

## **Marxist Philosophy, Liberation Struggles and Theologies in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

The contribution of Marxist philosophy to liberation struggles and theology in Africa and post-independence Africa cannot be overestimated. The liberation struggles and theologies of liberation in Africa have been influenced by ideas from Marxist philosophy. This equally applies to liberation struggles and movements inspired by Kwame Nkrumah, Obafemi Awolowo, Julius Nyerere, African liberation theologies and others. All these have been directly or indirectly influenced by ideas from Marxist thought. The concern of this paper is to see the nexus between Marxist philosophy and liberation struggles and theologies. While it is true that not all aspects of Marxist philosophy are viable or ethically relevant to liberation in Africa today; there are aspects such as the option for the poor that are still relevant. These viable aspects must continue to be encouraged in creating a better African continent. The paper uses a critical analytic method to break-open the issues involved. The paper finds and concludes that Marxist thought have influenced liberation struggles and theologies in Africa; and that aspects of Marxian thoughts still have some relevance to the Continent.

**Keywords:** Marx, Philosophy, Liberation Struggles, Liberation Theologies, and Africa

### **Introduction**

In the 1950s much of the continent of Africa was under colonial oppression. The European invaders brought and imposed their own systems of government on African countries. The evils and the negative effects of colonialism are well documented by scholars like Franz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Tiong'o, and many others. Colonialism denigrated African identity, personhood, and culture. It equally caused economic and political oppression depriving Africans of their right to freedom of speech, freedom of association, cultural expression, etc.

As Rousseau (1958) opines, people are born free but everywhere they are living in chains. People who live under oppression want to be set free. As African people propelled by their nationalist heroes and freedom fighters strategise to overcome colonialism, they were deeply influenced by various currents of thoughts especially Marxist philosophy. The goal of this paper is to examine this influence and the nexus between it and the liberation struggles and theologies in Africa. In accomplishing the thesis of this paper the followings will be done: (1) analysis of concepts, (2) examination of the tenets of Marxist philosophy, (3) an examination of the reality and practice of liberation struggles and theologies in Africa, (4) a look at the influence of Marxist philosophy on the liberation struggles and theologies, (5) and some concluding reflections will be offered. The method used in this paper is critical analysis. The issues involved in the paper are dissected, deciphered and broken-open for understanding. The import and implications of the issues are also studied. It is to the analysis of concepts that the paper now turns.

### **Analysis of Concepts**

Some concepts/phrases ground this paper. They are Marxist, philosophy, liberation, struggles, and theologies. The term Marxist is used to describe the thoughts and teachings emanating from Karl Marx and by extension the persons and systems of thoughts that draw deep roots and foundation from Marx's doctrines and ideas. The term Marxist is used as an adjective. Marxism and Marxist philosophy could be used as synonyms. Espin (2007) opines that Marxism is a broad term that can include all the theories that have their origin or have been influenced by him. Marx is a German philosopher. As Espin (2007) notes it is difficult to understand the 20<sup>th</sup> century in totality without Marx. It was in the year 1818 that Marx was born in Trier, Germany and he died in 1883. At the University of Berlin, he studied philosophy. He also studied socialism later in his life. Detailed biography of Marx can be found in Sargent (2009), Adams and Dyson (2007), Boucher and Kelly (2009).

The term Marxist is used to designate the philosophy, thoughts, and ideas coming/emanating from Marx. Philosophy is critical analytic search for wisdom on any aspect of reality. Philosophy probes into all of reality. It is a second order discipline. The subject matter of philosophy is all other disciplines.

Liberation deals with freedom from oppression and exploitation. Liberation speaks of people being free from all that hinders them from attaining the good life and optimal meaning. Liberation deals with people been free from all the chains and obstacles that prevent them from exercising their basic human rights and freedoms, and liberties. The word, struggle refers to efforts and activities exerted to move from a present or past situation of discomfort and pain to obtain a better situation. Liberation struggles in Africa refers to all movements, and other activities geared towards obtaining independence in all its ramifications from colonial oppression and colonial ways of life. All the pre-independence efforts to free African countries from European rule are all part of the struggles against colonialism. Tanko (2013, p. 7) writes that:

Liberation theology anywhere in the world and under whatever manner or shape it operates is the product or awareness that oppression and exploitation of the less privileged people are man-made, sinful and therefore contradict everything that the gospel message stands for (Odey, 1996; Hayer, 1996; Kirk, 1980). Today, the term liberation, serves a common denominator to the movements that struggle against the gangs of colonial domination.

There are also struggles in religion to free African practitioners of Christianity from European expressions of Christianity that are not part of early Christianity. While there is the Latin American version of liberation theology which was the most popular at a time and deeply influenced many other forms of liberation theologies, it is not the only form of liberation theology. Liberation theology is deeply contextual in various contexts. The *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* as cited in Encyclopedia (2016) notes that:

It is often wrongly assumed that liberation theology first appeared in Latin America and then spread to other continents and contexts. Some classical works on black theology (for example, James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1970) and feminist liberation theology (Rosemary Ruether's *Liberation Theology*, 1972) were published at about the same time as the first major works of Latin American liberation theology, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez's *Teología de la liberación* (1972). It is more accurate to say that the term *liberation theology* arose simultaneously in different contexts.

New World Encyclopedia (2018) notes that liberation theology refers to a Christian theology school concerned with freedom for the oppressed that arose in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America; and it was first expressed in the Medellin conference of Latin American Catholic Bishops in 1986. It is remarkable to note that as the New World Encyclopedia relates it used Marxist philosophy as social analysis giving prominence to “orthopraxis” over “orthodoxy”. Like liberation theologies there are many liberation theologies in African Christianity that are calling for authentic Christianity in Africa, and a Christianity that stands for the poor and oppressed.

### **Some Tenets of the Marxist Philosophy**

There are various ways to examine the philosophy of Marx. One way is to examine it through the lens of the *Communist Manifesto*. Mautner (2000) states that at the heart of the *Communist Manifesto* is the theory that class struggle or strive is the most important issue in society. He sees history as constituted of class struggles and tensions from the beginning of human history. For Marx, the economic motivations are

what propel this class struggle. History is moving in a teleological manner and driven by dialectical materialism.

What is dialectical materialism? Marx affirmed that there are three laws of dialectics- that of transformation from quantity to quality, opposition and conflict and negation of negation. Jakpor (2000) writes that the three laws of dialectics imply that matter or reality follows the sequential movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. In that same place, Jakpor (2000) asserts that: “(1) Consciousness or thinking is the product of a long historical process of the development of matter. (2) Thinking or consciousness is a product of social development. (3) The consciousness of each individual is shaped in a complex and very long process of development when his brain reaches a definite level of maturity” (p. 13).

History has moved from primitive communalism to feudalism, then capitalism, socialism and communism. Capitalism like its predecessors is full of exploitation and oppression of the masses. Workers are alienated from the fruits of their labours. History has witnessed the exploitation of man by man. The bourgeoisie class has oppressed the proletariat (the working class). There is a depersonalisation and dehumanisation of the worker in the capitalist system.

Capitalism is a tentative state in the history of humanity. Capitalism because it is an oppressive system needs to be destroyed and overthrown first by socialism and then the socialist society will move to communism. Socialism for Marx is an imperfect society, but in the interim it is a stage to communism. As Adams and Dyson (2007) has stated, Marx sincerely believed that capitalism will collapse and communism will be ushered in eventually.

This is a society in which people will no longer be alienated from the fruits of their labours. It will be a classless society. There will be no more oppression or exploitation. Marx in his thoughts denounces private ownership of the means of production. In a communist society, all the means of production belongs to all. The benefits equally belong to all. In this society there is freedom for all persons and no more master-slave relationship. The needs of people will be met according to their needs. Nobody will be allowed to suffer and live in pain in a communist society. In a communist society, there is no more state, it is stateless society. All the conflicts, struggles, tensions, divisions, and contradictions in the previous societies before communism are done away with. All history is moving towards communism. For Marx, communism is the end of history. Marx was very sure of the end of history, which is the emergence of communism.

### **Liberation Struggles and Theologies in Africa**

As defined above liberation struggles in Africa refer to all the movements and organised activities directed towards freedom of African peoples from colonialism, and other forms of oppression. In the various African countries in the 1950s and 1960s, African people struggled for their independence from the European colonialists. There were liberation struggles or independence movements in almost all African

countries. Names like Obafemi Awolowo, Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Nelson Mandela, etc feature in the liberation struggle movement. Even post-colonial authors and their writings are all part of liberation struggles in Africa. Post-colonial writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon, etc have all used their writings to advocate for independence in various aspects of African life.

As there are struggles in the socio-economic and political realms to free African people from colonial rule; so also, there are struggles in the Christian church in Africa to free Africans from European appendages that were attached to Christianity when it came to the land of Africa. These struggles in churches are forms of liberation theologies. Tanko (2013) citing Magesa states that: "African liberation theologies are attempts of the dispossessed to regain the right of self-determination and self-definition in the context of the prevailing hostile world-influence and pressures" (pp. 21-22).

Furthermore, with regard to the function of liberation theologies in Africa, Tanko (2013) rightly argues thus: "Authentic liberation and emancipation in Africa, consist of cultural, religious, structural and psycho-spiritual liberation" (p.22). African Christians are to live out Christianity within their own contextual environment while being faithful to the values of the gospel. The many writings of African theologians, philosophers, and scholars advocating for economic and environmental justice, political and religious freedom, against social and corporate evils of multinational oil corporations and corrupts African rulers are all expressions of liberation theologies. These writers and teachers include Cardinal Anthony Okogie, Bishop Hassan Kukah, George Ehusani, Barnabas C Okolo, Jean-Marc Ela, Engelbert Mveng, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, etc.

Independence struggles in Africa range from country to country, and from region to region. In South Africa where the apartheid system reigned, blacks were oppressed, discriminated against and deprived of their human rights in their own land. Apartheid was systematised racism against the blacks in South Africa. It is painful to note that the Reformed Church in South Africa officially supported and promoted the Apartheid regime. Black Theology in South Africa arose to oppose and critique the Apartheid regime. Black theologians in South Africa who used the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Exodus event, the return from exile and the values of the kingdom of God as preached by Christ to argue for the freedom of black people include Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu, and Dwight Hopkins. The contributions of Steve Biko who formed the all-black Student Organisation of South Africa are not to be discountenanced. He advocated for black people to cherish and value their traditions and culture and assert their God-given rights.

In African Christianity today there is a great movement called inculturation theology. This theology speaks about the authentic incarnation of Christianity in the values and culture of African people. Inculturation theology argues that when the European missionaries brought Christianity to Africa, they brought it with European

styles, manners, and ways of life that are not necessarily part of Christianity. For Christianity to be authentic and take incarnation root in Africa, it must accept authentic African values and free Africans from Euro-centric versions of the gospel. Because it argues for religious freedom for Africans to express Christianity in their own cultural way that are in line with the gospel, it is a form of liberation theology. This movement includes the use of the vernacular in the transmission of the Christian gospel, understanding the gospel in line with authentic African religious values, re-designing church structures, landscapes, liturgical dressings, naming, vessels, etc. Magesa (2004) says inculturation is:

...an integration of the gospel and culture in Christian life that will arrest the dualism and contrast oscillation from one set of values to another contradictory one is what the contact between faith and culture entails. It begins to happen when the gospel discovers itself in a culture, accepting elements that reveal the face of God already present, and rejecting those that do not (p. 161).

Inculturation theologies liberate Africans from inauthentic European and western forms of expressions of Christianity. Africans don't have to become Europeans or act in western ways to become Christians. A major act of inculturation occurred in early Christianity when the Church averred that non-Jews coming to the Christian faith don't have to undergo circumcision to be Jews to become Christians. True inculturation must always bring about the liberation and freedom of people. Magesa (2004) draws insights from the Latin American theologian Diego Irarrazaval who has argued that inculturation "encompasses all aspects of life in faith: ethics and solidarity among persons in need, healing with popular wisdom, faith experiences of the youth, initiatives by women in grassroots religion, programmes of enculturated catechesis, options for the poor in religious life and lay movements, paraliturgies and rituals of people."

Many experiments and practices of inculturation theology are within the Catholic Church. Many Bishops' conferences and theological conferences have been devoted to inculturation. Many books have also been written on it. When Pope Paul VI visited Uganda in 1969, he called on African to incarnate the gospel in their culture. In Zaire there is an official inculturated Zairean rite of the Catholic Mass.

## **The Influence of Marxist Philosophy on the Liberation Struggles and Theologies in Africa**

Coweel (1983) writes:

In Africa the legacy is confused, providing slogans for some leaders and rationales of tyranny for others. Africa's socialism is, if the jargon reflects a reality, widespread. But it is no monolithic institution, encompassing, as it does, credos that range from the humanistic to the dictatorial. Socialism of one kind or another took root in Africa in tandem with

decolonization, a reaction to what was perceived as the oppression of foreign capitalists who ruled and exploited from distant cities. It was a reflex that seemed to fit Marx's division of the world into oppressors and oppressed.

A central way that Marxist philosophy influenced African liberation-nationalists is in their conception of African socialism. It is a mixed heritage but the phenomenon of what they described as African socialism would not have been labelled that if they did not have contact with the writings and ideas of Marx. Hughes (2007) asserts that in the past the idea of communism was attractive to African leaders as:

...radical elements among the colonial and post-independence intelligentsia and labour movement, supplemented in the latter case by dissident groups within the armed forces of the new states, did find in Marxist values and theories blueprints for a new moral and political order and the supposed means to the rapid economic transformation of their societies.

The idea of freedom from oppression and even seeing colonialism as capitalism that need to be overthrown inspired African leaders. Marxist philosophy and ideology have had influence all over the world. The Marxist idea of freedom and liberation of the masses and workers from the exploitation and oppression of the rich and the ruling class has informed liberation movements and groups in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and other places. Many freedom fights even when they don't use the label Marxist have either read Marx or heard of his ideas. They are propelled and driven by his ideals and ideas. People like Fanon, Mandela, Nyerere, Awolowo, Azikiwe, etc have all been influenced by him. Writing of the spread of Marx's ideas, Ogunmodede (2005) avers both the achievements and influence of Marxist philosophy can be seen in the posture, writings and actions of people like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and nationalization projects we see in Africa immediately after independence.

The followings are some key leaders in Africa who were influenced or took some ideas from Marx. They are Awolowo, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Mandela, Azikiwe, etc. They were either leaders in the liberations struggles and movements in their country or key members. They were inspired by the socialist or communist idea of freedom of the people from oppression and exploitation. It does not in any way mean that they agreed with everything in socialism or communism. In 1975, the Ethiopian Derg declared that Marxism-Leninism is the official state ideology. Obafemi Awolowo one of those who fought for Nigerian independence was certainly influenced by Marx. Ogunmodede (1986) writes of him thus:

Like Plato and Hegel, Awolowo is influenced by Marx. However, it is not his rejection of God and the materialistic interpretation of history and society that appeals to Awolowo, but rather, his concern for society and social welfare and justice. For this reason, both Awolowo and Marx are socialists. The differences, as well be made known subsequently, is that Awolowo takes to a reformatory, peaceful and non-violent

means of socialism in contrast to Marx's bloody and revolutionary approach.

The liberation struggles in Africa in the political and economic arenas were led by African nationalists such as Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, etc. They were the ones who fought for African independence from the clutches of colonialism. Informed by his Christian faith and the global socialist movement Nyerere advocated for Ujamaa system of government in Tanzania. African independence-nationalist fighters did use the term socialism to designate their vision of what a post-colonial African state should look like. In using that term, it could be said that they adopted it from the worldwide socialist movement and Marxian thought. They did this only to indicate that the communal idea in socialism was already present in Africa even before the coming of colonialism. They were clear to distinguish it from Marxian revolutionary socialism and dialectical materialism.

Drew (2017) writes that in the post-independence era, some African nationalist leaders saw the communal basis from African traditional societies, the lack of private properties as pathway to an African socialism that is different from the capitalist west and also different from communism of the Soviet Union. The following were proponents of what has come to be called African socialism, They are Senegal's Léopold Senghor , Senegal's Mamadou Dia , Guinea's Sékou Touré , Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah , Kenya's Tom Mboya, and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere of Tanzania.

African socialism as an ideology has deeply influenced Africa. There are various understanding of African socialism. Karp and Masolo (1998) write that African socialism is a "body of materials combining Marxist and economic theories with negritude's politics of difference" (p. 448). There are various definitions of African socialism. Drew (2017) has noted that even when African leaders met in 1962 in Dakar in Senegal to discuss approaches to socialism, the leaders could not agree on what it is rather they interpreted it to reflect the needs of their different countries. They did agree on the communal nature of African pre-colonial societies. As Drew (2017) writes Senghor is reputed to have first use the term African socialism and it is rooted in the traditional communal values of African societies, the values of Negritude-black culture and personality.

For Dia, as Drew (2017) further shows, it is a combination of socialist ideas and individualistic values with a humanist outlook. With regard to George Padmore, Drew (2017) opines that African socialism combines self-determination of each nation, social revolution and collective agriculture. Nkrumah (1967) has shown that African socialism ought to be socialism. He narrates that it was in the Second International that there was a split in distinguishing between Marxism and social democracy. Before the Second International they were essentially the same and the German Social Democratic Party was the protector of Marxism. Nkrumah notes that the concrete forms that socialism should take in Africa are what is termed "African Socialism." For him the term has become meaningless. The point being argued is that the Marxian idea of socialism impacted some African leaders, until they began to distinguish it from

socialism. In spite of what has just been said, the following statements of Thompsell (2018) should be noted:

At independence, African countries had to decide what type of state to put in place, and between 1950 and the mid-1980s, thirty-five of Africa's countries adopted socialism at some point.<sup>1</sup> The leaders of these countries believed socialism offered their best chance to overcome the many obstacles these new states faced at independence. Initially, African leaders created new, hybrid versions of socialism, known as African socialism, but by the 1970s, several states turned to the more orthodox notion of socialism, known as scientific socialism. What was the appeal of socialism in Africa, and what made African socialism different from scientific socialism?

Africa has also been impacted by liberation theologies. Liberation theology is defined as critical reading of the biblical tradition with seeing a liberation and freedom motif. It includes the biblical readings and teachings for economic and political freedom. The bible is not simply seen as a document to guide people to heaven but also for a better life here on earth. The ground-breaking theological work on liberation theology is from the Latin American theologian Gutierrez (1972) who proposed that the exodus-event in the bible is aimed at the socio-economic and political liberation of the people of Israel from "Pharaohnic" bondage and servitude. The aim of the God of Israel is to take them to a place of freedom and life in abundance, the Promised Land. Liberation theology is aimed at giving voice to the poor and the oppressed.

Liberation theology is not limited to Latin America, you find it in the writings, preaching of some of the Christian leaders mentioned above, Liberation theology is used here in the loose sense to embrace all teachings and statements that upholds the tradition of social justice of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC prophets of Israel and that embraces the liberating messages of the kingdom of God as espoused by Jesus. The point worth noting is: did Marxist philosophy have any influence on them? Marxist philosophy places primary emphasis on praxis. Marx did say, before his time philosophers have interpreted the world now is the time to change it. Action is key and fundamental to leading a violent revolution to overthrow the capitalist class. This emphasis on action or praxis has greatly influenced liberation struggles and movements and theologies. A founding father of liberation theology, Gutierrez (1972) opined thus: liberation theology is radical reflection on praxis from the perspective of God's word.

Encyclopaedia (2017) notes that highlighting of the idea of praxis is an influence from Marx. This point is supported by Ogbonnaya (2016) who opines that the Latin American version of liberation theology which fought against injustice in the light of the gospel used predominantly the socio-economic analysis of Marxist philosophy. Since Latin American liberation theology spurred on and inspired other theologians worldwide to also contribute in harnessing theology for the benefits of their people, it could be said that it has influenced some other forms of liberation theologies,

preaching, and teachings advocating for social justice and human liberation for the people of Africa.

The lens of seeing society as broadly and roughly divided into two classes of the rich (bourgeoisie) and the poor (proletariat) though not original to Marx has also influenced the way theologians in Africa have looked at African societies. Marx also opined that religion is opium of the people. There are many forms of religious Christianity that operates for economic gain. The rate at which churches are spreading and the massive abuses in Christianity have made people to see some forms of religion as opium of the people. Through liberation theology that is deeply rooted in Marxist analysis, Marx and his philosophy have indirectly influenced socio-political and economic liberation theologies in Africa as stated by Ogbonnaya (2016) who writes of African liberative theologies. African style of liberation theology is certainly different from other forms of liberation theologies. As Allen (2009) says, African liberation theologies are more concerned with issues of good governance, leadership, provision of the dividends of governance, life affirmation issues, etc.

It should be stated clearly that it is not in all areas that Marxist philosophy has influenced liberation struggles and theologies in Africa. There are many divergences between Marxist philosophy and liberation struggles in Africa. Marxist philosophy is atheistic and materialist. Many of the liberation struggle leaders were believers in God, the universal spirit. They did not see socialism or communism as the end of history. While they saw African communalistic values as akin to socialist values, they did not adopt socialist values hook, line, and sinker. They argue that socialist values were already present in Africa through communalism. Some of them like Awolowo, and Azikiwe, did not adopt the revolutionary violent tactics of Marx.

## **Concluding Reflections**

The paper has shown clearly that Marxist philosophy did impact Africa. But it also noted that African socialism which is one of the key ideologies through which Marxist philosophy had influenced Africa, was conceived uniquely and has some divergences with regard to global socialism and Marxism. The paper also showed that African Christianity has also been impacted directly or indirectly by Marxist philosophy. It was noted that while Marx's call for freedom of humans and human labours from oppression and exploitation is well received in Africa, some have equally disagreed with his violent revolutionary tactics and dialectical materialism. Society can make progress through gradual social evolution and not necessarily through violent revolution. Though Marxist philosophy or Marxism has waned in influence, some of the key ideas of Marx are still relevant. It is true that capitalism has many flaws and many workers are still alienated from the fruit of their labours. Many people are still oppressed in almost all societies by the ruling class. There are people who still misuse religion to oppress.

The paper concludes that while it is true that Marxist philosophy has impacted Africa, African scholars should be true to their communalistic values even as they learn from outsiders. It should also be noted that though African countries have gained political independence from the European colonialists, many African countries have not fully gained economic independence. Both their political and economic policies are still deeply influenced by foreign countries and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, etc. In a sense the total liberation of Africa politically, economically, religiously is still ongoing. From Marx let Africa learn to continue to struggle against oppression, exploitation, religious alienation, etc. The radical impetus that African theologians and church scholars have adopted in their preaching and writings aimed at the full liberation of Africa and total emancipation of African Christians should continue. In all, Africa should be inspired by the ideas of Marx aimed at liberation while rejecting atheism, violence, and whatever does not accord with authentic African values.

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