

# On African Nations

B. R. Mann

IN an article entitled "The Formation of Nations in Africa"\* I. Potekhin has put forward a number of considerations which have led him to the conclusion that for most of Africa no nations have yet emerged. In his view most of the criteria of the nation as defined by Stalin have not yet matured: there is not yet a single literary language, only a diversity of vernacular tongues and the official language which is that of the metropolitan country; in spite of the rich cultural heritage of the African peoples there are as yet no truly national cultures; there is as yet no national market, or at most the beginnings of one. In general, he believes, African nations are only in the process of formation, which in view of the many difficulties must be a protracted one.

Much of his argument hinges on the conception of the African *countries* as outlined by the colonial boundaries. In a previous article† it has been shown that in progressive British opinion this conception is giving way to one which regards as nations not the accidental collections of peoples enclosed within these arbitrary boundaries but the historically developed communities whose countries in many cases are intersected by these boundaries.

These communities have a history which goes back over many centuries. In the course of that

history they have developed their own languages and cultures and their common economies within their own boundaries. They have built up their civilisation, their towns and cities based on handicrafts and trade, erected their own states or become subject to some larger empire, and, in short, had a history as varied and complex as that of any other continent. Not until quite recently were their economies ruined and their countries carved up among the colonial powers.

Nevertheless, Potekhin would still not grant these historical African communities the status of nations. His conclusion would still be that in general the question of the African nations is not one of the past or present but only of a somewhat indeterminate future. His conclusion rests on the following basic propositions:

1. The *ethnic community* of the peoples goes through several stages of development: *tribe*, *narodnost*, *nation*, corresponding broadly, but only broadly, to the development of the socio-economic systems.

2. Only where there is a developed capitalist market can one speak of an economic community; a nation can, therefore, only come into existence under the capitalist system.

3. At the turn of the century there was not nor could there be any nation in Africa because there was no capitalist society; colonisation found the African peoples at the stage of the primitive community with the characteristics of tribal organisation, and with few exceptions where feudalism and the *narodnost* have developed, they are in this stage today.

If these three propositions were quite self-evident and indisputable, so would the conclusions be. Is one justified, however, in assuming that there is general agreement on their validity, either among

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\* *Marxism Today*, October 1958.

† B. R. Mann: "The Right of the African Nations to Self-determination", *Marxism Today*, January 1959. In a contribution to the discussion on the question of nationality J. M. Warren has raised a number of critical points on that article to which neither time nor space permit me to reply specifically in the present contribution. All the same, I hope she will find here the further explanations she asks for at least to one or two of her more general points.

students of African affairs or among Marxists? Is there not, perhaps, a case for examining these propositions?

### Ethnic Community or Nation?

Marxists have generally accepted the definition of the nation which was given by Stalin in *Marxism and the National Question* in 1913, when this question formed the subject of fundamental discussions in the Social Democratic parties of the time.

According to this definition a nation is a specific community of people which is neither racial nor tribal, i.e. it is not ethnically homogeneous but composed of a number of ethnic elements which in the course of history have come to form a single nation linked into an economic community. Through living together in a connected territory from generation to generation, they have in the course of time acquired a common national language, culture and character.

Nations are stable, preserve their identity over long periods of history and in spite of all kinds of adversities. The definition distinguishes them sharply from casual, ephemeral conglomerations held together by the power of a state alien to the majority of the nations, which fall apart as soon as that state power disappears.

From this definition Potekhin selects common territory, language, culture and economy as the characteristic features of a nation, omitting that they should be stable, historically constituted communities. He then qualifies the expression "economic community" in such a way that only a *capitalist* economy is covered by it. From this point onwards he operates with a new conception: the *ethnic community* which goes through the series of metamorphoses described in the paragraph numbered 1 above.

It is this latter conception which I think is bound to be questioned. For the things which change in response to changes in the economic base make up the superstructure. Few people would agree to equate the nation, the community of people which is fundamental to everything else, with a mere stage in the changing superstructure.

There is a point in distinguishing between ethnically homogeneous communities, such as can exist only in more or less complete historical isolation, from communities of complex ethnical composition which arise in the process of historical intercourse between peoples. The Marxist definition of the nation includes only the latter. But beyond that it makes no distinctions of quality such as would require the introduction of new terms, whether *ethnic community* or *narodnost*.

Migrations, conquests and the development of trade and communications began to break down

the primitive isolation of the human communities in a very remote antiquity. Nations as distinct from ethnically homogeneous communities have therefore existed from the dawn of history; but not all the nations existing today were formed thus early. Some nations have grown at the expense of others and in some cases, e.g. in the Americas, new nations have been formed out of the fragments of almost all the nations of the world which came together on the new continent as conquerors, slaves or emigrants in comparatively recent times.

All this is quite in accord with the usage of the word "nation" in the works of Marx and Engels. They freely wrote of the nations of antiquity, and Engels, e.g., examined the genesis of the German nations after the breakdown of the Roman empire. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels describe what the bourgeoisie has done to "even the most barbarian nations" and to "nations of peasants". Lenin and Stalin repeatedly referred to "nations which had passed *through* feudalism and developed capitalism". (My emphasis.—B. R. M.)

What, then, gave rise to the idea that nations were *only* formed in the capitalist period?

### Capitalism, the Nation and the State

There is one difference between the use of the word "nation" today and in the nineteenth century: it included both the nation and the state, and the nations referred to by Marx and Engels, e.g., were in the main nations with states the frontiers of which broadly coincided with the boundaries of the national territory. Where a nation was included in the state of another nation, it was referred to as a "nationality" and the question of the nations without a state of their own became known as the question of the "nationalities" (Nationalitätenfrage). It was first raised by the growing bourgeoisie of the western European countries, by the bourgeois-democratic movements against feudal autocracy and national oppression.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the working class movement had begun to take on the character of an international movement, the national question, too, was raised in a broader sense. In 1896 the International Socialist Workers and the Trades Union Congress in London upheld "the full right of self-determination of all nations". This formulation obviously includes in the term nation both "nations" and "nationalities", nations both with and without their own state.

Further clarification of the meaning of the word "nation" came in the course of the broad international discussions of the early twentieth century in which Lenin and his party took the lead in formulating the consistent Marxist standpoint on the national question.

These discussions in essence covered the entire

period of the advance to socialism and representatives of the working class of many nations, including eastern European and Asian nations, took part in them. They received renewed impetus after the October revolution had opened wide the floodgates to the national liberation movements of all the world.

Originally based on the experience of the European nations, the discussion became constantly enriched as more and more of the oppressed nations staked their claims to independent state existence. In this sense it continues to this day.

Only in the course of this discussion did the concept "state" become definitely and finally separated from the concept of the nation. The special word "nationality" signifying an oppressed nation deprived of the possibility of forming its own state thereby became obsolete. Its use nevertheless lingered on in some languages. In the Russian language it became transformed into its opposite as applied to the House of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R.

Only this separation of the concept of the state, a part of the superstructure, from the concept of the nation, the community of people itself, the fundamental source of all history, enables us to express the role of capitalism in the history of the nations in terms which apply to the experience of all nations, be they large or small, old or new, in whatever continent they are situated. For then we can see clearly that not the nation itself is the product of the capitalist period but the national state, a state the frontiers of which coincide with the boundaries of the national territory.

The states of the feudal period conformed to this condition only exceptionally. In general, they were either small states, covering only part of a nation, or large empires dominating a number of different nations. Hence the nations were oppressed, but they did not cease to be nations. On the contrary, the greater the oppression the greater is also the striving for self-determination. These features the modern colonial empires have in common with the feudal empires. The aim of the struggle against these conditions is the political unification of each nation into a single state.

### **Economic Community and Capitalist Market**

In Potekhin's view the words "economic community" or "common economy" in the Marxist definition of the nation are virtually synonymous with "capitalist market". For he believes that the *economic community can only come into existence* when exchange relations have become regular and essential, while in the pre-capitalist period they were "sporadic and not at all essential".

According to Marx this is not the point of the distinction between pre-capitalist and capitalist

forms of economy; but in the former the production and exchange of commodities are subordinate, whereas in the latter they predominate over all other relations of production. A national market therefore existed before the bourgeoisie took hold of it, although it may appear puny and insignificant as compared with the enormous development this market was given under capitalism.

There is nothing accidental in the choice of the term "economic community" and not "capitalist market" for the purpose of the definition of the nation. It indicates that the scope of the concept "nation" cannot be narrowed down to include only capitalist nations. Capitalism does not create the nations, on the contrary, it presupposes their existence.

Capitalism has, however, made a very considerable contribution to the consolidation and development of many nations, which is by no means to the advantage of the bourgeoisie alone. The erection of an independent, sovereign national state, e.g., is an objective in which all classes of the nation are equally interested. This contribution is well summed up by Lenin:

"Throughout the world, the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism was linked up with national movements. The economic basis of these movements is that in order to achieve complete victory for commodity production the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, must have politically united territories with a population speaking the same language, while all the obstacles to the development of this language and its consolidation in literature are removed. Language is the most important means of human intercourse; unity of language and unimpeded development are the most important conditions of a genuinely free and extensive commercial turnover corresponding to modern capitalism, of a free and broad grouping of the population in all their separate classes; finally, they are a condition for the close connection between the market and each and every proprietor and petty proprietor, seller and buyer.

"The formation of *national states*, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied, is therefore the tendency of every national movement." (*Selected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 250-251.)

This balanced assessment of the importance of capitalist development in the life of many nations does not preclude the possibility that in the experience of the majority of the nations of the world, especially the nations of Asia and Africa, it may be comparatively shortlived and of relatively little consequence. Capitalist economic and *political relations are more beneficial to a nation's* development than feudal relations, but socialist relations even more so. The bourgeoisie seeks to establish a national state; but even that is perfectly achieved only under socialism. Something as fundamental as the nation cannot be made

dependent on something as transient as capitalism.

China may serve as an outstanding example. In all the long history of this great nation one can at best define a very brief period during which capitalist relations dominated in parts of Chinese territory. Neither the Chinese capitalist class nor the capitalist class of any foreign power ever succeeded in bringing the whole of China under its undisputed sway. Today China is marching to socialism and communism with seven-league boots. It would seem pointless on such grounds to refuse to speak of a Chinese nation, when among all the other attributes of the nation it possesses a national culture not only universally admired but antedating the capitalist period by many centuries.

If the proposition that capitalist relations are an indispensable condition for the existence of nations cannot be sustained, it follows that the presence or absence of capitalism has no bearing on the existence or non-existence of the nations of Africa.

#### Evolution or Revolution?

During the latter half of the nineteenth century there arose a school of thought which became known as evolutionism. In brief, it consisted of a mechanical application of Darwin's theories of biological evolution to social development and led to the conclusion that Victorian England represented the acme of all creation.

Evolutionism was grist on the mills of the empire builders. It served to justify the scramble for Africa and colonialism in general in the eyes of the mass of the ordinary people as a "civilising mission". Evolutionism did not bother about evidence; for all nations not of the "superior civilised races" were *a priori* classed as "primitive tribes", legally non-existent, *res nullius*.

Evidence from Africa, in so far as it was available, spoke entirely against this classification of the African peoples. It therefore became necessary to drown it in a flood of highly imaginative and totally misleading literature in order to sustain the sense of mission in the increasing numbers of people required to service the empire and to still the voices of protest at home.

Occasional glimpses of the truth could not be entirely suppressed, of course; they were invariably registered with expressions of surprise and astonishment, and promptly classified as "exceptions". As time went on, however, and acquaintance with Africa and its peoples improved, European anthropologists began to find it irksome perpetually to have to register surprises, and not to the advantage of their studies to continue using concepts both liable to cause offence and unsuited to the description of African conditions.

Having observed that neither the economies nor

the beliefs and social and political institutions of the African peoples correspond to nineteenth-century conceptions of primitive society as described, among others, by Morgan for certain North American Indian tribes, many anthropologists are drawing the remarkable inference that primitive society is quite different from this picture. In this way they try to convince us that they have disposed not only of nineteenth-century evolutionism but of the revolutionary theory of social development of Marx as well.

Far from challenging evolutionism, this view panders to those aspects of it which still render it of service to imperialist designs in Africa, namely the conception that Africans cannot allegedly stand on their own feet in the modern world and depend on the benevolence of their superior European "partners". It is widely exploited to fortify the crumbling barriers between the African liberation movements and the European working class, and especially to discredit Marxism in the eyes of both.

Potekhin's article is intended to counteract this propagandist use made of anthropological research, and it is precisely because one welcomes this intention that one regrets he did not make use of more effective arguments than the propositions grouped above under (3).

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in deciding such issues is that none of the source materials from which information can be derived has been written with a well defined, generally acceptable scientific system of concepts in mind, let alone from a Marxist standpoint. In regard to the study of Africa we are therefore no better placed than Marx was when he began the study of political economy, or Lenin when he examined the development of capitalism in Russia. The key to their success lay in the careful sifting of the grain of reliable fact contained in their sources from the chaff of philosophical and political misconceptions.

If we follow that method, surely the straightforward and conclusive answer to the anthropologist's dilemma is not so difficult. The facts their African researches have brought to light are not in accordance with what is known of primitive society; hence the gratuitous assumption of the evolutionists, that African society is primitive, has been proved false.

Once we have rid ourselves of this misconception the whole of the African problem appears in a new light. The barriers that appeared to divide the "primitive" Africans from the "civilised" Europeans can be seen to have no material existence. African states and civilisations cease to be a riddle the solution of which must be looked for outside the continent; it becomes clear that they are the creation of the African nations themselves, the result of their continuous history from ancient times.

Modern archaeological and historical research is tending more and more to this conclusion. Gervaise Mathew, not a man who would form such a view in eagerness or haste, has recently written:

“When I first began archaeological work on the East African coast eleven years ago, I assumed that the ruins and sites that I was investigating were the remains of Arab or Persian colonies along the coast . . . but gradually I have come to doubt it; now it seems to me that the history of the coast in the medieval period is more easily intelligible as the history of an African culture gradually Islamised than merely as the history of Islamic colonies from the Persian Gulf” (*Africa South*, Vol. 2, No. 2).

There could hardly be a surer indication that the idea of Africa as the home of primitive tribes is increasingly becoming untenable. The history of Africa before the European conquest is not a question of evolutionary theory but of Marx's revolutionary, materialist conception of history, just like that of any other continent.

#### Vernacular Tongues or National Languages?

Besides the theoretical propositions which he regards as self-evident, Potekhin offers only one consideration in which he sees proof for his contention: the multiplicity of languages.

“It is true that the linguistic divisions are a fact, and one which no scholar can deny or ignore since it is an irrefutable proof that for most of Africa neither nations nor narodnosts have yet emerged. The linguistic divisions reflect the tribal divisions of the people.”

Far from proving anything, this simply begs the question. A complex language distribution can come about in many different ways, and so long as we have not studied the detailed history of the speakers of these languages we are in no position to know what it reflects. In North America, e.g., there exist widely scattered communities for whom newspapers and entire literatures are published in an enormous number of languages; by comparison, the linguistic pattern of Africa, a continent nearly one-and-a-half times as large, is almost simple.

In both cases wars, conquests, emigration, colonisation, the slave trade, and the search for land, minerals and opportunities for trade have contributed to the complexity of the picture. In Africa, these historical processes were subsequently intensified by the intervention of imperialism which included the wholesale transportation of people from lands confiscated by the foreign powers.

But none of this does away with the fact that the languages themselves, wherever they are spoken, are the national languages of the peoples who in their overwhelming majority still live in their ancient lands. This also is as true of Africa as of any other continent.

There are very few African languages which are not written as well as spoken, do not serve as a medium for long-distance communication; all but the relatively rare international meetings attended by members of the several nations inhabiting a given colonial territory are naturally conducted in the national languages, and nationalist newspapers have been published in them whenever imperialism did not prevent it. In fact, one of the most potent means of counteracting the political movements of the African nations has been for the colonial administrations to publish official newspapers in the national languages, not to mention the Bible. It is difficult to see how Potekhin could have got the contrary impression.

Potekhin is not trying to make out a case for African “exceptionalism”; on the contrary, he is trying to get away from this conception. But he appears to be hamstringing his own arguments by a set of propositions which to many Marxists will not be as self-evident as they are to him; rather do they raise a number of fundamental questions of Marxist theory as well as lead to conclusions which are not entirely compatible with the evidence.

Among the evidence we must now reckon the historic second Accra conference, a most eloquent proof of the existence of the African nations. To leave us in no doubt, this conference has placed on the agenda of history the question of erasing the artificial colonial frontiers and the re-establishment of the historical national boundaries. It decisively challenged the imperialist concept of Africa as *res nullius*.

In one of his prefaces to the *Communist Manifesto* Engels wrote:

“Without re-establishing the unity and independence of each nation, it is impossible to create the international unity of the proletariat, nor the peaceful and intelligent collaboration of these nations towards common aims.”

Experience has time and again proved the truth of this statement, particularly so since the Bandung Conference. When the African nations have solved their question, and few would today say that their movement is anything but irresistible, they will also have removed one of the last obstacles from the road to world socialism.