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## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### Presuppositions in the Study of African Social and Political Thought

Max Assimeng

#### Abstract

The essay sought to initiate discussion among scholars of social and political theory on a then insufficiently acknowledged problem in African intellectual history. Attention was drawn to the neglect of African social and political thought in worldwide social and intellectual analysis in the hopes that it would lead to rigorous examination and debate that would lead to new and generalizable conceptual frameworks.

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## Résumé

L'essai eut pour objectif d'amorcer une discussion parmi les spécialistes de la théorie politique et sociale sur un problème qui fut insuffisamment reconnu dans l'histoire intellectuelle africaine à l'époque. L'attention fut attirée sur la négligence de la pensée politique et sociale africaine dans l'analyse intellectuelle et sociale sur le plan mondial, et ce, dans l'espoir d'engendrer un débat et de réaliser un examen rigoureux qui aboutiraient à de nouveaux cadres conceptuels généralisables.

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At the time of publication, the author was an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana, Legon. In addition to his vast intellectual output, Professor Assimeng was also politically active, involved, for example, in the now defunct National Commission for Democracy (NCD). The NCD, among other things, formulated a programme for effective realisation of a true democracy for the consideration of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government.

PRESUPPOSITIONS IN THE STUDY OF AFRICAN SOCIAL  
AND POLITICAL THOUGHT\*

Max Assimeng\*\*

Introduction

The essay seeks to initiate large-scale concern and discussion among scholars of social and political theory on an as yet insufficiently acknowledged problem in African intellectual history.

African students of sociology, history, economics, political science, and philosophy are introduced to sets of names and theoretical propositions on the nature of human society and the direction of social development. BUT THEY FIND THAT AFRICAN NAMES AND IDEAS ARE SCARCELY INCLUDED IN ANY SUCH DISCUSSIONS. Why is this so? Might it be that Africans have not contributed to the world's stock of what Chambliss (1981:426) calls meaningful social knowledge.

It may well be granted that African students appear unsure about which African names and ideas they wish to see incorporated in the study of social and political thought. Although some have their own idols on the intellectual and political fields (such as Nkrumah, Nyerere, Azikiwe, Senghor, Cabral, Fanon, etc.), they remain vague and unclear as to the theoretical status of

the works of good favourites. If indeed Africans have offered thoughts on the nature of social arrangements, then perhaps in searching for such thoughts for systematic codification and evaluation, we might ask the following questions: (a) what have been the objects of their speculation, and what questions have been asked? (b) what methods have been employed to answer those questions? (c) What sorts of answers have been given?

It is <sup>agreed</sup> generally that, in any serious study of philosophers and philosophies, these are the central questions for critical analysis (cf. Russell 1961; Klapp 1973; Chambliss 1954).

The inability of students to point to any African thinkers of significance in the history of social theorizing, seems to me to be related to a number of factors integral to the nature of African social structure and traditional systems of thought. These factors include the tradition of oral communication by which men of wisdom in traditional society usually expressed their ideas. This assertion is itself subject to considerable debate, as we shall see in a subsequent section of this paper. Nevertheless, literacy has usually been seen as a pre-requisite for the systematic collation and analysis of thought systems on the nature of society: 'The record of human thought awaited the development of the written word, and wise men with the truth on their lips have died and been forgotten, simply because they left nothing tangible that endured' (Chambliss 1954:8). Thus, Chambliss finds it imperative to begin his study of social thought

with Babylonia, 'because of first hand, not hearsay, information about that civilisation' (Chambliss, *op. cit.*, p. 8).

There was also the absence, in traditional African society, of a serious sense of long-term historical perspective and imagination from which, for instance, optimistic notions of progress and development could emerge as conceptual data in social thinking.

One should additionally mention the fact that several interpretations of aspects of social structure were often provided in the form of hallowed mythology and legends; the authenticity and logical coherence of such interpretations were not only doubtful, but also difficult to analyse empirically.

Thus, when it is claimed in some (nationalistically inspired) quarters that it is Africans who pioneered the progress of intellectual development in the world (cf. the discussion of Mazrui, 1966), other Africans do not share such claims. The late Ghanaian eminent scientist and medical practitioner, Raphael Armatte (1973:95), could thus poetically present what appeared to him to be features of the African mind:

Deep down the black man's mind there is nothing new  
Or bright, save midnight darkness and despair;  
We tell you this, we are the ones who dare  
For we have learnt the magic spells that, few  
Have heard or known. There's horror stacked for you  
Behind the blackman's mind, the brain that's there  
The cruel homicidal sun flays bone bare,  
Then there the simple drag on aghed lips.  
Oh! if ours be the calm before the storm,  
Then this dark sullen cloud may break with sun.



But not in our days. No, not in our days!  
 No mortal wit may change his shape or form,  
 Or make the blackman's thoughtless life of fun  
 Fit him to breed aught but a servile race.

Again, Orrin Klapp (1975:150), recalling Robert Redfield's model of the folk society (1941), has noted of traditional, folk societies:

Almost everything is organized by kinship, "a constellation of familial relationships". Hence all relationships are personal - there is no objectivity. The society is sacred and its world is also sacred. In such a world, of course, there is no scientific thinking nor secular values of the market place.

Of course not all African scholars would agree with the late Armah's characterization of the African mind and its contents, a topic which deserves more lengthy and serious treatment than has hitherto been done.

African students are not saying that the names and ideas that are encountered in the history of philosophy and the social sciences in the West are not great names. Due acknowledgement is given to such writers as Plato, Aristotle, Roger and Francis Bacon, Rousseau, Locke; and modern social thinkers such as Comte, Spencer, Marx, Weber, Pareto, Durkheim, Parsons, and Elias. And, for what they are worth, attempts are made in lectures and class discussions in African universities to cogitate on those aspects or models of society in the writings of these thinkers which might provide useful analytical perspectives for the study of African social and political structures.

The worry of African students appears to be this: might it not be the case that there have been African thinkers also who have contributed to the progress of intellectual development in the realm of social thinking? In what respects might one contend, with James Conyers (1972:173), for instance, that 'Ibn Khaldun (the Tunis-born Maghreb philosopher of history, who lived between 1332 and 1406) has as much claim as any other one person to be called the father of sociology', and that

'Despite the tendency to associate the development of sociology with western phenomena and European scholars, many scholars feel that this bias has prompted us to "look away" from Africa and Asia, thereby further encouraging an error which is generally prevalent in western culture'.

Perhaps, much of the controversy might be located in the often unclear senses in which 'intellectual development' and 'social thought' are conceptualized and understood. But more of this later.

On one hand, it might be possible to respond to such query of African students, by asserting simply that such students (and some of their enthusiastic lecturers, not to mention self-assertive politicians of newly independent countries) are indulging in cultural nationalism in their quest for the inclusion of Africans - and their ideas - in global intellectual history and comparative social theory. We might perhaps say then that parading in traditional togs and other attire and symbols in the corridors of the United Nations and other international gatherings, is different, and should be so



distinguished, from securing a place on the world map of intellectual history. The corollary might then be to say that membership in the republic of letters is not achieved by head counting or majority votes. Or, as Inkeles and Smith (1974:3) note in connection with modernization process in the Third world, 'diplomatic recognition and membership in the United Nations do not create a nation state'.

On the other hand, it might be seriously argued that perhaps such exclusion of African thinking from the analysis of mainstream social thought derives from the fact that, for a very long time, there were really no known, i.e. documented, African disquisitions of theoretical value that might be incorporated in the serious study of social or political theory. Recently, however, attempts have been made to examine what there is that might - or might not - be said to pass for African systems of social thinking (cf. Otite 1978; Echeruo 1974; J. O'Connell 1963; Marais 1972; Afari-Gyan 1976; Wanda 1976; Clapham 1968; Shepperson 1964; Twumasi 1978; Agbeko 1977; Anaman 1977).<sup>1</sup>

There is another factor that should be recognized in explaining the neglect of African social thought in worldwide social and intellectual analysis. This is to the effect that perhaps no intellectual atmosphere was created in African social and psychological structures that might be regarded as conducive to the disinterested use of reason for speculating on social issues. Such an atmosphere is itself dependent upon certain social and cultural

situations.

Basically, attention is drawn to these problems in the hope that the data that scholars have now begun to collect and assemble on African social and political ideas, might be subjected to more rigorous examination according to some criteria. Rigour and method are essential if ideas are to be studied in terms of possible philosophical propositions on the nature of man and of human society. Such criteria as a community of social analysts come to share and to examine, could then meaningfully serve as a framework for classification, categorization and critical evaluation of such data. As at present, the various studies of African social and political ideas seem not to hang appreciably on any generalizable conceptual pegs. Lately, however, we have begun to encounter isolated examples of this awareness. Such awareness, for instance, informs the study by J. O'Connell (1963:77-93), in which he mentions that 'Senghor and Azikiwe write with conscious awareness of the use of concepts in political science' whereas 'Nkrumah, in spite of a certain conceptual poverty, has better understanding of what a modern state is than some political commentators'. Another  $\angle$  has written: 'Nkrumah could not depend upon reasons of logic to fight colonialism' (Dzirasa 1962:28). Tucker (1978) has examined Michiavelli and Fanon as political philosophers who grappled, at different times, with the basic problems of freedom, legitimacy, and the moral basis of political action; whereas Michael Rogin (1963) has sought parallelisms between African ideas of social



development and Rousseau's view concerning the 'noble savage'.

There still remains an issue that should be clarified, and that issue is this: what should students do when they discover that analysis of thought systems differ as to whether a particular thinker is 'systematic' or not? Clearly, this is a problem which the student should be helped to examine and to resolve. It is a matter of regret, therefore, that in their otherwise very useful collection Readings in African Political Thought (1975), Mutiso and Rob Nkomo acknowledge that their volume 'is not intended to provide an analysis of African thought. If it were such an analysis, we should be concerned with the logical consistency and empirical verification of African political thought' (p. xi). However, even when such studies are undertaken with the principal aim 'to explicate the analysis his political ideas as they are revealed in his writings and speeches', as Afari-Gyan (1976: 13) attempts to do on the ideas of Kwame Nkrumah, no specific conceptual and methodological mapping is provided as a guide for students who might also wish to evaluate ideas of Nkrumah, as of other leaders of thought in Africa.

I believe that none of the foregoing responses and explanations should be regarded as wholly adequate because there are still some unexamined questions, namely:

- (a) what is social thought? and
- (b) what are people doing when it is said or claimed that they are thinking about society?

For our purposes these questions on the essential nature of social thought must be regarded as first-order questions. When they have been grappled with, perhaps the second-order questions might then hinge upon the following points;

- (a) have there indeed been African social thought?
- (b) if there have, what have been the nature, essence, and typifications of such social thoughts? and
- (c) what possible reasons might be adduced for the relative neglect of African thoughts (such as they have been); in global intellectual history and sociological analyses?

The way these questions have been posed in this essay might be regarded as too elementary. But, to my mind, the yardstick for measuring the level of development of a discipline is the extent to which the discipline's basic and elementary questions are posed and examined.

### The Nature of Social Thought

It is necessary to set out the general area of social thought, and the properties that all social thoughts have in common, in order to see the sense in which the term might be used in this study of the African situation. The field of social thought has engaged the attention of competent authorities for some time now; we might implicitly try to discover the nature of African thoughts on social structure and cultural arrangements, on the basis of foundations which have been laid for the field of study. We might then compare



mode and content of African social thought with those that have animated thinkers in western social and political history.

To Rollin Chambliss (1954:4) social thought is 'concerned with human beings in their relations with their fellows. Man's thoughts about his relations to others whether expressed in folk literature or in the compositions of individual writers'. Another foremost authority on the history of social thought, Harry Barnes (1934:vii), saw the field in terms of 'what social philosophers and sociologists have said about the origin of human society, the ways of group life, the development and expression of social interests, and the modes of both cultural lag and social progress'.

As the above contention of Barnes indicates, social thought is often studied solely with respect to the philosophical systems of great writers. But Africa produced no writers until recent times.<sup>2</sup> Yet it seems obvious that, before great writers emerged, Africans thought about their society, and this thought was embedded in the collective phenomena of social structure. In probing the objects of social theorizing, several significant questions should serve as guidelines of such introduction. Some of such questions may be posed in the following manner: what have been the causes of widespread failing in social structure, as these failings are seen and experienced by the thinkers or architects of programmes and suggestions for social reform? And what institutional solutions are offered as capable of returning society to a state of social, economic and political health?

In probing responses to the foregoing questions, it would be necessary for the student of social thought in Africa to analyse the traditional folklore, proverbs, and customary beliefs and conduct. This is because these serve as the standard formulations for the explanation and understanding, by traditional people, of their social world and its direction.

Clearly this is but one of a number of possible approaches to social thought; but I believe that a sociological study of social thought entails the analysis of the context of social structure. We may then define social thought of this type as responses to the challenges that arise in everyday life; and we must identify the points at which these challenges arise. What are the social problems that they have had to resolve? Where possible, we should also try to identify the actual individuals whose thoughts have been stirred. When any such individuals are located, it would be found that, unlike thinkers in Europe (cf. Crickshaw, 1965) and the United States, the medium of expression for Africans has been active rather than discursive. But is the medium of expression significant in the definition of social thought?

There appears to be a constant confusion in the use of the terms 'social theory' and 'social thought'. I have therefore found it necessary to analytically distinguish between these terms. This way, it should be possible to identify where on the scale of social



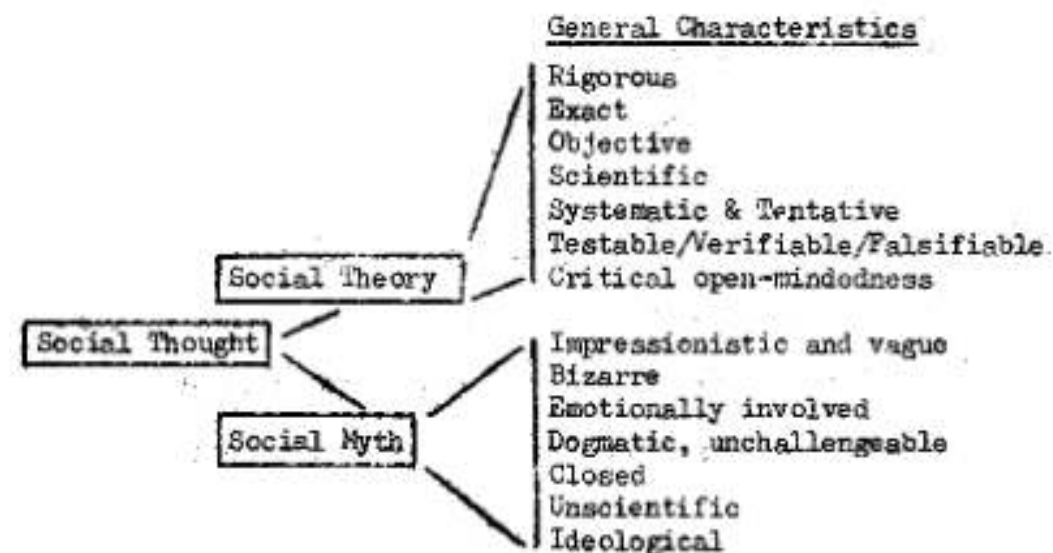
analysis the thinkers might be located.

By social theory, one has in mind a more or less logically interconnected set of propositions which purport to explain aspects of social experience. Ideally social theories should give rise to hypotheses. These hypotheses, in turn, ought to serve as research tools in further conceptualization and identification of empirical facts. Thus, social theory is seen as a set of scientific postulates: social knowledge should grow through constant processes of explication and validation.

Social thought, on the other hand, should be seen much more broadly and inclusively as reflections on the nature of social reality, or of collective social experience. Thus viewed, social thought can be of propositional potential for scientific research. An example of this kind of social thought is the relationship that has been posited as existing between 'relative deprivation' and the emergence of social movements. This is theory in support of which scholarly data have been assembled. Of course the actual content of the social thought itself might be of the nature of social dreaming. Here, too, an example is the wish/fulfilment entailed in the assumption that were socialism instituted - or a certain type of social and political arrangement, 'Union Government', for example, as expounded by the late General Acheampong of Ghana - everybody would be happy, and free from social and political disruption. Social thought of this type is the product mainly of visionaries and utopians; but such people are also concerned about the nature and direction

of human society, and much of the thought that should occupy the study of African social reflection, should be of such people.

Let us now look at the two sides of social thought that we have tried to portray, and the manner in which they are generally differentiated from one another.



It can be seen that while all social theories count as social thought, not all social thought constitutes social theory. In Black Africa, the available documentary and oral evidence indicates that social thought has involved more of wish fulfilment than of systematic attempts to construct scientific theories, especially theories on the basis of careful and systematically observed relationships of data in the social universe. Wish fulfilment is characterised by the conscious and unconscious distortion of facts and values, and we may therefore assume that such distortion, in the service of community interest and



survival, is related to social and environmental insecurity as a whole.

A feature that underlines the logical structure of such analysis is that social and political thought should be seen in the context of 'challenge' and 'response'. Thus, an appropriate starting point in our endeavour involves (a) delineation of those areas of social, cultural, and psychological challenge, and (b) specification of the ways in which people experience these challenges and have responded to them. This approach is not essentially new; in his major work The Social Philosophers (1973) Mieset stresses 'responses to crisis' as the central leitmotif of western social philosophy:

The history of Western social philosophy is basically the history of man's ideas and ideals of community. ... Closely related to the idea of community, forming its negative backdrop, as it were, is the idea of anti-community. There are many ways in which this idea can be expressed, given vivid manifestation, and all of them are current in our own time. There is the fear of the social void, of alienation, or estrangement from other, even from one's own self, of loss of identity, of great open spaces of impersonality and rejection (pp. 1, 2).

Mieset then adds (p. 9):

Without the perception of deep crises that recur in Western European history, there would be very little, indeed of what we call social philosophy.

#### CONTEXT OF SOCIAL THOUGHT

When it is said that social thought is a universal enterprise, it becomes necessary then to examine the context of such thought. In this section, I discuss what societal living entails, and what social

problems are likely to engage the attention of those who reflect, however casually, on their own societies. The stress, throughout, is on how one might elicit the meanings which individuals themselves attach to their actions in the course of social relationships. One would need to stress that the fact that members of a society formulate their own interpretations of the social order of which they are a part, is no substitute for the more sustained reflection of the philosopher and the sociologist; but then it needs to be clarified as to how the sociologist and the philosopher differ from those who merely partake in what Berger and Luckmann (1966) call the 'recipe knowledge' of society.

Social thought has become an academic object of study; it is studied in part in several disciplines. Among these disciplines are intellectual history or the history of ideas; politics; sociology; anthropology; and social and moral philosophy. Africa has not given rise traditionally to anything like these divisions, and it is therefore not easy to distinguish the African thinkers, particularly those of pre-colonial and pre-literate times. The whole ethos of thinking in African society was not one of individual debate; and - until fairly recently - conditions have not been such as to facilitate independent debate.

In western histories of social and political thought, the procedure is normally to go from thinker to thinker - Plato, Aristotle, Roger Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Adam Smith, and so on. They were thinkers about society. Africa does not offer exact equivalents; nonetheless there



were social arrangements, social values, and social sentiments. Whether one wants to say 'social consciousness', is perhaps a more disputable matter; but there was obviously a pattern of apprehensions about society, and this was a widely shared interpretation of the social world. Some of the features of that social apprehension were: a cosmology (of one sort or another), an awareness of evil, and the idea of theodicy; an idea of rights and duties; of social justice; of authority; of the relation of economics to political power; of law and customs; of necessary religious obligations; of correct relations between males and females, and between age groups.

In this regard, we may say that social thought as an exercise is a universal enterprise. Of no people can it be denied that they have the capacity to accumulate an intellectual capital, however small, that embodies the group's fears, aspirations, and some conceptions of the social good. Probably it is in a context such as this, that Shaperson (1964:22) notes that

'African Political Thought is as old as human society in Africa. To believe otherwise is to presume that pre-literate peoples cannot think politically, or that, in spite of constant repetitions of Aristotle's dictum, man is no political animal.'

But, no less pertinent is the fact that the universality of reflections on social order notwithstanding, not all people in human society, and not all societies in the world, have manifested an equal

degree of seriousness, concern, and effort in engaging in such an exercise. Nevertheless, at however minimal a level, it should be granted that the conceptions that are held of social structure and social progress, and the suggestions that are offered for effecting changes in society, may be embodied in several media of communication. Some of such media of communication or expression are paintings, sculpture, architecture, music and ritual instruments. These conceptions may also be found in the folklore of the society, as for instance in the famous proverbs and ananse (spider) story telling of the people of Ghana.

Or such conceptions may form the basis of periodic pronouncements of social groups. Such, for instance, are the various end-of-year traditional rituals in which the communion and mutual inter-dependence that are believed to subsist between the dead, the living, and the unborn, are ritually acknowledged and reinforced. The life cycle, in particular, represents the public dramatisation of changes in the fortune of man and of society.

The contingencies that create the opportunity for social thought should be viewed in the light of human nature. In particular, the specific aspect of human nature which should be our concern here is the universal imperative of societal living. Students need to be made aware, as a fundamental axiom, that the distinction between human beings and animals is the capacity of human beings for self-reflection,



and the consequent ability to store up information for future memorizing and usage. Thus, the basic problem that confronts the student of social thought might be posed in the following manner:

What are the natural concerns of individuals and groups with regard to interpersonal and group life, and what sets of reflections are likely to emanate from such natural concerns?

It is important to point out that all human societies are confronted with circumstances and conditions that call forth individual and group effort for their amelioration. Human beings experience constant shifts in their social interaction as a result of modification in life experience; social structures may therefore be said to reflect the constant grappling of the dialectical relationship between social being and social becoming.

But we know also that the need for a social system gives rise to the emergence and existence of regularized patterns of behaviour, which sociologists call institutions. Institutions develop in response to distinct experiences. But it may be asked; how are the goals of a society to be attained, and what is the yardstick for measuring the appropriateness of the instruments chosen by the society for attaining its basic goals of survival, harmony and peace?

In traditional societies in Africa, such questions were perhaps never consciously asked. However, responses were inherent in the

customary practices and proverbs that emerged from the socialization patterns, and which took the appropriateness of the ongoing social structure for granted. While societies lived in the context of a harsh natural environment, the most pressing need was the efficient adaptability of men in groups to the harsh realities of their world. In such a situation, what probably existed was a relative sameness of needs and aspirations; correlatively, the means for attaining such goals were easily defined. Conflict of opinion could scarcely be tolerated in such circumstances, except within the basic framework of traditionally sanctioned understanding of the structure of the community.

There were, therefore, no institutionalized sets of opposing camps as such, either in thought formulations or in behaviour, on the determination of the end purposes of social action, and on the means for attaining such ends. Nor was there any considerable and widespread power of self-criticism.

It may be that in traditional societies questions about society's ends and the means for attaining them were usually answered by socially recognized individuals in groups who, in earlier phases of social and cultural development, were assigned the role of nature's spokesmen. In Africa, these were fetish priests, or shamans, or magicians, or other specialists who claimed - or were imbued with - the capacity for being 'possessed'. These people became instruments through whom messages from gods to men, and vice versa, were communicated. In a limited way, these agencies, if they were specially committed to societal concerns, such as local and territorial mediums,

might be 'productive of societal critique in the sense of a formal evaluation of received values, norms, and institutions' (Schofellers, 1974:74).<sup>3</sup>

Through the process of socialization, human beings who operate in any particular society have some ideas of when 'affairs of the society are going on well'. Now, what might people mean by such an expression with regard to their personal and collective experience in society?

As far as African societies are concerned, I believe that affairs of the society would be said to be 'going on well' when the following conditions, among others, are acknowledged to obtain in the social collectivity as a whole:

- (a) when the principal natural resources on which man depends for sustenance and survival continue to be available for men to draw upon;
- (b) when the relationship between the living and the dead (and other unseen, but-influential forces in nature) is on ritually smooth footing, 'because of the need for an ontological balance between God and man, the spirits and man, and the departed and the living' (Mbiti 1969:59);
- (c) when man's connection with, and integration in, the social bond is such that he continues to draw upon this communal network for psychological, emotional, and spiritual assistance and comfort;

- (d) when the ordered arrangements of social hierarchy, as evidenced in the social, economic, and political division of labour, performance of roles, and reward structure arising therefrom, function towards the satisfaction of the different but mutually complementary segments of the population; and
- (e) when the dignity and integrity of the communal bond are honoured and inviolate.

When any of the above-listed conditions of societal survival is disturbed, it is contended in the society that 'affairs are bad', or, as the Akan of Ghana would say, 'the world has gone sour'. Questions arise about the situation. Concern or apprehension is neither extensive, nor is it evenly distributed, and certainly there is no extensive abstract exercise of theorising. As William Abraham (1962:12) puts it, 'participation in the theory, as distinct from the practice, of the culture, is made their preoccupation by only a minority of the people'. One is reminded here of what Adam Smith, too, wrote about the differential distribution of concern (1776:115), namely, that 'In the progress of society, philosophy or speculation becomes, like every other employment, the principal or sole trade and occupation of a particular class of citizens'.

But might it be appropriate to describe such thinkers in traditional African society as 'philosophers'? I think here it is appropriate to recall some of the debates on the extent to which philosophy, for



instance, or social thought, is dependent solely upon literacy. There might be a sense in which one can say that any person who has the capacity for clear, constructive and consistent thinking is a philosopher. In this regard, philosophy becomes an intellectual characteristic that is widespread in distribution in time and in space.

Some of the problems entailed in according to the accolade 'philosophy' to particular thinkers are probably entirely definitional, and seem to me to be reducible ultimately to the question of what one means by philosophy; and the degree of abstraction, disinterestedness, and generalizability of specific conceptual apparatuses, that one is prepared to grant for claims to philosophical disquisition. Indeed, according to Parratt (1976:67), 'to claim that a people has no philosophers because it has no writing is nonsense'.

It is worth mentioning, however, that not all writers might permit such liberal use of the term philosophy: there are people who see philosophy as entailing some specific characteristics such as abstraction, generalization, and classification. They might stress what they see as the incapability of the African for abstract thought forms, as well as the inability to comprehend generalizing procedures. It may well be that conceptualization as such does not appear as a widespread capacity among even modern-day African scholars. This is in spite of the relatively long history of literacy and western education in Africa. For instance, it is maintained that concern with definition, typology, classification and generalization have been less evident in

the work of black scholars, than the concern to locate phenomena in specific visual contexts. But are Africans alone in this regard? Is one not dealing with a universal phenomenon here?

Perhaps there is another facet to this debate. Concrete ways of thought may be all that are necessary in relatively small communities in which literacy has not developed. As the scale of social organization extends, and as literacy becomes part of the items of cultural tradition, so one would expect the need for abstract generalization to become pressing. One would then expect the tendency towards it (or the capacity for it) to develop but such a situation is obviously different from the assertion that the African is exclusively dominated by a 'concreteness disposition', and that he is, consequently, 'unable to detach himself from the uniqueness of the object and fails to see it as a representative of a class; (and that) the dependency results in rigidity and "lack of shifting"' (Ireson 1975:58). In fact, there was a time when the charge against the cognitive structure of Africans was rather that it made Africans flippantly and unpredictably shifting.

Be that as it may, these debates on the cognitive framework and development of traditional peoples, and on the applicability of the term philosophy to discourses in traditional society, point to the relationship between certain structures of thought and the level of social development, social ideas, and political complexity. Even if literacy is not a prerequisite for social and political theorizing, there is no doubt that literacy enhances the chances for objectifica-



tion of thought and of argument (cf. Goody and Watt, 1963). In this same regard, one would expect certain social and political institutions to develop and operate in a community before men in that community can reflect on such institutions. At later stages of such reflections, the way right then be set for the institutionalization of contention and renewal in social and political ideas about the institutions in the community. Organized and systematic social and political ideas, in effect, do not operate in a vacuum of social and psychological reality.

### CONCLUSION

It is obvious that several points need to be analysed in a paper that examines the presuppositions of social thoughts. But any essay runs the risk of becoming an unwieldy volume if it presumes to touch on all the edges of its subject matter. For this reason, only the central thrust of the subject has been highlighted. The sum of our discussion in this paper may, then, be put in the following manner.

Attempts are generally made by Africans to seek and to construct some sort of explanations on the nature and development of human society, especially the society that is familiar to them. We even get people in Africa who claim that Africans have done, in social theory constructions, what have also been done in the West. But I think it is fair to assert that, by comparison with thought styles in the West, Africans are barely making an effort in regard of description, analysis, and generalization. This assertion is not even related to any conviction about the originality or

otherwise of arguments in the philosophical sense of the term. Instead, it seems an honest position to take that AFRICANS HAVE NOT YET GO DOWN TO THE ACHIL HEEL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORY CONSTRUCTION, OR EVEN SOCIAL SCIENCE KNOWLEDGE, UNLESS WE GRANT THAT AFRICAN CULTURE HAS ITS OWN SOCIAL SCIENCE (SOCIOLOGY, FOR INSTANCE), WITH ITS OWN CONTENT AND METHOD. It is probably for this reason that Ametee (1973:2), whose views on the blackman's mind we have encountered earlier in this paper, says elsewhere in a discussion of the African "Between the Forest and the Sea":

To express himself culturally, he (the African) must go back to the roots, not of Greece and Rome, but of Africa South of the Sahara and north of the Zambesi. He must eschew self pity and the attitude of always being on guard against imaginary insults or social affronts. He must invest his life with a new meaning, a new mission, even if it is merely a passing phase.

Such enterprise in social theorizing, that is to say, in seriously reflecting on society and making analytical classification of categories of ideas thereon, and on methods for the acquisition of the ideas, requires a social, cultural and intellectual framework for it to emerge and be sustained. The background and framework for such intellectual activity have generally been traced to the social, cultural, and intellectual climate of Athens that produced Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc. It is in this regard that one finds it a pity that some African statesmen regard the study of the classics and other humanities as bourgeois activity. Certainly, if we want to probe the origins and



cultural background of philosophical enterprise, as of sociological discourse, then we need to study for instance, how it is that

in the sixth century BC, there came about a striking development in the history of Greek thought when, in the Ionian city of Miletus, all mythopoetic forms of thought were abandoned by certain thinkers who sought to explain the world about them in terms of visible constituents, instead of having recourse to theistic explanations (James Longings, 1972-73, p. 307).

Clearly, if one examined African social and political ideas for purposes of consistency and error, coherence and logic, and the perennial dissemination of doubt, then perhaps one might modestly conclude that this has not been the principal supposition upon which 'thinking about society' has been established and canvassed in Africa. Herein lies, I think, one of the major differences between western traditions of social thought - in which thought is seen basically in terms of disinterested speculation, logic, and system - and African social thought, which seems to me to be concerned essentially with knowledge for action. As Nathan Hare (1969:65) puts the case with respect to what he calls 'the taboo against taking a stand on matters of right and wrong':

The black scholar can no longer afford to ape the allegedly "Value-free" approach of white scholarship. He must reject absolutely the notion that it is "not professional" ever to become emotional, that it is somehow improper to be "bitter" as a black man, that emotion and reason are mutually exclusive. ... the scholar's main task is to cleanse his mind - and the minds of his people - of the white colonial attitudes towards scholarship and people as well. This includes the icons of objectivity, amoral knowledge and its methodology, and the total demolition of the anti-social attitudes of Ivory-Towerism. Such is the challenge facing the black scholar.

The basically activist posture of African scholarship, as evidenced in Nathan Hare's foregoing statement, is not entirely surprising. S.P. Aiyer (1972:401) has noted of Indian political thought, quoting B.B. Majumdar:

political treatises like Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, cannot be produced by a people groaning under the heels of foreign rulers. The proper climate necessary for propounding political philosophy was totally absent in India. Intellectual leaders who had the courage to speak on political affairs lent their voice mainly to the clamour of political controversy.

The allusion to Indian social and political thought, at a comparable period, is illuminating in terms of the light it throws upon the nature of thought in communities operating under alien domination, and while searching for cultural renewal. But what one wants to stress in this connection is that any talk about a possible creative period of African social and political thought, as also in India, must be premised upon a certain set of favourable social and cultural circumstances. In this regard, I should like to end by suggesting a few such features for black Africa:

- (a) breakdown of the extended family system;
- (b) radical shifts in what I have chosen to call the 'traditional African personality structure', with its essential characteristics
  - (i) conformity, and the blatant eschewing of individual speculation
  - (ii) unquestioning acquiescence



- (iii) lack of self-reliance
- (iv) fetish worship of authority, of charismatic leaders, and things 'coming from above'
- (v) hatred of criticism.
- (c) criticism and intellectual disputation should become institutionalized, widespread, and accepted as a preoccupation.

But the relationship between impersonality of discourse on social questions and the development of intellectual development, needs stressing.

When I reflect on the essentially activist and 'involved' stance of scholarship in African intellectual history, I cannot help but observe that the postulate of value-free social science seems highly regarded in western societies, but not to the same degree in developing societies. To the best of my knowledge, the sociology department of the University of Leicester is one such place where 'value-freedom seems quite established. For instance, in 1964, Professor Neustadt decried what he identified as 'the confusion between the role of the sociologist as a scientist and his possible roles as an advocate of a particular set of social and moral values and principles' (1965:8). And in 1971, Professor J.A. Banks, also in an inaugural lecture, raised doubts about those who might have a vision of sociology 'as some kind of secular religion' (Banks 1971:19). To be sure, though, neither Professor Neustadt, nor Professor Banks, nor even Professor Norbert Elias who stresses this position most emphatically in his What is

Sociology? (1973), ignores the subjective dimension in scholarship. But we should not underestimate their admirable efforts to differentiate sociology from what one might call 'pastoral theology'.

I know that this paper appears too programmatic, and less than systematic - and I know also that some might perhaps have liked more of the substantive analysis of African social thought. This is because purely methodological prescriptions about, and abstract sensitization to, what ought to be done or might be done, become at times too speculative. Thus, I acknowledge that it might in future be useful, for instance, to provide concrete evidence on what Africans have actually thought on social issues. If such thoughts were embodied in written form, as in the case especially in West African history, it might be necessary to examine such early publications. It might also be instructive if, on the role of, for instance, the professions one acquired information on how many lawyers and doctors and ordained clergy there were in various countries at various times and what it is that they said - and meant - concerning the nature and direction of social and political arrangements.



## FOOTNOTES

1. It is relevant to mention, in this respect, that virtually every issue of Thought and Practice, the semi-annual journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya, contains welcome discussions on the nature and implications of 'African Thought'. Another journal which students might consult with considerable benefit, is Second Step, a Journal of African Philosophy (Ife, Nigeria).
  2. Results of some of the researches into these religious themes, are available in Assimeng (1968; 1970; 1977; 1979).
  3. The discussions that follow, are based mainly on the present writer's already cited African Social and Political Thought: Introductory Analysis for Students (now in manuscript form).
  4. Or, there might be periodical festivals during which, as among the Akwari of Ghana, citizens were 'privileged' to 'insult' and to criticize the chief and his administration on some of the shortcomings in society.
  5. It may well be that, in this connection, sociology has not really succeeded in demystifying the social world of Africans, as Professor John Rex (1974) might perhaps wish. For, University education, science, and technology, do still operate in an African context where charms and talismans and incences are used avidly with the aim of influencing the course of social relations and social events (cf. Assimeng, 1977). Clearly, the undue personalization and the investment of emotion in debates on social questions do raise several problems for systematic social analysis.
- \* The outline of this essay, was originally presented at a staff seminar in the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester (U.K.), on May 18, 1979. The critical comments of participants of the seminar group, especially those of Professors I. Neustadt and J.A. Banks, are hereby gratefully acknowledged. This paper is informed by the theoretical framework of my African Social and Political Thought: Introductory Analysis for Students (now in manuscript form).
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