 80 he says "African canoes on the river Nile and the Senegal Coast were a high standard -- West Africa had developed metal casting to a fine artistic (emphasis mine) in many parts of Nigeria -- African wooden utensil were sometimes works of great beauty" thus he moves from the position of judging the level of technology from the quality of the product, and judges it from its beauty B. Davidson has the same approach to African history. This is a subjectivist way of looking at history. It does not make us understand history better. Let us note that it is not the beauty of a product that determines the level of the development of technology. A product might be a good piece of art but be of a very low quality. And even here, it is not simply the quality of a product that is a measure of economic development.

A point on which he again shows himself to be above the other nationalist historians is when he notes that not all African societies were at the same level of development. Most of the nationalist historians do not see this, those who do so continue to assert that at least, differentiations were not as sharp as those in Europe and Asia. At this point, he can be credited for contradicting his earlier assertions when he shows that it is not true that even where there were differentiations appropriations of surplus was done for the good of the whole society.

In looking at the intercaste region, he realises that states had developed with clear-cut methods of exploitation. He shows that pastoralists were new comers and yet gradually they imposed their rule over the indigenous agriculturalists.

However, he does not bother to explain how this process took place. One theory that has been advanced is that by Katate and Kamugungunu²⁰ which tries to interpret history as it appears in the mythology of Ankole, Toro and Bunyoro. This

theory tries to connect the ruling class with God and see them as a continuation of rule of "Ruhanga" the creator who is supposed to have lived on earth at one time. We shall not waste time in trying to refute such a self refuting "theory" that has no reality.

Even the "theory" of conquest cannot provide us with the answer since these people seem to have come in peacefully as suggested by Baitwababo.²¹ Baitwababo tries to give an explanation that is acceptable to us. He sees the relationship between the pastoralists and agriculturalists as being peaceful in the beginning. Each exchanged its products for others. He sees the pastoralists using their cattle to subordinate the agriculturalists. "Cattle were desired by both groups because of meat, milk, butter and hides".²² Another point which leaves out is that gradually bride wealth began to change the form so that it was paid in cattle. This increased the demand for cattle. To get all these "the Bahima (pastoralists) exchanged agricultural products (especially millet) for dairy products. The relationship remained heavily weighed in favour of Bahima, since some dairy products -- were very necessary. The desire for cattle led to gifts of beer and manual services such as mending fences etc. These gradually developed" into regular remittance known as 'Kutojja'.²³ So we find that the desire for cattle led to the appropriation of the surplus produced by agriculturalists, a system that finally led to the Bahima (Batutsi for Rwanda and Burundi) developing authority over Bairu (Bahutu in the case of Rwanda and Burundi).

Appropriation of the surplus was intensified by tributes which were in two forms as noted by Baitwababo. The first one was where subjects paid to the ruler a certain amount of their products. This was compulsory. This is what in Rungankole-Ruciga is known as 'Kutojja'. Another method was what is known as 'Kuhake'. People within a locality cultivated, grazed their cattle etc., with the permission of the ruler. In return they would provide with him part of their products e.g. food, beer, milk and services.

There was yet another method called 'Kutabaara'. The client would take products to a pastoralist in return for a cow or goat or favours in case the pastoralist was a ruler. At the ideological level this was given as being a method of leveling out property and that both parties benefited. It is this ditch that Karugire²⁴ falls in when he argues that the

relationship between the two groups was of mutual interests. But in reality, the process was a long one. The client would keep on taking products to the donor for a long time before he was finally promised a cow. This promise could only materialise if the former continued to bring products. Finally he would receive the cow and usually not one of the best ones. Clearly the cow so given was of much lower value than all the products the donor had received in the meantime. And still this was not the end of the story. The recipient would remain tied to the donor in "gratitude" and hence appropriation would remain. As if this was not enough, the recipient would have to give a cow to the donor (without the latter bringing in products as was the case with the first case) at one time in future.

Rodney is right when he looks at these groups as castes. It was difficult for a Muhima to drop down into the ranks of Bairu. This was because if his animals died, other Bahima would donate some to him. At this level there was no appropriation, however it was possible for a Mwiru to climb higher. If he acquired cattle say by proving a good soldier and the king rewarding him, he would no longer be called Mwiru but Mwambari (Bambari for plural). He would be between the two. His children would marry among the Bahima and become Bahima.

Slave Trade

Rodney tries to show the process of the underdevelopment of Africa by looking at the fact that labour was taken out of Africa in form of slaves. He correctly observes that not only did African economies have labour taken out of them but that serious effects followed even among the areas that did not have their people taken out.

But then he does not treat this question from a materialist point of view. He reduces the question to a set of morals and subjectivism. Hence on page 91 he talks about some Europeans feeling guilty conscious about what he calls /"their role" in this traffic. He contrasts the "treachery of Europeans with the resistance of the Africans to the trade". He looks at the kingdom of Kongo (p.90) and decides that slave trade was received with misgivings at the beginning of the 16th century. "He (the King) asked for masons, priests, physicians etc but instead he was overwhelmed (emphasis mine) by slave ships

from Portugal, and a vicious trade was opened up by playing one part of the Kongo Kingdom against another". Rodney here is in agreement with Vansina who looks at Alfonso I as a moderniser²⁵ that was "treacherously" led to participate in slave trade. This approach is incorrect. It stems from the way one poses the problematic - we have to look at the relations of production in Kongo at the time of contact, see how and why it was easy for the Portuguese to make alliances with the king, keeping in mind the economic interests of both parties. It is also necessary to see how free Alfonso was from the control of missionaries by the time he "asked" for masons, physicians etc.

In fact, Rodney comes to the point when he is looking at Benin. He shows that at first it were the women who were sold as slaves, to be replaced later by prisoners of war.

It is necessary to look at the social - economic structure of society to be able to see how such structures facilitated slave.

According to him, exploitation that existed in Africa before the 15th century was not done by Africans. He romanticizes the Africans so much that he cannot see how an African could have exploited another African! When they all were black, never! Not Rodney's Africans who only exist in his head. North Africa and other Muslim communities (who were not Africans in Rodney's definition) owned slaves. "Elsewhere in Africa, communal societies were introduced to the concept of owning alien human beings when they were made captives in war... very rapidly, captives of their off-spring became ordinary members of the society, because there was no scope for the perpetual exploitation of man by man that was either feudal or capitalist". (p.41) This romanticism leads nowhere else but into the abyss of mystification.

Slaves can be used for private or communal accumulation. It is true that in most parts of Africa up to the 15th century, slaves were not used for private accumulation. However, an example could show that Rodney's assertions are not correct.

A quick look at Kasanje Kingdom in Angola will help us here.²⁶ Lineages developed. The king called Kinguri does not belong to any lineage. When he becomes king, he gets out of the lineage structure, a process accomplished through rituals. Court officials were the king makers, selecting him from among the candidates holding kita titles, who came from lineages.

One of the methods used was sending nieces to the King so that he could have sons with them. The son of the king would automatically receive the kita title. Since the society was matrilineal, the son would go to his mother's lineage, with the kita title. Having so many sons returning to their lineages might be a threat to the position of the reigning king. In order to avoid this, the king would recruit slaves called abika and raise an army from them. This was important since an abika would belong to no lineage. Therefore all his loyalty would be to the king. It was possible for a few abika to become court officials. But this was only a very small number.

But it was not the king who invented the institution of slavery -- abika. He found it existing and took advantage of it. The more people a lineage had, the more powerful it became. In a partilineal society, polygamy might have solved this preoccupation. But in a matrilineal society, this would not work since the children would go back to their mothers' lineages. The solution was to recruit slaves. Children of slave women would remain in the lineage since slaves had no lineages. Meanwhile, the slaves themselves would belong to the lineage head. Besides war, another method of getting slaves was say where a person in lineage A committed a crime against a member of lineage B. If this individual was unable to pay for his crime, he might offer himself to lineage B and then live in a subordinate position compared to other members of the lineage.

Here, we find that slaves were not used for private accumulation, but for strengthening the lineage. The king took over the structure to recruit an army that had no lineage affiliations. When the Portuguese came around 1490's with their slave trade, they took advantage of such a structure. We can see how it was easy to sell the slaves rather than leave them in the lineages once the structure was already in existence.

In answer to those that try to look at the supposed benefits slave trade brought to Africa, he says that "trading in slaves has no special bearing on whether crops spread....". Without trying to draw a balance sheet of benefits and non-benefits of slave trade, there is need to go deeply and show the effects of the trade. For example, we know that slave ships would at times stay in the harbour for quite sometime with some slaves on board, waiting for more from the interior. There must have risen a need to have enough food to feed the slaves that were already on the ships. In response to this, it seems that certain crops were brought from outside Africa and planted along the coast.

Religion

Rodney looks at religion. On page 35 he looks at the social and cultural features prevalent in the underdeveloped countries, which keep these integrated into the capitalist system. "The Christian church has always been a major instrument for cultural penetration and cultural dominance, in spite of the fact that in many instances, Africans sought to set up independent churches". ("in spite of?") It seems that due to Rodney's racial tendencies (a point that we shall deal with later) he would have expected "African churches" to help in the liberation of the African labouring masses. Whether a church is "African" or "European" the role of religion is clear. Lenin exposed this when he said that "all oppressing classes stand in need of two social functions to safeguard their rule: the function of the hangman and the function of the priest. The hangman is required to quell the protests and indignation of the oppressed; the priest is required to console the oppressed, to depict to them the prospects of their suffering and sacrifices being mitigated (this is particularly easy to do without guaranteeing that these prospects will be 'achieved'²⁷) while preserving class rule, and thereby to reconcile them to class rule, win them away from revolutionary spirit and destroy their revolutionary determination".²⁸

On the same page 27 Rodney claims that religion can play a positive role. He sees it being used to mobilise and discipline large numbers of people in the process of state formations. "In a few instances, religion also provided concepts in the struggle for social justice". This could only be true in relation to those classes that were struggling to take "their" position in the exploitation of masses. For example, the bourgeoisie used protestantism as part of their ideological tools against the feudal order. When one looks at the reactions of different classes in Germany when Luther came out with reforms, this point becomes clear. Engels summarises the situation thus, "... the first of the three camps, the conservative catholic (emphasis Engels') embraced all the elements interested in maintaining the existing conditions, i.e. the imperial authorities, the ecclesiastical and a section of the lay princes, the richer nobility, the prelates and the city patricians, the camp of Lutheran reforms, Moderate in the burgher (emphasis Engels') attracted all the propertied elements of the opposition, the bulk of the lesser nobility, the burghers, and even a portion of the lay princes who hoped to enrich themselves through confiscation of church estates and wanted to seize the opportunity of gaining greater independence from the empire".²⁹

Even when one looks at traditional religions in Africa, we find the same old story. Religion arose out of man's failure to

understand natural forces. At that time, nature looked alien and almighty. But with the development of societies, some natural forces began to be understood. But side by side with this development were social relations which appeared alien and all powerful before which man was helpless. This made it possible for the continued "existence" of God because man still spent all his life living in illusion. The division of societies into classes saw a new aspect of religion. The ruling class now took it up and began to use it as an ideological tool for reproducing of social relations. We have already quoted how Katale and Kamugungunu show this in relation to Ankole. John Beattie, and A.R. Dunbar³⁰ see the same story in Bunyoro whereby it is claimed that the social relations as they existed were a creation of Ruhanga (the creator). He is supposed to have had a brother who had three sons.³¹ Ruhanga tested them and the one with the highest score was to be the king. The next one was to be a pastoralist while the last one was to be agriculturalist and slave. John S. Mbiti³² though he does not see religion as being a result of false consciousness, gives several examples of how in different societies, the existing social relations are presented as originating from the supernatural.

Religion keeps man fettered. It is this that led Marx to note "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress". Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people -- the criticism of religion disillusioned man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round men as long as he does not revolve round himself.³³

Racism:

Rodney is so much caught up in racism that he explains African history as a racial category. He looks at Africa's Underdevelopment and criticises those who explain it away by saying that it is a God-given factor. To him, this interpretation "is emphasised because of the racist trend in European scholarship. It is in line with racist prejudice to say openly or imply that their countries are innately superior, and that the responsibility for the economic backwardness of the race of

black Africans". p. 30. The point to bear in mind is that racism is not an aspect of the economic base, but is an ideological category. If there are races, then racism will be used, just like where there are different tribes, tribalism will be used, just like where there is more than one religion, religious differences will be used. The purpose is to keep the oppressed divided. Such prejudices will be created by the ruling class so that such differences appear to be more than their common interests against the exploiters. When studying a social phenomenon, it is important to distinguish between the economic conditions and the class struggle that goes with it, from the ideological forms these struggles assume.

Rodney's racial tendencies become clearer when he is looking at class and lineages in Africa. He tries to very much look for what was exclusively "African" in the formations. His discussion on page 41 shows this clearly. In looking for what was uniquely "African" he falls in the same ditch with apologists of colonialism who try to look for the absence of such so as to show that Africa had no civilisation etc. This leads him to use the same analytical tools which do not help us at all, as we have noted earlier.

In this respect, he suggests that "cultures" rather than "civilisations" should be applied to Africa before the 15th century. He suggests that the word "civilisation" should be rejected for a simple reason that it is attached to European colonialism, slave trade, fascism and barbarism as experienced in the last world war. History is not a set of morals expressed in an emotional form. It is true that words like "civilisation" have been used in a derogatory form to justify capitalist exploitation of the African continent. But as we have emphasised earlier, we do not get anywhere by trying to rub off the African continent. But as we have emphasised earlier, we do not get anywhere by trying to rub off the vocabulary all the words that have had their meaning twisted by the exploiters to justify their system. It is our view that rather than engage in such exercises, it is better to re-instate their scientific meaning and use them as tools of analysis.

He then continues to reduce history to a set of cultural values when he begins to argue that Africa too had culture. "Who in this world is competent to judge whether an Austrian Waltz is better than a Makonde Ngoma?" p.42. He uses cultural concepts as analytical tools. It is for this that he finds himself

with Davidson busy looking for pockets of cultures all over the continent.

When looking at history, it is important not to be taken in by appearance. A look beyond appearance will help us understand the reality. This will make us avoid the subjectivism Rodney landed in when for example he is trying to prove that Africa too had civilisation. He comes up with statements like "Kush was a centre from which positive cultural (emphasis added)" (p.62) He talks of "striking achievements of Moslem Maghreb".

He extends his racism everywhere. He lumps all the Europeans together and sees them as exploiting the Africans thus too lumped together. He talks of "European scholarship of Europe often treating European economy as if it were entirely independent" p.92 of the other economies p.84, he talks of "white bourgeois scholarship". He even talks of "European or white American Marxists" -.221. Everywhere we turn, it is racism.

When we start analysing history with class struggle as our starting point we shall avoid such pit falls. For example, rather than look at Europeans exploiting Africans, it is more helpful to look at the relations of production both in African and Europe. Hence we shall see that when we talk of a country dominating another it exploits both its workers and those of the oppressed nation. Rodney's stand would lead to a situation whereby it is claimed that due to the super profits from colonies and neo-colonies, the capitalists in the metropole are able to dish a few more crumbs to "their" working class and therefore this amounts to the workers in the metropole exploiting workers in the colony or neo-colony. What actually happens is that the bourgeoisie in the metropole appropriate the surplus produced by workers and peasants in the colony or neo-colony certainly, with the super-profits they make in the colonies, the imperialist bourgeoisie is able to "buy off" a stratum of the workers that Lenin called the "labour Aristocracy". But then the labour aristocracy alone, not the whole of the workers. Also the labour aristocracy, in spite of being the social basis of bourgeois reformism within the working class, remains a part of the working class, it was never for Lenin, a part of the exploiters.

It is again necessary to realise that what makes a person take a line he does is not due to his colour but his economic

interests - either as an individual or a group. Hence, what makes these bourgeois scholars write what they do is not because they are Europeans but because they are either bourgeois themselves or running dogs of the bourgeoisie. In fact on page 99 Rodney comes up with a statement that "no people can enslave another for centuries without coming up with a notion of superiority". So race cannot be the cause for exploitation. It is a mere ideological tool for the reproduction of social relations.

But Rodney cannot see this for soon, after his last statement quoted above, he contradicts himself when he is looking at the French revolution. "...the French revolution was made in the name of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity; it did not extend to black Africans who were enslaved by France in the West Indies and the Indian Oceans. The leaders of their (French) bourgeois revolution said plainly that they did not make it on behalf of black humanity. p.100. The point to establish which he himself touches on is that this was a bourgeois revolution. If it was, "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" could only have referred to the bourgeoisie in relation to the feudalists. The former wanted an atmosphere where labour would be easily available in the market, and hence where they could maximise their profits. Hence what the freed fought for could have been neither for "their" proletariat and peasantry nor for the black Africans -- enslaved by the French. The freedom they fought for was to create inside France conditions under which alone, free competition could be developed. That is why as soon they got state power they parcelled out landed property while at the same time they were exploiting and unchaining the industrial productive power; and finally to break all the feudal chains beyond the borders of France done by Napoleon, one of the heroes of the revolution.

But when the bourgeoisie came out to battle it out with the feudalists, they found that the workers and peasants too had grievances to settle with the feudalists. It was this that led to the alliance of these classes, led by the bourgeoisie to overthrow feudalism. All rising classes, fighting for their own share in the exploitation of the masses, have always mobilised the masses only to replace the chains from the previous exploiters with theirs on to the hands of the exploited.

When looking at the exploitation of workers in Africa, he simply states that the worker was paid less than enough to reproduce himself. He is so much concerned with enlarging

the list of the sufferings the Africans underwent that he does not bother to show why this was so, and if the worker was paid less than enough for his reproduction, how was it that this class did not die out?

Since what capitalism wanted was cheap raw materials from African basically, it was not necessary to destroy the pre-capitalist modes of production. In fact, the preservation of such modes would ensure the production of cheap raw materials since migrant labour, forced labour and even slave labour could be used. The preservation of these modes meant that the worker's family would remain in the rural area producing their own subsistence. Hence instead of having the whole family subsisting on the worker's wages, it was only himself that had to subsist on it. Hence he could be paid less. The preservation of the pre-capitalist modes of production meant that they were subsidising the capital mode, to ensure extraction of maximum surplus value.

An understanding of the concept of articulation of modes of production will show that this is how it was possible to exploit in this manner. But for Rodney, the reason was colour. ... capitalism was willing to exploit all workers everywhere (but) European capitalists in Africa had additional racial justification for dealing unjustly with the Africa - worker". p.163.

Colonial period:

He shows very well the role of the colonial state in the exploitation of colonies. But then his idealism makes its appearance again. He says that socio-economic services tended to decrease in colonies in those areas that were producing less cash crops, "that accounts for the fact that Africans in Gold Coast, Uganda and Nigeria could be considered as having been 'better off' than those in Dahomey, Tanganyika and Chad" p.227. On page 228 he says that all social amenities were for Europeans and "any catering to African interests was purely coincidental". Let us first repeat what we have said time and again that African countries had no homogeneity in this social relations i.e. that there were differentiations. In each of these colonies the precapitalist modes of production were preserved for the reason given above. Two more classes were created in the colony - semi - proletariat (or proletariat in some cases) and the petit-bourgeoisie. Certainly, not all these classes in the colony got the same treatment.

There is need to go into details and show which class got what. At the same time, even within a colony itself, there was uneven development at a regional level. Certain areas were reserved to produce labour while others were reserved to produce crops. The former provided the semi-proletariat while the latter provided the petit-bourgeoisie. The labour reservoirs were deliberately underdeveloped, land alienation took place here so that people could be forced to go and sell their labour. Hence social amenities were distributed unevenly, cash-crop reservoirs taking the bigger piece. It is important to look into these aspects because failure to do this leads to looking at the Africans as having been a homogenous group and conclude like Rodney does on page 244 that Africans had to do with bayonets, riot - acts and gunboats. Even when he is looking at the distribution of the product of forced labour he says that he sees this as "building castles for the colonial governor, bungallows for the colonial administrators and prisons for the Africans" .

In conclusion, we want to emphasise the fact that African history will not be understood by just saying the opposite of what the apologists of colonialism said but a moving away into the realm of materialism. Only then will the mystification of African history stop.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Ho chi Minh, selected writings, Hanoi, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1973 pp. 35-36.
- 2 Basil Davidson, Old African Rediscovered, London Victor Gollac Limited, 1965
- 3 J. Depelchin, "Towards a problematic History of Africa", in Tanzania Zamani, No. 18 January 1976 p.2.
- 4 See F. Engels "The Role played by Labour in Transition from Ape to Man" In Dialectics of Nature, for details.
The factors are labour, consciousness and speech, the latter two being a response to the former; but in the further development, each acts on the other. But in the final analysis it is labour that created man.
- 5 A.J. Temu, "Tanzania Societies and Colonial Invasion 1875-1907" Morogoro Conference paper 1974, p.9.

- 6 G.C.K. Gwassa "The German Intervention and African Resistance in Tanzania" in Kimambo and Temu (ed.) A History of Tanzania 1969.
- 7 Mao Tse Tung, Four philosophical Essays, "on contradiction" Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1966, p.51.
- 8 Ibid., p.52.
- 9 Marx and Engels, Selected Correspondence, Moscow, progress publishers, 1975 pp.394-6.
- 10 Lenin, The Development of Capitalism in Russia.
- 11 Ibid., p.66.
- 12 For details, see Mao Tse Tung, "Talks on questions of philosophy" in S. Scram (ed.), Mao unrehearsed, p.226.
- 13 For details, see G. Thomson, The first philosophers, Studies in Ancient Greek Society, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1972, Chapter 2.
- 14 Paul Lafargue, The Evaluation of property social and Philosophical Studies, New York, 1975, p.3.
- 15 For example, among the Banyarwanda, Barundi, Banyankole, Bashororo, Bakiga, Batoto, Banyoro, Bahaya, all in the interacustrine word "boy" does not so much refer to the chronological age but to a bachelor - young man.
- 16 M. Mead (ed.), Co-operation and Competition and primitive people, Boston Beacon press, 1961, "The Bachiga of East Africa" p. 130.
- 17 The spelling in current use in Baciga.
- 18 Donald Denon (ed.), A History of Kigezi in South West Uganda, Kampala, National Trust, Two Essays by the same author (1) "Foundations of Rujumbura society"
2. Bashombo rule in Rujumbura" A point to note that Rujumbura was organised on the same basis as Ankole and to a certain extent the other societies in the interacustrine region. Hence those observations are applicable there.
- 19 Ibid., p. 81
- 20 A.G. Katale and L. Kamugungunu, Abagabe B' Ankole Vol. I, East African Literature Bureau, 1967, Chapter 1.
- 21 Cit. op. p. 74.

- 22 Ibid. p. 75.
- 23 Ibid. p. 75.
- 24 S.R. Karugire, A History of the Kingdom of Nkore in Western Uganda to 1896, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971.
- 25 Vansina, The Savana Kingdoms
- 26 The point to bear in mind is that this was a Matrilineal society.
- 27 The brackets are in the original.
- 28 Lenin, Against Revisionism, Moscow, progress publishers, 1972, p. 239.
- 29 F. Engels, Peasant War in Germany, Moscow Progress publishers, 1974, p. 47.
- 30 A.R. Dunbar, A History of Bunyoro-Kitara Nairobi Oxford University Press, 1965 and John Beattie, Bunyoro, An African Kingdom, Stanford University, 1960. The latter looks at the myth "providing a geneological chapter for a structure of authority whose existence is contemporaneous with myth itself" - p. 16. He does not explain the development.
- 31 The number varies from three to four depending on whether the myth is told in Bunyoro or Ankole.
- 32 John S. Mbiti, An Introduction to African Religion, London, Heinemann, 1975.
- 33 Marx and Engels, On Religion, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1975 p. 39