Book Review

The Sun is not always Dead at Midnight[1]
(A Review of Basil Davidson's *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, New York and London, 1992)

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'These pages offer the conclusions of a life time', so Basil Davidson introduces *The Black Man's Burden.* Focused on the period since the emergence of Africa from colonial rule in the 50s, this 'meditation on the nature of the African experience' could not have come at a more opportune time. For the air is rife with 'Afro-pessimism'. Even friends of Africa have despaired of a crisis, persistent and prolonged, taking on continental dimensions, so much so that words like 'intervention', 'conditionalities', 'limited sovereignty', and even 'recolonization' have increasingly moved from a vocabulary that once sought to explain the genesis of 'the African crisis', to one that now prescribes solutions to it. Africa must be saved from itself, and the sooner the better, so runs the current refrain of specialists on Africa.

In the midst of such pervasive gloom, it cannot but be sobering to encounter the first fruit of Basil Davidson's forty years-long meditation: 'In retrospect, the whole European project in Africa, stretching over more than a hundred years, can only seem a vast obstacle thrust across every reasonable avenue of African progress'. For that project has 'taught that nothing useful could develop without denying Africa's past, without a ruthless severing from Africa's roots and a slavish acceptance of models drawn from entirely different histories'. (p. 42)

But Basil Davidson's reflection is not just another lament about the unintended consequences of ill-considered external intervention in Africa's internal affairs. It is, rather, first and foremost a devastating critique of the 'ideological poverty' of the educated strata, of those who assumed the reins of African independence in the 50s, of 'the general acceptance by literate Africans, at least down to the 1970s and perhaps beyond, of their necessary self-alienation from Africa's roots', (p. 50) of their seeing 'Africa's own

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1 Line from Okello Oculi, *Orphan*, East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1968.

history as irrelevant and useless' (p. 103), of their faith in everything imported, from 'capitalism' to 'socialism'.

An Alienated Intelligentsia

With great sensitivity and care, the opening chapter outlines the social history of the pace-setting core of the educated strata: the 'recaptives' and the 'mission-educated', on the west coast of Africa. It is a history that opens with Britain's 19th century naval blockade designed to put a stop to the Atlantic slave trade. 'In the curious language of those times', the 'captives... taken into slavery for shipment to the Americas, but 'recaptured' and set free by the crews of the naval blockade', came to be known as 'recaptives' (p. 25). Many thousands were set ashore at Monrovia. But many more 'settled in villages around Freetown or in Freetown itself'. 'Little by little', they 'created a common language, a modified English known as Kreo (Creole in English), invented forms of self-administration or adapted those they remembered from home'. They 'went into local business, local politics, local administration... and in due course produced theologians, political thinkers, men of capable action and, increasingly, men of relative wealth', though 'absolutely African in their origins', the recaptives 'were divided from Africa by an acute experience of alienation', for 'Africa had sent them into slavery'. 'With Christianity and Constitution as their watchwords, the recaptive thinkers held that Africa needed to be saved, and salvation must come from outside the Continent'. (p. 25-28).

The children of the recaptives were in time joined, in their literary skills as in their profound alienation from all that they thought Africa stood for, 'by all those West Coast and other Africans who now began to receive the benefits of literate education in mission schools in several colonies'. 'Those who are instructed in the English language', wrote the Afro-Carribean diplomat and civil servant Edward Wilmot Blyden to a friend, Mary Kingsley, in 1900,

> *are taught by those from whom they have received their training that all native institutions are, in their character, darkness and depravity and in their effects only evil and evil continually... The Christianized Negro looks away from his native health. He is under the curse of an insatiable ambition or imitation of foreign ideas and foreign customs* (p.42-43).

Basil Davidson has the confidence of one who combines conviction with knowledge, who has spent the better part of his working life not just combatting the racist presumption that Africa has no history worth recording but bringing to public knowledge the contours of that very history. At no point does this pungent critique of the educated strata in contemporary Africa convey even the hint of a caricature. His judgement is harsh, but

never exaggerated. It is pointedly formulated, but brought to life with numerous life-sketches of illustrious recaptives and mission-educated locals. With painstaking sensitivity, Davidson sketches the deep-seated tension that marked the consciousness of this group: it 'saw that the assertion of Africa having a history of its own must be part of their case against colonial racism', (p. 102) but wanted to erase this history in the name of development; it argued for Africa's independence, but could not break any thought of a development rooted in Africa's own history. Assailed by a white racism which contemptuously dismissed them — in the words of a colonial Governor — as 'useless visionaries, detestable clerks' (p. 45), and yet convinced that a 'job had to be done' for Africa had to be saved from the 'unrepentant savagery' that had fed the sinews of the slave trade, the educated strata found themselves 'sentence (d) to nowhere' in the purgatory that was colonial racism. They joined and inevitably led the anti-colonial struggle, with a passion that was directed as much against the colonizers as against the 'traditionalists' (p. 33, 46-48). And when they won, these modernizers with a mission sought to wipe Africa's historical slate clean. Of this group, Davidson rightfully concludes: 'No matter how much they spoke in defense of the virtues of Africa's cultures, the 'modernizers' were necessarily standing on the ground of European culture' (p. 35). It was the European legacy that they mechanically transplanted onto African soil that was to be their, and Africa's, undoing.

Erasing the Pre-Colonial Heritage

To import European institutions uncritically was the same as denying Africa's own legacy. With a broad sweep that only a historian of Davidson's stature can dare and deliver, chapters 2 ('Road not Taken') and 3 ('Shadows of Neglected Ancestors') sum up the political legacy of precolonial Africa that the 'modernizers' threw away without a second thought. Davidson sketches a legacy with an accent on processes of state formation and associated political cultures. He outlines two core paths leading to state formation: one to the ethnically distinct nation-state, the other to the ethnically diverse *regna.*

The history that Davidson recapitulates to highlight the process of nation-state formation in pre-colonial Africa is that of the Asante in West Africa. He traces with authority the process of unification of various clans of a people called Akan beginning 'around 1690 or so'.

> *The Europeans who first came in close contact with Asante... certainly thought and wrote of Asante as a nation-state, even if they only used for it the term 'nation', because it had all the attributes that justified the label.*

Davidson is insistent on the parallel. Precolonial Africa produced nation-states as did Europe, and a national consciousness that cemented allegiance around this state as did Europe:

> *The history of precolonial tribalism... was in every objective sense the history of nationalism: of socio-political categories, that is, corresponding to the origin and development of unifying community formation in one terminology or another* (p. 75).

Also, as in Europe, the consolidation of the nation within the territorial boundaries of its own state unleashed a powerful dynamic of expansion.

> *By 1750 this powerful nation-state had secured effective control of the whole of what would become, two centuries later, the republic of Ghana. The Asante nation-state had become an empire-state* (p. 58-59).

The political life of the Asante nation-state was organized around three general principles that Davidson contends more or less regulated the life 'of precolonial political institutions in every African region where stable societies produced one or other form of central government'. These underlined the need to create:

> *A unifying force (for) a system of participation that must not only work, but must publicly be seen to work, (and finally, for) a systematic distrust of power (leading to) an insistence on the distribution of executive power.*[2] (p. 60-61, 86).

But the nation-state was not the only destination to which state formation processes in precolonial Africa led. The second was a less centralized and more federalized form, one that developed 'south of the Sahara in medieval times, 'in ancient Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem. These 'big political formations' brought diverse peoples around an ambitious 'core people', and yet had little concern with 'ethnic minorities'. Davidson finds them 'an exact parallel with' the *regna*, a state form that developed in Europe after the collapse of the western Roman empire, (p. 93). Though the African *regna* 'fell apart' by the beginning of the seventeenth century and 'disappeared from history', its lesson has not ceased to be relevant. That lesson is the virtue of tolerating diversity in large political formations.

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2 Davidson later outlines 'a number of guiding principles of social behaviour', also characteristic of otherwise diverse societies: 'a principle of conservation' based on the idea that 'a successful balance with nature had to be a stable balance' (p. 83); the 'principle of 'levelling compensation' ... (in) judicial practice' as illustrated by the following example: 'Homicide is a crime, but the killing of one person may not be best answered by the killing of the killer: it may be better answered by providing the deprived family with a person to take the place of the lost person'. (p.84).

The synthesis is impressive; its historical sweep breath-taking. But as the reader moves from these historical chapters to what Davidson claims is 'the Black Man's Burden' — 'the curse of the nation-state' that is Africa's inheritance from Europe — a seed of doubt is implanted. For if the pivot of Africa's present crisis is the form of state that characterized its political life, the nation-state, to what extent can this be understood as a European import, and to what extent — given Davidson's own historical synthesis — is it a return to one of the two main trajectories in Africa's own precolonial political history, the Asante nation-state, of its extension, the Asante empire-state? Or does the problem lie not in Davidson's historical synthesis but in his historical analogy, leading to a conceptual confusion which sees the centralized state — and, at that, a very specific form of it, the centralized colonial state — as analogous to the nation-state? I shall argue that, in spite of his astute and startlingly mind-opening historical insights, Davidson is led astray by his tenacious search for historical analogies. Before moving on to the critique, however, let me sum up Basil Davidson's own formulation of the multi-faceted problem that plagues contemporary Africa.

The Problem and the Analogy

'Primarily, this is a crisis of institutions', so Basil Davidson begins his analysis of the problem. 'Which institutions?' he asks, and answers, 'We have to be concerned here with the nationalism which produced the nation-states of newly independent Africa after the colonial period: with the nationalism that became nation-statism' (p. 10). It is a process that, Davidson finds, has led to remarkably similar developments in east and central Europe, as in Africa.

> *About a dozen nation-states thus took shape in Europe out of the collapse of the old internal empires. Many more were going to emerge in Africa from the external empires: some fifty new nation-states in all* (p. 267).

We shall see that Davidson pursues this analogy relentlessly, from the beginning to the end of the book, and pays a heavy price for it.

But Davidson is aware that 'no simple explanation of such phenomena can ever be adequate'. He identifies two, and not just one, pivots of the African problem — on the one hand, the legacy of the nation-state, on the other, a culture of tribalism/clientelism, Africa's time-tested response to predatory dictatorship and disorder (more on this later) — one external, the other internal. And he proceeds to further unravel the many dimensions of these two horns of the African dilemma — an authoritarian bureaucracy, clientelism, a countryside bled dry by bloating urban areas and forced to turn to illegal trade to survive, all set in an ever-worsening ecological and

international context — as 'they all came together, visibly in the 1980s, in destruction of the accountability of the state' (p. 215).

Once again, Davidson illustrates his argument with numerous case studies, several that in their own right would interest a reader. But the most poignant outcome is that of Liberia. For here, the 'alienation' of the recaptives 'was displayed in its purest form by transatlantic black people' who meant to develop the continent 'on entirely non-African lines, convinced that nothing else was possible or, if possible, desirable' (p. 43-44). And it was here, in 1990, that 'the outcome of this long experiment in civilizing Africa by denying Africa's own history and achievements was to reach its ultimate degradation'. But Davidson makes it plain that the tragedy of Liberia, as of its leader Doe, is not explained by a single institutional inheritance from outside, the nation-state; it is also shaped by an internally-generated African response. Doe, like Liberia:

> *was equally the victim of another pathology of the times that formed him: the pathology, that is, of a colonial or a neocolonial 'tribalism' or clientelism which, itself, was a product not of Africa's precolonial development, but a desperate mode of self-defense by citizens whose state could not or would not protect them* (p. 248).

This 'modern tribalism', Davidson has no doubt, 'flourishes on disorder, is utterly destructive of civil society, makes hey of morality, flouts the rule of law' (p. 11). The two horns of the African dilemma are thus the nation-state that has denied Africa's own history and 'modern tribalism' that has destroyed 'civil society'; one externally imposed, the other an internally generated mode of self-defense. The more Davidson explores these two 'curses' the more he gets entangled in East European analogies, and the less fruitful becomes his quest for answers to questions that he formulates in the introductory chapter: 'What explains this degradation from the hopes and freedoms of newly regained independence? How has this come about? Where did the liberators go wrong?' (p. 9).

Nation-State or Centralized Colonial State?

In just about every country in Africa, two broad groups contended for leadership at independence: 'modernizing nationalist' and 'traditional chiefs'. The kings and chiefs enjoyed not only the legitimacy of 'tradition' but also the backing of the colonial power. And yet, in just about every country, they lost. Why?

To make sense of this outcome, one needs to be wary of the implications of Davidson's brief description of 'nationalist' organizing as mainly an urban affair with periodic campaigning forays into the countryside. True, this movement drew its cadres mainly from urban and peri-urban social forces: teachers, petty traders, trade unionists, ex-students. And yet, the fact

remains that the core social base of every compelling movement — such as the CPP in Ghana or TANU in mainland Tanganyika — was mainly rural, not urban. Also, among the targets of this rural peasant revolt, everywhere, were chiefs. To understand the constellation of forces on both sides of the anti-colonial struggle, and to grasp the character of the state that the 'modernizers' inherited at independence, one needs to move away from Davidson's analogy centered on the 'nation-state' and begin with an analysis of the agrarian question in peasant colonies.

The widespread contradiction between peasants and chiefs, surfacing from colony, was generated by the very character of the colonial state and the office of the 'chief'. For the colonial state was predicated on a sharp distinction between town and countryside. Towns were governed through a 'modern' state structure based on a differentiation between various moments of power: the executive, the legislative, the judicial, the administrative. But this 'bourgeois' state form was only transplanted into colonial towns, not into the countryside.

The state structure which governed the rural population was organized around an opposite principle: power was concentrated, not differentiated. The various forms of 'native authorities' confronted their peasant populations like a clenched fist. A chief in the countryside did not just implement laws passed down from the central government; he also had the power to formulate bye-laws affecting the area of his jurisdiction. He was also the authority that adjudicated local conflicts, listened to appeals, and meted out punishment — so long as this concerned only 'natives'. A single example from Uganda, requiring no more than minor modifications to suit other cases, will suffice to illustrate my point. Come the beginning of the calendar year, it was the chief who assessed the property of the peasant, determined the tax he would pay, had the right to pass a bye-law which may involve a supplementary payment, whether in cash or kind or labour, listened to the appeal of the peasant if he thought he had been unfairly assessed, arrested the peasant in case of failure to pay the levies in time, released him when the sentence expired, and determined the fine he would pay in addition, for having failed to pay the original levy in time! This 'chief' was no 'traditional' leader with 'traditional' powers; he was the executive, the legislator, the administrator, the judge, all rolled into one. Even when local governments were elected following post-war reforms, their role was only advisory — to the chief.

This form of the state becomes intelligible once we understand that the relationship between the state and the mainly rural communities over which it ruled, was markedly different in the colonies: the state structure was not only there to stabilize and reproduce existing social relations, but to transform them; not just there to regulate existing markets but to create them in the first place. Force was not just a regulator of productive relationships, it

was integral to the very process of production, often necessary just to set it into motion. Relations of exploitation were not simply economic, but also extra-economic: forced enclosures. The fused power that was the person of the chief made sense as the enforcer of this regime of extra-economic coercion.

But this regime is not brought to light in Basil Davidson's analysis. Davidson's analysis of the city-country dichotomy revolves exclusively around two notions: exploitative trade relations, and the increasing weight of an urban-based authoritarian bureaucracy. No wonder that his starting point is the unequal terms of trade between town and country, institutionalized with the setting up of post-war marketing boards, and taken over at independence. The non-monetary relationships where direct force figures as a key ingredient and its political deployment that enforces them evade him totally. It is an analysis that cannot possibly come to grips with the totality of the agrarian question under colonial conditions. If thus cannot explain why, when the anger of the rural masses did explode, it was aimed not only against the marketing boards and the (usually immigrant) traders that formed a link in the chain of unequal trade relations, but also against the chiefs who were the linchpin of the regime of extra-economic coercion. This anger was a force readily available for organization and incorporation into the countryside anti-chief and anti-colonial movement led by the 'modernizers'.

When independence did come, the 'modernizers' inherited a bifurcated state structure, designed to govern 'citizens' in towns but 'subjects' in villages. It was a state structure forged and perfected during the colonial period, not imported from the metropolitan countries on the eve of independence. But Davidson claims the latter, maintaining that the colonial state gave way to the nation-state at independence. His only proof is the language of 'nationalism' used by the 'modernizers'. But the language stood at odds, and sharply too, with the institutional reality. It was not the first time that the oppressed sought to lend legitimacy to their struggle by borrowing battle-cries and slogans from the arsenal of the oppressors. Every colonial child was aware of the imperial dictum that the right to self-determination was cast in the language of nationalism; the debate on whether Jews, Armenians, or Poles had the right to self-determination became a debate on whether Jews, Armenians or Poles were 'nations' or not. 'One thing's certain', Davidson quotes Jacques Rabemananjara, the Malagasy nationalist, writing in 1958:

> *in today's political vocabulary the word nationalism means, generally, the unanimous movement of coloured peoples against Western domination. What does it matter if the word doesn't really describe the phenomenon to which we like to apply it?* (p. 164).

But Davidson is adamant, that Africa at independence took the same route that Europe did following the Wilsonian settlement at the end of the First World War, the route of the nation-state. But if 'the Divine Will' in Europe 'was generally seen as urging each culture to realize itself as a nation, and then as a sovereign nation-state' (p. 129, it was not so in Africa. And the irony is that several statements, scattered through the book, indicate that Davidson is not unaware of this historical fact. He says at one point:

> *The doctrine of the sovereign nation-state in Europe was accepted more easily than in Africa, if only because the cutoff from the precolonial past in Europe was less drastic and complete. This was because the new frontiers in Central and Eastern Europe corresponded, often enough, with major ethnic groupings and historical memories* (p. 267).

The point is that they did not, often enough, in Africa, it is a historical fact that Davidson himself proceeds to illustrate, quoting Jean Suret-Canale, a leading French historian of West Africa (p. 203):

> *Like most frontiers in Africa today, those inherited by Guinea from the colonial partition are completely arbitrary. They do not reflect the limits of natural regions, nor the limits of separate ethnic groups. They were shaped in their detail by chances of conquest or compromise between colonial powers.*

And this is the real point. The language of 'nationalism' notwithstanding, one could not speak of 'nation-states' in Africa. The nation-state is precisely the option that Africa did *not* take at independence. For, unlike in Europe, the history of state formation bears little resemblance to the history of social transformation in Africa. Political history, the history of state-making and boundary-drawing, is at total odds with social history in this one continent in the world. The irony is that the African case is, if anything, the opposite of the historical process that led to state formation in Europe.

As I have been at pains to point out, this basic fact cannot escape a historian of the calibre of Basil Davidson. And sure enough, it is a point often made in his book, but also just as often set aside as Davidson pursues the central analogy around which he has chosen to organize his material and fashion his argument. The more tenaciously Davidson pursues the analogy between Africa and Eastern Europe, the more surely he is led astray, and the more the analogy hangs like an Albatross leading to a lame and tame conclusion in place of the *tour de force* that the opening chapters seem to promise.

But before we can turn to Davidson's prescriptions for Africa's contemporary ills, we need to follow him through the tortuous path he has chosen to tread to drive home the East European analogy. For the analogy hangs on not one but two conceptual pegs: not just nation-state but also civil society.

'Civil Society' vs 'Modern Tribalism'

Following popular uprisings in Eastern Europe in the late eighties, the notion of 'civil society' gained widespread currency amongst Western intellectuals. Democracy, many argued, meant the liberation of civil society à la Eastern Europe. To that refrain, Davidson adds a corollary: the evidence of the collapse of civil society in Africa is the spread of 'modern tribalism'.

Davidson distinguishes between three types of 'tribalism': pre-colonial, colonial and modern. Pre-colonial tribalism was largely a 'nationalism' that 'has often been a force for good, a force creating civil society dependent on laws and the rule of law' (p. 11). Then there was the 'tribalism' of the colonial period whereby 'tribes' were literally invented where none had previously existed. Davidson sees colonial 'tribalism' as 'perhaps the only African political invention of those times that could or did succeed, and was well-promoted by the British or the French major colonial powers, as a useful administrative instrument'. For enterprising men (and there must also have been some women), it was a rare opportunity for endeavour and enterprise. For the colonial authority, it rationalized and lessened the cost of administration: 'Let related ethnic units' band together and become 'tribes' ... because, if they banded together, the costs of European administration would be that much less'. So ran the flow of official thinking.

So 'new tribes, such as the Sukuma and the Byakusa' in mainland Tanganyika 'rose fully formed from the mysterious workings of 'tradition' (p.100-101).

To these two types of 'tribalism', one a pre-colonial 'nationalism', and the other a colonial 'invention', Davidson contrasts a third: modern tribalism/clientelism. Once again, Davidson falls back on a historical parallel, while remaining faithful to the original analogy with Eastern Europe. 'The Nigerian historian Peter Ekeh has argued convincingly', Davidson tells us:

> *That the spread and reinforcement of kinship ties and manipulations — in short, forms of clientelism — became a dominant mode of political life in Africa in that historical period, the major slaving years, whenever the state either failed to defend citizens from violence or enslavement or became the wrecker of community life. ... As the slaving state became increasingly a predator, 'kinship systems were strengthened and elaborated as a means of providing protection against the dangers of the violence created by the slave'.*

'In just the same way', argues Davidson,

> *the predatory nature of the postcolonial or neocolonial state in Africa ... has provoked self-defense by kinship ties or their bureaucratic*

> *equivalents and, with this, a corresponding subversion of the state by smuggling and related kinds of economic crime.*

Matters have come to a point, he insists, that:

> *in present day life there is no doubt that kinship corporations or their equivalent, rather than any other form of political self-organization, are what generally count for most in everyday life.*

But 'kinship corporations cannot produce a democratic state, whether or not they are disguised as political parties', he concludes, for 'they point, more often then not, to a collapse of civil society ... open(ing) the gate to fearful abuse of common interest'. As evidence, Davidson cites examples of:

> *Uganda, Chad, Burundi, and quite a few other lands ... submerged in tides of violence which revealed time and again that the 'tribalism' of kinship corporations and their equivalents could act as agents of mutual havoc that nothing seemed able to contain* (p. 225-228).

So, finally, and alas, Davidson arrives at the same conclusion as have the 'modernizers', whether within or outside Africa, that the real problem in the continent is 'tribalism', even if a modern and historical product!

But Davidson does not stop there. He goes on to argue that, no matter what the appearances, 'modern tribalism' has become the single most enduring reality of contemporary Africa. It is these 'regional or territorial interests' that have 'flowed into the 'party-political' compartments'' and have 'often ... assumed an ethnic guise'. It is this 'modern tribalism', or this 'clientelism', that lurks behind every organized interest. 'Generally', argues Davidson, 'the nation-states of Africa have had to endure clientelist 'single-party rule' with all its openings to dictatorship, or else 'multi-party rule', which has simply led to other forms of clientelist corruption' (p. 207). So much so that the 'multiparty' state proclaimed in Zaire in 1990 'had fostered overnight no fever than 230 'political parties', not a single one of which had any of the organizational and mobilizing capacity that a political party is supposed to have'. 'This was a reversion', he claims, 'to kinship corporations under the thinnest guise, and was going to solve precisely nothing' (p.227).

Having started his journey with an uncompromising and illuminating critique of the 'modernizers', Davidson is ironically tempted to conclude it with a return to the fold of a triumphant modernism. I shall argue that the clue to that retreat is the dichotomy civil society / modern tribalism: contrasting the promise of 'rule of law' that regulates 'civil society' with the danger of 'modern tribalism' opening floodgates 'to a fearful abuse of common interest'. I shall try to show that so ideological is this dichotomy, that neither of its polarities is anchored in a defensible historical analysis. Rather, Davidson uses the concept 'civil society' as many have 'socialism',

prophetically and not analytically, as a promise and not a reality, as programmatic and not actually-existing; just as he employs 'modern tribalism' as a semi-caricature, throwing to the winds his otherwise sure inclination for not just a contextualized but a nuanced understanding of historical phenomena'.

Let us begin with the notion 'civil society'. Forged in the annals of Western social theory, the concept of 'civil society' is anchored in a dichotomy central to modern sociology, that between community and society. Perhaps the clearest explanation of this dichotomy is to be found in the writings of Max Weber as he seeks to contrast 'communal' action with 'associative' action. In his words, community relations are based on 'various types of affectual, emotional or traditional bases', whereas relations in a society turn around either a 'rational free market' or 'voluntary associations'.

While communal relations are natural or primordial, societal relations are historically constructed. In this distinction between community and society was anchored the post-war edifice of modernization theory, constructed around the dichotomy tradition and modernity.

Civil society, too, is understood by its proponents as a historical construct. While contemporary notions of civil society are several and varied, some more and others less structural, Hegelian theory remains the underpinning of them all. For Hegel, civil society formation is a process with multiple dimensions, anchored in profound changes in the nature of both 'society' and the 'state': on the one hand, the rise of free and autonomous individuals, relations between whom were recognized as contractual with the emergence of civil law and the freeing of economic relations from social bondage; on the other, the rise of the modern state and the depersonalization of violence, a phenomenon that contemporaries were tempted to describe as the advent of 'civilization'. Hence, 'civil(ized) society'.

The history of civil society formation in Africa — Davidson's trans-historical use of the concept notwithstanding — has a very distinct trajectory, one marked by racism from the outset. For civil society under colonial conditions was urban society, and urban society was the society of colons. The distinction between civil society and peasant ('tribal') communities was crystallized, as I have briefly sketched earlier, in both the bifurcated state structure and the regime of extra-economic exploitation in the countryside. To be sure, the parameters of civil society in Africa were continually and forcibly stretched through democratic struggles. The first to gain entry to it were immigrant minorities; on their heels followed indigenous middle strata and even sections of working classes. The high point of these struggles was the post-war anti-colonial movement, a movement that pitted not only the colonized against the colonizers, but also peasant communities against civil

society. That clash was captured most incisively and eloquently in the writings of Frantz Fanon.

But the truly spectacular expansion of civil society was yet to come, it followed independence. That dramatic expansion can be glimpsed if we contrast the primarily rural-based anti-colonial post-war movements with the mainly urban-based 'pro-democracy' movements of today. For while the nationalist movement of yesterday drew its strength mainly from the organized support of peasant communities, the pro-democracy movement of today is mainly anchored in civil society. To be sure, there is a marked difference between most African countries where civil society is a minority construct and its movements — dominated by middle strata such as clergy, lawyers, professionals and academics — tend to speak the language of liberalism, and those like South Africa where a strong working class has shaped the struggle of a civil society whose demands transcend the boundaries of a liberal agenda. Davidson, however, totally ignores the latter while he has little sympathy for the former. He sees their liberal agenda, and particularly their call for a multi-party electoral system, as nothing but a facade for the forces of 'modern tribalism' to continue to occupy the political stage. It is surely a curious contradiction in Davidson's writing that, in spite of a never-ending eulogy of civil society, he sees nothing regenerative about actually-existing civil society in Africa!

But this not all. The same contradiction plagues his passionate denunciation of 'modern tribalism'. For a more analytical and nuanced understanding of that phenomenon will bring to light a fact obscured in Davidson's treatment of it: every emancipatory movement in the peasantry, whether in the colonial or the contemporary period, has been either a 'tribal' or a religious movement. This has been as true of the armed liberation movements like the Mau Mau, the movements in the former Portuguese colonies, or the National Resistance Army of the 80s in Uganda; as it has been true of religious cults, from Nyabingi in Uganda/Rwanda, to Maji Maji in Tanganyika, to Mwana Lesa in Zaire, to Alice Lanshena in Zambia, to Maitatsine in Nigeria, to Alice Lakwena in contemporary Uganda. Contrast, for example, Amilcar Cabral's analysis of the social base of armed liberation in Guinea-Bissau ('An Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea-Bissau') with Basil Davidson's treatment of 'modern tribalism': Cabral makes sense of that social base as primarily a united front of several peasant ('tribal') communities. Surely, it is yet another curious contradiction in Davidson's writing that while pinning hopes on peasant-based armed liberation movements as swept through former Portuguese colonies — movements whose leadership spoke the language of 'national liberation' and 'socialism' with as much ease as its adherents did the language of 'tribalism' and 'religion' — he repeats *ad nauseum* a one-sided critique of 'modern tribalism', not forgetting, once in a while, to warn against 'fundamentalism'.

The Way Ahead

Davidson would surely agree that neither the 'revolution from above' that Africa's post-independence 'modernizers' sought nor the 'revolution from without' that the international financial institutions promise today can hold much prospect for Africa. But to say this is to accept that the main elements of any solution to Africa's malaise must be found within the parameters of the African problem itself. It is in its attempt to charter a way out of the current crisis that *The Black Man's Burden* falls short, not only because of the inconsistencies it is riddled with, but because of Davidson's failure to appreciate the contradictory nature of the phenomena he seeks to analyze.

Davidson is right to identify the problem at two levels: the form of the state, and the absence of 'mass participation'. But he is wrong to identify that state form with the nation-state, and the absence of 'mass participation' with the destruction of civil society, both à la Eastern Europe. So enamored is Davidson with the language of civil society that he seems constantly in danger of slipping into an uncompromising modernism, and substituting one borrowed solution for another. But he doesn't, not because he discards the 'civil society' perspective, but because of his instinct, the sure touch of a veteran with a long and enduring experience of Africa. In the process, however, there emerges a continuous tension between Davidson the theorist and Davidson the historian and the practitioner.

The theorist who never tires of reciting the virtues of 'civil society' and the evils of 'modern tribalism' is saved by the practitioner who has learnt from liberation movements of the eighties that, where the peasantry is a majority, there can be no democratic transformation without direct peasant participation, and that 'democratic participation would have to be 'mass participation'' which must be 'aimed at giving rural multitudes a real measure of practical self-government' (p. 295-299). The historian affirms that:

> *'mass participation' ... was at the heart of all those African societies which has proved stable and progressive before the destructive impact of the overseas slave trade and colonial dispossession had made itself felt* (p. 295).

And yet, blocked by a 'civil society' and 'nation-state' perspective, the practitioner is unable to cull from experience the kernel of what democratization must involve if it is to be of meaning to the peasant majority: the dismantling of the *uncivil* colonial state that strangles the peasantry in a web of extra-economic coercion.

Davidson is right in pointing to 'federalism' and 'mass participation' as key signposts in Africa's endeavour to find a way out of its crisis, but he is unable to link the two in an organic whole. The theorist who never tires of

the uni-dimensional critique of 'modern tribalism' fails to appreciate that 'modern tribalism' (like modern religious movements) is a contradictory phenomenon, comprising moments both manipulative and democratic. And yet, the practitioner unhesitatingly concludes that:

> *a hopeful future ... would have to be a federalizing future: a future of organic unities of sensible association across wide regions within which national cultures, far from seeking to destroy or main each other, could evolve their diversities and find in them a mutual blessing* (p. 286).

Is it not strange that, having just dismissed 'modern tribalism', Davidson should turn around and see salvation in rejuvenated national cultures?! What would these 'national cultures' be if not the cultures of the much berated 'tribes'? And why in the same breath herald the liberation of these 'national cultures', these 'diversities', while bemoaning the demand for a multiparty system because it would mean 'a reversion to kinship corporations under the thinnest guise', leading to 'a collapse of civil society' and a 'fearful abuse of common interest'? (p. 227).

The point is neither to celebrate 'modern tribalism' nor to recoil from it in alarm. Rather, to recognize its contradictory nature is to appreciate the contradictory possibilities in any liberation of 'modern tribalism'. While any type of federalism would have to recognize the legitimacy of 'tribal' interests, the resulting 'tribalism' could either be democratically-constituted or turn into a top-down manipulation. The outcome, in turn, would depend on whether or not federalism has been joined to 'mass participation' through a reform which goes beyond simply federalizing the colonial hold over the peasantry to dismantling it.

This is why it is rather unfortunate that Davidson should uncritically acclaim 'those honest generals and soldiers' in Nigeria who have been the guarantors of a federalized state, but have at the same time held the fort against every movement calling for its democratization! It is also why it is equally unfortunate that Davidson should lamely apologize for the failure of regimes born of armed liberation struggles in Portuguese colonies to proceed 'with the project of mass participation once the driving disciplines of the war were no longer present' — and not recognize that a far more important reason lay in the perspective of 'revolution from above' that these regimes shared with fellow-modernizers around the continent. It is unfortunate, too, that Davidson should choose to ignore the experience of those regimes around the continent who have gone the furthest in institutionalizing rural mass participation. I am speaking of Khadafi in Libya, Sankara in Burkina Faso, the early Rawlings in Ghana, and now Museveni in Uganda. How does one explain the staying power of such regimes except by the reforms they carried out, far-reaching reforms that generated rural support by reorganizing the colonially-inherited state structure and simultaneously

recognizing collective rights of reorganized rural communities — even if not always consistently.

But these regimes have their darker side too: a deep-seated suspicion of civil society and its liberal demands. His eulogy of 'civil society' notwithstanding, it is a suspicion shared by Davidson — and by the regimes born of the armed liberation movements in Portuguese colonies. One needs to recognize that, all the way from the post-war anti-colonial movements to the armed liberation movements of the eighties, peasant-based movements have had a deep distrust of civil society. At the same time, the Achilles Heel of contemporary civil society-based movements is their lack of a peasant base, and consequently their limited liberal agenda. The question of the hour, surely, is how to transcend the limitations — in their social base as well as perspective — of both types of movements, and not reproduce the limitations of only one of them, as would Davidson. For if we are to arrive at a political agenda that can energize and draw together various social forces in the highly fragmented social reality that is contemporary Africa, we need to devise an agenda that will appeal to both civil society and peasant communities, that will incorporate both the electoral choice that civil society movements seek and the quest for community rights that has been the consistent objective of peasant-based movements.

It is Davidson's merit to have taken a bold step on a journey that must without fear challenge all received wisdom, even if he begins to fall back on a little too much received baggage along the way! His contribution is to have asked questions that were taboo for a long time amongst conventional 'modernizing' circles, and equally so amongst radical champions of a 'revolution from above' who were equally constrained by the 'modernization' paradigm. But it is a limitation of *The Black Man's Burden* that it retains vestiges of that very perspective. For, after all, was not the language of 'modernization' also a language of domination, delegitimizing popular struggles of colonial and neocolonial subjects as so many 'tribal' — and today, also, 'fundamentalist' — holdovers on the march of progress? Because he remains trapped in 'fundamentalism', and because he continues to share with top-down revolutionaries a deep distrust of civil society movements, Davidson is unable to identify the social forces whose struggles can take Africa out of its present crisis — precisely because these forces are to be found inside these very movements!

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