

THE WESTERN SUDAN IN ITS CLASSICAL PERIOD:

A Review of Marxist Research and Analysis

by

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The Marxist Approach to History

Before looking at Marxist work on the Western Sudan, it might be as well to have some idea of the Marxist approach to history and to become familiar with the terminology.

Historical materialism treats the *mode of production* as the basis of social life. It consists of two elements, the *productive forces* (tools, means, and producers) and the *production relations* (also called economic or property relations). History is seen as the "self-developing social state" of mankind as it passes from one mode of production to another. This is brought about by contradictions within each mode between ever-increasing and improving productive forces coming into conflict with obsolete property relations. With the disappearance of primitive-communal and kinship-oriented society, these conflicts are expressed in the conflicts of classes with opposing interests within the particular society.

Another important element is the relationship between the mode of production within society and its social relationships, ideology, and institutional structures. The *economic basis* is seen as determining this *superstructure*. Societies at the same stage of economic development are found to have fundamentally the same superstructures. The ensemble of basis and superstructure is called by Marx a *socio-economic formation*.

With the production of an appropriable surplus, society passes from the primitive-communal or kinship socio-economic formation to a series of those in which exist two features of fundamental importance, division into *producing-exploited classes* and *owning-exploiting classes*. The antagonistic relations between these necessitate the creation by the owning and exploiting class of the *state* - an instrument of coercion and control. History is thus seen at a higher level as a process of conflict between ruling and subject classes. (The above analysis is based on Kuusinen, 1961).

Such an approach might seem to put an end to, or at least to circumscribe, historical research. Fundamentally, however, it seems to imply no more than the following:

Assume a particular rate of development in the productive faculties of man and you will get a particular form of commerce and consumption. Assume particular stages of development in production, commerce and consumption, and you will have a corresponding civil society. (Marx, cited in Kubbel, 1969:109)

This provides a framework and a methodology. It certainly rules out many approaches to history, but beyond that it might be said to merely set out a program of research. During such research, as we shall see, Marxist historians come to conflicting conclusions. We might also see how their conclusions lead them to question the framework and the methodology with which they began.

From the above summary, it would seem that Marxist historians should be able to throw particular light on such questions as economic and social development, the development of classes and class conflict, such elements of the "superstructure" as religion, authority systems (particularly the state); that they would be able to tell us what kind of society we are seeing, and finally, that their discoveries would be in contrast with those of non-Marxist historians.

The case of the Sudan during its classical period is, perhaps, an ideal one for this purpose. The "evidence" is limited, yet accessible to all. The period is far enough away for it to be beyond the arena of political dispute. The differences are therefore likely to be clearly those of interpretation. A consideration of a number of issues will reveal the particularities of the Marxist approach.

Periodization

Most historians seem to make no attempt to differentiate stages in the classical period of West Sudanese civilisation. As a result, its history is usually presented more or less chronologically, in the manner of the "one damn thing after another!" school, or as a football field on which Pagans versus Mohamedans is being played - but with the commentators reaching different scores at full time. The first tendency can be found not only in the standard British textbooks covering the area (e.g. Oliver and Fage, 1962), but also, surprisingly, in that produced by two Marxists for Guinean schools (Niane and Suret-Canale, 1961). The second approach is implicit in the writings of such Islamic scholars as Trimingham (e.g. 1959) and Hunwick (1966), but also in Fage's criticism of "Islamophile" approaches (Fage, 1964).

The most striking alternative is that of Kubbel (1969) who

wishes to base his periodization on a distinction, in the Marxist manner, between different stages of economic growth and social relations. Ghana (8th to 12th C.), Mali (13th to 15th C.) and Songhai (mid-16th to 17th C.), represented, he claims, three different levels of economy and society and political relations. His distinctions can be summed up in three quotations. On Ghana:

...we can conclude that the Ghana of the period of aflorescence (the end of the 10th to 11th centuries) was a vast foreign-trade superstructure over a society in which the process of class formation was still at an early stage and proceeded under the influence of mainly external conditions on the basis of a weakly developed domestic economy and with the preservation of many tribal-society survivals (Kubbel, 1969: 114).

On Mali:

...the effect of the use of slave labour, which became customary, on the entire subsequent social-economic development of the Keita state was so strong that we can definitely contend that in the 13th century a major qualitative leap occurred in the social development of Mali...Thus it can be sufficiently safely contended that if in Ghana the formation of a society with antagonistic classes merely started, Mali was the next stage of this development, a stage at which an early feudal society, the first one in the history of the Western Sudan took shape (ibid: 117-119).

On Songhai:

...the process of fusion of free communal people and dependent people of different categories into a single class of dependent and exploited peasantry which began, as we have seen, during the Mali period, advanced very far during the Songhai time... (and)...In the middle of the 16th century, a single ruling class which united the leadership of all aspects of the life of society - economic, political, ideological and military - consolidated out of various social groups for the first time in the history of Western Africa. (ibid: 123-124).

Social and Economic Development

The above leads us naturally to the question of what kind of economic development, if any, took place in this period. Economy and society have been dealt with in conventional manner by such writers as Trimmingham (1959) and Niane

(1961), and in such learned monographs as that of Levtzion (1968). None of these writers, however, seems to do more than present evidence concerning the character and extent of trade, the existence of crafts, the use of slaves, or the kind of local economic activities.

These have been treated more purposefully by Kubbel (1969) and the Polish Marxist, Malowist. The latter has written a detailed monograph on trade in gold and slaves between Sudan and North Africa, referring *en passant* to the fact that it was the dominance of this kind of trade that was responsible for the economic and social stability of the region throughout these centuries (Malowist, 1966: 1). Another article is devoted to a full exposition of this argument. His thesis is as follows:

The abundance of gold and the slave trade held up economic and social progress, and Songhai in the late 15th and 16th century was not much different from Mali two centuries earlier. This stagnation was not restricted to their economic life, the same phenomenon is noticeable in the structure of the state, in its military organisation and even, despite a few appearances to the contrary, in the culture of the Western Sudan on the eve of the Moroccan invasion (Malowist, 1966: 2).

Malowist's reasoning is that, on the one hand, the aristocracy of Mali and Songhai had no incentive to develop the economies of their states since they had sufficient income from gold and slave trading; and, on the other hand, the peasantry lived in conditions of "barbaric prosperity", having few needs other than for the salt provided in exchange for gold and slaves, and therefore, had no incentive for agricultural development themselves.

Malowist appears to argue that the development of crafts under Mali and Songhai is additional proof of his thesis. It was precisely the low economic level that obliged the aristocracy to create castes of craftsmen, and even these were probably part-time cultivators, since there was insufficient surplus to provide for full-time craftsmen. The trade in gold and slaves is thus presented as both stimulating the rise of the states and holding back their economic and social advancement.

As may have been observed already, this thesis is in apparent contradiction with that of fellow-Marxist Kubbel (although it should be pointed out that Kubbel shows no awareness of this, or of the paper in which Malowist's argument was presented). Criticism of Malowist has, in fact, been made by Hopkins (1967) who quite justly rejects what he calls the "carrot and stick" theory of economic development. However,

he seems to agree that there was no economic development, whilst Kubbel's whole schema assumes the contrary.

Kubbel begins by considering the role of external trade in gold and slaves in the development of the Sudanese empires. Whilst the primary cause of the rise of great states in this zone is considered to be the division of labor between the pastoral and the agricultural populations, the external trade is described as a primary class-forming factor. Kubbel, then, repeats Malowist's position on the contradictory effects of this trade. And he emphasizes for Ghana the conservative effects on economic development of the low technological level and the tribal social relations. On the basis of the gold and slave trade, there nonetheless developed a parasitic ruling class, a class of rich merchants, and an alliance between the two.

In Mali, however, Kubbel finds a *quantitative* economic development due to its better agricultural base to the south of the dry Sahel lands. But the consolidation of this huge empire, even if based on the gold and slave trade as in Ghana, necessitated an

expansion and reinforcement of its economic basis which could no longer rely on trade alone. (Kubbel, 1969: 116).

It was the difficulty of this in the face of tribal social structure that necessitated the use, for the first time, of slaves as agricultural labor within Sudanese society. These slaves were not private property. They were exploited either in patriarchal or in clan form, thus reproducing traditional social forms. It was, however, on this basis that by the latter half of the 14th century, polarisation between a more-or-less homogeneous exploiting class developed. And, alongside the destruction of the kinship ties between rulers and ruled went the creation of large, landed estates and military fiefs.

Under Songhai there was a similar economic advance. Irrigated rice permitted greater productivity, demanded more intense labor, and encouraged the decay of kinship social organization (based on the necessity of collective labor). Military needs, plus the weakening demand for gold and slaves, caused the ruling class to introduce "mass-scale" slave labor in agriculture and to increasingly exploit the agricultural population. By the time of the Moroccan invasion, there existed an economically uniform exploited peasantry (though cross-cut socially by caste) and there had taken place the first peasant uprisings (of *dyogorani*, descendants of slaves).

Meanwhile, there was a development of cities such that Gao, Djenne and Timbuctu formed a single trade and craft complex

by 1500. In contrast to Malowist, Kubbel stresses that by 1600:

the process of separation of crafts from farming had already ended in large cities... (ibid: 120).

At the other pole, the organic fusion of a ruling class from the aristocracy, merchant class, and religious leaders was completed. The merchants and religious leaders received immense privileges in exchange for their support. We may now contrast the above arguments from Malowist with one from Kubbel, who concludes by stressing the

unquestionable relative acceleration of the rates of social development of the three great West-Sudanese states of the Middle Ages compared with its predecessors (ibid: 125, italics mine).

Ideology

As an important element of what Marxists call the "super-structure", we may take ideology, which in the Sudan meant, of course, either animistic or Islamic religions. This is an aspect which has had much more attention than social and economic development. Traditional African religion in this area is dealt with at length by Mauny (e.g. 1961) and mentioned in the textbooks. Islam is covered in even greater detail by Trimmingham, Hunwick, Fage, and Niane and Suret-Canale. The best of these do more than merely describe. Both Hunwick and Fage attempt to assess the role played by Islam in the Sudan. But such analyses seem rarely to go further than an understanding in political terms of the competing religions, although the connection between Islam and trade cannot but be remarked upon.

One seeks in vain a sociological appreciation. Unfortunately, there seems to be little direct appreciation of religious factors in the Sudan even from the Marxists. Suret-Canale has, however, some relevant points to make in the section on religion in his *Afrique Noire*. This begins by pointing out that

Religious ideology, although developing in an autonomous manner and not being mechanically 'deducible' from social conditions, is their reflection... Reflecting social conditions, religion is, however, not a passive reflection... it reflects its contradictions, that is to say the very ferment of its evolution... Generally conservative, it can, in certain historical conditions, be the expression of forces of progress (Suret-Canale, 1968, new ed.: 133).

Of animism, he says that it is local because it reflects the autonomy of each people living in a closed economy at a tribal stage. And he stresses that religious representations reinforce that cohesion of the extended family, village and tribe which rests on their economic unity. This is, however, too general to be of explicative value when dealing with traditional religion in, say, Ghana. But what he says of this region in the 18th century seems to me true of the West Sudan in its classical age also:

At the same time a religion and a set of rules for social life, born in a very similar social setting (development of a trading economy and overthrow of the old kinship structures in Arabia of the 8th century), Islam responded exactly to the new needs. (ibid: 143).

When he does deal with the Sudan in the middle ages, however, Suret-Canale stresses that Islam was an urban religion, and suggests that the pagan counter-offensives after the fall of the great states were possibly the expression of peasant revolt.

These few remarks tie up with the evidently increasing role of Muslim theologians within Sudanese society in the period under review. The reverses of fortune recorded for Islam by different historians do not contradict that generally increasing power stressed by Kubbel.

Many historians have considered the extent to which the Askias of Songhai used Islam to support a lineage which had no traditional basis (and which was deprived even of the traditional pagan emblems of power). But, for Kubbel, this is an incident in the general increase of merchant-clerical power (the merchants of Ghana were largely of Arab-Berber origin and therefore the bearers of Islam) in the three succeeding empires. Already in Mali there was an increasing number of Muslim clerics of Mande stock. The *Qadis* came to control certain settlements and enjoy administrative and legal immunity. Their influence was based on the trans-Saharan trade and their ecclesiastical authority.

Under the Askia dynasty of Songhai, the Muslim legislators and merchants gained greatly in power. They had supported Askia Mohammed and he in return granted them land and slaves, thus incorporating them into the ruling class. Kubbel mentions the ethnic fusion which helped this process, but the post-invasion period lies outside his field. It would seem to me, however, that there is evidence here to support his presentation. The Muslim clergy were so far identified with the Songhai empire as to be suspected of instigating the anti-Moroccan revolt of October-November, 1591, and were thereupon arrested

en masse, many being exiled to Morocco (see Hunwick, 1966).

Characterization

By way of conclusion I will consider what kind of society or societies these empires have been described as. The importance of this exercise for the Marxists is in their aim to go further than chronology, deeper than empiricism, in an attempt to uncover structure, function, and process in history. It is precisely here, however, that Marxists have been obliged not merely to return to Marx (from Stalin's five universal and obligatory stages of human historical progress [see Kuusinen, 1961]), but to go further than he did. How does this problem arise in the context of Africa and the mediaeval Sudan?

The problem is one of characterizing these societies. There has, for example, been considerable serious discussion amongst Africanists on the application of the term "feudal" to certain African societies (see Maquet, 1962, and Goody, 1963). For Maquet this term has a strictly political meaning. For Goody, it is so problematical and Euro-centrist that he tends to rule out its use in Africa. When used by Kubbel, however, of Mali and of Songhai, the reference is to a mode of production that can be found in many parts of the world. And the essence of feudalism is defined by Marxists in such terms as the following:

The social hierarchy that manifests itself is based on ties between individuals; the hierarchy of rights to land implied by feudalism concerns private, personal rights. (Suret-Canale, 1969: 113)

Here arises a conflict not simply between Kubbel and Suret-Canale (who denies that such relations existed anywhere in Africa), but the necessity for the former to develop a concept to cover that mode of production he considers to have existed in the Sudan and many other parts of Africa.

But first of all, we should note that Kubbel defends his conception against possible criticism by saying

though the ownership by separate individuals was not legally formalised, the rights to the possession of land usurped by the aristocracy proved to be so wide that practically they did not differ from the rights of ownership (Kubbel, 1969: 118).

He does not, however, consider the other possible classification of these relations in terms of a type of society that Marx (who knew of its existence only from studies of Asia) called the

"Asiatic mode of production". Suret-Canale, on the other hand, believes that Sudanese society rested on this mode, though for obvious reasons he considers it necessary to abandon this particular name and certain associations it had in Marx's writings in favor of "tributary mode of production" since exploitation was exercised through the payment of tribute.

The essence of this mode is the coexistence of a system of production based on the rural community and collective land-ownership with various forms of exploitation that always pass through the community. Historically, says Suret-Canale,

it is found at the moment of apparition of a society of clearly-characterised antagonistic classes, at a rather low level of productive forces (1969: 128).

Comparing this with the economic and social characteristics of the Sudan revealed by Kubbel, we can already see the outline of Suret-Canale's argument. He contends that it is in the savannah zone that there begins to develop the storable surplus, facilities for trade and the diffusion of technique that permits the creation over the villages and patriarchal families of aristocracies and privileged classes. The development of these classes is based on the traditional tribute that these communities had paid to their "officials" for carrying out responsibilities such as that of land chief and war chief. As the state develops there is the creation of "false-fiefs". Where the society is highly hierarchic, the condition of the "free" peasant is little different from that of the "captive". This interpretation correlates with Kubbel's evidence, though obviously not with his interpretation.

The most interesting part of Suret-Canale's analysis of this mode is that which reflects on the apparent conflict between Kubbel and Malowist, for the question is raised of whether or not the tributary mode implies stagnation. Suret-Canale stresses that the basic internal contradiction of this mode (class exploitation versus maintenance of collective property), cannot of itself bring progress. Increased exploitation only reinforces traditional social structures since they provide the very framework for the extraction of the surplus. By itself, therefore, this system can only lead to temporary destruction of the dominant class and state, or reversion to the tribo-patriarchal stage. In the absence of a development of individual wealth through commerce and of a market for land, there will be an effective stagnation.

Suret-Canale does refer to Ghana in passing, but he is mostly concerned with the light that African conditions throw on his tributary mode of production, rather than vice-versa. However, he may have produced the key to that "non-development"

found by Malowist - an explanation all the more weighty for having its basis in the very structure of the society. But where does this leave Kubbel's "progress", with which I tended to identify? Even with the critique of Kubbel's characterization of Mali and Songhai as feudal, there is still, perhaps, the possibility of a synthesis. Suret-Canale considers the tributary mode to cover a whole range of types and levels of societies. The "progress" within the Sudan could thus be seen as a progress within the confines of this mode of production. The "stagnation" could be seen in the failure to pass beyond it. However, this is a casual hypothesis that would require further rigorous study.

As far as this review is concerned, it will be sufficient if it has demonstrated the scope and style of the Marxist approach and brought certain important problems into the light.

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... the African National Congress asked for a boycott of the schools, and if one continued to teach, at least, one suffered the stigma of having sold out. A lot of young people at the time found themselves in this quandary, i.e. whether to go on and earn their bread under such conditions, or to do something else. There were a lot of us at that time who decided to go to the university. This was the time when political activity among the Africans was at its highest, with the defiance campaign of 1952. Almost every weekend we went to rallies. * * * * * At the time, we were I guess very ideologically what was happening, but we had a sort of vague interest in what went on at these meetings.

I finished my degree in 1958, and then again I was faced with the problem of what to do. It was not possible to go to the normal, but then I got a research scholarship from the Eger for his book, *St. African Communists*. Another African fellow and I worked for two years, and that's when I did my Master's. I had never really intended to do a

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... what was the thrust of your study political activity... the only thing that was the end of interest African... with this number in the American problems of... integration, segregation, etc.

... The political thrust was for integration basically.