

BEYOND STATISTICAL AND CONCEPTUAL RIGOUR-MORTIS IN RESEARCH ON  
RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND FOOD SELF-SUFFICIENCY IN AFRICA.

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(The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the Zimbabwe Institute of Development Studies)

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"The events that have shattered our people were not simply painful events. They were disasters. They were strange, unnatural catastrophies. Those who survived them could only survive in part because they found ways to forget the catastrophies. When you are still close to past dangers that threatened to wipe you out, even remembrance pains you. Our people forgot a lot of things in order to survive. We even went beyond forgetfulness. To forget thoroughly the shattering and the dispersal of a people that was once whole, we have gone so far as to pretend we have always been these silly little fragments each calling itself a nation".

"The disease was an urge to fragment everything.

"And the disease gave infinite satisfaction to the diseased because it gave them control.

"Healing is work not gambling. It is the work of inspiration not manipulation. If we healers are to do the work of helping bring our whole people together again, we need to know such work is the work of a community. It cannot be done by an individual. It should not depend on any single person, however, heroic he may be. And it can't depend on people who do not understand the healing vocation - no matter how good such people may be as individuals. The work of healing is work for inspirers working long and steadily in a group that grows over the generations, until there are inspirers, healers wherever our people are scattered, able to bring us together again".

From The Healers by Ayi Kwei Armah

## PROLOGUE

The food 'crisis' affecting Africa, as yet shows no sign of abetting. The United Nations Secretary General has recently stated that it may in fact get worse this year. In a report to the U.N. Economic and Social Council, he cited figures which showed that famine and malnutrition is afflicting 150 million Africans, despite increased international food aid. 1985 could even be worse than 1983-84, with 21 countries continuing to experience serious food deficits.<sup>1</sup> Another sort of crisis - for which a term still yet has to be coined, has also been affecting the African continent, and it is as yet too early to determine whether it is symptomatic of the African food crisis or whether it is indeed one of the major causative factors:

"The United Nation's own efforts appear increasingly bedeviled by infighting among agencies concerned with food aid"

The F.A.O. has come into conflict with the United Nation Office of Emergency Operations (O.E.O.A.) 's attempt to purchase food grains for Chad encroached on the F.A.O.'s operations.<sup>2</sup> And the whole debate on what is a food crisis and how should it be solved has been refuelled at the highest international levels of decision making. There therefore seems to be no clear end in sight to much dictionary thumbing and rearrangement of words and phrases, in the attempt to decide whether Africa's malaise should be dubbed food insecurity/food self sufficiency/food inadequacy.

Enter the World Bank into the fray: the crisis is one of management on the part of Africans: 'indicators of African mismanagement' according to the World Bank Development Report published on July 3 1985, are "unambiguous and appalling: food production has been falling far behind population; manufacturing output for Africa was lower in 1980 than 1970; only 25% to 30% of industrial capacity is actually in use. In the Report, which an enterprising weekly in Zimbabwe Christened "Africa's Last Chance", the whole crisis/<sup>of</sup>management has been crystallised in African governments' reluctance to rely on market forces:

"The World Bank has a tasty carrot dangling before the noses of African governments who may be loath to accept these terms but - it has raised U.S. \$1.25 billion in those countries which accept the terms and the U.S.A. has come in with another U.S. \$500 million".<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably much project mongering will ensue from the latest World Bank prescription to our woes - and proposals to either strengthen already existing management institutes or to create new ones will flood consultancy offices, university departments, and development ministries.

All this will of course be done with the best intentions and with much 'innocence' Coming onto the modern African stage as it were from the cold after 15 years of not too splendid isolation imposed by Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), and having re-entered world history only five years ago what is particularly irksome (though hardly surprising) is that the basic orientation underlying some of these 'last chance' cures has a local reflection - in the famous Rhodesian white settler racist model whose apotheosis is all too apparent in Azania. Recovering as we are from a racist ordering of civil society which bludgeoned our psyches with among other things, the statistical mind of settler colonialism, we are wary of the "innocence" of many of the preferred solutions. The latest however also smacks of the behaviourist models traditionally employed to denigrate our human dignity.

The very focus on 'management' ends up making virtue out of powerlessness, weakness and helplessness, leading to a type of 'innocence' Boesak has characterised as a 'helpless utopianism'. And he emphasised the imperative to dispense with this innocence, not only in the cauldron of Azania but even at the international level:

"This farewell to innocence means that the traditional role of the white liberal is thoroughly re-evaluated. The question is no longer whether whites are willing to do something for blacks but whether whites are willing to identify themselves with what the oppressed are doing to secure their liberation and whether whites are aiding that liberation in their own communities.

"The same applies to other relationships in the world for example between "white" South Africa and black 'homelands' and the "first" and "third" worlds. Blacks realise that liberation from colonial regimes does not automatically mean the end of all dependency and that oppression and colonialism are simply continued on another level. This innocence must be exposed, for it forms the shield behind which continued exploitation hides itself".<sup>5</sup>

To achieve the above would require an extensive anthropological study of the culture of research activity in Africa so that within the limits of this paper all that is possible is to point out constraints to meaningful and purposeful research on the food crisis in Africa stemming from this 'innocence' and some of its manifestations in the internal method of work, approach to problems, and formulation of the problematic. The more immediate concern of this paper is however to combat the greyness, stale cynicism, and non committal cautiousness that characterises African research. Too often it is conveniently forgotten at lavishly funded gatherings of researchers that researchers should be the voice of a culture and are therefore its integrators and its body-guards and its healers. It involves questioning the intellectual values or resources offered to us, be they from benevolent 'positive deviants' from the left in the metropolitan countries or from the international

power houses of reaction, or even liberalism.

Tragically though, whenever the question of culture is brought up at our fora, the solution is to turn anti-intellectual and rely on a very often sexist sort of folksy wisdom. What is required in order to strengthen training research and documentation activities is primarily to recognise the enormous power and the crucial importance of research. African culture cannot survive without a constant stream of ideas and alert independent minds that do not restrict the research activity to merely going to the library and putting down in long hand what someone else has put into print. Our own perceptions of the Afrikan reality must be integrated into our conceptual framework by a process of abstraction. The process

of abstraction and of concept formation is a process of reason, of thought; it is neither instinctive nor involuntary. In our present predicament it also involves finding a commonly accepted African communicable framework across the scientific disciplines. At present, the division of Africa into Franco-phone, Anglo-phone, Lusophone Africa, is compounded for researchers by the fact that each discipline uses different modes.

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian 'Black Heartman' surmised on our problem from the dungeons to which Mussolini had consigned him in order to stop his brain working:

"One further phenomenon in the United States is worth studying, and that is formation of surprising number of negro intellectuals who absorb American culture and technology. It is worth bearing in mind the indirect influence that these negro intellectuals could exercise on the backward masses in Africa, and indeed direct influence if one or other of these hypotheses were ever to be verified:

1. that American expansionism should use American negroes as its agents in the conquest of the African market and the extension of American civilisation (something of the kind has already happened, but I don't know to what extent);
2. that the struggle for the unification of the American people should intensify in such a way as to provoke a negro exodus and the return to Africa of the most independent and energetic intellectual elements, the ones in other words, who would be least inclined to submit to some possible future legislation that was even more humiliating than are the present widespread social customs. This development would give rise to two fundamental questions: 1. linguistic: whether English could become the educated language of Africa, bringing unity in the place of the existing swarm of dialects? 2. whether this intellectual stratum could have sufficient assimilating and organising capacity to give a "national" character to the present primitive sentiment of being a despised race thus giving the African continent a mythic function as the common fatherland of all the negro peoples? It seems to me that, for the moment, American negroes have a national

and racial spirit which is negative rather than positive, one which is a product of the struggle carried on by the whites in order to isolate and depress them. But was not this the case with the Jews up to and throughout the eighteenth century? Liberia, already Americanised and with English as its official language, could become the Zion of American negroes, with a tendency to set itself up as an African Piedmont".<sup>6</sup>

In the half century that has passed since Gramsci wrote these words, several African intellectual Piedmonts have been established in our centres of learning and research, and attempting to document them would be akin to spring cleaning the Augean stables of imperialism on the continent.

What is of more immediate concern, is that in a period professedly very concerned with communication and certainly aware of its importance as evidenced by the multiplicity of research talking shops from Harare to Dakar there is a major collapse of that very object of prime concern. And with all the talking and theatrical posturing, there has yet to develop a conceptual framework for diagnosing our problem independent of old colonial school ties. The issue clearly is not one of loyalties nor of dogma, but calls for a conceptual framework clear of dogma, capable of flexibility, of fluid evolution and of responding to rapidly changing specifics, and annihilating academic divisions of labour.

Generating these multiple levels of understanding implies a patterned networking in documentation based on a clear communicable conceptual framework. In this it is imperative to understand the traces of complex events the manipulation of socio-economic relationships at all levels of analysis from the humble household, to the heady heights of Washington. Given the present explosion of information, documentation in Africa has to concern itself not with replicating the information explosion of the North, but rather with the implosion of documentation - so as to give individual African researchers a well defined sense of their role and motivation for operational effectiveness. This will ensure that the African research community is not merely bombarded with novel data. To maintain an appropriate perspective and a sense of proportion it is important that data does not create a serious imbalance in our conceptual development.

An excessive quantity of detailed knowledge on food-self sufficiency and rural development not only leads to "one sector chauvinism" but to a distortion of the picture, and makes training/teaching well nigh, impossible.

Research and documentation should also be integrated into educational systems at all levels of the particular country they are intended for. The present tendency of

carrying out blitz-kriegs of training activities, such as the recently launched courses on management training by ESAMI serve no purpose except that of those suffering from the disease Ayi Kwei Armah described as bearing this symptom: "the urge to fragment everything, which gives infinite satisfaction to the diseased because it gives them control".

There has to be a common logical form to allow a transformation by analogue. The intervention of regional training institutes should be of a catalytic nature to permit the alchemical transformation of knowledge,

The conceptual framework employed in research activity would also have to develop a common notation to permit a translation of concepts and ideas into the training activity, by structuring all we know in order to filter, store, relate and communicate data successfully.

In Zimbabwe, and in other parts of Africa, only a hundred years ago it was still possible for one man or woman to have a good grasp of the knowledge available to his culture - a situation which encouraged cross fertilisation and a sense of wholeness, born of recognition of common principles. This was embodied in the leaders of the first Chimurenga (War of Liberation in Zimbabwe 1896/97 - the healers Nehanda, Mkwati, Chaminuka who had effective networks right down to the village level for the alchemical transformation of knowledge. The healer was a key figure in the pre-colonial Zimbabwean village; not only was the or she the preserver of tradition, but also a man or woman who could capture or illuminate the inner essence of existence. This alchemical knowledge was passed down from generation to generation.

The question is really not whether African researchers can construct the pre-capitalist structures with the attendant romanticisation of conjuring up visions of a "merrie Africa" free of class antagonisms, but rather whether we can construct a schema built upon principles which are not merely general enough to be common but flexible enough to survive the accumulation of input. Indeed are these fundamental principles to be gleaned from this influx, or should we be transferring our attention from the absorption of facts to the means by which we order, understand and use information.

## 2. REFLEXES AND REFLECTIONS OF THE STATISTICAL MIND OF SETTLER COLONIALISM - COINCIDENCE?

The need for African scholars/researchers to develop an independent conceptual framework emerges quite clearly from a brief review of some of the work done on

the food crisis in Africa. The striking parallels in the basic orientation of some of the F.A.O. and World Bank studies - and what we in Zimbabwe have been subjected to under the aegis of the statistical and conceptual mind of settler colonialism, leads one to the inescapable conclusion that "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark".

It is almost a banality to state that hunger in Africa has been caused by problems of food self-sufficiency and rural underdevelopment. There is however little agreement in the view point of the majority of policy makers when the problem is disaggregated from the continental to the regional and further down to the national level. Does the main solution lie in ensuring food adequacy or alternatively achieving that balance of food and other trade which optimises net foreign exchange receipts? This difference in opinion underlies some of the bureaucratic wrangling on the division of labour between international agencies. But more basically there is the assumption that the two are in fact the same problem - that increasing food or export crop production is the means to solve both.

Raikes has noted that the very exquisite formulations on which many policy prescriptions have been dished out to Africa are based to large extent on an erroneous understanding of the Indian experience.

India, has been praised in extravagant terms by the World Bank and other agencies for solving its food problem. It has been pointed out that fifteen years ago, India was a major net importer of basic foodstuffs, notably cereals. Since then through a variety of factors ranging from the Green Revolution to an improvement in the terms of trade facing agricultural producers, India has moved to a position of "roughly balanced trade in cereals". And yet the consensus indicates that India's population which suffers from hunger has not fallen and may even have risen.<sup>7</sup>

A type of conceptual rigor mortis characterises those inclined to prescribe free market solutions to Africa's food problem. Their most resonant claim is that the marketing of agricultural commodities is one of the few real-life examples of the "free" (even perfect market). But characteristically the level of analysis is never specified. While it could hold within the cyclical cob-webs of agricultural micro-economics, the attempts to construct a global supermarket model for agricultural marketing is at best mischevious, and at worst dangerous. Raikes has emphasised:

"World trade in cereals is, for example very highly concentrated. Almost without exception, the developed countries protect and subsidize their agricultural sector heavily - and then subsidize the sales of the surpluses which this generates on international markets (even excluding food aid). The same for agricultural inputs, equipment and processing capacity. Given the current levels and the developed countries' significant excess capacity for many such items and with most African countries short of foreign exchange, and an increasing proportion of their imports are covered by subsidized or grant commodity aid agreements".<sup>8</sup>

Freeing the market in Africa therefore does not necessarily mean the optimization of either global or national production and trading patterns.

The case for the global supermarket model and the 'mismanagement' by African governments has been also bolstered up by to say the least, very questionable statistics.

The F.A.O. in 1983, declared:

"Africa South of the Sahara is losing the race to keep food production ahead of population growth..... Of 41 sub-Saharan countries with a significant agricultural sector, only five (Cameroon, Central African Republic, the Ivory Coast, Rwanda and the Sudan) have kept food production consistently ahead of population growth".<sup>9</sup>

Sarah Berry has recently commented upon the unreliability of both national and F.A.O. figures:

"Even where serious efforts are made to collect production data directly Agricultural censuses and sample surveys no matter how well organised and administered are subject to numerous sources of error and uncertainty, ranging from farmers' unwillingness to disclose information to potential tax-assessors, to problems of designing a representative sample in countries where there is no reliable census from which to work".<sup>10</sup>

Raikes has illustrated this point by referring to a sample agricultural census administered in a region of Tanzania he worked in - with the direction of population change wrong in all four districts.<sup>11</sup> It was only in the "best" situation that there are surveys of this nature upon which agricultural and food production can be based and there was a tendency to use consumption estimates (normally based on F.A.O. nutritional requirements) to provide a rough production estimate for a base year and to adjust this each year, thereafter on the basis of local officers' best guesses, these normally being based on estimates of the quantity officially marketed. The reliability of the evidence was further reduced by attempts to control the marketing and prices at which crops were sold.



Further, F.A.O. Production Year Books estimates, Raikes has demonstrated are not only unreliable but are subject to a very significant downward bias, with the tendency to underestimate the importance of agricultural activity which does not result in production marketed through official channels unless part of some government scheme.

More insidiously there has been a deliberate reduction of production figures by F.A.O. officials, in Raikes's words:

"In a conversation with an official from F.A.O. he freely admitted the uselessness of the data. He also mentioned (and justified) deliberate reduction in aggregate production figures in certain cases. Famines and food emergencies often occur in particular regions of countries, even though the country as a whole may not be seriously (or even at all) in deficit. International emergency aid donors, however are not often willing to accept that an overall deficit exists. If one is to make the case for rapid deliveries of supplies to cover an emergency, it may be "necessary" to report deficits, but omit to mention surpluses in other parts of the same country".<sup>12</sup>

Thus we have above a definite case in point where the perpetuation of careers based on the so-called experts on Africa has led to much falsification.

The other sort of innocent statistical activity that interests us, is that from which racist behavioural assertions about African mismanagement disabilities have been premised.

In Tanzania, as in Zimbabwe the F.A.O. and World Bank somehow found a tradition created by settlers, they were easily able to slot themselves into - with regard to the underestimation of both area, cultivated and production from peasant farms. Raikes again:

"In 1969, I went to northern Tanzania to study wheat production and went, as a first step to interview officers from the agricultural department. This rather significant development seemed simply not to have been noticed by extension officers (and especially the remaining whites). Almost without exception they spoke of wheat production as being in decline from an earlier heyday. Questioned about African production, they referred to it as of minor importance and hastened to tell stories about what poor farmers these were, how low yields were and that tractor owners were primarily concerned with the "prestige" rather than tractor farming".<sup>13</sup>

For Zimbabwe, I have documented elsewhere the underestimation of harvests from African farmers - in 1965/66, 1974/75 - and 1984, when sales to the Grain Marketing Board exceeded harvest estimates. The most spectacular was however in 1984, when the underestimation of the maize harvest was by over half a million tonnes. This was

invariably attributed to a 'freakish spate of late rains' that somehow produced the the best yields from peasant land. But I have argued that the downward estimating of peasant maize harvests in Zimbabwe is a built in value system in the pricing system and marketing system inherited at independence; wherein maize was imported even in good years in order to protect commercial beef producers, and further suppress wage levels. At fault too is the form in which official statistics are collected and collated: the attempt to calculate the proportions of directly produced forms of consumption and purchased forms of consumption, without taking into account historical changes in food habits.<sup>14</sup>

## 9. TOWARDS THE ELEMENTS OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The framework suggested below seems to meet some of the criteria for integrating research, documentation and training. It has been used in the situational analysis of children and women in Tanzania prepared by the Government of Tanzania and UNICEF.

The basic assumption that has to run through any research on food self sufficiency is that every community or society right down to the household has a certain potential for production. What does eventually get produced of what potentially could be produced is influenced by technical, social, political and ideological factors - the conditions of production.<sup>15</sup>

1. The technical/material conditions of production reflect the relationship among people, the means of production and nature. These include not only aspects such as ecological conditions, existing tools, available natural resources and technology, but also knowledge, skills, practices, imagination and will-power. together they form a system which defines the potential for production at a given point of in time.
2. The Social Conditions of Production reflect the relationship among people and means of production. These conditions determine what is actually produced out of the potential. Existing property relations are the most important determinants of the social conditions of production, which can also be described in terms of the ownership or the access to the means of production, the division of labour and the power structure of a society.

These two conditions of production determine the economic structure of the society. . These conditions form structural constraints but there are also other determinants that influence what is produced, by whom and for whom. Political and ideological systems of superstructures may affect production, distribution, and consumption to a very large extent.

3. Political factors primarily reflect the structure and the function of the state. They include such important issues as national policies for agriculture, health, education, income and price policies and also the existing legal system.
4. Ideological factors cover even broader aspects of society, for example religion, culture, tradition and beliefs. Often ideological changes lag behind changes in the economic structure of a society. That is why "modern" and "traditional" ways of living often co-exist. Both political and ideological superstructures are reflected in institutions, both formal and non-formal.

The conceptual framework described above can be used to deal both with macro and micro issues of researchers - as it clearly defines the context within which resources are controlled. In Zimbabwe, resources are controlled primarily at the following levels:-

Household  
Village  
Ward  
District  
Province  
Nation  
International.

At whatever level, a review of the decision-making process is essential both with regard to the allocation of resources to sectors providing "basic services" as well as within these sectors.

And as Urban Jonson et al emphasise:

"Awareness of mechanism which control resources is also crucial in planning external aid programmes, because the introduction of external resources into existing systems may have serious risks. External funds may often lead to the diversion of existing resources for other purposes or to the provision of services and goods at a level which is not sustainable with local resources after the termination of external support. In both cases, the result will be a dependency on external funding that is likely to lead to a deterioration of the situation in the long term".<sup>16</sup>

It should also be noted that the proposed framework is not rigid, as it determines the stage of the assessment and action as well. This is because the collection of data normally includes only such data as are considered relevant by the researchers

("you only find what you are looking for") and actions are based on the factors included in the analysis.

This against makes it imperative for the analytical model being used to be continuously evaluated.

## EPILOGUE

"Zimbabwe's social and political progress has not matched economic development because of lawless elements and unreconstructed "Rhodesia 'frontiersmen'."

(Prime Minister R.G. Mugabe addressing Zimbabwe Institute of Bankers, July 12 1985).

The demolition of the mental infrastructure constructed by the Rhodesian frontiersmen since 1890, has since independence proceeded as far as dismantling its political technology and some of patterned racial attitudes which informed policy. But this is clearly not enough especially because the material world the Rhodesian 'frontiermen' sought to conquer was not the one faced by his counterpart in North America three centuries ago; the latter operated in a situation where there had been genocide, whereas the former had to include the native population among the other elements of nature that had to be tamed and conquered and proceeded to build up an intricate model and technology for bringing about that submission.

The struggle for emancipation from mental slavery in Zimbabwe therefore has to go beyond the conscious, and confront the unconscious elements behind the celebrated white settler model. This is so, because though the white settler model operated on a conscious level, it is important to realise that it owed its beginning to the transfer of the collective, imperialist and racist idea, from the unconscious to the conscious, from field pattern to actual situation.

As the beast of imperialism still breathes in Azania, with its most primitive tentacle intact - apartheid, it is necessary for researchers particularly in Southern Africa no matter what the problematic to translate to/abstract <sup>the</sup> their collective unconscious in the fight against racism. Too often, the unconscious processes of racism have been accepted unquestioningly and are the favourite field for anecdotes and jokes. It is therefore necessary to beyond the mere arrangement of words and linguistic redefinition of concepts, but rather of those notions appended to the socio-economic structure inherited at independence - in order to arrive at a fresh

reappraisal of these notions.

Methodologically it means dispensing with positivist methods of research; for no matter how formally refined our conceptual framework becomes, and no matter how strongly projected the results of such research, it will only reach the conscious level of the intended users and recipients, but will fail to impinge deeply into their perception of reality. Socio-economic research, must therefore not be merely participatory with the subjects of research, but must be active and catalytic in order to go beyond the conscious level.

Merely stopping at the conscious level leads both on the part of the researcher and the researched to at best a suspended cognition of socio-economic reality and at worst conceptual rigour mortis. Social researchers therefore should accept responsibility for some of the results emerging from the conceptual frameworks and methodologies they employ - and not continue to claim that such concerns lie outside their academic disciplines, because they will only be consciously ignoring modes that do not submit to the laws of their usual practice. The specialist reductionist in rural development or food self-sufficiency in isolating a specific area of attention usually lands up indulging 'in one sector chauvinism'. His reception of data will therefore be distorted, ill-tuned, and unable to receive the type of guidance the sensitized can and must receive when operating in either a normal life sustaining situation or a critical life-determining situation.

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