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Claude Ake (1939-1996): An Appreciation

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I

Claude Ake who died on 7th November, 1996 aged 57 was, perhaps, the greatest and most engaging of my generation of African political scientist. He was universally acknowledged and recognised as an original thinker, a respectable and socially committed intellectual with a deep-seated concern for the underclass. He was a fine and cultured man who placed high premium on proper behavior. It is not an exaggeration to say that there are few African political scientists who command or are surrounded by as much respect and admiration as did Claude Ake.

He bestrode the African and, indeed, the international social science community like a colossus, exemplifying the best and the brightest in social science scholarship that Africa could offer, and winning international and national recognition in the process, as when he was invited to serve on the prestigious Social Science Research Council of the United States of America, or on the select group of social scientists empanelled by the Director-General of UNESCO to prepare a blueprint on Culture and Development for that organisation, or when he won the Nigerian National Merit Award.

Although simple, modest and self-effacing in appearance, Claude Ake was by no means pedestrian in his taste or in his choice of personal accoutrements, as those who visited him in the leisurely comfort and luxurious ambience of his house or office will attest to. Indeed, beneath his outward simplicity lay what a colleague recently described as "a simple grandeur". He valued friendship but was very selective in making friends. He possessed an infectious sense of humour and when among his close friends he radiated warmth and charm, extending loyalty, generosity and an uncommon solidarity to them.

In his death, African social science has suffered a major loss. For Claude Ake was a central and positive force in the emergent social science networks which were spawned in the 1970s and 1980s under the aegis of the African Association of Political Science (AAPS), the Nigerian Political Science Association (NPSA), and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), all of which he served with distinction and principled direction as Director of Research and Publications and Editor of the *African Journal of Political Economy* (AAPS), as President (NPSA), and as President (CODESRIA) at various times.

Working with other African social scientists within the intellectual and professional pan-African environment provided by these networks, Claude Ake was a major and leading force in the movement or tendency within African social science to Africanise mainstream western (bourgeois) and mainstream eastern (marxist) social science, with the objective of mapping out an intellectual agenda to give concrete expression to the relevance of the nascent, if combative, Afro-centric social science to African development. Indeed, this was the concern that consumed his later life and work with burning passion reaching its apogee with his establishing the Centre for Applied Social Science (CASS).

II

If there was an underlying, unifying thread in his intellectual and professional work, it was his aversion to dogma. He was in this respect a radical of a progressive hue. This is to say that his general theoretical and methodological outlook was defined by his belief that theoretical paradigms and modes of social analyses should be contextualised or "culturalised"; that we should avoid generalising or replicating from one context to the other without coming to grips with the specificities defined by our own history and culture. For him, this was what social praxis demanded; and this was why social analysis was necessarily complex.

To understand this theoretico-methodological position is to unravel the reason why Claude Ake rejected the pluralist "national integration" approach to African politics and why he similarly rejected or refined the neo-marxist "underdevelopment" school in its application to Africa. For him neither approach was useful in unraveling what he saw as pathological trends and tendencies in African politics; and this was because they were looked at Africa from the perspectives of other cultures. This explains his movement away from the theoretical framework of his first published book, *A THEORY OF POLITICAL INTEGRATION*. In respect of his matured works, for example his *REVOLUTIONARY PRESSURES IN AFRICA* or *THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AFRICA*, written within the framework of dialectical materialism, the use he made of this framework was neither dogmatic nor naively "marxisant."

In recent years, his radical social science turned its characteristically insightful searchlight on to a devastating critique of the conflation of the democratic agenda in Africa with bourgeois, liberal democracy and its institutional and structural artifacts. The result was a contrary formulation in his *DEMOCRACY & DEVELOPMENT* of a populist, people-centered, participatory and perhaps social democratic alternative which recognises the collective rights of sub-national or ethnic groups and which allows representational voice at different fora for marginalised civil society groups like students, women and trade unions, among others.

The implications were in a sense iconoclastic. For example, he published a series of insightful interpretations of the development process in Africa and identification of the relevant variables that should form the core and central foci for the study of that process. This is not to say that Claude Ake was a cultural relativist in the crude sense of the term or that he did not subscribe to certain basic universal standards to which intellectual work must conform and by which it must be judged. He never compromised his belief in and commitment to canonical rules of scholarship, although here too he could be a radical, as in his studied refusal in his later work to make copious references, if any at all, preferring to discuss issues in his own right. Nor was he unwavering in his belief in human rights and freedom of expression as immutable prescriptive rights which must be secured against the state.

If my assessment of his intellectual prism is correct what this means is that for Claude Ake the universality of theoretical and empirical knowledge is best pursued within the framework defined and provided by one's social experience and one's cultural milieu. We look at or search for reality (knowledge, truth) from the perspective provided by our history, broadly defined to include our psycho-cultural antecedents and location in time and space. The objective and the subjective must necessarily and dialectically be juxtaposed, if the frontiers of knowledge are to be advanced; and if we are not to make the mistake of defining the truth or reality or knowledge only in the context of our location in time and space. This point was forcefully articulated by him in his *SOCIAL SCIENCE AS IMPERIALISM: THE THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT*.

III

Let me now indicate briefly what I consider to be Claude Ake's contribution to knowledge, and specially to our understanding of African politics. My own assessment is that *REVOLUTIONARY PRESSURES*, whose theoretical focus is the political economy of Africa's under-development, is his most original and yet most controversial theoretical work. I consider the theoretical contributions of this book to be twofold.

First, its chief merit is that, as a theoretical "opus", it avoids a major weakness

in the then popular neo-marxist underdevelopment theory as applied to Africa. This weakness stemmed from the failure to recognise the importance and salience of "internal" structures and social forces for sustaining the dependent relationship of African countries and African economies to the wider international system of finance capital.

Here, of course, he was following Frantz Fanon, Fanonist scholars and others like Samir Amin and Colin Leys. But what marks out **REVOLUTIONARY PRESSURES** is that it provides a stimulating framework for linking production relations *within* African countries to the wider system of international production relations. This linkage is important because excessive and obsessive focus on expatriate monopoly capital tends to blur internal dynamics of and the contradictions generated by productive relations within Africa, with the reactionary effect of denying the reality of class differentiation and therefore class contradictions and class struggles in Africa. To focus on internal productive relations is necessarily to investigate the dynamics of class relations within Africa, "the contradiction between the African bourgeoisie and the African proletariat." This is something which African and expatriate apologists of the one-party state and African socialism were wont to deny.

But are there classes in Africa? Claude Ake's answer was that,

"if we can make a case for the existence of a basic (that is class) contradiction in relations of production, we can make a case for class analysis too. For even before the contradiction matures, becomes politicised and radicalised, it is pregnant with the future." However, class analysis of a society with an immature class situation is full of hazards, especially for determinists." [Revolutionary Pressures, page 62].

Furthermore, Claude Ake significantly advanced the theoretical contributions of Fanon, Colin Leys and Samir Amin in another respect. He saw and defined the relationship between metropolitan bourgeoisie and the African (comprador) bourgeoisie as a critical aspect of Africa's internal contradictions and as more than a parasitic one. For him, the fact that the comprador bourgeoisie, the ruling class in Africa controls political power confers on it some leverage. Claude Ake characterised this relationship as a patron-client one, involving strategic adjustments between economic and political power. Richard Sklar's work on Zambia has made the same point.

The second theoretical contribution of **REVOLUTIONARY PRESSURES** is the controversial distinction which Claude Ake drew between "bourgeois" countries and "proletarian" countries. The "bourgeois" countries, defined by their "... monopoly over two fundamental instruments of labour in the global capitalist system, namely capital and technology, particularly the latter which is the decisive

instrument of production in the world today," (Revolutionary Pressures, page 17), include the industrialised countries of the capitalist world and the former Soviet Bloc countries. The proletarian countries are "the vast majority of countries, especially Third World countries" which lack these two critical instruments of labour. The explanatory power of this distinction lies basically in its provocative conceptualisation of the structure of international politics as involving a global class struggle between bourgeois (industrialised) and proletarian (non-industrialised) countries, regardless of ideological posturing and alliances. Within this framework, for example, the former Soviet Union would stand objectively in the same antagonistic and exploitative relationship as would the United States of America to Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe or any African country. This is what helps to explain why, according to Claude Ake,

"the Soviet Union will be less enthusiastic about the redistribution of the world's capital and technology than Mozambique [although] on another level of analysis, the Soviet Union and Mozambique, as progressive countries, stand together and struggle against such non-progressive countries as Senegal and France." [RP, page 18].

It is not difficult to see why this framework of analysis was vigorously rejected and viciously attacked by mainstream Marxist scholars. But its powerful explanatory value has been demonstrated by its use to explicate and clarify aspects of the foreign trade relations between the former Soviet Union and the Afro-Marxist states, namely, Ethiopia and Mozambique. As Claude Ake would put it, the visceral reaction of the Left, understandable as it is, must be placed against the fact that "... reality is full of contradictions, and [that] we can not grasp it unless we learn to think dialectically". The logic of dialectical materialism, as methodology as opposed to ideology, can sometimes be difficult for determinists to accept, especially when it leads to uncomfortable conclusions. Nowhere was this clearer than in the Left's rejection of Claude Ake's distinction between "bourgeois" and "proletarian" nations, and the conclusions he drew from it.

There is another aspect of REVOLUTIONARY PRESSURES which is noteworthy. This is Claude Ake's fascinating intellectual skill in coining elegant phrases and inventing memorable concepts which graphically capture and illustrate behavioural patterns and tendencies in Africa and which have become part of the staple of the vocabulary and conceptual tools for the analysis of African politics. Three such phrases come to mind: "defensive radicalism," "... the assumption of radical posture and the use of this posture as a cover up for containing revolutionary pressures and for maintaining the status quo ..." [RP, page 93]; "depoliticisation" — which "... entails reducing the effective participation of the masses and the non-hegemonic factions of the ruling classes, and

preventing some interests and points of view from finding political expression ...” [RP, page 78]; and “booty capitalism” ... “... a tendency to apply force ubiquitously in political and economic competition and also to appropriate surplus by force..” [RP, page 80].

If much of the argument of REVOLUTIONARY PRESSURES is formal and logical, A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AFRICA, widely acclaimed as his magnum opus, is a path-breaking and seminal work which may well become the *locus classicus* on the subject. This book's chief merit lies less in its originality than its clarity and the broad, historico-anthropological and contemporaneous kaleidoscopic canvas it spreads out in 189 pages in a masterful attempt to describe, analyse and explain the development trajectories of Africa since the onset of colonialism.

IV

Claude Ake did not engage in social science for its own sake, although he believed in its intrinsic value and was at a stage disdainful of a crude utilitarian or instrumentalist justification of the role of the social science in the developmental process. His acceptance and later-day conversion to an instrumentalist social science arose out of two interrelated considerations.

The first consideration was a theoretical or substantive one, involving his principled rejection of what he regarded as the false or misleading dichotomy between pure and applied (social science). In fact, it was this epistemological position which informed his choice of the name *Centre for Advanced Social Science* as opposed to his initial preference for the *Centre for Applied Social Science* for the institution he started, although his rejection of this latter designation was also due to the fact that a centre by that name was already in existence at the University of Zimbabwe.

The second consideration, was a more practical one. It was that, given the social and material character of Africa's underdevelopment and incorporation into the capitalist world system, and the colonial inheritance and residual colonial mentality it had created and induced, African social science must necessarily serve as a force for liberation, providing an alternative Afro-centric definition of development and charting alternative pathways to autcentred development on the continent.

This ultimately required the conscientisation of African social scientists and the radicalisation of African social science through critical and liberating curricula and pedagogical innovations; the production of appropriate and socially relevant textbooks and research; the professionalisation of African social science and the development and nurture of strong African social science networks. One condition for this to happen was that African social science must breakdown traditional intradisciplinary barriers, departmental compartmentalisation and rivalries and

build cross-/multi-disciplinary bridges linking it to other disciplines like the humanities and law. His address to the Annual Meeting of the Historical Society of Nigeria in 1983 or thereabouts, entitled "History As The Future of the Social Sciences" was a persuasive and powerful statement of this position.

Four aspects of Claude Ake's work, as he tried to work out the practical implications of his conception of the developmental role of African social science, need mentioning. First, he used his tenure as the President of the Council of CODESRIA to effect far-reaching changes in the organisation, research orientation and agenda and the network outreach of CODESRIA, at a time when, virtually comatose and almost on the verge of collapse, it needed leadership and direction.

Second, as the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Head of the Department of Political Science at the then fledgling University of Port Harcourt, the structure and content of the social sciences at the university placed emphasis on their organic unity. Their various courses were integrated and specialisation minimised, until the final year or so. Another innovation of the social science degrees was the requirement that undergraduate students in the faculty undertake a compulsory community-based practicum before graduating. The philosophy behind this requirement was obvious enough: to integrate the undergraduates into the surrounding communities and make them share in the lived experiences of the inhabitants of these communities. The experience they gained would enable them to appreciate the developmental problems of the average Nigerian community. Moreover, under Claude Ake's leadership, the faculty began to focus on and to set up research teams to study problems of environmental pollution caused by the oil companies in the neighbouring communities.

The third aspect concerns his conception of the Centre for Advanced Social Science (CASS) as a development-oriented social science think-tank. He conceived CASS as a major intellectual project. His model was the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., where he had spent a year as a visiting scholar, as well as the Center for Advanced Behavioural Studies at Princeton University.

He thought on a grand scale and planned big. He approached a number of international foundations which had supported similar think-tanks in Africa, Latin America and Asia with seed money. He achieved a major breakthrough with a major grant/seed money from The Ford Foundation. The grant was predicated on counterpart funding from the Nigerian government as a gesture of goodwill and national commitment for a project that was intended to serve the developmental needs of the country and to advance theoretical and practical knowledge. His own solid intellectual reputation and probity was no doubt a major consideration which influenced The Ford Foundation in making the commitment as was the lucky coincidence that the Foundation's representative in Nigeria at the time believed strongly that there was relevant developmental work which needed to be done by Nigerian social scientists. He not only encouraged the idea of CASS but took active

steps in pushing it through successfully at headquarters. The rest is now public record. The good work CASS was doing went round the funding agencies and the multiplier effect was felt in due course, in the form of unsolicited grants.

I have said all this simply to draw attention to a problem which worried Claude Ake. This was the implication of external funding for the type of conscientising and liberating Afro-centric social science research he was doing and practising. He was deeply concerned about questions pertaining to the autonomy and independence of CASS, especially in the areas of fund/grant management, the choice of researchers and research location and even of research topics and methodologies and the authority to use research findings and data. This was more problematic in the case of collaborative work with external institutions that approached CASS to boost their own legitimacy at home. Claude Ake was worried that the objective conditions of existence in many African countries, including repression, constitute a major threat to intellectual work, which also make it all too easy for external sources to subvert critical Afro-centric social science. It is to the credit of Claude Ake that he was able to preserve the autonomy of CASS in the face of such a problem.

The point to draw from all this is that some of the external funding agencies have their own agenda which may be at cross purposes with those of African think-tanks or research outfits like CASS. Some of them even suffer from imperial reflexes and can pose a greater threat to intellectual work on the continent than national governments.

The fourth aspect I want to touch upon briefly was Claude Ake's hugely remarkable success in popularising the developmental role of the social sciences among the general public. He cultivated the mass media and won their respect and admiration. He used that medium effectively to air his views on a wide-ranging number of important, topical public policy issues, in a fearless, uncompromising manner. He cut the public image of a relentless advocate of popular democracy and a fearless opponent of military rule. He was a committed scholar, and an intellectual in the finest sense of the word. He cared because he loved humanity and his fatherland: and because he had an abiding faith in humanity and his country's future, had the courage to speak the truth. The paradox is that Claude Ake, a man of peace, had to die in such a violent manner.

Adieu, Claude, my brother and intellectual mentor!

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