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'We are so poor that we have nothing to earn respect but our principles.' Julius Nyerere
'I am an idea.' Patrice Lumumba

The study of African political ideas raises questions that cannot be answered with any confidence. What is the nature of African political thought? Is there anything so coherent as the term ‘political thought’ implies? What are the functions of political ideology in the African context? Is there any connection between the ideas expressed by political leaders and their political actions? Do these ideas influence the beliefs and actions of other Africans and in particular, the beliefs and actions of the masses? Do political leaders believe what they say? Do the masses believe what they say?

Confident answers to these questions can only be provided (if ever) by research. For the moment, the student of African politics must confine himself to a speculative discussion of the issues involved in the relationship between political ideas and political actions. Certainly, there can be no complete understanding of African political systems without some insight into the perspectives and motives of the people who play principal roles in those systems. The starting-point for achieving such insight is a consideration of the statements made by political leaders. The intention in presenting this selection of readings from the recorded statements of African political leaders is to enable the student to make this first step, as a necessary preliminary to a more probing analysis of the context and function of African political ideas.

Whether these ideas are true or false, idealistic or pragmatic, is neither here nor there. What matters, in the first place, is that these ideas exist, and are given existence by men who are crucially placed to put the ideas into practice. Their motives in constructing and propagating ideologies are likely to be complex, diverse, and even self-contradicting. The implementation of ideas may be impeded by a variety of obstacles not always amenable to political control. The ideas may be well or badly received by other leading actors in the political drama, and might be viewed with blankness, scepticism, or dismay by the general audience. But
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they cannot easily be ignored, or avoided; for, in the political systems of developing countries, ‘it is the relation to authority that gives ideology its political significance’.

There is a tendency, though, for familiarity with the statements of African political leaders to breed, if not contempt, something akin to boredom. It would be easy enough to dismiss their ideologies as strident, repetitive, rhetorical and unproductive. The political theorist would search in vain for originality; the general reader would more often be mystified than enlightened. Let us, for the sake of argument, accept these strictures. But there remains an irreducible core to these ideologies; and that hard centre is provided by the human condition itself, which is so poignant in the poor regions of the world, and to which these ideologies constantly address themselves. In this context, it is the actions of political leaders which are of immediate concern and interest. But again we are brought up against the fact that these actions find at least a partial explanation in the beliefs and values of the actor; and in trying to uncover those beliefs and values, we must take the formal expressions as one piece of evidence.

The next step is to examine the evidence critically, and I will confine myself here to an identification of what seem to me to be the three most significant areas for discussion. These are the content of African ideology; its political purposes; and the relationship between political ideas and political actions.

‘...the philosophy of the African revolution...is defined by three political components of our liberation movement – namely: Nationalism, Panafriickism, and Socialism.’ Kwame Nkrumah

The labels selected by Nkrumah remain the most convenient catch-phrases to summarise the dominant strands in African ideology. They are labels which reflect the pre-eminent day-to-day concerns of African decision-makers, as well as their cultural and intellectual stances. Nationalism was the chosen philosophy of the colonial independence movements. A Western philosophy, it was turned to good effect against embarrassed imperial governments, which had customarily pretended not to notice the blatant contradiction between their own explicitly democratic values and the colonial autocracies for which they were responsible. Leaders like Nkrumah, Azikiwe, Senghor and Sekou Touré lost no opportunity to proclaim this contradiction, and to claim that they represented genuinely nationalist movements rooted in the evident aspirations of the colonial peoples. The clearest evidence that this claim had little foundation in social reality is the post-independence experience of the liberated territories. Ethnic, linguistic, and religious differentiations
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ensure that these formal political units lack natural cohesion. Political leaders who in the colonial period found in the call for national unity a sharp-edged slogan, in the independence period strive to convert the slogan into reality, or at least to use the slogan to maintain the national unit they have called into being. Naturally enough, they soon discover the limitations of slogans as an effective political instrument, and increasingly find themselves in the position of exerting their political authority in the direction of imposing a political unity which has only a tentative social basis. The establishment and maintenance of national unity therefore becomes inextricably involved with the establishment and maintenance of the leader’s authority. A challenge to national unity is interpreted (and resisted) as a challenge to the political leadership. Likewise political competition is viewed as damaging to that national unity which is seen as the guarantee of genuine independence; ergo, political competition is subversive.

It is this progression which underlies the emphasis in African ideology upon the need to restructure political institutions so that they accord with what are believed (or expressed) to be the real needs of the emergent political system. This emphasis invariably centres on the nature of democracy, the irrelevance of institutional models of democracy drawn from Western experience, and the necessity to limit political competitiveness and conflict. Political organisation henceforth is to centre on a single political party which will act to reflect the popular will. The logical extension of this argument is that the state bureaucracy is obliged to act in accordance with the directives of the party; as Sekou Touré puts it, ‘the Party constitutes the thought of the people of Guinea at its highest level . . . the thought of the Party specifies the principles which ought to direct our behaviour.’ The influence of Marxist–Leninist principles of political organisation is evident in this approach: but it is an approach which in more or less radical form is to be found across a wide spectrum of African ideology. And to the charge that this approach is merely a cloak for the pursuit of power, the African leader would reply that, from a cynical viewpoint, the charge applies to all forms of political organisation, and that any political arrangement is valid once it meets the requirements of a given economic and social situation. Since most African countries are in an approximately similar economic and social situation, it is no matter for surprise that common forms of political organisation make their appearance; nor that the question of political institutions and their operation should be a central concern of political ideology. The development of central institutions of State bureaucracy has always been a distinguishing characteristic of the emerging nation-state, and in Africa today the best hope for viable national entities would appear to rest in the
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creation of effective and authoritative political institutions. In these terms, the self-interest of the political actor and the general interest of the political unit in which he operates could be regarded as indivisible.

Just as all African leaders have to define the arena in which they will operate, so do they have to respond to a common demand from the people brought within these arenas. The demand is for improvements in the social and economic conditions faced by the nation’s new citizens. Indeed, political support for anti-colonial leaders was often based in social and economic discontents which the colonial regime could not, or would not, assuage. The political pact between the nationalist leader and his political subjects contained an implied promise that social and economic discontents would be remedied with the overthrow of the offending regime. Again, then, the political self-interest of the leader demanded that he should attempt to honour this pact, quite aside from moral imperatives or social ideals. The attempts to achieve economic and social development vary in tactical and doctrinal scope; but the overall strategy is everywhere the same, and is imposed by the brutal and unyielding facts of economic and social existence in Africa. Nonetheless, tactics and doctrine are of primary political concern; and so a situation obtains where many roads to socialism are declared open, but where all roads lead only to socialism. A common characteristic in African versions of socialism is what has been described as ‘reconstructed traditionalism’, or the tendency to claim that modern socialist planning is no more than a redefinition of the communautocratic basis of traditional African social organisation. Even Nkrumah, who ultimately rejected the adjective ‘African’ in favour of ‘scientific’, insisted that socialism must be informed by traditional African cultural values. Often enough the claim can be regarded as having only a tenuous relation to social reality. Traditional social organisation often did not possess the character attributed to it; the viewpoint is a romantic one. Even where communautocratic qualities did exist, social and economic existence was frequently harsh and unpleasant. Indeed, it is precisely the political dilemma of modern African leaders that such large numbers of traditional groups wish to improve their social and economic position. Nonetheless, the attempt to link modern social and economic planning to traditional and familiar patterns of life is probably essential if the African peasant is to be persuaded into modern ways; in other words, this is the element of African ideology intended to make it adaptive to social reality.

A second, slightly baffling, characteristic of African socialism is the co-existence of significant elements of vagueness and precision. The controlling ideology is only vaguely defined; the precision comes in the concrete planning mechanisms which purport to translate the ideology into practice. The vagueness serves a useful purpose to the politician: it
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provides symbols around which his supporters may cluster, without the rigidity which might cause embarrassing doctrinal divisions. And if, as so often occurs, concrete plans fail to realise their intentions, the ideology may conveniently be reinterpreted to cover up the failure, or at best, to explain it away. It is this syndrome which, perhaps, explains the recurrence in African socialist ideology of juxtaposed elements of pragmatism and utopianism. But it would be rash to judge the utopianism from a cynical standpoint: there is no reason to doubt the moral earnestness of Kaunda's humanism, or the moral conviction of Nyerere's socialism. One may doubt their ability to achieve what they believe in, or note the inconsistencies which arise in the constant dialectic of theory and reality; but these are separate matters. What is clear, and crucial, is that there is a relationship between theory and practice, between social ideal and social reality which underlines the political significance of socialist ideology.

Nkrumah's third general label, Panafrocanism, is one which ideologically is most difficult to pin to political reality; Fanon describes it as ‘African unity, that vague formula, yet one to which men and women of Africa were passionately attached'. The nature of the passion can more easily be traced through the causes which Africans take up collectively than through statements by leaders on what constitutes African unity. And it is here, too, that the gap between principle and practice is most evident. Passion there may be; but the collective heart rarely turns the collective head, and Africans have themselves launched stinging attacks on the inadequacy of panafrocan institutions. Yet the Organisation for African Unity is, rather like the United Nations, in itself a remarkable translation of ideal into reality; and if it is not a sufficient condition of panafrocan unity, it is certainly a necessary one. The chief ideological difficulty with the concept of Panafrocanism is that it both contains and conflicts with other strands of African ideology. The concepts of racial identity and continental solidarity were both significant elements in the construction of the ideology of anti-colonial nationalism. It is still a main objective of Panafrocan organisation to achieve the national liberation of colonial peoples. Yet the concept of nationalism, and the vigorous efforts by African leaders to build and define their national units, are quite at odds, with the notion of political union across national boundaries; hence the division within the Panafrocan movement between supporters of Nkrumah's vision of a continental political union which would erode national distinctions, and opponents of that vision, who would at the very most support only a confederal arrangement. Practical attempts to realise the unionist philosophy, such as the Mali Federation, and the Ghana–Guinea–Mali Union, came quickly to grief, and the emphasis now is on a
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pragmatic, gradualistic approach, in which regional groupings with a primarily economic character are seen as forerunners of wider unions of a political character.

This wholly realistic position should not be allowed to obscure the significance of the cultural manifestations of the Pan-African idea. The debate over negritude which seemed so significant in the 1950s is no longer an issue wherever politically conscious Africans meet; but it is that debate, and the influence of Senghor’s philosophy, which provided a platform for the present outburst of a literature which is regarded as distinctively and uniquely African in its content, its style, and its concerns. Just as the construction of viable nation-states is regarded by African political thinkers as a necessary defence against neo-colonialism, so the construction of an African cultural identity is regarded as a necessary defence against the cultural imperialism imported by Western systems of education and thought. It is impossible to define what the importance is to the political leader of this search for cultural identity, but we must be ready to see it as one more intellectual influence. The most concrete evidence of this influence is to be found in the emphasis on the values of the African past, which are to be rediscovered and reinstated in the existing culture. And it is in the portrayal of African life, and of African modes of behaviour, by existing African writers, that we most readily perceive African reality. To read James Ngugi on psychological and social strains in Kenya, or Chinua Achebe on political and social behaviour in Nigeria, is immensely instructive, and provides for the outsider an invaluable frame of reference in his attempts to understand the social complexity to which African political activity is related. In the long run the African writer may be the most penetrating critical influence in African politics.

‘A government does not operate according to theories; practical decisions have to be taken every day of the week.’ Tom Mboya

The easiest, and the least useful criticism of African political ideology is that it bears little relation to political practice. It is an easy criticism because it is comfortably irrefutable; but it is a trite criticism which obscures the real problem to be explored here, that is the nature of the obstacles between theories and their practical implementation. African leaders are themselves well aware of the ‘reality gap’. Many of their ideas were expressed in a context in which they were divorced from political responsibility; they were ideas which could only be implemented in the future, when political power came their way. Mamadou Dia acknowledges the situation which then existed: ‘we let ourselves be seduced by the
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mirage of the construct most satisfying to our mind, and taking the ideal for reality, we believed that it would be sufficient to condemn.5

In the independence period, African leaders quickly showed themselves alert to the problem. They were still concerned to construct a new reality, but one which offered hope of realisation. The ideology itself came to include an insistence on the necessary participation of the mass of the people in building the new society. Sekou Touré had already said, in 1959, that ‘to take part in the African revolution it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people’.6 Frantz Fanon was quick to warn political leaders that political activity must be a partnership: ‘to educate the masses politically does not mean, cannot mean, making a political speech. What it means is to try, relentlessly and passionately, to teach the masses that everything depends upon them.’7 The ideologies of Africa reflect this position; they make constant references to the need for self-sacrifice, self-discipline, self-reliance, references which are neatly encapsulated in the blunt statement ‘Principles are a good thing, but they are no substitute for hard work.’8 But then, exhortation is not action; and there is an inherent suggestion in such demands that the masses are in some way themselves to blame for the condition in which they find themselves. As Mboya trenchantly observes, ‘it’s really no good telling the peasant scratching away at the soil to be self-reliant; he’s been self-reliant since he was born’.9 The fact is, he needs leadership; and resources; and identity. The leader controls, and can provide for all these requirements. Resources are scarce, but government distributes them; identity is nebulous, but ideology can shape it. What shall be the utility of the resources, and what shall be the characteristics of the identity, rests initially with the leaders. But the leader is faced with serious obstacles in both areas. The ideological obstacles are straightforward. Firstly, there is the problem of falsified reality: that is, the ideology constructed to deal with real events may be misplaced if the events have been misinterpreted. African leaders fall into this trap when they attribute to colonialism ills which derive from more fundamental causes. When the ills persist, the leaders then attribute the failure to neo-colonialism and so box the intellectual circle. At this point, the ideology becomes a cover-up for failure instead of a means to productive actions.10

Secondly, there is the problem of communication. The spread of an ideology requires more than the mere expression of it. In African countries, even the physical transmission of ideas is a difficult business, since literacy is low, and the radio the only pervasive type of mass medium. Ideas can be passed through the educational system, but this is a long-term process and catches only a limited number of people. Inevitably, the instrument of communication becomes the political party,
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or political party plus state bureaucracy. The initial step is the indoctrination of the political elite, who then disseminate ideas in a more or less uniform way through political and bureaucratic channels of influence. The acceptability of the ideas will, in this circumstance, be tied closely to the acceptability (and efficiency) of the political and bureaucratic elite which proffers them; and we have evidence to show what a chancy and fragmented process results. The elaboration of ideology into practical proposals is no less difficult. African leaders have attempted to apply rationality here in the form of planning. The hope has been that the implementation of planned social and economic development would lead to self-sustaining economic independence which is the basis of genuine political independence. But this hope has not been realised, and African countries still show the classic signs of economic and social deprivation. The explanation lies partly in adverse environmental factors; and partly in the defects of a world economic system in which primary producing countries are at a permanent disadvantage. These factors are not always amenable to control. But there are internal factors which can be controlled, the most significant being administrative organisation and political communication. The state bureaucracies of Africa suffer from the conventional ailments of the classic bureaucracy, with the additional disadvantage that they lack the resources of technical expertise which the classic bureaucracy is assumed to possess. Moreover, the position of the bureaucracy in the power system has not been clearly defined; the result is a clash of interest between the technical bureaucracy of the state, and the political bureaucracy of the party. This conflict of interest, if unresolved, either prevents the making of decisions, or the implementation of agreed policies, or the evaluation of the results of proposals already implemented; or all these things simultaneously. In this event, not only do plans remain merely paper demonstrations of good intentions, but the ideology ceases to have practical meaning. Only where the bureaucracy and the party have clearly defined and interacting roles (or perhaps where they are fused together in a clear structure of decision-making) can plans be implemented and the first step to real economic growth and social improvement be taken. Where this happens, the ideology will be seen to have some relation to everyday reality. But if it does not happen, the claims of the ideology as a motivating force for action will inevitably be weakened.

In this event, the leader is faced with two alternative approaches. He might grapple with the problem of administrative-political relations in the public administration; and he might redefine the ideology either to explain current failures or to set new objectives. The new objectives might be phrased so as to accord more with social reality, that is they might
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become less idealistic and more pragmatic. Alternatively, they might present a more deeply etched picture of the future in order to distract attention from unpleasant social reality, while affording an explanation of the persistence of the gulf between present conditions and future expectations. The second type of ideological redefinition will invariably be more radical in its proposals, and this pattern occurs wherever a leadership with an ideological bent enjoys a small economic return on its ideological investments. The Arusha Declaration in Tanzania, The Common Man’s Charter in Uganda, Nkrumah’s Dawn Broadcast in Ghana, and Sekou Touré’s l’Afrique et la Révolution, all constitute examples of this pattern; and it seems clear that the point of ideological shift occurs at the moment when the leader realises that the political exhortation which transformed the colonial situation is not by itself sufficient to mobilise the masses for an assault on underdevelopment. Hard thinking about political and administrative organisation is required; at the same time, scapegoats must be found, to provide explanations of the rejection of the earlier ideology. And so, ‘what was progressive in 1964 may cease to be so in 1965’.12

The shift to the left is not likely to succeed any more than previous ideological positions, unless the fundamental economic and political problems of the state are solved. In some cases the use of the ideology as a substitute for action indicates that the leadership has given up the struggle: the ideology becomes at best a counsel of despair. But where ideology and action are still contemplated in a symbiotic relationship, certain attitudes become apparent. First is the renewal of the call for self-reliance, but with a new and sharp note of self-criticism. Neo-colonialism is still the principal cause of adversity, but the people have their fate in their own hands and if they cannot be persuaded towards a better future, they might have to be compelled. Secondly, the administrative deficiencies of the state are acknowledged, and the remedy proposed here is usually a form of administrative decentralisation, so that the state bureaucracy can be more effectively linked to the grassroots, and better informed about them. Thirdly, the faults of the political leadership are openly proclaimed; the elite has a special role, must obey a special code, and must avoid the privileges and status which open up a social gulf between it and the masses. Austerity is a keynote of both political and economic life. This attack on the privileged position of the political elite is usually linked to a restructuring of the party organisation which brings it more closely within the machinery of the state. Fourthly, political control is exerted more deliberately over those organisations which operate in crucial areas of economic activity and have political affiliations: this normally means the trade unions and the agricultural cooperatives. In short, ideological
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radicalism precludes a system of autonomous politics. Finally, the controlling status of the ideology is asserted; all political (and economic) activity should have reference to consistent ideological guidelines which will be formulated by the party (or in practice by the leader who is head of state and of party).

The lines are clearly drawn in these circumstances: an established leader (or leadership) enunciates an ideology which is implemented jointly by the party organisation and the public administration. There is no guarantee that the party will function, that the state will be efficient, or that the ideology will be correctly interpreted through these institutions to effect a transformation of the society. There is a vicious circle in operation: the ideology proposes a fundamental economic and social transformation, but cannot be realised because of the existence of economic and political obstacles which are part of the system which the ideology was constructed to transform.

‘If we persistently think and cherish good thoughts, good will result; if evil, evil will result.’
Obafemi Awolowo

Fanon has made a searing attack on the set-up where he sees the triumph of a cynical bourgeois elite without real ideals and motivated only by economic self-interest; where the party, rather than a living instrument of communication between the masses and their representatives, becomes a hollow shell inhabited by time-serving placemen; and where the nationalist leader who took his people into independence has become corrupted by power, and uses the weight and authority of the state to manipulate and exploit the people in a manner no colonial system could improve upon. These fiery arrows find numerous targets in contemporary Africa, yet the attack seriously underestimates the difficulty of political stewardship in the third world. A leader may be sincere in his ideals, yet have to be ruthless in his political struggle for survival; he may be tender in his social conscience, but have to be tough-minded in managing his society; he may detest placemen, but otherwise be surrounded by no one. Caught in the web of these contradictions, he may see the enforcement of an ideology as the only instrument which can at once ensure social reconstruction and his own political survival.

This brings us to the question, what influences a leader? What are his motivations? And what are the political purposes or functions of political ideology? Conventional wisdom and sociological analysis unite in ascribing to political leaders motives which have little to do with conscience or morality. Ideology is variously viewed as a weapon in the