SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND THE
DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLE IN UGANDA

by

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This essay is written in four parts. The first discusses two contradictory conceptions of nationalism that flow out of the theoretical struggles around the French Revolution, one democratic, the other anti-democratic. The section concludes by calling for an understanding of nationalism that takes into account its objective as well as subjective dimensions.

The second part is a brief analysis of the objective context of the national movement in Uganda.

Part Three returns to a theoretical discussion, this time by way of a critique of modernisation theorists who proceed in their analysis of the national question using two central dichotomies, that between tribe and nation, and that between tradition and modernity. The section argues that the methodology of these theorists divorces the analysis of ideology from that of political practice; in the process, it tends to give an apologia of state ideology and an uncritical critique of "tribalism."

The last part returns to a discussion of Uganda, this time to focus on the national movement in two periods: that of the 1940's and that of the 1980's. The argument is that the defeat of the national movement in the 1940's led to a break between nationalism and the democratic struggle on the one hand, and the development of nationalism as a repressive state ideology on the other. This analysis is used both to shed light on the present period and to draw lessons for today.

I. Two conceptions of Nationalism

1. In the development of nationalism, the French Revolution represents the first major touch stone. In the ideological struggles that prepared the groundwork for the French Revolution and subsequently defended it, and in the conservative reaction to it, we can trace two contradictory conceptions of nationalism.

2. The French Revolution, and the Enlightenment that preceded it, is the spring board of the broadly democratic conception of nationalism. For the French Revolution was understood by its proponents as first and foremost a revolution of the French people. It was associated with radically new ideas, as those of citizenship and popular sovereignty. In one fell swoop, in a revolutionary wave that was a radical seizure and exercise of rights, the French people were said to have created the French nation.
The French nation, it was said, was the result of a "social contract". It signified a political category of freely associating individuals.

The tradition that flowed from the French Revolution had a dual character about it. On the one hand, it stressed - as Gramsci would argue later - the popular basis of nationhood; on the other, it claimed that the nation was a creation, the result of an act of will. Politically democratic, methodologically this tradition tended to stress the subjective (voluntarist) nature of the development of a nation.

3. A contrary tradition is rooted in the political and ideological reaction to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It derives on the one hand from Herder, Fichte and the German Romantics, and on the other from Edmund Burke and the reaction in England. It denied the rational and implicitly contractual basis of nationalism. Instead, it asserted that national identity has an inherited and traditional character; it is rooted in the genius of a people and in their unique culture and tradition. Nations are not created; instead, they wake up or are brought to life. Instead of a contractual, it advanced an organic conception of nationalism. Politically anti-democratic, methodologically it tended to stress the objective aspect of the development of national movements.

A Methodological Question

4. The issue that I wish to focus on at the outset is the methodological one: that of the relationship between the objective and the subjective aspects in the development of national movements. I shall return to the political question, that of the relation between nationalism and democracy, in a subsequent section.

5. Both conceptions outlined above contain an aspect that corresponds to the historical reality of nationalist movements. The German Romantics were correct in emphasizing the historical character of the development of a nation, but not in imputing to the nation a natural and an inevitable character. Correspondingly, the theorists of the Enlightenment and the French revolution rightly underlined the active and the subjective aspect in the development of a nation, but they were off the mark to the extent they

1. The organic conception of nationalism has tended to be put forth by diverse political tendencies, from the fascists in Western Europe to the populists in eastern Europe. While the former were acutely hostile to the left, the latter were not always so.
abstracted from the historical process that is the formation of a nation. In other words, the nation is a historical but not a residual category; it is formed as the result of a process, not invented as an act of will. This historical process must be seen as a struggle, both ideological and political. While it unfolds within a changing objective context and is shaped by it, in no sense is this process of nation formation inevitable. Without analysing the relationship between the objective and the subjective aspects of this process, it is not possible to grasp the significance of "the national question" in any epoch.

6. If we now turn to the major writings on nationalism, and try to see how these understand the relation between objective and subjective factors in the development of nationalism, we shall find different and even contradictory trends. I shall examine briefly first the academic tradition in universities, and then the Marxist tradition flowing out of the experience of major social movements.

The Academic Tradition

7. The academic tradition has been greatly influenced by the dichotomous analysis of the origins of nationalism in the French Revolution and the German Romantic reaction to it — one rational, the other organic — put forth by Hans Kohn in his voluminous study in the 1940's. From hereon, it is possible to identify major and influential academic writings, in each case putting primary emphasis on the subjective or the objective aspect, in part depending on whether the focus is on nationalism as an ideology or as a movement.

8. The focus on nationalism as an ideology is clearest in the influential study by Elie Kedourie in 1960. Elie Kedourie, Nationalism, London, Hutchinson, 1960. He sees nationalism as a doctrine 'invented' in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. The emphasis is thus on the central role of the nationalist intelligentsia, on its retrospective rewriting of nationalist history and in subsequently presenting the very process of nation formation as "the awakening of sleeping nations." While the stress on subjectivity, and on the role of the nationalist intelligentsia, is clearly of importance, by itself this emphasis tends to be partial, missing the objective context of the very development of nationalism as a movement.

9. The focus on the objective context, is most clearly brought out in another influential academic study, that by Karl Deutsch on Nationalism and Social Communication. In his conception of 'social communication', Deutsch puts his finger on the need to analyse the more fundamental processes of social and economic change in which the very process of nation formation is rooted - though he does not do so himself with any satisfaction.

The Marxist Tradition

10. The dominant conception within the Marxist tradition has been set by the writings of Stalin on the national question. Stalin's major contribution was to underline the historical character of the objective context of the development of national movements. Briefly put, he argued that nationalism can not be understood except in the context of the development of capitalism. For it is the development of capitalism that generalises commodity production, creates national markets, dissolves age-old communities established on the basis of 'natural' affinities in the crucible of this common market, and thus creates the objective need for a national state to consolidate the growing national market in the interest of the class that controls or has aspirations to control that market: the national bourgeoisie.

The weakness of Stalin's analysis, on the other hand, was to underplay the subjective aspect in the historical process of nation formation. His preoccupation with defining a nation - as "a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture" - both tended to assume that a nation existed before "coming to life" and tended to provide some sort of a checklist of what was a nation and what unfortunately was not. It, in other words, tended to close the historical process on the basis of developments in a single historical epoch, that of rising capitalism in Europe.

11. The anti-dote to Stalin in the Marxist tradition can be found in the writings of Gramsci and Mao.

In his analysis of the failure of the Italian bourgeoisie in constructing an Italian nation, Gramsci gave full play to

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the subjective aspect. Gramsci's emphasis on the ideological is clear from his conception of the state as "coercion plus hegemony" and the struggle for power as "domination plus moral-intellectual leadership". He thus underlined the role of intellectuals, but not in a social and historical vacuum, rather as organic to particular classes; and he went on to underline their historical significance, mainly by asking whether the intellectuals were organic to a fundamental social class with a national capacity for social transformation.

Similarly, the significance of the subjective aspect, alongside the objective, is clearly underlined in Mao's writings on the nature of the Chinese revolution. Two ideas of Mao are of importance in this context. First is his general thesis - one of particular importance in the African context - that in the case of colonies and semi-colonies, nation formation and national liberation are two inter-connected aspects of a single process; in other words, the nation does not necessarily exist first and then become the basis of a national movement. And secondly, his insistence on the inter-connection between the national and the social (class) question. Thus, Mao analysed classes in Chinese society not simply on the basis of social relations but also on the basis of the question of national liberation; one only needs, for instance, to think of the by now famous distinction drawn by Mao between the 'compradore' and the 'national' bourgeoisie.

Sum-Up

12. This brief methodological overview, I hope, is a sufficient backdrop to delineating the central questions one may focus on so as to be able to analyse comprehensively the question of nationalism in the specific context of contemporary Africa. In other words, it is time to give concrete content to the objective and subjective dimensions of this process.

13. By the objective dimension, I mean those factors which together form the overall context within which a national movement develops. Though these factors tend to influence and shape the development of the movement, their very existence is independent of the consciousness or the activity of that movement. It seems to me that three issues

merit particular attention here. The first is that of the uneven level of social development of the various nationalities that were brought within the fold of state boundaries carved out at the onset of colonialism, and in some cases even on the eve of independence. The second issue concerns the development of commodity production and its social impact. And the third is that of the role of the state and, once again, its social impact. The first and the last questions are of particular significance for the contemporary African context for a number of reasons. It is well known that in our case the relationship between state and society, as it were, stood on its head with the beginning of colonialism. In most of the continent, state boundaries bore little relationship to the history of social development. The history of colonialism, one may say, begins with the implantation of a bourgeois-colonial state on a more or less arbitrary conglomeration of pre-bourgeois societies and unfolds as an attempt by this state to transform the society from above. Dr, as Cabral once wrote, "in the colonial period, it is the colonial state which commands history."9

14. By the subjective dimension, I mean those factors which give expression to the will of the movement, both as consciousness and as activity. In this case, we may delineate two key issues: one political, the other ideological. For if the nation is to be understood as a historical formation, it must then be analysed as the product of historical struggles, both ideological and political. In other words, it must be understood as the outcome of both a political struggle waged by a coalition of social classes in the course of which a nationalist movement is forged, and an ideological struggle waged by an associated intelligentsia whose fruit is the development and spread of a nationalist ideology that cements and gives coherence to the movement. The first concerns the analysis of nationalism as a social movement, as a welding together of various social classes; the second, its analysis as an ideology, as the language in which this movement understands itself and puts forth its demands to all other social forces.

Now, though I do not deny the significance of the analysis of nationalist ideology and of the intelligentsia that produces it, I shall argue later that in the literature on Africa there has been undue emphasis on the ideological

8 Though it is commonly said that Africa was carved out like a cake at the Berlin Conference, it should not be forgotten that a large number of mini-states in Africa were the product of the division of various colonial federations on the eve of independence.

aspect at the expense of the political aspect. The
tendency, in other words, has been to detach the analysis of
the ideology of a movement (or a state) from the analysis of
its practice, and therefore to present the self-description
of a movement (or a state) as its explanation and raison
d’être. The result, as we shall see, is either an
uncritical apologia or an uncritical critique.

II. The Objective Context of Nation Formation: Uganda

15. The overall context of the development of a national
consciousness and a national movement includes social,
economic and political dimensions.

The Social

16. The boundaries of the Ugandan state drawn at
independence included within its parameter not only class-
divided nationalities but also tribes in which the
development of classes was at most embryonic. It is not
accidental that the former tended to become the focal point
of raw material production for export; after all, this was
where the colonial state could most easily find local allies
from amongst the ranks of the pre-colonial ruling classes
and most effectively implant the policy of indirect rule. On
the other hand, it was amongst the latter, the tribal
societies – where local allies were most difficult to find
and popular resistance the most difficult to quell – that
commodity production advanced the slowest and labour reserve
policies were most likely to be practiced.

The point is that the colonial state at no point wrote on a
blank slate. To understand the social and economic history
of the colonial period, it is necessary to take into account
not only the interests that crystallised in the organisation
of the colonial state, but also the forces that had
crystallised in the various tribes and nationalities that
were the target of colonial state policy.

There is also a second point here. True, the social
development of the tribes and nationalities that were
brought into the fold of colonial Uganda was uneven. But it
is also true that colonial policy built on and further
accentuated this unevenness. Thus, the uneven character of
social development amongst the nationalities comprising
Uganda – for no tribe existed by the end of the colonial
period – was greater at the end of colonialism than it was
at its outset.
Because the social development of nationalities tended to be extremely uneven, the social composition of the national movement - as it developed - tended to differ from one nationality to another. In some cases, it could find support or sympathy amongst all classes within the nationality; but in other nationalities, however, it could find indifference or even hostility amongst classes with clearly defined pro-colonial interests, for example, Indian compradores or Baganda landlords. 10

The Economic

17. The overall context of the development of a national movement and a national consciousness also includes the dimension of political economy. From this point of view, it is necessary to emphasize the contradictory character of economic processes unleashed in the colonial period. On the one hand, the spread of commodity production within the territory demarcated by the colonial state gave rise to a commodity-producing peasantry that could be rallied around common demands, such as those for higher prices and for freedom of association for marketing purposes. At the same time, the middle class that serviced commodity exchange and were functionaries of the colonial state could also be rallied around common demands for the 'indigenisation' or 'Africanisation' of trade and the civil service.

18. On the other hand, the nature of the colonial economy also put obstacles in the path of a developing national movement. The first major obstacle derived from the pivotal significance of export-import in the colonial economy. This meant that every new step in the development of the commodity economy was one further step towards disintegrating and fragmenting the economy, rather than towards integrating it as a national economy.

Take the example of the historically developing relations between Lango on the one hand and Buganda, Bunyoro and

10 It is interesting that, in his analysis of the class structure in Guinea Bissau, Amilcar Cabral moves from one nationality to another, analysing the character of social development of each, the nature of classes that sprang from this concrete history, and only then their attitude to the national movement and the colonial state. See, Amilcar Cabral, "A Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea Bissau," in Ibid. The only example I know in academic analysis of an attempt to examine seriously the social development of various nationalities comprising the nation-in-formation, with a view to then understand the class structure of both, is by Richard Joseph, Radical Nationalism in Cameroun, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1977.
Busoga on the other. By the onset of the colonial period, all these nationalities were involved in the planned production of surpluses for exchange in the expanding regional market. By 1917-18, the export of simsim from Lango to regional markets was estimated at 1500 tons a year, with an additional 400 tons exported to the world market. In return, the Langi imported salt, ironware and cattle from these regional markets. But with the expansion of the colonial export-import economy, in only a decade, the regional export of simsim was reduced to a few tons, and was replaced by the production of cotton for export to the world market. By 1931, no less than 57% of Uganda's cotton crop was grown in the two districts of Lango and Teso; correspondingly, both ironware and salt were now also imported from overseas.

The point is that the fragmented character of growing markets - organised around the nexus of export-import - had the effect of pulling different nationalities (whose boundaries tended to coincide with that of different markets) away from each other, rather than that of drawing them into the framework of a single, integrated and national economy. Integration of markets would have created the basis of an inter-dependence of nationalities in their economic intercourse; lack of it created a fragmented society.

19. The second major obstacle in the way of a developing national movement was that the spread of commodity production was uneven. As a result, the developing national movement - with its social basis in the commodity-producing peasantry - had also to be uneven. The national movement thus developed on the basis of an uneven mobilisation, moving into action the peasantry of certain nationalities more so than of others. Thus, the UNC organised most successfully in the coffee (Buganda) and cotton (Lango, Teso, Busoga) belts, but not really elsewhere in the country. And then, given the fragmented character of the economy underlined in the paragraphs above, even this unity was more akin to a coalition which could withstand only minimal stresses and strains before it broke up.

The Political

20. Central to political analysis is the character and impact of state policy.

The sectarian basis for the recruitment of state functionaries, in Uganda as in other colonies, is well known. Thus, if commodity production was concentrated amongst nationalities in one region (the South) of the country, the recruitment of personnel for the repressive organs was organised in another region (the North) of the country. Likewise, the development of schools was concentrated where commodity production was rooted; and these nationalities therefore became the main source of functionaries for state administration.

21. In Uganda, the colonial division of labour amongst the nationalities was ‘always’ that ‘the North’ provided the major personnel for the repressive organs of the state and the political leadership of successive governments; ‘the South’, on the other hand, provided the bulk of the business class and the main personnel for the administrative organs of the state. The ‘Northern’ middle class, relatively weaker than its ‘Southern’ counterpart, considered its access to political structures vital for personal advancement. And so long as these state connections obtained, its preference for a centralised over a decentralised state structure – and for a ‘nationalised’ over an ‘Africanised’ economy – obtained.

22. From this point of view, then, the coming to power of the NRA in 1986 marks a dramatic rupture in the historical division of labour between nationalities. For the first time in the history of Uganda, the Southern middle and propertied classes control business, the repressive and the administrative machinery of the state, and the political machinery of government. No wonder the ‘Northern’ middle class is in a deep crisis. No wonder this same middle class, historically one of the most avid champions of a ‘united’ Uganda is today more open to the call of nationality-bound organisations than ever before.

Sum-Up

23. Throughout this section, I have been using the terms nation and nationality freely and without explanation. At one point, however, the concept of nation was qualified – in our concrete historical context – as that of nation-in-
formation.

In my opinion, the national question in a colony or a neo-colony has a dual character, external and internal, which are obviously inter-connected. Externally, the content of the national question is that of imperialist oppression and exploitation; internally, it is that of the relation between nationalities within the country.
By the concept nation, I mean the nation-in-formation. By the national movement, I do not mean any particular empirical movement but really a historical process which may be organisationally and empirically brought forward by a number of concrete movements at different points in time. After all, my central point in this essay is that the further development of the national movement, of the process nation-in-formation, requires a struggle on two fronts, anti-imperialist and democratic. Together, these come to grips with the dual character of the national question in our case.

24. The point I wish to stress by way of concluding this section is that, given the objective context of a colonial and a neo-colonial economy and state organisation, even the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist national movement tends to begin and unfold as a movement of particular nationalities — those most drawn into the crucible of commodity production and exchange, and the management of state affairs — and not of others. The question then is: What is it that tells apart a national movement from a movement of particular nationalities, particularly if the former tends to unfold apparently as a movement of nationalities? Or, to put the question even more starkly, since all these movements must have a social basis in the peasantry of one nationality or another, which of these is historically progressive, and which is not? And further, to preempt my discussion in the next section, where does the answer lie principally, in the analysis of the ideology of these movements or in their political practice?

IIII. The Ideological Character of the Modernisation Perspective

25. In his study of Orientalism, Edward Said dissects eloquently and passionately — the European discourse on 'the Orient' over the centuries of expansionism beginning with the era of mercantilism. 'The Orient', he says, was constituted as 'the Other', as what Europe was not, but still defined in Europe's own image. It was the not-subject, without initiative, without creativity, and indeed without a living history. Orientalism, on the other hand, as a set of institutions that produced a body of knowledge of 'the Orient', was "all aggression, activity, judgement, will-to-truth and knowledge." (p.204) Indeed, it was a discourse of acquisition and domestication, an example of knowledge as power and power as knowledge.

26. In his study of the "Africanist Discourse in French", Christopher Miller takes as his point of departure Said's dissection of Orientalism. The Orient, argues Miller, was reconstructed as an "inferior civilisation"; but at least as a civilisation. Africa, on the other hand, was a "blank darkness", "an empty slate written on by outsiders". It was not even the Other, but simply a null.

27. The most blatant and brazen expressions, the quotable quotes, of such a will-to-knowledge may no longer be as numerous. But the discourse constructed in the process, whose method and terminology is the very embodiment of this will-to-domesticate, still abounds. It is thus no surprise that the thrust of social science analysis of Africa still remains strongly anti-historical, and just as strongly anthropological.

Tribe/Nation

28. The discourse of Africanist social science has been constructed around two dichotomies: tribe/nation and tradition/modernity. It has been an accepted practice to employ the concept 'tribe' for every ethnic group in Africa. The implicit connotation that the group referred to has a 'premordial' character goes along with a deafening silence as regards the social history of the group. The entire history of the spread of commodity production and exchange, of the associated development of a division of labour and of classes with distinct and at times even contradictory interests, and of social movements anchored in the specific interests of distinct classes -- all this is easily and quickly glossed over.

In this essay, I have chosen to use the concept of 'nationality' in preference to that of 'tribe'. The reason is simple. If one aims at underlining the development of a division of labour and of classes inside ethnic groups, it is better to avoid a term which historically has tended to connote a relatively undifferentiated ethnic group.

29. The tribe/nation dichotomy employed in much of contemporary literature should also be viewed in the context of the overall methodological thrust of these analysts. Broadly speaking, the orientation is that of modernisation theory, with its rigid demarcation between the 'modern' and the 'traditional.' The nation is put forth as a 'modern' political category, the tribe as a 'traditional' one.

A movement was characterised as 'tribal' or as 'nationalist' depending on two factors: first the language in which its demands were articulated, and second, the geographical parameters within which it organised. Put in the unilinear evolutionist framework of modernisation theory, 'tribalism' was defined as pre-modern and backward, either hindering or at best preparing the ground for modern 'nationalist' movements. Thus, in one influential instance, 'tribal' movements were seen as examples of 'primary' resistance and 'nationalist' movements as those of 'secondary' resistance, the latter seen as the outcome of the former!

The political conclusion of such a perspective is worth noting: that national movements are modern and therefore historically progressive (or legitimate), and that tribal movements are pre-modern and therefore historically not progressive.

Tradition/Modernity

30. What is wrong with such an analysis and such a conclusion? My first premise is that the dichotomy tradition/modernity is itself ideological in that it tends to ossify tradition and render it ahistorical and lifeless. Historical studies of "tradition" have shown that there is no simple, unilinear, unproblematic carry over of tradition from one generation to another. Neither is tradition a single universal; it is, on the other hand, contradictory. What constitutes tradition and what does not is the stuff of sharp social struggles. Tradition is born and reproduced through confrontation. "Tradition is born in confrontation with ... aggression," argues a leading Arab intellectual,15 "Slavism, brahmo samaj, the reinterpretation of Confucius by Kang Yu-Wei, salafiyya - these responses are doubtless different but nonetheless display the same structure." As Michael Gilsnan16 has shown with admirable clarity and subtlety in his study of various forms of Islam, "one of the single most important elements in what is often called

15 Abdullah Laroui, The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1976, p. 87
Islamic fundamentalism is precisely this struggle over the definition of what is the tradition. ... Such processes ... have been worldwide in the past two centuries, as capitalism has spread, and are by no means confined to Islamic communities."

In other words, "tradition" is as modern as "modernity"!

31. My second premise is that the analysis of ideology can not be separated from that of politics. Since nationalities comprise different classes, social movements anchored in distinct nationalities must be concretely analysed from the point of view of which classes they organise and the demands they put forth. This means that we must go beyond the simple identification of the language in which a movement puts forth its demands (whether traditional or religious); just as we must go beyond asking simply whether a movement comprises certain nationalities or whether it indeed brings under its fold the bulk of the nationalities within the country. It is, in my opinion, far more important to analyse the practice of a movement, including the objectives around which it is organised and therefore the interests it hopes to realise.

**Nationalism and Democracy**

32. To underline this issue, it is necessary to return to the two conceptions of nationalism deriving from the time of the French Revolution, but this time to highlight their respective political orientation, not to contrast their methodological perspectives.

The conception of nationalism put forth by the Enlightenment and crystallising in the course of the French revolution - unlike that advanced by Edmund Burke and the German Romantics - was profoundly democratic. After all, the French Revolutionaries put their accent on the popular character of the nation. And also after all, the movements that were to put the greatest emphasis on the organis....

17 The tendency to take the ideology, the self-description, of a movement or a state as key to the understanding of its political character is not confined to modernisation theorists. The only difference is that the subject matter in this case are the radical states, those with officially Socialist, Marxist or Marxist-Leninist ideologies. See, for example, the writings of John Saul over the past decade or so about "socialism" in various countries. In each case, the premise is that socialism is being built in a particular country because that is the state ideology. The essay then goes on to detail "the problems of building socialism" in that particular country!
conception of nationalism inherited from the German Romantics - the fascist movements of Western Europe - ended up divorcing nationalism from democracy.

33. It is to the democratic tradition of nationalism that I wish to return in my evaluation of the 'national question' in the Ugandan context. It is a tradition which puts the 'national question' in the context of the question of democracy, and makes the analysis of the former contingent on its analysis of the latter. It is a tradition best carried forth in the writings of Lenin, of Gramsci and of Mao.

It was Lenin who drew a clear distinction between "the nationalism of the oppressor" and the "nationalism of the oppressed."

It was Gramsci who developed the category of the "national popular" and argued that popular democratic struggles must be included within the struggle for socialism, pointing out the contrast between Italy where 'nation' had become separated from the 'people' unlike France of the Revolution.

And finally, it was Mao who argued that the road to internationalism, in the case of the oppressed nations, lies through the intermediate stage of national liberation, but a liberation which must be in the context of a struggle for a "new democracy".

34. My point is simple. Nationalist movements are of a contradictory character. They can neither be universally supported nor universally opposed. To determine our standpoint in relation to a particular movement, it is necessary to grasp its political and social content. It is the question of political practice, of objectives/interests - and not that of ideology divorced from a political analysis - that is far more likely to reveal the social and political character and significance of a movement. Broadly speaking, one can distinguish a movement for rights from a movement for the realisation or consolidation of privileges. Or, to put it differently, a movement that puts forth the interests of the oppressed classes - whether within a national or nationality framework - can be distinguished from one that advances the interests of the oppressor classes, whatever its framework. The former is historically progressive, the latter is not.

35. To take an example. The debate inside Kenyan historiography about the character of Mau Mau has posed the question as to whether it was progressive or not. This

debate has turned on the question of whether Mau Mau was a movement of particular nationalities (the Gikuyu, the Embu, the Meru) that were numerically a minority inside Kenya, and therefore whether it can be conferred the title of a national movement, and therefore the badge of historical legitimacy.

First of all, as argued above, one must expect that given the uneven character of the colonial economy, it should not be surprising to find the origin of a national movement in the movement of particular nationalities. The objective fact was that the forcible alienation of land - to which Mau Mau was a political and social response - affected certain nationalities more so than others. In this context, it is significant that the struggle of the Mau Mau was for "land and freedom". In other words, Mau Mau was a movement for rights, not for privileges.

All of this, however, is not to say that the ideology of Mau Mau could not at another historical juncture become the language of a movement seeking privileges for property-owning or property-aspiring classes amongst the same nationalities!

IV. The National Question in Uganda: Some Ideological and Political Aspects

36. The high point of the national struggle in the colonial period was in the years following the Second World War. A tide which had peaked towards the middle of the 40's was at a low ebb by the middle of the 50's. Before trying to look at the contemporary situation, it is instructive to return to that decade and draw certain lessons.

37. The organisations that sprung up in the 40's were distinguished by two features, compared to those of the preceding decade. One, these organisations had a popular character. The middle class intelligentsia that organised in the 30's - as Young Men of Buganda, of Toro, of Busoga, etc. - seldom bothered to go beyond the narrow confines of their own class, either in the demands they put forth or in their organisational initiatives. This was the root cause of their failure. The intelligentsia that organised in the 40's, on the other hand, consciously reached out to organise popular classes, peasants and workers, by putting forth popular and democratic demands through organised forms like cooperatives and trade unions.

Secondly, the wave of popular protest that culminated in the general strike and peasant uprisings of 1945 and 1949 displayed a variety of organised forms. The struggle for democracy was not confined to explicitly political
organisations. It found expression in diverse organisations, as far apart as cooperatives and trade unions on the one hand and religious bodies like the African Hellenic Church on the other. The form of an activity did not automatically define its content. For example, political activity inside the Church was not necessarily sectarian; to the extent it confronted the pro-colonial and anti-democratic practice of the Church establishment, there took place a democratic struggle inside religious organisations.

And thirdly, as the democratic struggle advanced, it pitted the popular classes inside a nationality against those interests which constituted the social base of the colonial state within the same nationality. The most dramatic illustration of this was of course in 1945 and 1949, when peasants in Buganda razed to the ground houses of Baganda landlord-chiefs. In other words, the further the democratic struggle advanced, the more it tended to dissolve the unity of all classes on a nationality basis, and the more it tended to reconstruct a unity of popular classes within that nationality on a democratic basis.

38. It is important to understand that this movement was not defeated by the colonial state through simply the force of arms. Far more important was the fact that the colonial state was able to seize the initiative, on both the ideological and the political fronts. Why was it able to do this and what was its initiative?

39. The colonial state was able to seize the initiative for two major reasons. The first stemmed from the fact of the uneven development of the colonial political economy: that the national movement was rooted mainly in the small working class of the towns and in the commodity-producing peasantry. In other words, the base of the anti-colonial and the democratic struggle tended to be those nationalities most drawn into the crucible of commodity production and exchange, not those least drawn into it. This is why the colonial state was able to present the national movement ideologically as a movement of certain nationalities, and therefore a threat to other nationalities. (We may note in passing that the Obote II regime tried to present the armed struggle in the Luwero Triangle in 1981-85 in a similar fashion to the rest of the nationalities in Uganda.) It thus tried to present a struggle for rights by popular classes within certain nationalities as a demand for privileges by all classes within these nationalities.

40. The second reason why the colonial state was successfully able to seize the initiative was due to the weakness of the democratic movement itself. The democratic movement was an alliance of various classes, with interests that coincided up to a point and diverged thereafter. It was a movement whose popular character had yet to be
consolidated in organisational terms. It was thus a movement which had yet to develop organisational forms whereby the base could hold accountable its leadership. It was a movement whose middle class leadership was not only susceptible to being wooed through partial concessions by the colonial state, but could also do so at the expense of the popular classes.

The cajoling and capitulation of this middle class leadership was the sum and substance of the reform programme launched by the colonial state in the aftermath of the 1949 peasant uprising and workers' strike. The purpose of this political initiative was two-fold: simultaneously to demobilise the popular classes in the advancing national democratic movement and to mobilise the property-aspiring strata both inside and outside that movement.

Let us first look at how the popular classes were demobilised by the reforms. The legislation of the late 40's and the early 50's that was designed to legalise cooperatives and trade unions at the same time depoliticised these organisations. Both were brought under the scrutiny of the state, reorganised in a bureaucratic (rather than democratic) fashion, put under the control of a middle class leadership for whom these organisations became a new-found vehicle for career advancement and the accumulation of wealth. From then on, cooperatives and trade unions were less and less vehicles that advanced the interests of peasants and workers, more and more organisations that controlled the activity of these popular classes.

At the same time, the colonial state implemented yet another series of reforms. Directed specifically at the property-aspiring middle class, its sum and substance was "Africanisation", of trade and the civil service in the main.

In the final analysis, the success of these reforms hinged on detaching the national demands of the movement from its democratic demands, and then giving the former the narrowest possible content: i.e., anti-colonialism rather than anti-imperialism. To succeed, the reforms had to promise that independence would be 'granted', and at that, soon. Without this, it would not be possible to convince the property-aspiring middle class that it was about 'to arrive'; that the question of the hour was now an internal question. How were the fruits of the reform to be distributed amongst the middle class? The more this middle class divided and organised on a fractional basis, each trying to organise popular classes of its nationality for political activity

under its own leadership, the more the struggle for rights of the popular classes gave way to a jockeying for privileges amongst middle class-led coalitions, organised variously, on either a nationality or a religious or a regional basis.

41. The divorce between nationalism and democracy was consolidated in the period after independence. It is in this period that nationalism emerged as a state ideology. At first cut off from its popular base and later turning hostile to any demands for democracy, middle class nationalism became no more than a form of statism.

Nationalism as a state ideology represented not only a divorce of nationalism from democracy but ultimately an opposition of that specific form of nationalism to democracy. This is clear from the experience of a number of 'radical' African states: Uganda under Obote I, Nkrumah, Tanzania, to take but a few examples. In each of these experiences, the counter-position of state nationalism and democracy was evident time and again. In the process, nationalism turned into a language of state repression. The demand for national unity became in practice no more than an attempt to legitimise state control in all its forms. Correspondingly, official denunciation of "sectarianism" and "tribalism" turned into so many attempts to discredit any demands for democracy, i.e., the freedom to organise outside and independently of the state.

And finally, we may note that the stifling of democracy in the name of nationalism and national unity tended to give rise to a double phenomenon. On the one hand, governmental power was increasingly exercised in the interest of - and was seen to be an expression of - the privileges of the property-owning or aspiring classes and strata of the nationalities 'in power'. On the other hand, this encouraged the development of oppositional movements also based on nationality (or religious) affiliation, and also crystallising the leadership of property-owning or aspiring classes and strata within the nationalities 'out of power'.

The NRA Experience

42. The NRA experience can be divided into two periods: 1981-85, the period of oppositional activity; and 1986 onwards, the period beginning with the capture of state power.

43. From the point of view of the question of nationalities and the national struggle, the experience of the NRA from 1981 to 1985 is remarkable for a number of reasons. Most

obvious was the success of the NRA in forging an alliance of popular classes cutting across nationalities, some of which had even apparently hostile relations in the immediate past. The first phase of the armed struggle successfully established a peasant base in Buganda, but under a leadership which substantially came from outside Buganda. The second phase expanded this peasant base from Buganda to Bunyoro, establishing an alliance between nationalities whose dominant classes had been at loggerheads for most of this century.

In another article, I have tried to argue that its success in organising the peasantry of diverse nationalities needs to be traced to the democratic component of the struggle waged by the NRA. Key to the social programme of the NRA was not the replacement of one set of state agents by another set, but in fact their replacement by popularly elected organs, called Resistance Committees. In other words, just as with the national movement of the 40's, key to winning over the support of the peasantry of various nationalities from its 'traditional' state-connected leadership was the successful pursuit of a democratic struggle inside each nationality.

From the point of view of this same question, that of nationalities and the national struggle, the weak point of the NRA's struggle was that its organised base was restricted to certain nationalities by the time it took power in 1986. Most importantly, it lacked an organised base - though it did have popular sympathy - amongst nationalities on the other side of the Nile.

Most observers seem to agree that in the period since, these popular sympathies have not been translated into popular organisation and a social base amongst the popular classes of these nationalities. On the contrary, it would seem that popular sympathies have tended to erode rather than to be consolidated. The question is: why?

In what follows, my basic premise is that the answer can only be found in the zigzag nature of the relationship of the NRA to the democratic struggle. In order to underline the tentative nature of the discussion which follows, I shall proceed by way of posing a series of questions, each of which is intended to open up a field of inquiry, rather than by presenting any definitive answer to the question I have posed above.

44. From the moment the NRA took power, a contradiction emerged that had not existed before. Can the struggle for democracy be waged from the position of state power? If the

21 Mahmood Mamdani, "Background to Takeover of State Power by NRA," Forward, vol. 8, nos. 1 and 2, 1986, Kampala
cutting edge of the democratic struggle is the establishment of popular democratic organs — Resistance Committees — is it possible for the state power to take the initiative in establishing these committees, the very reason for whose existence is to resist any encroachment on their rights by officials of the same state power? Or, to put it in a nutshell, can the object of a struggle be its subject too?

And yet, one could argue that this contradiction was still embryonic in January, 1986, because the NRA could not be said to have 'taken power' in a definitive sense at that time. What the NRA did destroy was the neo-colonial repressive machinery. What it had yet to touch was the remaining machinery of the neo-colonial state: the civil service and the judiciary. This aspect of the struggle would be particularly complicated for two reasons: one, in the concrete conditions of Uganda, it can be said that almost every regime since independence has come and gone with its army. The pillar of the neo-colonial state that has remained firm since colonialism has not been its repressive but its administrative organ, complemented by the judiciary. The consciousness of this historical fact has tended to give the Ugandan civil service and judiciary a measure of confidence and arrogance in their relations with regimes. For, according to the former, the latter come and go while they alone guarantee a semblence of stability and continuity to the state.

Secondly, the struggle against the administrative and the judicial organs of the state can not be waged using arms. It was bound to be a far more complicated and a far more political struggle. To be successful, it also had to be a profoundly democratic struggle, since to be successful it would require the organisation of those popular classes who had historically borne the brunt of the injustice meted out by this same civil service and judiciary.

For these very reasons, it is clear that the outcome of the struggle could not be a foregone conclusion in 1986. One could, and many did, ask: Was the NRA going to transform the neo-colonial civil service and judiciary, or was it going to be swallowed up by the neo-colonial state leading to the consolidation of the latter?

45. To return to the questions I posed above, it must be clearly stated that a democratic struggle can not be waged from the position of state power. On the other hand, if the NRA expected to wage it (the struggle for "fundamental changes"), it could only be because it was not yet in control of state power; in fact, after January 1986, the contention for state power intensified, and the focus of this contention shifted to the very organs of the state that still remained intact: the civil service and the judiciary.
Under these conditions, for the democratic struggle to be waged successfully - this time from above and from below - three issues assumed vital significance. The first two concern the relation between the Movement and the state on the one hand, and popular democratic organs and the state on the other; whereas the third concerns the advance of the democratic struggle into areas where the NRA had no organised base by the time it took power, i.e., areas "on the other side of the Nile". I shall outline them below, once again in the form of questions rather than answers.

46. The waging of a democratic struggle from above is possible only under very special conditions: that is, when the summit is not cohesive but divided with various forces in contention. And yet, such a struggle can not be waged simply from positions of state authority. It requires the existence of a political organisation anchored in some sector of the popular classes and independent of the state. Thus the question of the NRM.

From available information, it would seem that in the armed struggle waged from 1981-86, there did not exist a political cadre separate from the military cadre. Except in places where there was no armed struggle - that is, in government-controlled parts of the country where an underground functioned and in the external wing - the political cadre and the military cadre were one and the same. This is why in January 1986 the NRM did not exist except at the summit, as a Secretariat, but without any significant cadre.

Its experience in trying to create cadres through 'politicisation' in the cadre school has gone through two phases. In the first phase, the political school admitted anyone and everyone who volunteered. The result was a rush of lumpen and opportunist elements who expected to become the security personnel of the new regime. This realisation was partly behind a change in admission policy in the second phase. Then, admission was in the main compulsory; its targets being primarily various categories of state functionaries.

One would have expected, on the other hand, that a democratic movement would look for its political cadre in the cadre thrown up by the democratic struggle of the popular classes and the intelligentsia, i.e., in peasant struggles, workers' strikes, student struggles, etc. - and not in the functionaries of the neo-colonial state, without any discrimination whatsoever. The question that arises as a result is: to what extent is the NRM today an adjunct of the state?

47. The second key issue from the point of view of pursuing the democratic struggle today is that of the relation obtaining between popular democratic and state organs. I
have pointed out that RCs originated in lieu of state authority in the guerrilla-held regions.

Since January 1986, there have been a number of changes in the role of RCs. To begin with, RCs are no longer seen as replacements for chiefs but as popular organs that are to hold state officials (chiefs) accountable. This, in my opinion, is a positive development. If the RCs had developed as replacements for chiefs, they would indeed have turned into new chiefs. Given the organisational weakness of civil society in general, and popular classes in particular, RCs would have been popular democratic organs in name only, for there would have been few realistic ways of holding them accountable to the people.

But the development of RCs has not gone ahead without resistance from the very state officials RCs are supposed to hold accountable. A clear and growing tendency can be discerned that aims at turning RCs into adjuncts of the state. This can be discerned in attempts to turn RCs into administrative adjuncts of the state, whose duties are increasingly defined by top state officials as convenience demands (e.g., in the distribution of commodities). The tendency can also be seen in the attempts to turn RCs into political adjuncts of the state power, e.g., in decisions by DAs to dismiss entire Resistance Committees, as in Arua and Iganga for example.

My second question, then, is: To what extent are popular democratic organs (RCs) also being turned into adjuncts of the state, in the process losing both their independence and their popular accountability?

48. Finally, the question of the advance of the democratic struggle "on the other side of the Nile." In political terms, this issue has a dual significance. I have already argued that, from the point of view of the division of labour between nationalities, the changes of January 1986 represent a dramatic turn. For the first time, the historical division of labour between the "South" and the "North" no longer obtains. For the first time, the Southern propertied and middle classes control the main lines of business, the political machinery of government, and the repressive and administrative organs of the state. One element in the present situation is thus the acute political crisis of the "Northern" middle class.

The second aspect of the crisis stemmed from the fact that the NRA had no organised base in these parts of the country when it came to power in January 1986. This issue, however, was compounded by a second fact. The "broad base" (united front) built by the NRA after January 1986 included in the main parties and individuals with a historical base in "the South", but excluded in the main those with a historical base.
in "the North". Ironically then, the coalition that came to power following January 1986 had a "broad base" in "the South" where the NRA had a historic presence and an organised base, but a "narrow base" in "the North" where the NRA had little historic presence and no organised base! In other words, where the NRA needed to create a broad base - in "the North" - its base remained narrow; where it did not - in "the South" - it made concessions to parties which had already lost their popular base.

This combination of factors meant that the extension of the new government on the other side of the Nile gave this political machinery most often a "Southern" face in the "North"! Under such conditions, it could not be very difficult for the "Northern" middle class to convince the "Northern" peasantry that the "broad base" was simply another name for a "Southern" government!!

While the most dramatic expression of the crisis on the other side of the Nile is the military confrontation between bands of rebels and the NRA, this should not obscure the fact that the crisis is in essence political. In other words, it can not have an exclusively or even mainly a military solution. Simply put, even a defeat of the rebel bands will not solve the crisis in "the North". If the "Northern" peasantry is to be convinced of the national character of the new government, at the minimum, the political machinery in the "North" will have to have a local face.

How is this possible under today's circumstances? Two possible alternatives can be spelt out. The first would involve an extension of the "broad base" to the "North". In political terms, it would mean that the purveyors of the anti-democratic politics of the neo-colonial state will be rescued once again, as they have been by the "broad base" in "the South." From the point of view of the "Northern" peasantry - and therefore from a national point of view - this would still be preferable to the present situation.

The second alternative would be to democratise politics in "the North", from the bottom up. Democratic organs, not only at the grass roots level, but also at the summit, would ensure that all levels of the political machinery in "the North" will wear a face that is not only local but also a result of popular initiative.
The first alternative, by itself, will tend in the direction of peace and the consolidation of the neo-colonial state after nearly a decade of continuous instability. Only the second alternative can advance the democratic struggle inside every nationality in the country and thus arrest the cancer of a political struggle organised increasingly along nationality lines and under the leadership of anti-democratic forces in each nationality.
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