# Scientific Ethos, Authoritarian Regimes and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Résumé: L'auteur part de l'hypothèse que les régimes autoritaires sont incompatibles avec certains principes fondamentaux de l'éthique scientifique et que par conséquent les conditions d'existence de ces régimes s'opposent à tout changement social progressiste parce que la rationalité scientifique constitue un desideratum important et une condition sine qua non de tout changement social significatif. L'auteur élabore un modèle théorique pouvant contribuer à mieux faire comprendre les rapports imbriqués et dynamiques entre les régimes autoritaires et la science par rapport au changement social, cela dans le cadre de la recherche de formes alternatives socio-économiques et politiques en Afrique au Sud du Sahara.

# **Preliminary Specifications**

From the colonialist era to the present state of nominal/flag independence, the latter of which the period between the late 1950s to early 1960s was an historical watershed in sub-Saharan Africa: the realities in sub-Saharan African societies are characterised by authoritarian regimes (Bangura 1989; Ake 1987: Collier 1982). While nationalist struggles against direct colonialist domination and administration that got to a feverish crescendo during the mid-1950s were in favour of liberal democracy, authoritarian regimes (as well as the military variety), have been the rule rather than the exception across sub-Saharan Africa. Authoritarian military regime, for instance, have predominated in Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sudan, Chad and Angola in their recent histories. In the particular case of Nigeria, only ten (10) of the thirty-one (31) years since nominal independence have witnessed anything that presents a facade of 'liberal democracy'. In the same vein, social relations and structures that approximate 'liberal democracy' have been comparatively more enduring in places like Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya and Zambia.

We say something that approximates or a facade of 'liberal democracy', to the extent that we visualise the civil society and the state in peripheral social formations within the confinement of asymmetrical world-system economy. To the extent that this is so, the forms that liberal democracy would take in peripheral societies could not but be distorted vis-à-vis

advanced capitalist economies within the same world system (Wallerstein 1975, 1979; Szymanski 1981; Frank 1966, 1972, 1979; Ninalowo 1987).

It is owing to the relatively high rate of distortions and contradictions within liberal democracies where they ostensibly exist that one has to be cognisant of the structures and relations of authoritarianism under the facade of liberal democracy. It is to be argued below that, to the extent that: (1) Authoritarian regimes are antithetical to some of the key salient properties of scientific ethos and democratic culture (Merton 1968; Lipset 1981); (2) Authoritarian conditions are, therefore, counter-productive to progressive/ameliorative social change. As our subsequent model would show, the latter is on account of the fact that scientific rationality is a key requirement, sine qua non, for any meaningful social change. To be sure, the concept of social change herein implies:

... a temporal alteration in the composition, structure or process of day-to-day operations, activities and functions in the society, either in its totality or constituent parts. In other words, the concept of social change is marshalled to capture an alteration over time, the direction, implementation of policies or plans, complexity, roles, functions et cetera, in varying degrees.... (Ninalowo forthcoming: p.4; Ninalowo 1991a)?

The ultimate intention here is to develop a theoretical model that would contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of authoritarian regimes and science in relation to social change. This is with a view of alternative socio-economic and political forms. In the light of the preceding, we look at the question of authoritarianism as an antithesis to progressive/ameliorative social change (Ninalowo 1990a).

Antinomies of Authoritarianism and the Reproduction of Underdevelopment

We proceed from the thesis that democratic properties, both structurally and relationally, are proportionally related with progressive/ameliorative social change, that is authentic human-centred development. Aside from the principle of universal suffrage at the level of practive, other components of democratic culture include social justice, egalitarian distribution of power and resources which will ensure optimal level of employment, freedom of

While we shall highlight some of the key properties and essentials of democratic culture, these had been addressed extensively elsewhere — see Ninalowo (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that where there is human-oriented development such as would help bring about the amelioration of lived conditions of people en masse, either through state policies and/or by virtue of collective class action; this would be consistent with what has been characterised as progressive social change. The obverse of this retrogressive social change or underdevelopment. For an amplification of conceptual nuances of social change — see Ninalowo (1990a).

speech and association, liberal and equitable distribution of formal educational opportunities, provision of adequate opportunities for nutrition and shelter, and so on. The cardinal essence of democratic properties as specified above is that they help to nurture and reproduce legitimation for a given system of domination or policy. For in the final analysis, the process of legitimation goes far beyond the sheer legalisation (as in Law) of elitist national goals, interests, values or dominant norms (Habermas 1975; Well 1989; Schumpeter 1975; O'Conner 1973; Lipset 1981). Rather, the ultimate acid test of legitimation is the degree to which people are generally able to fulfil their needs, aspirations or values. In otherwords, the ultimate test of enduring process of legitimation, properly speaking, resides in socio-political legitimacy as opposed to the sheer legal type. The former is consistent with human-centred authentic development, that is, progressive social change:

people may regard a given prevailing status quo, regime, programme or national goals as legitimate or illegitimate in terms of the ways by which dominant ideology or values are consistent with those of the generality of the people since they also have and harbour specific interests that might often be at variance with the dominant elitist ones. The alignment or reconciliation of general interests and values with dominant ones is said to enhance the possibilities of socio-political legitimation of the status quo (Ninalowo forthcoming).

A key corollary of the deliberation hitherto is that both democratic culture and socio-political legitimacy are opposite sides of the same coin. It is hardly conceivable to obtain one without the other. Empirical indicators in recent history have suggested to us that on the one hand, there is comparatively high stability within the systems of domination in technologically and economically advanced societies of North America and Europe. On the other hand, instabilities often punctuated by incessant coup d'état, are common place in the peripheral sphere, including societies in Africa, Latin America and South-East Africa. This differential is a function of the much higher prevalence of concrete dimensions of liberal democracy and the concomitant socio-political legitimacy in advanced societies (Lipset and Schneider 1987; London 1987; Held 1987; Lipset 1981; Boswell and Dixon 1990).

The preceding body of argument presents a logical basis to now advance a counter-thesis. That is, authoritarianism is proportionally related to the reproduction of underdevelopment or retrogressive social change. Before we amplify this counter-thesis, we would like to clarify on our particular appropriation of the concept of authoritarianism. Others have employed the concept of authoritarian personality — as referring to almost a blind submission to dominant or powerful individuals or institutions (Adorno 1950; Lipset 1981). This is, however, not the sense in which the concept is being used at the present time. Rather, the concept is hereby to be understood as connoting situations of anti-democratic social relations,

structures and institutions. In an ideal-typical sense, authoritarianism refers to conditions of extreme asymmetrical structural distribution of power and resources in a given social formation. This asymmetry is particularly heightened by the extreme penchant for kleptocracy amongst African ruling elites. This partly explains why African ruling elites harbour the illusion as though they are able to cling to power indefinitely, even against severe opposition or general crisis of confidence. Annexation of political power in this instance becomes a means towards self-centred economic gratification (Ake 1987; Graf 1988).

Also, under authoritarian circumstances, the powers-that-be have little or no tolerance for deviations from dominant values and beliefs. Consequently, authoritarian dispositions within a given polity are associated with flagrant infringement of fundamental human rights of subaltern groups and classes. Owing to a combination of relatively high degree of asymmetrical distribution of power and resources, in conjunction with low level of tolerance, there is, correspondingly, relatively low level of socio-political legitimacy. Some of the far-reaching consequences of authoritarian conditions in sub-Saharan Africa have recently been captured as follows:

Certainly, under the prevailing circumstances whereby subaltern groups and classes overwhelmingly bear the yolk of pernicious effects of SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme) vis-à-vis dominant groups and classes, and where individual citizens are summarily incarcerated in flagrant infringement of their fundamental human rights, principles of social justice are thereby most obviously violated. Such situations are some of the breeding grounds for resistance to domination, for they help to reproduce a crisis of legitimation or 'crisis of confidence' in regard to the dominant status quo, in so far as the class state is unable to satisfy some basic existential requirements and needs of the masses. The raison d'être of the ruling class is, therefore, put to question from the ruled—popular masses (Ninalowo forthcoming).

It is against the backdrop of heightened unequal distribution of power and resources that we begin to understand recent anti-SAP popular demonstrations and general critiques against related policies by African states in Cote d'Ivoire, Zambia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Algeria and so on. The popular demonstrations constitute active resistance and challenge to authoritarian conditions. That is a crisis of legitimation.

The episode of authoritarianism and the attendant falling rate of socio-political legitimation have chiefly served as a pretext for the military usurpation of civilian power in places like the Sudan, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Chad, Zaire and Angola. Predictably, military regimes that have been coercively instituted, by virtue of political appropriation of legalised monopoly over the means of violence, have really fared no better than civilian political elites. This is precisely because the contradictions of authoritarianism and socio-political legitimacy have really not been abated

as a result of military intervention into the political realm. Rather, the contradictions have been known to be exercebated under military regimes. Hence William Graf (1988) was compelled to talk of 'austerity without development' even under military regimes that are ostensibly 'corrective.'

In any event, it would have been rather unrealistic to expect military usurpation of civilian powers to resolve structurally immanent class-related contradictions. The presence of the military in the political arena is, of course, contradictory in its own right *ab initio*, in terms of the expected historical conventional functions and roles of soldiers. More importantly, just as there is a subsystem of stratification in terms of the asymmetrical distribution of power, privileges and resources in major institutions of the society, so is there a similar unequal distribution within the military institution. Furthermore, the substratum of the military institution is part of the totality of the configuration of class within the civil society and the state (Graf 1988; Ninalowo 1987). Consequently, the military elites at the commanding heights of the state structure act essentially to protect the interests of other elites, both on their behalf and/or their behest. By so doing, contradictions of authoritarianism are thereby reproduced.

Consequently, soldiers have been known to shoot their way back; wrestle political power from civilians after a relatively brief inter-regime by the latter. In the particular case of the Nigerian society, for instance, the country witnessed 'indigenous' civilian rule for two periods since 1960, viz., 1960-1966 (1st Republic) and 1979-1983 (2nd Republic). That is, the civilians have been at the commanding heights of the state only for a total of ten years since nominal flag independence from the British colonial power in 1960. The affairs of the state and society have been spearheaded by the military elites outside of these periods to date — i.e., for a total of almost twenty-one years hitherto — consequent upon a crisis of coups and counter coups.

The major point to be deciphered from the foregoing discussion is that, by definition, contradictory moments inevitably ensue from authoritarian situations in ways that nurture and reproduce retrogressive social change or underdevelopment that have recently been elucidated in the following manner by the writer:

The obverse of progressive social change is the retroactive type. This is exemplified by limited opportunities and facilities for housing, communication, health care, education, nutrition, transportation and so on — that is, abject poverty and deprivation on a rather large scale among the masses...

Situations of underdevelopment are aggravated by ubiquitous instances of retrenchments in the private and public sectors, grossly inflated prices of basic consumer goods (particularly food), exorbitant rents and so on. However, these negative socio-economic indicators are experienced mainly by subaltern classes and groups. In contrast, those at the helms of affairs

are comparatively insulated from adverse socio-economic constraints.... (Ninalowo 1990:2-3).

Now, whereas antinomies of authoritarianism and underdevelopment mutually reinforce and reproduce each other, a practical negation of the strain towards the reproduction of underdevelopment may not really be too far-fetched. There has historically been an ideal-typical mutual affinity of scientific ethos with democratic culture. That is, components of both do mutually reinforce one another. The proportionality in the relationship between scientific precepts and democratic principles is congruent with the possibilities for the reproduction of progressive social change.

# Interface of Scientific Ethos, Democratic Properties and Social Change

Once again, we proceed here on the basis of a counter-thesis. That is, the properties of authoritarianism are inconsistent with the precepts of scientific ethos. Moreover, this inverse relationship posited between authoritarian properties and scientific ethos, as we shall see later, is incongruent with the possibilities for progressive social change.

By scientific ethos, it is meant to refer to a set of guiding beliefs, values or norms that inform both the professional activities and orientation of a group of people in the course of the pursuance of their vocationally-related roles and functions. Robert Merton (1968:595) captures the full essence of the notion of scientific ethos thus:

The ethos of science refers to an emotionally toned complex of rules, prescriptions, mores, beliefs, values, and presuppositions which are held to be binding upon the scientist. Some phases of this complex may be methodologically desirable, but observance of the rules is not dictated solely by methodological considerations. This ethos, as social codes generally, is sustained by the sentiments of those to whom it applies. Transgression is curbed by internalised prohibitions and by disapproving emotional reactions which are mobilised by the supporters of the ethos....

By definition, scientific ethos is inextricably compatible with democratic properties. There are four salient properties of scientific ethos (Merton 1968), we shall invoke in order to demonstrate this mutual affinity:

(1) Universalism, (2) collective epistemic ownership, (3) selflessness, and (4) institutionalised scepticism. We shall now discuss these seriatim.

## Universalism<sup>3</sup>

Crucial components of the principle of universalism consist of objectivity and fairness. This implies that peer adjudication of validity or knowledge

<sup>3</sup> For a more encompassing and detailed discussion of the concept of universalism—see Parsons (1951).

claims would be based on criteria that portray institutional grounding. The criteria also have to be applied indiscriminately without favour or bias. Particularistic or non-universalistic criteria have no place in science, indeed, they constitute a violation of scientific ethos. Acceptance or rejection of validity claims can not be pursued on the basis of ideological, ethnic, racial, lingual, class, religious or similar biographical attributes of the claimant. This would constitute a violation of institutionalised scientific ethos.

For instance, there are compelling scientific grounds and data with which to demonstrate that the female folks with similar socio-economic status and opportunities, would be able to perform certain professionally or occupationally-related roles to similar component or efficient degree as their male counterparts. Neither male chauvinistic propensity nor patriarchal relations and structures of control ought not to contaminate the demonstrability of such a proposition in the spirit of scientific ethos. In a some notable scholars have convincingly made vein. pronouncements, based on systematic data procurement, analysis and logic, to the effect that deleterious fall-outs from the so-called Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) are experienced almost exclusively by subaltern classes and groups at various locations within the peripheral sphere. That is, the gap between the haves and the have-nots gets increasingly wider with the incessant implementation of SAP-related policies. Such scientific revelation ought not to lead to the persecution or vilification of intellectuals by the state as is often the case in sub-Saharan Africa (Bangura 1989; Ninalowo 1987, 1990b).

Where the state and the civil society harbour authoritarian or anti-democratic postures in flagrant violation of the principle of universalism, this is very likely to limit the extent to which intellectuals are able to contribute to progressive social change. This is consequent on the conduciveness of authoritarianism to alienation among intellectuals and scientists (Gouldner 1979), in the same vein, Robert Merton (1968:609-10) observes as follows:

.... Democratisation is tantamount to the progressive elimination of restraints upon the exercise and development of socially valued capacities.... In so far as such restraints persist, they are viewed as obstacles in the path of full democratisation.... The political apparatus designed to put democratic values into practice may thus vary, but universalistic standards are maintained. To the extent that a society is democratic, it provides scope for the exercise of universalistic criteria in science.

## **Collective Epistemic Ownership**

In a given epistemic (or knowledge-seeking/producing) community, both the ownership of the means as well as products of scientific inquisition are common to all and sundry within a particular epistemic or scientific community. There is, in any event, one basic historical reason for the

ownership of formal knowledge to be collective. The reasons inhere in the cumulative nature of scientific or formal knowledge. Any scientific or formal knowledge or innovation is, from a strict technical standpoint, traceable to common precepts, guidelines, paradigms or some other form of common heritage in the past. It is indeed, the hallmark of the scientific enterprise that advancement in science relies on the inputs of the past, present, as well as future generations. Consequently, any claim to property right cannot but be minimal and modest, properly speaking.

Once again, as Robert Merton (1968:610-11) puts it:

.... The scientists' claim to 'their' intellectual 'property' is limited to that of recognition and esteem which, if the institution functions with a modicum of efficiency, is roughly commensurate with the significance of the increments brought to the common fund of knowledge .... The institutional conception of science as part of the public domain is linked with the imperative for communication of findings. Secrecy is the antithesis of this norm, full and open communication its enactment, the pressure for diffusion of results is reinforced by the institutional goal of advancing the boundaries of knowledge and by the incentive of recognition which is, of course, contingent upon publication.

In the light of the foregoing observations, it is intrusive to note that private ownership as well as appropriation of both the means and results of production in capitalistic-oriented economies are inconsistent with the ethos of collective epistemic ownership. To the extent that this might be the case, it would further lead to some additional strains for democratic culture. That is, authoritarian relations and structures are likely to be heightened in ways that can be antithetical to progressive social change. It is noteworthy in this context that privatised property relations and structures under peripheral or advanced capitalism provide legalised legitimacy for ruling or economic elites, in terms of their claims to property rights and their dominant positions. This serves to consolidate and reproduce structural inequalities and class-related contradictions.

#### Selflessness

Ideal-typically, the essential underlying motive behind the activities of scientists or other professionals is not for the fulfilment of personal interests or goals, as per the scientific ethos. Rather, the essential motive underpinning the activities of the scientist is a combination of deep-seated passion for sheer acquisition and propagation of knowledge, idle curiosity, altruistic concern *et cetera* with a view to helping the society at large. The scientist is institutionally compelled to conform to the ethos of selflessness on the threat of possible negative sanctions. Besides, where the norm has been internalised, the possible pain of psychological conflict provides an additional incentive for conformity (Merton 1968:613).

Be that as it may, a caveat is in order, nonetheless: The phenomenon of 'publish or perish syndrome' may have a tendency to lead a handful of scientists and intellectuals among university dons, in particular, to the possible temptation of less than morally sound posture, in their bid to enhance their particular chances of upward social mobility. This is to say that there have been isolated cases of self-centred motive and impropriety underlying the pursuance of scientific or epistemic activities. But then such cases would, indeed, be exceptions to the rule. Moreover, such deviant cases, would, of course, not be condoned by the particular community of co-experts, scientists or colleagues. Indeed, negative sanctions range from sneering, rebuking, ostracising to outright termination of appointments of erring individuals.

It must be emphasised that cases of professional self-centredness are comparatively rare amongst scientists. This is certainly not unrelated to the institutional system of verification and authentication of claims by fellow scientists and experts. That is to say '....the activities of scientists are subject to rigorous policing, to a degree perhaps unparalleled in any other field of activity' (Merton 1968:613). It is to be noted that the scientific ethos of selflessness is, in real terms, not consistent with the realities of peripheral capitalist state as it is witnessed in sub-Saharan Africa. Where there is the pervasiveness of authoritarian structures and social relations, coupled with the attendant immanent contradictions. The prevalent hidden agenda amongst the ruling elites have primarily been self-centred. As it has been documented elsewhere, institutionalised corruption and kleptocracy are deep-seated within the social structures and relations in sub-Saharan Africa. (Onimode 1988; Ninalowo, 1987; Ake, 1981). Under these circumstances, expressions of structural alienation are enacted and reproduced amongst scientists and intellectuals. These are, of course, counter-productive to any meaningful progressive social change. (Gouldner 1979; Brym 1980; Ninalowo 1990b).

A fourth and final component of scientific ethos we shall discuss here is institutionalised scepticism.

## Institutionalised Scepticism

One of the hallmarks of the scientific enterprise happens to be institutionalised scepticism. It is, indeed sine qua non for science, properly conceived. A claim, assertion, argument, thesis, proposition, hypothesis, conjectures et cetera cannot, of course, be logically sustained without concrete demonstrable substantiation or evidence. A claim that cannot withstand the principle of verifiability or falsifiability does not, of course, belong to the realm of science. In effect, the extent of the scientific status of a claim is a function of the degree to which it may be proven to be true or

false — that is, the extent of its falsifiability or verifiability potential (Popper 1965, 1968, 1976; Winch 1958).

On the one hand, institutional trait of scepticism is normatively consistent with scientific culture as well as democratic properties (i.e. freedom of speech and expression). On the other hand, the conflict-generating potential congealed within the attributes of scepticism for social relations between the scientist and the powers-that-be is of almost infinite proportion; especially under authoritarian regimes such as are common-place in Africa. Scientific ethos that incites or encourages the scientist to question, say, fiscal mismanagement, kleptomania, corruption, or to generally reveal inadequacies in the running of the affairs of the society and the state by the ruling elites, would quite obviously receive hostilities in a variety of forms. These may range from reprimand, blockage of upward mobility to incarceration or even surreptitious elimination of allegedly erring individuals.

It is of course, axiomatic that persecution or vilification of scientists or other particular professional groups, simply as a result of the performance of their roles in line with their vocational guidelines and principles, is bound to be counter-productive for any meaningful social change. The point can hardly be over-emphasised that any violation of the features of the scientific ethos, which are, to reiterate, consistent with democratic properties either by the state or the civil society, is bound to reproduce structural alienation amongst the intellectuals. With increasingly deep-seated structural alienation, one would witness concomitant attitudinal and behavioural expressions of alienated state. This episode would, of course, be inversely related to ameliorative human-centred social change (Gouldner 1979; Ninalowo 1984, 1988, 1990b).

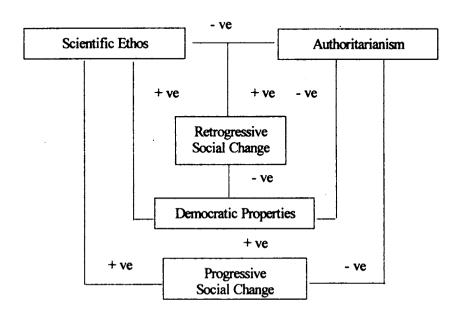
The deliberations hitherto afford us a theoretical frame of reference for the issues we have raised up to this point. The summary of these will now be crystallised in the final section IV that follows. Figure I provides a schematic reference point.

## In Retrospect and Prospect: Towards Progressive Social Change

According to the theoretical model that is distilled in Figure I. First, it is posited that there is an inverse relationship between the components of scientific ethos — i.e. universalism, collective epistemic ownership, selflessness and institutionalised scepticism — and authoritarian social relations and structures. This is on account of the fact that authoritarianism constitutes a violation of scientific ethos. Second, the tenuous relationship between scientific ethos and authoritarian circumstances help to reproduce expressions of structural alienation amongst scientists and other professional groups. Owing to the strategic importance of these social groups, the inverse relationship between scientific ethos and authoritarian properties is only

consistent with retrogressive social change. That is, the negative relationship buttresses the possibilities for retrogressive social change or reproduction of features of underdevelopment.

Figure I: Theoretical Model on the Relationship Between Scientific Ethos, Authoritarianism and Social Change



By the same token, the inverse relationship between scientific ethos and authoritarianism militates against the possibilities for progressive social change. Finally, the inherent mutual harmony and affinity between the properties of scientific ethos and those of democratic culture are, in turn, proportionally related to progressive/ameliorative and human centred social change.

To reiterate, the practical corollary that we distill from all of the preceding discussions has to be that, the pervasive realities of authoritarian social relations and structure in sub-Saharan Africa portend inordinate tendency to enhance the reproduction of underdevelopment. This is partly consequent on the alienation of scientists and other professional groups, who happen to be key agents for progressive social change. Having said that, a viable alternative path, therefore, for authentic human centred development reside in situations whereby both the state and civil society would make consistently genuine decisive practical efforts in order to provide for conducive and enabling environment for the harmonisation of the features of

scientific ethos with those of democratic culture. In other words, for any human-centred progressive development to unfold, there has to be an alignment of the properties of scientific ethos with those of democratic principles in consistently practical forms.

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