

BOOK REVIEW

ETHNIC PROBLEMS OF
THE TROPICAL AFRICA -
CAN THEY BE SOLVED?

by

Dr. Rosa N. Ismagilova
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In 1967 when the Ibo people of Nigeria attempted to secede and establish their own sovereign enclave of Biafra, thousands of Nigerians were killed and wounded in one of Africa's most disastrous civil wars. Although the causes of what has passed into history as the Biafran War were many and varied, the bottom line of the conflagration, often vigorously fanned by foreign economic interests, was ethnicism.

Ethnicism, or what is usually referred to as tribalism, confounds many of the most astute political observers of Africa, especially bourgeois students of African studies, who do not have a theoretical approach to the national question. In recent years, however, scientific socialists and other progressive people around the world, especially growing numbers of African activists, have begun to analyze the national question as it relates to the many African states from the perspective of Marx, Engels and Lenin. As such, only recently has the problem of ethnicism begun to receive the serious and consistent study it demands.

An important contribution to the field is Dr. Rosa N. Ismagilova's, *Ethnic Problems of the Tropical Africa - Can They Be Solved?*

Dr. Ismagilova sets herself a prodigious task, as outlined by the title of her work, but she is well qualified having spent the last twenty-five years as a leading scholar in the USSR Academy of Sciences and the Academy's Africa Institute, as well as first-hand study in seventeen African countries. The book, the first one in Marxist African Studies to examine ethnicism, covers such diverse regions as Nigeria, the southern Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, the People's Congo, Zaire, Guinea, Benin, and many others as well.

What effect do ethnic problems have on the socio-economic and political life of African countries? What are the main trends in the ethnic development of African countries? Are there special features in the forming of modern nations in

Africa? What is the explanation of the exacerbation of inter-ethnic relations in a number of countries? What are the reasons for and the character of ethnic antagonisms? What are the social forces behind them? What are the ways to tackle ethnic problems? What is the ideology of tribalism? What effect does it have on solving the most important problems of economic and social development? How is the problem of self-determination to be approached? How are questions of state structure, language and so on to be tackled? These are some of the most pressing questions critically examined by Ismagilova.

Fundamentally it is Ismagilova's view that although tribalism has existed for long periods of time on the African continent and was encouraged and nurtured by colonialist administrative policies, as it exists today, it is primarily an expression of economic disparities among the different peoples. However, she is quick to point out that ethnic differences are certainly real, culminating long periods of isolation of many peoples and characterized mainly by different languages and religions. But she says that just because economic grievances are often the base of what turn into ethnic antagonisms, it is as much a mistake to overemphasize the class character of Africa as it is to overemphasize its tribal characteristics.

In this same vein she stresses that as concerns many African groups today, the term tribalism is obsolete. "How can you call the Yoruba, Ibo, Baganda, Kikuyu and Bakongo peoples and many others in Africa tribes, when a national bourgeoisie, a working class and an intelligentsia have developed?" she queries. But among many of those same groups, the traditional leaders still hold great sway and influence among the people, and only folly would result if modern political leaders did not consider such.

An important section of the book examines the state policies of many of the countries as regards their approach to solving the national question. Interestingly enough, many countries, even some with bourgeois oriented parties and leaders spell out principles of national equality which correspond closely with the principles of scientific socialism. Although many parties and leaders speak in the conviction of equality for all the peoples of any one state, few have at this time, with the exception of Kenya and Tanzania, grappled adequately with the question of language. Ismagilova says that the right of a people to learn and speak their own language is just as important as the right to self-determination.

Nigeria and Tanzania receive special attention from Ismagilova: Nigeria because of its extremely complex national characteristics (Ismagilova has a separate volume, *The Peoples of Nigeria. Ethnic Composition and Brief Ethnographic*

Description, 1973 in Russian) and Tanzania because it is, she says, tropical Africa's most successful example of state consolidation. As a result of historical circumstances and influential policies of the *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* party most people there consider themselves Tanzanians, rather than Swahilis, Chaggas, Masai, etc.

However, the complexity of the national question in Nigeria appears to be as complex, if not more so, than any other area of the world. Although the UN estimated in 1975 that the population of Nigeria was 63 million, the most accurate census, according to Ismagilova, in terms of identifying the various ethnic groups, was commissioned during 1952-53.

At that time in Eastern Nigeria there was a strong movement to set up separate states. The Efik and Ibibio, for example, wanted to set up the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers state; but there was no unanimity on the matter, some standing for separation from the Ibo, others against.

In Western Nigeria, where two-thirds of the population was Yoruba, the population of the Delta and Benin Provinces, inhabited by the Edo, bitterly complained that they received no attention from the Western Nigerian government. Their complaints became so vociferous that in 1962 a special state was carved out for them, the Mid-Western Region.

In Northern Nigeria, an area which is three times the size of Eastern and Western Nigeria, there are no people who constitute a majority. At the 1952-53 census, the Hausa were the most numerous but constituted only a third of the population while the Fulani were about 17 percent and the Kanuri seven percent.

Along the middle course of the Niger and the Benue Rivers there are a great many people, very different in numbers, language and level of development. The ethnic composition of the areas that were arbitrarily called the Middle Belt was so complicated, and remains so today, that the most detailed census in the history of modern Nigeria, classified its five million inhabitants as "others".

Finally Ismagilova concludes that several new characteristics and conditions currently surround the national question in Black Africa. She states that overall, increasing attention is being given to ethnic problems in most African states. The underestimation or complete ignorance of the problem is giving way to realization that the national question plays an important role in a country's socio-economic development. In addition, despite the fact that ethnic problems are mainly understood in some cases as ethnic antagonisms and intertribal

hostility, many leaders are today classifying a complex of various matters under the heading "ethnic problems".

Another new feature, Ismagilova says, is that more and more, realistic approaches to the solution of many problems of national development, in particular to linguistic problems, questions connected with boundaries and border disputes and problems of self-determination are being tied to a theoretical approach to the national question. Importantly, many of the solutions and policies are much more flexible and adaptable to changing conditions than in the past. Her main and final point is that the solution of the ethnic problems is being increasingly linked with the socio-economic transformation of society. On this point progressive African leaders frankly state that the complete solution of these problems is impossible under capitalism. The progressive African intelligentsia is becoming firmly convinced of the need to link the solution of the ethnic problems with the need for sweeping democratic and social reforms.

Ismagilova, while basing her work on the pillars of the national question as upheld in the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin, is sensitive to the question of culture as the fabric of everyday life of the African peoples. In fact, the discussion of the new African states' attempts to develop state cultures which embrace the best of the various peoples within defined borders is revealing in the importance that the architects of socialism placed on culture.

The most noticeable gap in the book is the failure to discuss what is known in the United States as affirmative action, or policies designed to aid an economically oppressed people in catching up with their more prosperous fellow citizens. If ethnicism, as is argued here, is indeed the reflection of social and economic disparities, then aside from the important questions of national and linguistic rights, how would a state such as Nigeria go about raising the economic level of some of its isolated peoples to the level of say the Ibo or Yoruba who, relatively speaking, are economically better situated? To a slight degree Ismagilova hints that some of the smaller people, numerically, will probably be absorbed into the larger groups; but this does not seem to directly answer the question. The matter is a critical one for the potentially wealthy states such as Nigeria with her myriad of peoples. Increased experience in studying the question and greater development will undoubtedly offer realistic suggestions.

Dr. Rosa Ismagilova's work is a pioneering effort in Marxist African Studies and is certainly must reading for all progressive African activists.

Jean Damu



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