Political Power, Multiethnic Territories and Democratic Renewal in Africa.

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Today, as yesterday, phenomena currently designated by the titles "regionalism", "ethnic conflict", "tribalism", "tribal regionalism", and so on, seem to be the major and permanent fact of social and political life in black Africa. Not that these phenomena are proper to Africa. One meets them as much in Europe, America or Asia. Yet nowhere do they seem as pregnant as in the political debates and practice of the African political classes.

This peculiarity is explained by the fact of the special trajectory that political power took in Africa after Independence. This turbulent trajectory makes of post-colonial African politics – to paraphrase the eminent anthropologist, Louis Dumont – one of the typical forms of "the sicknesses of modern politics". It has been undermined by a triple contradiction: conceptual, sociological and political. The modern phenomenon of ethnicity and the troubles attaching to it are the cumulative effects of these contradictions. It is in the light of these that the democratic renewal must be understood and the effort be made to rise above the present political decadence.

1. The Vicious Circle.

In the evening of decolonization, the African political powers inherited territories and a mass of diverse populations and economic-political institutions as the colonizers had established them. The new masters were immediately confronted with a problem: what use to make of the acquired freedom? It is a problem for all movements of liberation.

In its last phase – at the end of the second world war, thanks to international pressures and internal resistance and demands – the colonial regime had to jettison ballast and allow

a certain "liberalization". This took the form of representative institutions emerging over the continent, multiple political parties, diverse trade-unions and a private press. All of this hastened independence.

But what did the coming of independence mean? Was it a starting-point for major transformations or a terminus ad quem? The final step in the struggle for liberation or on the contrary the beginning of a new era, a new plan for society? The political elites of Africa, obsessed by the mystique of independence and traumatized by the brutality of the shock of colonization, was not able to furnish a coherent precise answer to the question. The vast majority adopted solutions that were more of a flight forward than a reflected, measured plan. The new powers in place settled down in their own logic, the development of which could not promise bright tomorrows. In fact a look back at the last quarter of a century obliges us to take account of a catastrophic balance sheet in many ways. One example will suffice here. The African continent today pours forth the greatest number of refugees, refugees who are in many cases confusedly political and economic.

Under the colonial yoke, the spearhead of claims was the claim to be a nation. Independence was represented as the end of humiliations and arbitrariness, the coming of peoples to sovereignty. The patriotism of resistance, the resolute maintenance of an identity denied and buffeted, was in itself aesthetics as much as politics. And that was enough! But as the lucid observers of wars and liberation movements maintain: nationalism is fine only when it is oppressed. Independence once acquired, liberty against colonialism and imperialism cannot take the place of the exclusive exercise of liberty. Liberty has to be defined positively. The new leaders did not only proclaim themselves to be nationalists (Father of nation, national helmsman), they gave themselves the job of ensuring the riftless cohesion of the nation within the State. The national State must be substituted for the colonial State. This was an uncharted path. Historically, the State was the instrument of the nation. As G. Burdeau has shown:

'In all the old countries, the nation made the State; the State was slowly

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formed in minds and institutions unified by the national sentiment. In the new State, as it appeared on the African continent, the State has to make the nation. But as the State can be born only by a national effort, the drama of politics is bound in a vicious circle'.[1]

To this first difficulty was added a second, more pernicious and evil in its consequences. It pertains to the model of nation adopted by the African powers in the context of the time. The history of the formation of the European nations advanced two ideas of the nation: an "ethnic" concept, so to say, and a contractual, elective concept. The first had recourse to the soul of a people, to what particularized and individualized them, to their own genius, their subconscious thought patterns. It placed the accent on the nation as an individuated collective, an englobing totality. Doctrinairely, this concept leads to nationalism, the exalting of the collective identity and freedom of a people. In practice, it favours obligatory homogeneity, unanimity.

The second idea of nation is the nation as a collection of individuals, the fruit of a rational adhesion and free consent. The belonging of individuals to the global collectivity does not assign them to unchanging identity, but the contrary. Multibelonging is the rule in this case. The individual subject pertains to several communities: religious, regional, linguistic, ideological, and so on. He has several identities, and they must be permanently allowed to him.

At the dawn of Independence these two ideas of nation were in vogue already in African societies. It must be stressed that they had undergone decisive qualitative changes. The precolonial made little of the dynamism of these political unities, which profoundly modified their state of existence and evolution. Communities of similar origins and structures historically might find themselves torn apart among different concurrent hegemonies, while others who were in no way predisposed from the start to live in common saw themselves grouped under the same administrative and political authority. Nascent multi-party systems, the introduction of new technology, the systematization of finances and the partial integration at least of western world economies came to be added to these upheavals, which were already a source of

destabilization and new challenges.

The inheritors of colonial power and of the State trappings fashioned by Western powers came into this radically new context. They opted for the ethnic model of nation, exalting the cultural identity and authenticity rediscovered at the same time (an apparent paradox). They gave themselves the objective primordial task of cementing all the individualities and solidly pressurizing the citizens to a collectivity. The Single Party and the army were put at the disposal of this unreal ambition. The repression and the confiscation of individual and public liberties took place in almost all post-colonial states. The "democratic" interlude was of short duration. The nation, in its consent and desire to continue its common life, lost its chance of becoming a reality. The national affirmation, now an obsession, simply indicated disarray, impotence, the impossibility of reconciling the nation-less post-colonial State and the State-less ethnic nations. To proclaim the nation, a closed organic entity, as a value: is it not admitting the right of everyone to have "his" nation? Why would a community that is subordinated and frustrated not demand its own independence from the national political "great unity"?

It seemed to be the problem of squaring the circle. African political leaders soon abandoned the objective of national construction for another myth – development.

2. Ethnic Groups.

2.1. Political Opportunism and the Ethnic Group.

It is important to grasp that the origin of contemporary Africa's sufferings is in this contradictory movement, which is the source of the perversion of political power and of the misuse of the State's role. Once for all the idea must be discarded that our difficulties stem from what is economic, social or even cultural. There must be said about Africa, mutatis mutandis, what Rousseau proclaimed about the society of his time: the trouble does not come so much from people as from people "badly governed". As contemporary anthropology

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has shown, "our system of values determines our whole mental outlook",[2] and decisively influences our conduct. At a far deeper level than institutions, values bring our basic attitudes towards others into play. Politics should be sustained by ultimate values. Opportunism and ideological tinkering have inexorable consequences in this area that are not always calculated. In relation to the ethnic question we must take into account the political history of these last decades covering the colonial and post-colonial period to understand what is at stake. I will give some examples from recent writings, more or less in accord with the process of democratization going on over the continent, to illustrate what I mean.

We begin with the statements gathered in 1983 by researchers at CNRS[3] under Paul Mba-Abassole, president of one of the political organizations at present on the political scene in Gabon, within the frame work of the recent multi-party system of that country. To the question, "What is your political model"?, he replied,

"There are certain things to be noted. We see that Gabon is made of diverse things. There are several ethnic groups. Unfortunately this has hardly been taken into account since independence. In Bongo's and Sivan's speeches there is no more Bakale or Fang, there are only Gabonese. We know well that when one chases nature away it returns at the gallop. As far as we are concerned, as long as the Gabonese political system does not allow for ethnic reality it will never work... On this basis we understand our multi-party democracy.... For us this is the meaning of democracy: recognizing the difference of ethnic groups and accepting that that difference is proper and natural to us".[4]

This remark is striking. It poses problems we will analyse further.

Let us take another quotation from the magazine **Jeune Afrique**[5]. In it, Ola Balogun writes,

The political parties do not correspond to any deep African reality. A vital question will be to find a way of allowing our peoples to express themselves on the basis of ethnic structures, since Ethnicity remains the basic factor of political life in our States.

I take a last example, from a publication of Francis van Hoek, former director (until the end of 1992) of the European Centre for Management, Politics and Development at Maastrich (the Netherlands). He writes:

> It is frightening to note how little resistance Africans offer to the very idea of importing western models of democracy, constitution and electoral procedures. It is vital to place the present process of democratization into the perspective of the multiple African inheritance by trying to find the right amalgam of tradition and modernization, indigenous culture and foreign experience and thus come to truly internalized systems.[6]

The debate about ethnic groups within the framework of the democratization process in African countries seems to have no clear contours. Ethnic pluralism, recently represented by African autocrats as an impeding obstacle to instituting democracy in Africa, is being invoked today as something that can and should be a base for forming new States engaged in the process of institutional and political reform. Many observers question the validity of the Western model of democracy for Africa in its present condition. Many admit that, to say the least, the solution given to the ethnic problem – a given in all our societies – will depend the success or failure of institutional and political renewal. What then are these ethnic groups which are of so great importance in the debate on democratic renewal? Do we know what we mean when we speak of them?

2.2. Ethnic Group – an Elusive Concept.

Ethnic groups are part of those social realities which depend on a network of evidence that disappears as soon as one tries, however little, to examine rigorously the reality to which it points. What is an ethnic group? When no one asks you, you know. But when you are put the question the certitude evaporates, difficulties begin, doubt seizes you and confusion follows. You do not know any more. Is an ethnic group a nation of small dimensions? Are there not as many ethnic groups in the micro-States like Gabon, Togo, Benin, as there are in the macro-States like Zaire, Nigeria, the

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Sudan? Who could undertake to make an exact count of the ethnic groups south of the Sahara? Is an ethnic group all those who acknowledge the same mythical origin? The same myths are sometimes found among "different ethnic groups". Is an ethnic group a community of language? Those called "Bambara" speak languages of different families – the mande and the senufo; while the language called "Hausa" is spoken by diverse communities spread over several States at present – Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, to mention a few. The ethnic group, a paradoxical reality, is not distinguished by language or culture or history or circumscription of space. The definitions often given sometimes stress language, culture, space and sometimes common descent, the consciousness of individuals to belong to the same group, and so on. Is the ethnic group a fact of nature or of culture? A recent scientific approach to the phenomenon prudently stated:

The concept conveyed by the phrase 'ethnic group' lies somewhere between groups which are related and the organized collectivities of the State.[7]

The contours and lived experience of the reality designated as ethnic are, consequently, as fluid as the concept itself. The history of the ethnonyms current in our young States confirms, moreover, this fluctuation of meaning and content of the phrase. Indeed, ethnic groups exist nowhere if one means by that a homogeneous, permanent entity arising from a stable combination of cultural, linguistic or other invariables. "What have always prevailed are social unities, unequal and heterogeneous in their composition".[8] The search for an absolute identity of origin derives from ideological naivety or manipulation. For all that, it is always a useless exercise.

3. The Ethnic Question Raised as a Result of Mis-governance.

Notwithstanding the conceptual fluctuations and the difficulties of defining the phenomenon "ethnic groups", one fact remains constant: the facts considered are always a sign of crisis in the African Nation-State and the power tied up with it. Dealing with contemporary crystallizations, they

denote the incapacity of the African post-colonial State to guarantee a harmonious flourishing of the communities and individuals within its bosom, to redress and correct imbalances and inequalities introduced by colonization. They denote the almost natural propensity of these States to aggravate the imbalances and inequalities and carry them on to crisis-point. "Tribalism" and "ethnic conflict" do not need to be satisfactorily defined before they manifest themselves. They reveal a crisis of identity that arises precisely from accumulated unease and frustrations, from the hardships imposed by a comfortable State on the people, who simply ask to live. The search for identity is not the primordial activity of social groups. Recent historical sources show that certain groups do not even feel the need to give themselves a name. To use a phrase of Amilcar Cabral, "People do not struggle for ideas or things in someone else's head, they struggle to gain concrete goods, to live better and in peace, to see their life improved".[9] This holds at least in normal situations. In crisis, a particular dynamic operates, entailing manoeuvres of touching identification and readaptation. It is most important not to make a "fetish" of the processes of solidarity that are made and unmade in the course of the history of one global society. For example, enmities between sedentary commercial communities and nomad cattle-raisers can arise according to circumstances stronger than community or language and culture. The feeling of belonging to a community is in itself legitimate and normal, but it becomes perverse once it claims a return, on the political level, to an originality that is incomparable and untransmittable to be imposed on others. Such claims in Europe gave rise to Hitlerism and two world wars. In Africa it served as an alibi and a justification for oligarchic dictators and "obscure despotisms"; it also led to areas of tension and wars in different parts of the continent. It is normal to say, "Fon", "Yoruba", or "Wolof". But on the other hand, it is dangerous to want to make an essence or nature of these historical identifications and determinations. This necessarily happens once one makes ethnic groups the basis of institutional and democratic renewal. Besides, it is contrary to the democratic spirit and idea. It is one thing to say the new African State ought to have support in concrete

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basic communities, it is another thing to say it ought to be built on ethnic crystallizations which are supposedly a permanent characteristic of the continent. When we are dealing with the rights of humans and with democracy in Africa, care must be taken not to carry differences to an absolute point, not to exaggerate the African specificity. Democracy is a modern invention susceptible of permitting every society to surmount its handicaps and to progress. As Jean-François Médard writes, "It is a vital necessity, for it is the only known means to avoid political harm".[10]

In Africa this presupposes redefining the State's power and role and a positive evaluation of what African traditions can bring to this renewal.

ENDNOTES

1. B. Burdeau, L'Etat. Paris: Seuil, 1990, p. 37.

2. L. Dumont, Essais sur l'Individualisme. Paris: Seuil, 1983.

3. Centre National de Recherches Scientifique.

4. Cf Politique Africaine, 11th September 1983. Information gathered by François Doey and Jean-Francois Bayard.

5. N° 1681, 25-31 March 1993.

6. The Newsletter, Afrique caraibe - Pacifique - Communauté Européenne, N° 138, Mars-avril, 1993.

7. Jean-Pierre Chrétien et Gerard Prunier, Les Ethnies ont une Histoire, Paris: Karthala, 1989.

8. J.L. Amselle and Elika M'Bokolo, Au Coeur de l'Ethnie, Paris: Ed. la Découverte, 1985, p. 37.

9. Quoted by Thsiyembe Mwayila, L'Etat postcolonial Facteur d'Insécurité en Afrique. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1990, p. 85.

10. See **Politique africaine**, October 1991, no. 43.

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