



## Traditional Production in Primitive African Economies

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## TRADITIONAL PRODUCTION IN PRIMITIVE AFRICAN ECONOMIES\*

GEORGE DALTON

The absence of market dependence, 361. — Production and social organization, 364. — Allocation of factors of production, 365. — Work arrangement, 367. — Disposition of products, 369. — Reciprocity, 370. — Redistribution, 371. — Market exchange, 373. — Colonial impact and the new national economies, 374. —

Economic historians often stress the role played by the traditional institutions of pre-industrial European countries in shaping their sequential patterns of development: that the costs, speed, and specific lines of development were influenced by what existed before industrialization.<sup>1</sup> However, we seem not to apply the lesson to exotic areas such as Africa. Economists rarely show interest in the voluminous anthropological literature concerned with the economic organization of primitive societies before Western impact. Yet it is these same primitive societies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America which are now so much the concern of the economics of development.

Although Western impact in the form of wage employment and dependence upon cash cropping have become widespread in Africa, it is probably still true (as it was in the early 1950's), that most Africans get the bulk of their livelihood from traditional modes of production within the framework of tribal societies.<sup>2</sup> It is with such relatively unchanged, primitive economies in Africa that this paper is concerned.

There are at least two kinds of development problems for the solution of which knowledge of primitive economic structure is useful: (1) What accounts for the marked difference in receptivity to

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1. Alexander Gerschenkron, "Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective," in B. F. Hoselitz (ed.), *The Progress of Underdeveloped Areas* (Chicago University Press, 1952); W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge University Press, 1960).

2. "... between 65 per cent and 75 per cent of the total cultivated land area of tropical Africa is devoted to subsistence production." United Nations, *Enlargement of the Exchange Economy in Tropical Africa* (New York, 1954), p. 13.

economic and technological change among primitive societies? Why do some adopt Western institutions and techniques with ease and alacrity while others resist the changes necessary to generate growth? (2) Why is economic development often accompanied by traumatic social change? Is it possible to reduce the social costs and dislocations by building compensators into the new economic forms?<sup>3</sup>

The point of this paper is to show how primitive economies in Africa differ structurally from developed economies in the West. Our concern is not so much with technological differences as with differences in the organization of production. And for either the West or primitive Africa it is convenient to regard production of any kind as consisting of three component sub-processes: the allocation of labor and other factors; the work process of arranging and transforming resources into products; the disposition of what is produced.

#### THE ABSENCE OF MARKET DEPENDENCE

At the outset, we may summarize our main theme as follows. The absence of market exchange as the *dominant*<sup>4</sup> economic organization allows indigenous African production to take forms different from those in Western economy. These forms invariably entail social control of production by kinship, religion, and political organization. Therefore, change in primitive economic processes means inevitable change in social organization.

In primitive communities, the individual as an economic factor is personalized,

3. On social aspects of economic development, see Paul Bohannon, "The Impact of Money on an African Subsistence Economy," *Journal of Economic History*, XIX (Dec. 1959), 491-503; N. Keyfitz, "The Interlocking of Social and Economic Factors in Asian Development," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, XXV (Feb. 1959), 34-46; Mary Douglas, "Lele Economy Compared with the Bushong: A Study of Economic Backwardness," in Paul Bohannon and George Dalton (eds.), *Markets in Africa* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1962); W. E. Moore, "Labor Attitudes toward Industrialization in Underdeveloped Countries," *American Economic Review*, XLV (May 1955), 156-65.

4. By dominant is meant that source which provides the bulk of material livelihood. Market-place exchange occurs frequently in indigenous Africa, but typically provides sellers with only a minor portion of their income. The point is considered at length later in the paper. It should be emphasized that market-place exchange does *not* refer to long-distance trade, usually in prestige goods (gold, cattle, ivory), sometimes carried on by professional traders, sometimes under government commission. On such trade, see the writings of Karl Polanyi referred to throughout the paper.

not anonymous. He tends to hold his economic position in virtue of his social position. Hence to displace him economically means a social disturbance.<sup>5</sup>

It is necessary to emphasize the economic importance of indigenous social organization because production in tribal Africa is most frequently a community activity in MacIver's sense, and only rarely associational:

Association is a group specifically organized for the purpose of an interest or group of interests which its members have in common . . . . Community is a circle of people who live together, who belong together, so that they share not this or that particular interest, but a whole set of interests wide enough and comprehensive enough to include their lives.<sup>6</sup>

We are used to thinking in terms of "production units" because the Western firm is an association, not importantly affected by kinship, religious, or political affiliation of participants. In Africa, however, production is often undertaken by intimate communities of persons sharing a multitude of social ties and functions, one of which happens to be the production of material goods. If we are not to prejudice the nature of production organization in African economy, it must be understood that none of those special characteristics of Western production due to the use of machines and reliance upon factor and output markets, need be found. The component processes exist: the allocation of factors; the arrangement of work; and the disposition of produce. How they are organized in the absence of market integration must be a matter for investigation. In a word, every society has production processes, but not necessarily production "units."

Indigenously, the most important production lines in Africa are agricultural, carried on without machine technology, and for subsistence purposes rather than primarily for market sale.<sup>7</sup> Un-

5. Raymond W. Firth, *The Elements of Social Organization* (London: Watts, 1951), p. 137.

6. R. M. MacIver, *Society, Its Structure and Changes* (New York: R. Long and R. R. Smith, 1933), pp. 9, 10, 12, quoted in S. F. Nadel, *A Black Byzantium, the Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. xi. The distinction goes back to Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, and to Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1947), pp. 136-37. Association and community are not to be regarded as mutually exclusive, but as opposite ends of a range describing degrees of emphasis. What is here meant by community is characterized in a recent work, as diffuse, ascription-centered, and socially recruited. See Stanley H. Udy, *Organization of Work* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1959), pp. 39, 53.

7. United Nations, *op. cit.* The literature on indigenous nonagricultural production in Africa, is fragmentary. A good study of handicraft production is contained in Nadel, *op. cit.*

like his counterpart in the American Midwest, the African farmer typically is not enmeshed in that kind of larger economy from which he extracts his livelihood as a specialist producer of cash crops, the money proceeds of which are used to recoup his costs of production, and the residual (his income proper), used to buy daily-used material items and services.

The absence of machines and of market dependence are related: as with hired labor or any other *purchased* factor, a machine represents a money cost which can be incurred only if the purchaser uses the machine to enlarge his money sales revenue from which he recovers its cost. The analytical point to be stressed is that without purchased ingredients of production, and without reliance upon market disposition of output, the input and output decisions of producers cannot be based on factor and output prices as guiding parameters. That neither factor nor product prices exist to constrain the indigenous African agriculturalist (as they do the Western) is crucial to understanding why it is that Africans can organize production in such seemingly bizarre "social" ways.

The absence of Western technological and market constraints means also the absence of the Western kind of material insecurity. It is not technological unemployment and depression which are the threats to the continuity of production and income, but rather physical environment—weather, plant disease. That there is no counterpart to depression-born unemployment is simply a reflection of the absence of dependence on market sale.

A related point of contrast is that unlike the Western worker, the African is rarely a full-time specialist in one occupation or in one production group.<sup>8</sup> Not only is it typical for him to produce for himself a wide range of the items he uses—his own house and tools as well as his food—but during the course of a year he is frequently a part-time participant in several production activities: he may join sporadic work-parties to do specific tasks such as clearing fields for friends, kin, and chief; he may be of an age set which is obliged to perform community services such as repairing roads;<sup>9</sup> he may go on seasonal expeditions to extract ore for metals.<sup>1</sup> In sum, it

8. I. Schapera and A. J. H. Goodwin, "Work and Wealth," in Schapera (ed.), *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa* (London: G. Routledge, 1937), p. 153; also, M. J. Herskovits, "The Problem of Adapting Societies to New Tasks," in Hoselitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 94, 106.

9. Nadel, *op. cit.*, p. 248; M. J. Herskovits, *Economic Anthropology* (New York: Knopf, 1952), p. 113; Richard Kluckhohn, "The Konso Economy of Southern Ethiopia," in Bohannan and Dalton, *op. cit.*

1. Walter Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy in Negro Africa* (Menasha, Wisconsin: George Banta, 1937), p. 56.

is frequently the case that during the year an African will work in several production groups, no one of which is crucial to his own livelihood. It is also common for an African to receive substantial amounts of factors, goods, and services as gifts, or in forms other than remuneration for work performed.

#### PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The negative point stressed above, that the absence of machines and market dependence means the absence of those kinds of constraints on production organization in the West, clears the way to examine two positive points stressed repeatedly in the literature of primitive Africa: (1) That neighboring societies sharing the same physical environment often produce markedly different ranges of output,<sup>2</sup> with different technologies<sup>3</sup> used within differently organized production groups.<sup>4</sup> (2) That such economic and technological differences are largely attributable to differences in social organization: that kinship, political, and religious institutions constrain and direct all phases of production, in the same sense that market structure and machine technology constrain and direct production in Western economy.

The connections between indigenous African production and social organization may be described in three ways: (1) In terms of the MacIver-Nadel distinction, production groups typically are not separate associations but rather are integral parts of a community:

... obligations to participate tend to be obligations to associate with the group involved rather than specifically engage in production.<sup>5</sup>

The ties between producers tend to reach out beyond this common interest in the act of production and its rewards alone. A production relationship is often only one facet of a social relationship. . . . economic relations can be understood only as a part of a scheme of social relations. . . . Economic anthropology deals primarily with the economic aspects of the social relations of persons.<sup>6</sup>

... special organizations to carry out cultivation or manufacture need not be expected among the Bantu; the functions are always actively carried out, but often by organizations of which the family or household is the most important, which exist to carry out almost all necessary functions, including the religious,

2. E. H. Winter, "Livestock Markets among the Iraqw of Northern Tanganyika," in Bohannon and Dalton, *op. cit.*

3. Mary Douglas, *op. cit.*

4. Margaret Mead, "Interpretive Statement," in Mead (ed.), *Cooperation and Competition among Primitive Peoples* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937); Udy, *op. cit.*

5. Udy, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

6. Firth, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-38.

the legal, the political, and the educational, and which conduct manufacture and agriculture alongside of these other activities.<sup>7</sup>

(2) The same point is generalized by Karl Polanyi in saying that primitive economy is "embedded" in society, in the sense that the economic system functions as a by-product of noneconomic institutions: that economy as a cohesive entity, a separate set of practices and relationships apart from social organization, does not exist in primitive life.<sup>8</sup>

(3) If the organization of production in African economies is indeed an inextricable part of social community, it should be possible to show how *each* component subprocess of production — the allocation of factor resources, the arrangement of work, and the disposition of produce — is related to social structure.

#### ALLOCATION OF FACTORS OF PRODUCTION

Production in all economies requires organizational devices and rules to direct labor, land, and other resources to specific uses. Resource allocation is never unstructured because continuity in the production of basic goods is never unimportant. One may gain insight into the special rules which mark off types of economy — say, the United States compared with the Soviet Union compared with the Bantu of South Africa — by asking which transactional procedures channel resources to production lines: how are land, labor, and other resources allocated; how do they change hands or usage?

In our own economy, factors as well as products are marketable commodities. In tribal Africa, products are frequently marketed, but factors almost never. A distinguishing characteristic of such economies is that labor and natural resources have no separate "economic" organization: factor movements and appropriations are expressions of social obligation, social affiliation, and social right. A second characteristic is that typically, land utilization is organized differently from labor utilization. Unlike Western market economy *each* of the factor ingredients may enter production lines through *different* institutional channels, the channels being structured social relationships. Both points are illustrated by the following examples.

In much of agricultural Africa, land for homesteads and farms

7. D. M. Goodfellow, *Principles of Economic Sociology* (London: G. Routledge, 1939), pp. 7-8.

8. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944), Chap. 4, "Societies and Economic Systems"; "Our Obsolete Market Mentality," *Commentary* (Feb. 1947); "The Economy as Instituted Process," in K. Polanyi, C. M. Arensberg, H. W. Pearson (eds.), *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).

is acquired through tribal affiliation or kinship right. One receives land as a matter of status prerogative; only rarely is land acquired or disposed of through purchase and sale.<sup>9</sup> The Bantu are typical in this regard:

Every household-head has an exclusive right to land for building his home and for cultivation. Generally he can take up such land for himself within the area controlled by his sub-chief or headman, provided that he does not encroach upon land already occupied or cultivated by others. Failing this, it is the duty of his headman to provide him gratuitously with as much land as he needs. . . . He also has the right, subject to the approval of his headman, to give away part of it to a relative or friend, or to lend it to someone else. But he can never sell it or dispose of it in any other way in return for material considerations. Should he finally abandon the spot, his land reverts to the tribe as a whole and can subsequently be assigned to someone else. The only other way in which he can lose his right to the land is by confiscation, if he is found guilty of some serious crime.<sup>1</sup>

So, too, with the Tiv,<sup>2</sup> the Dahomeans,<sup>3</sup> the Nupe,<sup>4</sup> and the Kikuyu.<sup>5</sup>

What makes the African social integument so important for factor allocation (and therefore production) is that land may be acquired through one set of social relationships, while labor to work the land is acquired through others. In the same Bantu societies in which land is acquired from chiefs by all family heads as a matter of tribal affiliation, labor to work the land is acquired by marriage rights (wives do the sustained cultivation), and by kinship and friendship reciprocity (work parties to do specific tasks such as clearing fields and harvesting). Put another way, the "labor" to perform different tasks in growing the same crop—clearing the field, planting, harvesting—may be acquired through different social relationships.<sup>6</sup>

The extent to which various community relationships allocate factors to production lines is even greater than indicated above. Each separate production line—farming, cattle-raising, house con-

9. Paul Bohannon, "Africa's Land," *The Centennial Review*, IV (Fall, 1960); Herskovits, *op. cit.*, pp. 364-65.

1. Schapera and Goodwin, *op. cit.*, p. 157; see also, J. L. Sadie, "The Social Anthropology of Economic Development," *Economic Journal*, LXX (June 1960), 297.

2. Paul Bohannon, *Tiv Farm and Settlement*, Colonial Office, Colonial Research Studies 15 (London: H. M. S. O., 1954).

3. M. J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, An Ancient West African Kingdom* (New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938).

4. Nadel, *op. cit.*

5. The Kikuyu came closest to Western concepts of land tenure, and land was sold on rare occasions. See, Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); Bohannon, "Africa's Land," *op. cit.*

6. Schapera and Goodwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 149, 151-52.



struction, road construction — may use somewhat differently institutionalized procedures for recruiting the labor and acquiring the land and material resources used in each; that is to say, labor for agriculture may be acquired in several ways, each different from labor used in producing other goods.

As will be pointed out below, such factor diversity born of multiple social obligations is also the case with the disposition of the goods produced. African economies are "multicentric"<sup>7</sup> in the allocation of both factors and produce. This multicentricity is expressed in two ways, both extremely common in primitive economy: (1) Resources and products are arranged in groups, the items in one group exchangeable with each other, but not with items in other groups;<sup>8</sup> indeed, there may be items which are not exchangeable at all. Typically, "subsistence" items form one or more exchangeable groups, and "prestige" items, others. (2) Each commensurable group of factors and products may be transacted by an essentially different socio-economic device or procedure (reciprocity or redistribution); each socio-economic procedure expressing the special social obligation which induces the material transaction and, where relevant, dictating the permissible ratios at which commensurable goods may change hands.<sup>9</sup>

Market exchange is also a common transactional procedure in tribal Africa, but differs sharply from reciprocity and redistribution in the permissible range of goods transacted in markets, the forces which determine exchange ratios, and in the absence of a social imperative connected with market transactions.

In summary, an African's role in each production process is usually defined by some aspect of his social status — tribal member, husband, cousin, friend, elder. The question, what forces, institutions, or rules direct labor, land, and other resources to specific lines of production, can be answered only with reference to community social organization.

#### WORK ARRANGEMENT

The specific arrangement of work in any production line is the combined result of physical environment, technology, economic structure, and social organization. But the relative importance of

7. "Introduction," in Bohannan and Dalton, *op. cit.*

8. Raymond W. Firth, *Human Types* (New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1958), p. 69.

9. Polanyi, "The Economy as Instituted Process," *op. cit.*; George Dalton, "Economic Theory and Primitive Society," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 63 (Feb. 1961).

each may differ between different production lines and between different types of economy. Here we will be concerned with one primary point of difference between Western and primitive economies: in our own system, the constraints imposed by economy-wide market integration and by machine technology are far more important in determining work organization than those imposed by physical environment and social structure. In tribal Africa just the opposite is the case: physical environment and social structure are all-important because of the absence of machine technology and of a larger market economy to enforce economizing decisions on local producers.

That physical environment imposes sharp constraints on African work organization is due to the great reliance by the Africans on production lines entailing little fabrication, such as agriculture and herding. Compared with their Western counterparts, the African agriculturalist and herder lack those devices of applied science (irrigation equipment, disease-resistant seeds, scientific stock breeding) which reduce ecological risks in the West.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, technology and science have allowed some Western farmers to organize farm work on something like a factory basis. However, the economic as distinct from the technological differences between Western and primitive production, deserve emphasis. Dependence on market sale for income together with reliance on purchased factors, force Western farmers into the same economizing choices of weighing costs against sales revenues that typify manufacturing processes. With us, farm production too is sensitive to market prices, which of necessity serve as guiding parameters for production decisions including efficient work organization as measured by least cost.

Where African producers do not use purchased factors and do not depend on market sale, economizing least-cost choices in work arrangement are not enforced by technological or economic necessity, as in the West. We are told frequently that in primitive economy social relationships and values are important determinants of work organization:<sup>2</sup> that sexual division of labor is maintained, that magic and religion impinge on work schedules, that there is often a festive aspect to work parties, and that it is not uncommon for more labor to be lavished on a task than is strictly necessary. It is because of the absence of Western market and technological constraints that

1. Daryll Forde and Mary Douglas, "Primitive Economics," in Harry L. Shapiro (ed.), *Man, Culture, and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 337.

2. Peter Lloyd, "Craft Organization in Yoruba Towns," *Africa*, XXIII (Jan. 1953), p. 31; also, Mead, *op. cit.*; and Udy, *op. cit.*

work *can be* arranged to express social relationships. The tribal producer does not have a payroll to meet. It is *not* that he is indifferent to material abundance or efficiency; rather, unlike the West, the larger economy neither compels producers to seek cost minimization, nor provides them with economic directives (factor and output prices) to make economizing decisions in work arrangement. It is important to understand this point in order to understand why economic development or Western "impact" induces such deep and wide social dislocation. When Western market economy comes to dominate some area of Africa — typically, through a land shortage forcing changeover to production of cash crops — there are socio-economic repercussions because of the need to reorganize factor allocation, work arrangement, and the range of items to be produced, in accordance with market criteria.<sup>3</sup>

### DISPOSITION OF PRODUCTS

The apportionment of outputs is a concept familiar to Westerners. We are used to tracing through the yearly flow of goods to their final recipients as is done in national income accounting and input-output analysis. But as one economist who tried to measure product and income flows in primitive African economy points out, our Western categories of analysis are derived from our own very special market-integrated structure.

An attempt to examine the structure and problems of a primitive community in the light of the existing body of economic thought raises fundamental conceptual issues. Economic analysis and its framework of generalizations are characteristically described in terms appropriate to the modern exchange economy. It is by no means certain that the existing tools of analysis can usefully be applied to material other than that for which they have been developed. In particular it is not clear what light, if any, is thrown on subsistence economies by a science which seems to regard the use of money and specialization of labor as axiomatic. The jargon of the market place seems remote, on the face of it, from the problems of an African village where most individuals spend the greater part of their lives in satisfying their own or their families' needs and desires, where money and trade play a subordinate role in motivating productive activity.<sup>4</sup>

The absence of purchased factors (including machinery) and the lack of dependence on market sale for livelihood, together with

3. P. H. Gulliver, "The Evolution of Arusha Trade," in Bohannon and Dalton, *op. cit.*

4. Phyllis Deane, *Colonial Social Accounting* (Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 115-16; the same point is made by Firth, *The Elements of Social Organization, op. cit.*, p. 121.

the pervasive influence of the social integument, are reflected in the disposition of produce as well as in the allocation of factors and the organization of work:

The income-creating process is itself part and parcel of the income it yields, and the results of the process cannot be abstracted from the process itself.<sup>5</sup>

If the categories we use to describe output disposition are to be analytically revealing they must be derived from the special structural characteristics of indigenous African economies. We follow therefore the African emphasis on the social obligations to pay and to give, and the rights to receive goods and services, built into social situations. In the succinct statement of Firth, "From each according to his status obligations in the social system, to each according to his rights in that system."<sup>6</sup>

In primitive economy, transactions of products are like those of factors in four ways: (1) Factors and products both may be transacted by different rules or mechanisms within the same economy. (2) Both may enter different transactional spheres, in the sense that the items in each sphere are commensurable and exchangeable only with other items in the same sphere, and not with items in different spheres. (3) The dispositions of factors and products cannot be understood outside the social situations which provide the impetus for their movement, i.e., transactions of both express underlying social relationships. (4) What might be called "socially guaranteed subsistence" is arranged both through factor resource and product disposition. Illustration of each point is given below.

### RECIPROCITY

Factors and products are transacted by any of three socio-economic rules or principles: reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange.<sup>7</sup> Reciprocity is obligatory gift- and counter gift-giving between persons who stand in some socially defined relationship to one another. Indigenously, gifts of produced items and factors are regarded simply as one form — material, or economic — of expressing such social relationships. (In our own society, a birthday gift from father to son is just one among many ways of expressing their kinship relation.)

Reciprocity plays a much more important part in primitive

5. S. H. Frankel, *The Economic Impact on Under-Developed Societies* (Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 41.

6. Firth, *The Elements of Social Organization*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

7. Polanyi, "The Economy as Instituted Process," *op. cit.*

African economies than in our own: the frequency and amount of such gifts are greater; the number of different people with whom one person may engage in gift exchange is larger; the social obligations (and sanctions) to do so are stronger; and, above all, such gift reciprocity may play an important part in production (especially in labor allocation), which is rarely the case in our own economy outside the family farm.

After describing the network of obligatory gift transfers of labor and material products among kin and friends, at ordinary times as well as during festive occasions, Schapera and Goodwin explain the importance of reciprocal flows in Bantu societies:

The main incentive to conformity with these obligations is reciprocity. In the relative absence of industrial specialization and consequent economic interdependence, kinship serves to establish greater social cohesion within the community, and to integrate its activities into a wider co-operation than obtains within the restricted limits of the household. The so-called "communal system" of the Bantu is largely a manifestation of this close bond of solidarity and reciprocity arising out of kinship and affecting well-nigh every aspect of daily life.<sup>8</sup>

The great variety of items and services transacted reciprocally helps to explain why "production" is invisible, so to speak, in primitive economies: from the viewpoint of the participants, the movement of resources and products is not regarded as an activity distinct from other social activities. A gift of labor to help a kinsman clear his land (part of production) may not be distinguished from a gift of cattle to help him acquire a bride; or, indeed, a gift of a song or a name. The pivotal matter is the social relationship between the persons which induces gifts of labor, cattle, songs, and names. When the source of the gift obligation is the same, there is no reason for the participants to mark off the labor gift as part of production. *It is only when production activities become divorced from activities expressing social obligation that production becomes marked off as a peculiarly economic activity, apart from other activities (as, of course, occurs in market economy).*

#### REDISTRIBUTION

Redistribution entails obligatory payments of material items, money objects, or labor services to some socially recognized center, usually king, chief, or priest, who reallocates portions of what he receives to provide community services (such as defense or feasts), and to reward specific persons. Typically, but not invariably, the

8. Schapera and Goodwin, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

central figure is also endowed with the right to distribute unused land or hunting sites; these allocation rights are vested in him in the name of the community by virtue of his high political, juridical, military, or religious authority. As with reciprocity between friends or kin, the obligation to give over factors, such as labor for the chief's garden or new house, may not be distinguished from the obligation to pay over items such as food. Indeed, what appear to us as economic transactions of resources and products need not be distinguished indigenously from such as express the obligation to perform military service.

Among the Bantu the chief receives payments of specific goods and services from all his people, and payments of fines and blood-wealth. Such tribute payments are partly in recognition of his position as the steward of tribal landholdings, and of his juridical authority. The word "tribute" is important here in both its economic and social meanings: the goods and labor paid over are tribute, and the social recognition of authority is a tribute:

By virtue of his official status as head of the tribe he also played an important part in the economic organization. . . . He received tribute from his people, both in kind and in labor. He was given a portion of every animal slaughtered or killed in the chase; the *lobola* [bridewealth] for his chief wife was paid by the members of his tribe; he had the right to call upon his subjects to perform certain tasks for him, such as building his huts or clearing the land for his wives' gardens; above all, he received fees for hearing cases and fines for misdemeanors, and, in cases of homicide the culprit paid compensation not to the relatives of the deceased but to him.<sup>9</sup>

His material receipts cannot be regarded apart from the chief's material obligations to his people. He uses the payments and fines for his own maintenance, but also to provide community services and to reward special service of his subjects:

. . . all this accumulation of wealth by the chief was really made on behalf of the tribe. One quality which was always required of the chief was that he should be generous. He had to provide for the members of his tribe in times of necessity. If a man's crops failed he would look to the chief for assistance; the chief gave out his cattle to the poorer members of his tribe to herd for him, and allowed them to use the milk; he rewarded the services of his warriors by gifts of cattle; his subjects frequently visited him in his kraal and during their stay he fed and entertained them.<sup>1</sup>

Just as an individual receives land from his chief and labor from his wives, kin, and friends as a matter of right, so too does he receive

9. I. Schapera, "Economic Changes in South African Native Life," *Africa*, I (1928), p. 175; see also, Herskovits, *Dahomey*, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-80.

1. Schapera, *op. cit.*, p. 175; see also, M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *African Political Systems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 8-9.

material aid in time of need as a matter of social right. Rarely in African societies are there special institutions to care for the disabled or the destitute.<sup>2</sup> Subsistence is guaranteed among the Bantu — as is the case widely in primitive Africa — in two ways: through socially structured rights to receive factors of production, and through emergency allotments of food from the chief and gifts from kin. It is these socially assured rights to labor and land, and to emergency subsistence, which has sometimes been mistaken for "primitive communism."<sup>3</sup>

### MARKET EXCHANGE

As with reciprocity and redistribution, market exchange is a common transactional procedure, especially in West Africa. However, indigenous market transactions differ sharply from those labeled reciprocity and redistribution, and differ also in important respects from market transactions in developed economies.<sup>4</sup>

Purchase and sale seem to us peculiarly *economic* — permeated by utility and material gain — precisely because market transactions are neither induced by nor express social obligations or relationships. Unlike the partners to reciprocal and redistributive transactions, buyers and sellers in the market share no social tie which *obliges* them to engage in the market transactions. Therefore terms of trade may be haggled out without social disruption, both parties to the exchange being socially free to seek their own maximum material advantage.

Indigenous market exchange in Africa might better be called market-place exchange to point up the absence of labor and land markets. In primitive Africa, market exchange is usually confined to a limited range of produced items transacted by face-to-face buyers and sellers in market places. Moreover, the market exchanges are usually peripheral, in the sense that most sellers do not acquire the bulk of their livelihood, and buyers the bulk of their daily-used goods and services, via the market-place sales and purchases. Although the market prices are determined by familiar sup-

2. Sadie, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

3. See, Polanyi, "Our Obsolete Market Mentality," *op. cit.*, p. 112; also Firth, *The Elements of Social Organization*, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-46. It should be added that the material insecurity which results from dependence on favorable weather and other aspects of physical environment, together with low productivity techniques and the lack of storage and processing facilities, also work in the direction of mutual aid and sharing. See Forde and Douglas, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

4. For an extended treatment of markets in primitive compared with developed economies, see "Introduction" in Bohannan and Dalton, *op. cit.*

ply and demand forces, there is absent that crucial feedback effect which links change in market price to production decisions. Unlike the price mechanism in a market-integrated economy like the United States, prices formed in African market places do not serve to re-allocate factors among production lines, because labor and land do not enter the market and basic livelihood is acquired in non-market spheres. Market-place exchange is found widely in Africa as a peripheral pattern in the same societies in which all important output and factor flows are carried on via reciprocity and redistribution.<sup>5</sup>

#### COLONIAL IMPACT AND THE NEW NATIONAL ECONOMIES

It is necessary to consider the socio-economic impact of colonialism to understand the present situation in much of Africa. Two points especially must be made clear.

The destructive aspect of colonialism was not *economic* exploitation of Africans in the conventional Marxist sense; it could hardly be so considering that material poverty was already the common lot before the Europeans arrived. It is, perhaps, our own cultural emphasis which makes us focus on the real-income component of welfare and regard it as the sole component. Typically, colonialism did not make Africans worse off *materially*; it destroyed culture and society of which the indigenous economy was an inextricable part.<sup>6</sup> It destroyed materially poor but unusually integrated ways of life, wherein economic and social processes were mutually dependent and reinforcing. This is something on a different plane from simple material betterment or worsening. The destructive colonial impact consisted in forcing socio-economic change which was not meaningful to Africans in terms of their traditional societies:

For the sting of change lies not in change itself but in change which is devoid of social meaning.<sup>7</sup>

5. Soviet economy provides an analogy: peasant market-place exchange of a few food and craft items which are bartered at freely fluctuating prices, is a peripheral pattern compared with the dominant central planning complex through which most goods are produced and almost all factors allocated.

6. There is a familiar parallel situation worth mentioning. Some literature of the British industrial revolution addresses itself to the question, "did the English workers get better off or worse off during the period of rapid industrialization?" The writers then attempt to measure real income changes to find an answer. The ambiguity lies in implicitly defining better or worse off solely in terms of real income, despite the massive social dislocations involved in movement from a rural subsistence to an urban commercial way of life. See T. S. Ashton, "The Standard of Life of the Workers in England, 1790-1830," *Journal of Economic History*, Supplement IX, 1949.

7. Frankel, *op. cit.*, p. 27.



Despite any real income increases which may have resulted, European enterprise was devoid of social meaning for Africans because it required work which was not part of social obligation to kin, friends, or rulers. Work for Europeans was not done as a by-product of traditional social relationships, and work for Europeans meant not working at those traditional tasks which were expressive of social rights and obligations:

Of [indigenous] labor itself, we can say . . . that it is a socially integrative activity. . . . Nor must we forget that wherever European and other more complex societies have encouraged primitive man, the carrot has been a bribe (and a pitiful indemnity) for those who must willingly neglect the performance of what are to them socially important functions so that they can perform during that time activities which are not integrative in their own society.<sup>8</sup>

Material income is important to Africans not only because it sustains life, but also — in Steiner's phrase — because the work processes which yield income and the transactional disposition of the labor, resources, and products are so organized as to express and strengthen social relationships and purpose: kinship, tribal affiliation, friendship and religious duty. It is noteworthy that in the few cases in which Africans have been able to work for Europeans without giving up most of their usual activities, traditional social life has remained intact.<sup>9</sup> Most frequently however, entering the newly created market economy as laborer, specialist producer of cash crops, or commercial trader buying for resale, has meant enlarged material income at the sacrifice of work activities which were necessary to traditional social organization, and so the latter deteriorated.

What has been called the "demonstration effect" — increased willingness to enter commercial activities in order to acquire Western material items — works in the same direction. In traditional society material wealth acquisition was largely a by-product of social status.<sup>1</sup> Typically, only those of higher social rank were permitted to acquire certain wealth items or an unusual amount of wealth. In the kingdom of Dahomey, for example, "The accumulation of wealth, except by those whose status entitled them to wealth, was deemed treason to the state."<sup>2</sup> A socially divisive impact of

8. Franz Steiner, "Towards a Classification of Labor," *Sociologus*, Vol. 7 (No. 2, 1957), pp. 118-19.

9. William Watson, *Tribal Cohesion in a Money Economy* (Manchester University Press, 1958).

1. Douglas, *op. cit.*; Herskovits, *Dahomey, op. cit.*, p. 73.

2. Karl Polanyi, "Economy and Society in Historic Dahomey" (unpublished manuscript).

Western economy in Africa has been the democratization of wealth. Neither market organization nor industrialism impose status criteria on wealth acquisition. Rather the opposite is the case (as Sir Henry Maine has long since told us).

It should be added that the force of socio-economic change in Africa cannot be explained in the simple terms of changed ownership of property. To the extent that Africans sell their labor to European firms (and other Africans), they become proletarians. What strikes the Marxists is that the wage laborers engage in production processes the capital instruments of which they do not own. This is true, of course, but the crucial point is not that the workers do not own the buildings and machines, but that they come to depend for their livelihood on the impersonal market sale of their labor. Material income thereby depends upon forces, people, and institutions outside of and not controlled by the indigenous social community. Work becomes a thing apart from the other aspects of life, organized as a separate association, and not merely one facet of community life.

What is important for our purpose is that the same is true where Africans do *not* become proletarians, but enter market economy by producing cash crops on their own land. Here they own the instruments of production, but like the wage laborers also come to depend for their livelihood on market sale for a money income. The latter mode of entering the exchange economy can be as disruptive to indigenous social and economic organization as wage labor, and for the same reasons. It is not alienation from the means of production which is socially divisive, but rather the dependence upon impersonal market forces unrelated to indigenous social control; the separating of economy from society by divorcing resource allocation, work arrangement, and product disposition from expressions of social obligation. And, to be sure, the consequent loss of socially guaranteed subsistence, as well.

In advocating policy measures for developing African economies one must avoid the vice of utopianism: to create a blueprint of what ought to be which bears no relation to what is, and so is unachievable. However, to retain indigenous social organization in the new economies of markets and machines is obviously impossible. What is not impossible is to frame local economic organization and national policies which allow the expression of traditional values of reciprocity and redistribution within the new economic and technological context. As we are learning from our own welfare state experience, even within efficiency constraints, economic organization is capable of contrived flexibility to accommodate social

values.<sup>3</sup> The extent of diversity among the already developed nations indicates the possibility of creating distinctive African forms viable economically and socially.

The real task is not to force change but to induce it in a manner which will be meaningful to the members of the societies it affects.<sup>4</sup>

The institutions being fashioned in the newly-independent countries of Africa may appear somewhat suspect in the West. They include strong central controls, unions, producer's and consumer's co-operatives, and much else of the paraphernalia of welfare and socialist states, even at the very beginnings of development; indeed, even in countries without industrialization.

What deserves emphasis is that political and economic structures transplanted to Africa from the West are being adopted with major changes to suit African needs and traditions. Neither democracy nor the welfare state mean to Africans what they do to Westerners because Africans did not share those Western political and economic experiences, in reaction to which democracy and the welfare state came into being in the West.<sup>5</sup> To us, the welfare state is a reaction against the social and economic experiences of squalor, depression, and war resulting from industrialism within the economic context of the relatively uncontrolled market system. The Africans neither shared our experiences of the pre-1930 system, nor committed themselves to our laissez-faire ideology (which we so painfully had to unlearn).

3. Gunnar Myrdal, *Beyond the Welfare State* (Yale University Press, 1960).

4. Frankel, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79. Herskovits points out that the successful transition to market-oriented production in Ghana is characterized by, "... inner developments based on pre-existing patterns rather than development induced by the direct application of forces impinging from outside and cast in terms foreign to native practices. Here there is no lack of incentive to expand production." Hoselitz, *op. cit.*, p. 102. See also, Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 164; also, Kenyatta, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-18.

5. In much of Africa, creating conditions necessary for the success of democratic political institutions is likely to be even more difficult than creating the economic and technological bases for growth. Tribal instead of national identification, widespread illiteracy, and the initial power assumed by the single parties and leaders who brought political independence, all militate against democracy as it is known in the West. Moreover, unlike economic development, political democracy must be fashioned almost wholly from within; there are really no equivalents in the political sphere to the massive economic aid and technical assistance to be had from abroad. However, the existence of single political parties should not be taken as *ipso facto* evidence of dictatorship. Diversity, and dissenting views within unified political and juridical structures, are not uncommon African traditions. One must hope for the substance of democracy, but not for the familiar forms.

We should not be overly eager to create in Africa an uncontrolled market idyll the blessings of which we so insistently deny ourselves. To Africans, the welfare state and policies of strong central control mean techniques for rapid economic development and political unification, which, at the same time, express social responsibility in accord with traditional usages. It would be unseemly to deny the Africans material aid or sympathy because—like us—they insist upon having institutions shaped by historical<sup>6</sup> experience and current needs.

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6. Africa has two kinds of history: the conventional kind to be studied through European accounts of exploration, settlement, and colonial rule, and an unconventional kind to be studied through anthropological accounts of indigenous economic and social organization.