

*New Directions and Priorities for Research in Africa: More Think Pieces**

Social Stratification and Nomadism in Africa

Here are some reflections on CODESRIA's research priorities and directions. I would just like to address two issues that deserve great attention from CODESRIA and African scholars. I would like to focus on the social stratification of various African countries and the issue of nomadism.

Social stratification of African countries

With the attainment of independence by African countries, the national question emerged as a priority issue for African politicians and scholars. The initial period was especially about building the nation and laying a foundation for the development of these countries. This was also the period of denial of the existence of African social classes and of advocating the establishment of single, unified or dominant parties, as Leopold Sedar Senghor would put it. Reality has shown that, during the struggle for independence, there was a large front which included almost all social categories in favour of national independence. But setting-up that front did not eliminate the existence of conflicting interests in it. There were social forces outside that front and clearly allied with foreign countries.

Even within the social groups making up the united front for independence, some forces began to emerge seeking to ally with social classes or categories linked to the colonial system upon achievement of formal political independence. The main contradiction existing between all African social forces and supporters of the colonial or neo-colonial system had managed to conceal existing secondary contradictions within forces struggling for national independence.

Thus, the study of the social stratification was a completely neglected issue. The social dimension of the national issue was

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hardly considered. There were few studies addressing the existence of social classes and their struggles in various African countries.

This inadequacy contributed to the ignorance of social levers likely to facilitate the achievement of real independence. It was the rule of extreme voluntarism that ended into simple incantations. No one knows about the social forces likely to affect any social project presented to population. A good knowledge of social stratification in every African country will allow identification of hostile or favourable forces likely to come up in view of projects aimed at achieving genuine independence and true economic and social development. It is time to start studies on social classes, their nature, their objectives, the nature of their social agenda, and their strengths and weaknesses. And this should be specifically done for each African country.

Nomadism, the state issue and the national issue

There are few studies on the question of nomadism especially among African scholars belonging to sedentary communities. Nomads, pastoralists and transhumants were penalized by the colonial school system that was designed for sedentary people and especially for city dwellers. Ibn Khaldun's theories which are not favourable for nomads were repeated by some African scholars without any criticality. But there are authors who advisedly conducted comprehensive studies on the relationship between nomadic and sedentary people. This is the

case for Jacques Attali who wrote: 'The entire mankind history can be reread like that of this caravan. Because, all this history is stamped by a sense of nomadism.' (*L'Homme nomade [Nomadic Man]* Fayard 2003). The word is now fashionable, and erroneously used to describe a large variety of people who are not necessarily nomads: they do not always travel with all their properties. But they all share the nomadic ethics and culture: travelling is the essence of their existence.

Sedentariness is only a brief parenthesis in history. During most of his adventure, man has been shaped by nomadism and he is becoming a traveller again. Ten thousand years ago, in the Middle East, with a particularly welcoming climate, hunters learned to re-use seeds, to water lands, and to store reserves. They became farmers and soon villagers. The only survivor among the various lineages of hominids as he was the best of nomadic people, the *Homo sapiens* invented sedentariness. Sedentariness is thus an idea of hunters: agriculture, an invention of sedentary people; pastoralism, a practice of farmers.

The nomads invented the basic essentials: fire, hunting, languages, agriculture, animal husbandry, footwear, clothes, tools, rituals, art, painting, sculpture, music, calculation, the wheel, writing, law, market, ceramics, metallurgy, horse-riding, the rudder, God, democracy. In short, they left to next sedentary people – and first to Rome – only the invention of the state, tax, prison, savings, and the gun and gunpowder.

About a thousand years ago in America and sub-Saharan Africa, which were then almost cut off from the world, travelling stopped and settling processes encouraged nomadism. Many civilizations, mainly sedentary and pedestrian, were created there. Not knowing about the wheel and the horse, they were bound to the status quo and cycles of agriculture. The world revolution came with pastoralists taming

* The titles of some of the Think Pieces were chosen by the editorial team

animals capable of carrying heavy loads, pulling carts and carrying armed people. For the first time, man could travel faster than his steps; carry more than he could. Progress was once more the prerogative of nomadic people. Henceforth, crossing Eurasia, Africa or America was no longer measured in terms of lifetime, but in years, and soon in months.

The isolation of sub-Saharan Africa is just as deep as that of America. Bushmen were dominant there, by 8,000 BC. Xan is the name that was much later given to them by Hottentots who, themselves, appeared around 1,000 BC. The Xan call themselves Khoi-khoi ('men of men') and from them descended the Twa of Rwanda. Further north, on the edge of the Sahara, settled Bantu peoples ('men') including the Hutu. Other peoples came from Nubia, fleeing the desertification of the Sahara, such as the Tutsi who arrived in the Great Lakes region 3,500 years ago. We know little about their evolution. Until the development, from the sixth century, of the first city-states of nomadic origin; the Berber kingdom of Aoudaghost, the current Mauritania; the Tukulor kingdom of Tekrur, on the Senegal River; the Mandingo kingdom in Niger; the Songhai kingdom near Gao and the Mossi kingdom between Senegal and Niger. Then the kingdom of Ouagadougou, becoming later the Ghana Empire, was overthrown in 1077 by the Almoravid, nomadic Berbers. Because of lack technical equipment, Africa and America were thus confined to a very inventive sedentary agricultural or primitive nomadism. For 1,500 more years, everything would be settled on the other side of the Pacific and the Atlantic, and around the Mediterranean.

From the seventeenth century, merchants increasingly needed space to sell their goods, and therefore safer roads; so it was all about helping workers to move and not using the labour force of those who were moving. The first globalization was approaching; and the first global merchant nomadism was beginning. In sub-Saharan Africa, the very last nomadic tribes of the continent were dying (Dinka, Fulani, Masai, Somali, Nuer, etc.).

The controversy between Cheikh Anta Diop and Jean Suret-Canale

Cheikh Anta Diop

Nomads have been ignored by historians who are usually sons of sedentary people, as pointed out by Gilles Deleuze

and Felix Guattari: 'History is written, but it has always been written from the perspective of sedentary people and on behalf of a state apparatus. Nomadism has never been understood by history.' It is important and interesting that African researchers should address the controversy between Cheikh Anta Diop and Jean Suret-Canale.

In his main thesis *Pre-colonial Black Africa* (1960: 166) Cheikh Anta Diop argues that the relative hatred that existed at a time between semi-nomadic Fulani and their sedentary neighbours can be explained by their different ways of life. It is very common seeing the Fulani taking advantage of the lack of farm watching to let their herds graze there. This is allegedly the origin of the evil, because this fact is all but fortuitous, one cannot overstate its importance. 'But the idea of Fulani hegemony in West Africa is a legend; it is not consistent with documents,' Cheikh Anta Diop wrote. He builds on the *Tarih el Fittah* by Kati, translated by Houdas and Delafosse in Paris in 1913, and on *Tarih es Soudan* by Sadi, translated by Houdas in Paris in 1900. Sonni Ali made several expeditions against the Fulani; he virtually destroyed the Sangare (San-Ka-Re) clan to such an extent that survivors could gather in the shade of a single tree.

Following one of those expeditions, Sonni Ali distributed several Fulani women captives as 'concubines' to some scholars in Timbuktu who were friends. Sadi confirmed that one of them was his grandmother. Can Sonni Ali's simple statements serve as irrefutable evidence? There, is a lack of source criticism to which professional historians attach great importance. Cheikh Anta Diop argues that the idea that the nomadic Fulani were feared in pre-colonial black Africa is not also based on facts. It stems from an *a priori* perspective which aimed at justifying pastoral life at all costs, for reasons that are peculiar to authors. It would have been interesting to know such authors.

Cheikh Anta Diop calls for the testimony of Sadi. The latter emphasizes the insignificance of the material and social force of nomadic people who, due to the fact that they move all the time, do not have the possibility or the ability to accumulate power which is dangerous for sedentary people. This point of view does not seem very strong to us and is worth discussing.

Jean Suret-Canale

Let us now turn to Jean Suret-Canale's essay on the social and historical significance of Fulani hegemonies (XVII - XIX centuries). The original version of this paper was published in German in Berlin, in Akademie Verlag in 1960. Jean Suret-Canale attempted to identify the historical significance of the Fulani hegemony; the hegemony of the Denianke who were in power until 1776, the settlement of the Fulani in Macina in the early fifteenth century, the revolution that made Fouta Djallon an aristocratic, military and theocratic state, the constitution of the empire of scholar Ousmane dan Fodio.

Cheikh Anta Diop read the last two publications of Suret-Canale: 'Traditional societies in tropical Africa and the concept of the Asian mode of production' in *La Pensée* n° 117 published in October 1964, and 'Essay on the social and historical significance of Fulani Hegemonies (XVIIth-XIXth centuries), 1964' published in *Cahiers du C.E.R.M.* He simply wrote: 'I do not want to say anything. I would fear being too critical.' (*Antériorité des civilisations nègres. Mythe ou vérité ? [Anteriority of Negro Civilizations. Myth or Reality?]* Presence Africaine, 1964). It is unfortunate that Cheikh Anta Diop remained silent on this critical issue. Jean Suret-Canale addressed the ethnic origin and ethnic characteristics of the Fulani. They are a special race (or racial type). He decided not to speak any more in terms of 'race' and 'racial' to describe those physical types, moreover impossible to define rigorously. The progress in biology in recent years has finally proclaimed the inappropriateness of the term 'human races.'

It is worth noting that Cheikh Anta Diop spoke in 1948 in an article published in the journal *Presence Africaine* of the Valaf race. The term race was used by colonial authorities in place of ethnicity. The scattering of the Fulani is explained by their economic specialization. They are (or were originally) pastoralists, cattle breeders. The area that is best suited to their activity and that is the focus of their settlement is the Sahel. They may face competition from Saharan pastoralists (the Moor and Tuareg).

In the case of West Africa, conflicts between pastoralists and nomads which exist in the world may have an ethnic character. Here, specialization in pastoral

and agricultural activities is done on the basis of ethnicity. Nomadic or semi-nomadic populations like the Fulani, the Moor and the Tuareg, may come into very violent conflicts with sedentary people such as the Wolof, the Soninke, the Bambara, the Songhai, etc.

In pre-colonial Africa, pastoralists were in a position of hegemony, thanks to the mobility of their draught animals (horses, camels, bullocks, etc.). Yet, with colonization, the balance of power changed in favour of sedentary people who benefited from achievements resulting from colonial outputs (schools, health, roads, railways, etc.).

Jean Suret-Canale, who labels himself Marxist, was interested in nomadic people from West Africa out of necessity. In this area, the founders of Marxism did not bring any input to a true knowledge of

nomadic societies. Marx believed that nomadism is a primitive form of society. For him, the nomad did not know writing, or savings or accumulation or class relationships; they appeared only with agriculture and slavery, and developed only in capitalism. For Lenin, the liberation of the balance of power can be achieved only through the implementation of the most sedentary society, where all means of production belong to the state.

Haal Pulaar-born Senegalese historian, Omar Kane, published a book with the evocative title: *La première hégémonie peule [The first Fulani hegemony]* in Editions Karthala. Kane's position seems to contradict Cheikh Anta Diop's theory that hegemony is a legend.

The elements we have tried to collect can help to better reflect on the social and national issue in Africa.

Relations between nomadic and sedentary people are issue-prone in Senegal.

Martin Weicker wrote a pamphlet entitled: *Nomades et sédentaires au Sénégal [Nomadic and Sedentary People in Senegal]* published by Editions Enda in 1993 in Dakar. In Senegal, space for pastoralists is receding. Agriculture is extending beyond pastoral areas. Nomadism appears as opposed to 'development.' Pastoralist populations are now facing multiple anxieties and many uncertainties for the future. Martin Weicker's analysis of the accumulated effects of agricultural extension and the reduced mobility of pastoralists is a valuable input to the reflection on the relationship between pastoralists and farmers in outlying the Ferlo areas. This could serve as a basis and reference for the design of essential tools.