THE BLACK MAN'S BURDEN
Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State

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forgotten, because, not having formed nation-states and therefore not being admitted to be nations, they have no right or reason to remain alive.

So it is that the ideology of nation-statism, here in Africa as in Europe, becomes appallingly reductive, rather as though a wealth of cultures were really an impoverishment. Much ink of mockery has been spilled in deploRING the polyglotism of the Tower of Babel, even while the beauties of imperial monoglotism, of "world language," leave so much to be desired. Here again we have one of the impoverishments left in legacy by the nineteenth century.

If the ethnic diversities of Africa outlived the long medieval period of the regna, many subsequent revolutions and reorganizations, and finally the manifold upheavals of the nineteenth century, these diversities then found it relatively easy to live through the colonial period—as ethnic diversities, that is, though sorely often not as persons or constituent communities. The new nationalists of the 1950s would then embrace nation-statism as the only available escape from colonial domination. Striving to transform colonial territories into national territories, they would find Africa's wealth of ethnic cultures both distracting and hard to absorb into their schemes. They would fall back into the colonial mentality of regarding it as "tribalism," and, as such, retrogressive. This diversity, it seemed, had to be just another hangover from an unregenerate past. It should at least be on its way to museum shelves, and should be meanwhile handled as a temporary nuisance. That was to prove difficult. The nuisance was found, as in the earliest days of nation-
statist debate in centers such as Cape Coast during the 1860s, to be stubbornly insistent. It refused to disappear into museums.

This was scarcely surprising: most of these precocious political formations were communities with a venerable past rooted in popular acceptance. In the public mind they were living realities; they were identities to which people strongly held. Dismissing them as the regrettable phenomena of “tribalism” might comfort those, British or others, who preferred to think of precolonial Africa as a kind of savage backwoods, rather as the notion of a Scottish nation or a Welsh nation had long become an antiquarian absurdity to average English opinion. But that is not how the “tribesmen” were prepared to see it.

Out of this came confusion. For there was also at work, from quite early in the colonial dispossessions, another meaning for “tribalism.” This was the new product of “divide-and-rule” policies, perhaps the only African political invention of those times that did or even could succeed, and was well promoted by the British and the French, major colonial powers, as a useful administrative instrument. Let related ethnic “units” band together and become “tribes”—a term probably applied in the African context by officials educated in the classical tradition of Caesar’s Gallic wars—because, if they banded together, the costs of European administration would be that much less.¹

Segments or even substantial communities in more or less closely related communities, though historically separate and distinct from one another, now declared themselves a single people; and new tribes, such as the Sukuma and Nyakusa, rose fully formed from the mysterious workings of “tradition.” Not being worried by such workings, whatever Europeans supposed them to be, such coagulated clans and segments do not seem to have minded becoming “tribes” with exotic names—Sukuma, for example, is a word borrowed from the neighboring people of Unyamwezi—but rather pleased about it. A single agreed spokesman against the claims and demands of colonial power was easily seen to wield more argumentative clout than a mob of spokesmen from smaller units. And then, of course, there were appropriate personal ambitions. According to John Iliffe, whose description of this process in Tanganyika is exemplary, “many Africans had strong personal motives for creating new units which they could lead. Europeans believed Africans belonged to tribes: Africans built tribes to belong to.” And the effort to create such “tribes,” Iliffe goes on to remind us, “was as honest and constructive” in those circumstances of apparently permanent foreign rule as the later effort, when that appearance of permanence was gone, to create a Tanganyikan nation. “Both were attempts to build societies in which men could live well in the modern world.”²

This was one situation. And as Africans from rural areas moved, ever more in the 1940s, toward the “melting pot” of periurban slums and shantytowns, this “tribalism” that was a genuine product of African diversity but also an invented weapon of self-defense, became a potent factor in opening the route to nationalism. “Tribal unions” and “tribal associations,” or other such manifestations of solidarity, began to flourish in the 1940s, and were to be powerful influences in the building of nation-statist politics. Their nature, of course, meant that they were destined to become divisive of national unities. They would then play the role, after independence, of opposing “tribe” to “nation.” But that was still for the future. For the present these “tribal unions” were able to rephrase and reabsorb
Africa’s own history in times of great political change and challenge.

Elsewhere, contrasting situations developed. In West Africa, for example, the cultural diversities of African life were no fewer than in East Africa; if anything, they were more numerous. They were many hundreds, very old, and sometimes encased in venerable historical institutions. The Asante example, which we have briefly inspected, was a relatively recent one. The kingship of the ancient state of Benin in Nigeria (not to be confused with the modern republic of Benin) was several centuries older; so was the kingship of the Mossi. Others could rival them in antiquity. But “receptive” politics—the politics of Freetown and Monrovia, or of educated (but not receptive) groups in Accra and Cape Coast and other such places—were in no state of mind to accept these diversities as useful or constructive.

Broadly, the educated elites in West Africa—for a long time, it would be much the same in South Africa—saw Africa’s own history as irrelevant and useless. The issue has been contradictory because so was their stance. They saw that the assertion of Africa’s having a history of its own must be part of their case against colonialist racism. They presented this assertion in books they wrote about Africa’s past glories. They lectured on the subject, composed brilliant and poetic evocations of great moments in Africa’s past. If they were clergymen, they recalled the Christian African bishops of Byzantine descent. If they were lawyers, they praised the writings of classical Greece in praise of Homer’s “blameless Ethiopians.” If they were politicians, they did their best to square the circle.

But when it came down to brass tacks, to the question of who should take over from the British when the British withdrew, they demanded a more or less complete flattening of the ethnic landscape. All that history then belonged to what Attoh Ahuma, back in 1911 in his book The Gold Coast Nation and National Consciousness, had found no difficulty in calling the “savage backwoods.” Deplorable in the past, it could do nothing for the present; and the future would forget it. As the gathering force of nation-statism in its guise of liberating ideology began to reap the fruits of argument and agitation around mid-century, what David Kimble has called the clash between “the inherited privileges of chieftaincy” and the “acquired privileges of education”—meaning Western education, and its derivatives—became acute and would soon become violent.

Stereotyped as a conflict of rivalry between the makers of Progress and the upholders of Tradition, this contradiction was to be vividly dramatized in the political campaigning that climaxed and followed the struggle for indigenous power, but perhaps most clearly of all in the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) after 1947. To the upholders of Tradition, well able to speak their minds because they also had sometimes grazed in London’s Inns of Court, the new nationalists led by Kwame Nkrumah were dangerous and irresponsible purveyors of destruction, “verandah boys” greedy for the spoils of office but not deserving any spoils, and often enough little better than crooks or con men. Great chiefs such as Nana Ofori Atta, splendidly equipped himself, found it obviously right that he should despise these would-be usurpers of an executive power which ought in all equity and good sense to revert to himself and his peers. Even greater chiefs, the king of Asante for one, gathered their robes about them and made ready to resist. Yet to dismiss these men as “tribalists” would be a misuse of language.
They, too, were caught in a contradiction of their own making. In their own context they were for African advancement, and some of their spokesmen, notably J. B. Danquah, valiantly argued the case for that advancement. On the other hand, they were the favored recipients, almost to the last days of British rule, of official approval and support. All through Nkrumah’s severely testing campaign for independence, after 1947, he had to face the malice and intrigue of opponents such as Kofi Busia, always running to the British and then the Americans to complain against the new nationalists, while governors almost to the last saw these new nationalists as disgusting “trouble-makers.”

Meanwhile, the British for their part were likewise caught in a contradiction of these years. In West Africa, up to the end of the 1940s, they redoubled their efforts to launch their colonies down that same slipway of chiefly rule which their own colonialism had previously done its best to undermine. Titled honors were duly handed around to suitable chiefly recipients. Red carpets were appropriately laid for chiefly feet. Hard-pressed district officers were urged to invent new ways in which the authority of chiefs, now that Britain was to withdraw, could be reinforced by prudent measures of administrative devolution, notably in the matter of “native tax” and “native treasuries.” A painstaking survey of these matters commissioned by the British government from an acknowledged British authority, Lord Hailey, and afterward completed in several volumes, dealt with the new nationalism simply by ignoring it.

So the cleavage between Africa’s own history and Africa’s borrowed nation-statism was made complete in West Africa, and widened elsewhere. For none of these “traditionalist” caperings, and British arguments in praise of them, could seem anything but obstructive and reactionary to the new nationalists. As the self-appointed champions of Progress, a cause they were also ready to suffer for—and sometimes fatally—they saw every such maneuver as one way or other of conserving an African inferiority of status, as a resurrection of incompetence, or as good evidence that any conceded independence was intended to be scarcely worth the name.

To the new nationalists, and increasingly when genuine “tribunes of the people”—for one example, Sékou Touré in French Guinea, Abdoulaye Diallo in Soudan (Mali) for another—joined their ranks and led their emergent parties, the challenge was to confront and disarm a hostile hierarchy of “ancestral powers” hand in hand with colonial policemen and their bosses. And here one has to bear in mind, against a certain historical hindsight which has liked to suggest that the British and the French were amiably ready to pack up and go, that the new nationalists had to meet, almost to the last moment, an acute and even harsh hostility. There was not much in those last years of colonial rule that was amiable about the attitude and actions of colonial officialdom. Whatever might be said in London and Paris, the officials “on the spot” had few warm feelings about the new nationalism.

One needs to bear in mind, furthermore, the general sterility and helplessness of imperial attitudes concerning the issues raised by winding up colonial empires. The British in West Africa brought a handful of the “educated elite” into legislative councils, but avoided as far as they could any who spoke in the language of the new nationalism, preferring “reasonable men” who would not rock the colonial boat. This indulgence in “advisory democracy” had almost no influence on the upheavals that
were about to take place. The French, for their part, simply fought a rearguard action in defense of a chiefly power which they thought, quite mistakenly as it was to prove, could be relied upon as a convenient partner. As the new nationalists in French Guinea were to show, such “native partners” were easily swept away, often leaving no trace behind.

Eager to get rid of colonial rule along the only route now open to them—the route of nation-statism on the European model—the new nationalists were in any case left to conduct their struggle on their own. Some of the best of them, during the 1950s, saw the dangers of this “neocolonialist” nation-statism. They argued and pressed for interterritorial federalism. They tried to devise ways of rejecting the carapace of the colonial frontiers. They formed ambitious interterritorial movements—for example, the multiterritorial Rassemblement Démocratique Africain in the French West and Equatorial territories, the Pan-African Freedom Movement in the British East and Central territories—but they formed them in vain. Neither the imperial powers nor ambitions unleashed among the new nationalists themselves were ready for such visionary initiatives, while the imperial powers, just in case the vision might become real, positively worked for their destruction.

Being left on their own, the new nationalists had to make the best of things. This was at least difficult, besides being often dangerous. It could mean being shot at by police or army. It could mean long terms of imprisonment. It could mean torture or quiet murder behind doors, as in the Portuguese colonies. It had often to defy a skeptical, mocking, or contemptuous outside world taught by decades of imperialist ideology that Africans were really, if the truth be told, primitive beings incapable of knowing what was best for themselves, let alone for anyone else.

Being a new nationalist made huge demands. He had to be a “modernizer” in every sense of the word. These new nationalists had to be fluent in writing as well as speaking at least one European language. They had to be widely read in the culture and history of that language. They had to know how to move with self-confidence, real or assumed, among the traps and idioms of European—and soon American—politics and manners. They had to reduce vague aspirations into coherent paragraphs of constitutional programming couched in the concepts of European law and precedent. They had to do a lot of other things besides.

The idea that old-fashioned, barely literate, and in any case many-wived traditional worthies could do these things with any hope of success seemed so obviously impossible as to preclude serious denial. All the same, it was denied. “As we have noted,” wrote Obafemi Awolowo, the highly articulate Yoruba pioneer of west Nigerian nationalism in 1947, when the battle for independence was just beginning, “only an insignificant minority of Nigerians have any political awareness.” This in itself was an astonishing statement, given Yoruba political history over the previous several centuries, but it was entirely characteristic of the pioneers of Progress in the recaptive tradition. And Awolowo went on to underline his point. “It is this minority that always clamours for change. . . . Are we to take our cue from this clamant minority?” Certainly we are, proclaimed Awolowo, himself a member of that minority and later to make a great political career with the new nationalism: “The answer is an emphatic ‘Yes.’ It must be realised now and for all time that
this articulate minority are destined to rule the country. It is their heritage."

But Awolowo, like others of his kind, was to find that matters were not so simple. When push came to shove, as it did in the 1950s, the ignorant “masses” who were in Awolowo’s superior eyes indifferent as to “how they are governed or who governs them,” were found indispensable to nationalism’s success. Having formed their parties of national liberation, the educated elite had to chase their voters. And so they did, penetrating places never before seen, crossing rivers never before encountered, confronting languages never before learned, and all this with the help of local enthusiasts somehow recruited. They thus made contact with these “masses” quite often with only the assistance of aged Land Rovers able, with their four-wheeled drive, to go where no other wheeled vehicles had ever been, but only just able, and not seldom abandoned by the way.

One’s memories of those years are of jubilant young men (as yet, rarely young women, although these came along as soon as the men would let them) setting out on endless journeys delayed and harassed by endless troubles and upsets, lack of petrol, spare parts, cash, and even food. Mostly these journeys have been long forgotten, but a few records survive. Thus it was that young men of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) set out upon a journey of this kind that lasted eight whole months. By whatever transport they could find, on foot or horseback, in truck or “mammy wagon,” their arrival was often “accompanied by brass bands, flute bands, cowhorn bands and dancers” in places never visited before. Meeting the “masses” in “schoolrooms, compounds, cinemas and churches, they touched the lives of hundreds of isolated communities in a way never known before.”

There was no successful party of the new nationalism in those days that did not do as much or much the same, from the far north to the southern bastions of white settler rule; and even within those bastions they somehow managed to do it too.

Wherever there were well-implanted traditional authorities buttressed by colonial officials, the new nationalists had to provoke and exploit the often concealed realities of social conflict. So it was that the pioneers of the new nationalism had to react in hierarchical Northern Nigeria, where the British stood behind (and usually very close behind) the emirate princes. “All parties,” declared the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU, or Jam’iyiy Namnan Sawaba) in its radical manifesto of 1950, “are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the Talakawa [“commoners” in Hausa usage] is diametrically opposed to the interest of all sections of the master class”—the Hausa-Fulani emirs and their henchmen—“the party seeking the emancipation of the Talakawa must naturally be hostile to the party of the oppressors.”

To officials and visiting “experts” all this could sound like very desperate talk; and in those years of sharpening Cold War propaganda, it was often traced to Soviet or Communist influence, as surviving police archives, whether in English or in French (and no doubt in Portuguese and Spanish, but those archives I have not inspected), sufficiently though quite foolishly attest. There were no Russians in Africa in those years, save for one or two elderly “white” refugees from the revolution of 1917, and the relevant European Communist parties had only the flimsiest of contacts with tropical Africa. This was well
known but failed to assuage the grim suspicions of the Cold War. In 1952 I visited the house in Kano of the then still youthful but already widely admired founder of Northern Nigeria's "commoners' party," NEPU, who was Mallam (afterward Alhaji) Aminu Kano, officially reputed to be "very radical," and was able to make this visit only when accompanied by a British district officer. This D.O. was a nice man, however, and agreed to my request that he remain outside. It was seldom like that. Visitors contacting nationalists in the 1950s were all too likely to find themselves asked to leave the territory, and not return. The P.I.-prohibited immigrant-list soon grew to formidable dimensions.

Misunderstandings therefore multiplied. Few of the new nationalists thought in terms of revolutionary change, and even if they talked of socialism or comparable horrors, it was rarely after giving thought to what these terms might mean or ask of them. What they wanted, in most cases, was simply the inheritance of which Awolowo had lately written. But for this, of course, they needed the pressure of the "masses," while the "masses," beyond any doubt, looked to independence for large if also vague social changes in their favor. Later on, when American support became possible as well as desirable, all talk of socialism was an embarrassment to nationalists striving for their colonial inheritance. Some of them invented an amiable creature called "African socialism," which meant precisely nothing but sounded good. Others, if they were francophone, followed the classicist Léopold Sédar Senghor, of Senegal, into the pleasant groves of négritude, which sounded even better and meant even less.

Even so, the substantial point was gained. The elites needed the masses, and took steps to recruit them. With or without flutes, gongs, and aged Land Rovers, the effort was successful. In the name of social change and improvement, the "masses" surged into politics. By the late 1950s the whole colonial continent, even in the solitudes of the vast mainland colonies of Portugal or the forgotten zones of Spain, trembled or thudded with hopes of social change, everyday change, that ranged from sober calculation to dreams of messianic glory.

At this point, as would be rapidly seen in the aftermath, things began to change. As long as the principal colonial powers had not withdrawn, the ideas and aims of the "social conflict" held their primacy over those of the "national conflict"; and "tribalism," in that context, retained its positive value. In Nigeria, for example, the Igbo National Union, as a "tribal association," played a crucial role in the formation (1944) of a party of nation-statist independence, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons launched by Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe. So did other such associations elsewhere, most notably in Nigeria the Action Group (1950) whose "tribal" strength derived from the Yoruba "national union," Egbe Omo Oduduwa (1948).

Such new political parties drew authentic and sometimes overwhelming popular support from their ethnic roots: the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, for example, wrote its inspiring call for Yoruba resurgence in the terms and language of foundation myths and beliefs that everyone had learned to respect at their mothers' knees. Such beliefs were powerful instruments in raising mass expectations of a better life after colonial rule was over.
But once colonial rule was over, or would obviously soon be over, the leaders of the new nationalism became the potential or actual leaders of their newly independent colony. From being instruments of pressure against foreign rulers, the new parties at once became instruments of rivalry within the nation-statist political arena. The competing interests of the “elites,” as they began to be called by sociologists and others, took primacy over the combined interests of the “masses.” The “social conflict,” one may say, was subordinated to the “national conflict”; and “tribal unions” such as the Igbo National Union and the Yoruba Egbe were in a different posture. They were now divisive of that national unity, initially empowered by a social unity behind social aspirations, which the whole independence project was supposed to be about.

Not, of course, everywhere or to the same extent. In the Tanganyikan (Tanzanian) case, for example, the multiplicity of fairly numerous ethnic groups, coupled with the strongly unifying influence of a single major nationalist movement, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), was able to keep the “social conflict” near the center of the picture. Where the elitist politicians of multiparty Nigeria went for the spoils of office or each others’ throats, usually the same target, those of Tanganyika, or most of them, remained more or less acutely aware of their duty to promote postcolonial social change. They functioned within a power-monopolist TANU, raised to national authority in 1961, as companions rather than as rivals; and this progressive outcome of one-party rule, afterward sorely abused when postcolonial poverty had duly opened every door to postcolonial corruption, was undoubtedly a great factor for good at the start of independence.

Events moved fast in the 1950s. Once the major colonial powers had digested the difficult thought that actual territorial possession was no longer useful to them, one phase of “tribalism” and its like shifted almost imperceptibly into another. In the case of Britain, for example, the many Nigerian students living there by the end of the 1940s had transformed their own union, the West African Students’ Union (WASU), into an agitational pressure group in which all its members acted in the name of Nigeria. By late in the 1950s, with nationalist parties on the scene and increasingly in rivalry with one another, WASU’s members suddenly became Yoruba or Igbo or Hausa and so on, much to the discomfort of British sympathizers, their nationalist friends having taught them to regard such ethnic loyalties as belonging to colonialist artifact.

But however fast things moved, and no matter what unexpected paths they took, two principles were now in any case established. The first principle, universally accepted like the second, was that advancement toward the nation-state was the only feasible route of escape from the colonial condition. The receptive descendants of Freetown and Monrovia, like their Western-educated friends at Cape Coast, Accra, and Lagos, had clearly been right about this. For the British, and then the French, would hear of nothing else. Those who argued for interterritorial federalism or its equivalent, pointing out the obstacles to progress adhering in the colonial frontiers, were ignored or pushed aside. Any such large and constructive reorganization of frontiers could never suit the imperial powers, eager still to retain “neocolonialist” levers of interest and influence. Nor could they suit the nationalist leaders, now increasingly impa-
tient for the fruits of power, and rightly aware that interterro-

torial reorganization must delay and perhaps threaten their

enjoyment of these fruits. So the colonial territories and states

had to be accepted, as they were: taken over, and renamed with

the titles and prerogatives of as many new nation-states as there

had been colonies.

The second principle, servant of the first, was that the “na-
tional conflict,” embodied in the rivalries for executive power

between contending groups or individuals among the “elites,”
must continue to take priority over a “social conflict” concerned

with the interests of most of the inhabitants of these new nation-

states. Anything else would slow up access to full political inde-
pendence, sow frightful suspicions of “radicalism” in London

and Paris, and therefore threaten the financial and other forms

of aid upon which the “elites,” once in executive power, found

that they were advised to depend.

So these men and women, no few of whom had paid dearly

for the success of their anticolonial agitations, pressed eagerly

along this chosen path to power, feeling themselves beckoned

by destiny and all the gods as well as urged on by families and

dependents. And the frontiers of the colonial partition, however

inappropriate to an independent Africa, became the sacred fron-
tiers which it must be treason to question or deny.

It was difficult in that haste and hurly-burly of risk and

ferment to see how little was being thought of and foreseen;

and perhaps it was impossible. The prestige and power of the

imperialist project and achievement had been so great, so im-

mensely hard to confront and overcome, often so hopeless to

contemplate; and the cards in the hands of the nationalists, save

for stubbornness and courage, were few and feeble. After the

Second World War the weakness of the imperial powers had

allowed the opening of gates to colonial freedom, but those

powers were still very much present and well able to defend

their interests. In later times it might seem to have been easy

to challenge those powers, almost a going along with what was

going to happen anyway. At the time it could be a hazardous

enterprise, to be embarked on only by the rash or the blindly

romantic, and all too possibly ending in ruin.

That so little was foreseen is easy to understand. Any ques-
tioning of nationalism, of the credentials of nation-statism as

the only feasible route of escape, had to seem very close to

betrayal of the anticolonial cause. To warn of nation-statism’s

likely disaster in the future of Africa, just as it had lately been

in the past of much of Europe, was what no one, but no one

anywhere, appears to have thought sensible until years later.

Besides this, the record of nation-statism in recent Europe—

above all in Central and Eastern Europe—was little known or

not known at all: Africans who studied in Europe before 1939

seldom went to Central or Eastern Europe. If they had done so,

the parallels in nation-statist experience could still not have

struck them as interesting, for it was not until the 1970s that

the nation-statist route of escape began to seem, just possibly,
a dead end.

Lately, no doubt, nationalism has increasingly gotten itself a

bad name, and the nation-statist project—the attempt to turn

colonially formed territories into nation-statist territories—

looks increasingly like a mistake, like a “shackle” on good sense

and policy in Edem Kodjo’s memorable phrase. That is easily

acceptable in and for Europe in the wake of Fascism, Nazism,

and Stalinism, under whose ideological impetus more crimes
and horrors have been committed in the name of one or another kind of nationalist glory than will ever be counted or even remembered. But for the nationalists of Africa the matter had to look quite otherwise.

Men of their time, the pioneering nationalists were intensely conscious of the history they had lived through. They scrutinized the news with all the seriousness of those who have had to struggle hard for enlightenment and who, having found it, look only for that. They studied the portents and examined the entrails of Europe's nation-liberating struggles; and they found in them sure prophesies for colonial Africa and for the nations that Africa must build if it was to realize its destiny.

Their every experience had confirmed it. Whether or not they were the descendants of captives or of others like Edward Wilmot Blyden, the West Indian of Hausa parentage who became in the 1890s a beloved and famous spokesman for Africa's claims, they knew what happened to persons "without a nation." With Blyden their experience of European racism easily confirmed for them that nationality has to be "an ordinance of nature; and no people can rise to an influential position among the nations without a distinct and efficient nationality." Colonized and despised Africa, as the Gold Coaster Atoh Ahuma would write in 1911, must "come into the open where nations are made": new nations, that is, which had yet to reach existence.

And this was a conviction that held firm through later years. It was a conviction formed in a nineteenth-century Africa whose intellectuals were acutely aware of the drive and promise of national liberation in contemporary Europe. Their self-assurance could scarcely have been otherwise. For they had lived through a time when nationalism glowed with the brilliance of a manifest destiny, and spoke with the tongues of angels. The legacy of this conviction, in a large sense the legacy of the 1860s, was to retain its force, a force that had come from Europe with the breadth and surge of a grandly liberating adventure.

It is time to look at that adventure, and the light it may cast on much later developments in Europe but, also, as we may find, in Africa.