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CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

British Colonialists, Ibo Traders, and Idoma Democrats: A Marxist Anthropologist Enters "The Field" in Nigeria, 1950-51

Having undertaken and put aside in early 1950 a wide-ranging Marxist theoretical treatise on "Society and Matter" (HAN 29 #2, June 2002:1-10), Robert Gelston Armstrong returned to work on his dissertation project after two years away from the University of Chicago, during which he taught at Atlanta University (1947-48) and at the University of Puerto Rico (1948-49). As originally proposed in 1946, Armstrong's thesis was a comparative historical study of cultural elements in sub-Saharan Africa, in order to determine the relation of the gendered division of labor to matrilineal and patrilineal descent. In contrast, the dissertation that he completed while at Oxford during the summer and early fall of 1950 was a more focussed comparative study, based on recent monographs by British social anthropologists, of six African peoples, ranked in implicitly evolutionary order, in terms of the form that "exploitation" took in each of them (Armstrong 1950). In late October, with his dissertation needing only finishing touches, Armstrong set sail for Nigeria, with support from the British Colonial Social Science Research Council, for two years of fieldwork among the Idoma, under the nominal supervision of Edward Evans-Pritchard, whom he had met when E-P taught at Chicago in the winter quarter of 1950. During the time he was in Nigeria, Armstrong sent a number of lengthy letter reports to his close friend John Murra, whom he had known at Chicago before the war, and who had been instrumental in inviting him to Puerto Rico, where Armstrong participated for a time in Julian Steward's innovative team study of "The People of Puerto Rico" (Steward et al. 1956).

The letter reproduced in part below is the second in the series, and is published with the permission of the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution, where it is in Box 5 of the John Murra Papers. In its original form it is half again as long as here presented, and had to be edited in order to fit within the HAN format. In addition to deleting several extended passages relating to inquiries about mutual friends and radical student activities at the University of Chicago, I have substantially condensed on a line-by-line basis most of the Nigerian topics Armstrong treated, hopefully without sacrificing too much of the vivid "this is the way it was" (or seemed to him to be) experiential stuff of Armstrong's initiation into the colonial and ethnographic field, now more than fifty years ago. In a few cases, I have inserted in brackets clarifying comments or identifications of people who might not be known to readers of HAN.

Dear John

[Ibadan, Nigeria] May 6, 1951

It's really your fault, you know, that I haven't written to you for so long. You were so damned flattering about my last letter that I thought I couldn't do less in my next. But finding the time and energy to do it hasn't been so easy. I have [received] a sample copy of Monthly Review [a Marxist monthly] in the mails, though, and they say you gave them my name. Maybe this is just the sort of burr in the ass I needed....

The Department kept me on edge all winter waiting for formal word of some kind on the thesis. I was buoyed up, however, by the thought that [Robert] Redfield liked it ...and will quote the various relevant points to you:

(From RR, Dec. 27th) I have read your thesis—from the beginning to the end. I liked it, and like it the more because I think it is in some respects not so easy to like as are some other theses. ... You take some considerations and argue them out, publicly, which isn't done, you

know. But ... I recognize in this public exposure of one's efforts to find general meaning in some facts a weakness of my own, to which, when I find it in others, I am therefore sympathetic....As for "exploitation," I think there are real troubles there, but not so much from the uncomfortableness which attaches to the word from its background in Marxism, as for the reason that the concept is not so clearly defined as it sounds....

When I heard nothing more for quite a time, I wrote ... pointing out that I discuss the limitations of the exploitation idea in pretty explicit detail in the thesis; that although it formed the real backbone of the thesis, I felt that I had really just got started on what must be a long-term study; that this was the real reason for my five-months excursion into theoretical green pastures [the essay on "Society and Matter"]; and that I had sought to cover myself from the point of view of thesis requirements by making a couple of "contributions to knowledge" at points where they are easier to make: vanquishing the Hamitic Hypothesis and chastening the Conquest Theory [the ideas that civilizational advances were the work of invading lighter-skinned racial groups]....

[Having heard that his dissertation was formally approved, Armstrong continued:] I have been telling myself and the public at large that I feel elated etc. that it is now substantially over. Actually I feel more like a wrung-out dishrag. I think it would have been good if I could have arranged to have a rest before starting on fieldwork, but I don't know quite what to do about that now....

So much for me and mine. Now for Africa. ... The Ibo are really quite a phenomenon. They include in one teeming volcano the most emphatically advanced and the most emphatically backward peoples of Nigeria ("backward" in the stereotypical sense of most naked, most atomized political organization, most surrounded by rumours of sale of human meat in the markets, etc. I suspect that the actual incidence of cannibalism in Iboland is no greater than in the U.S.A. today). I mention the stereotype because it seems to me important in the thinking of just such folk as a hell of a lot of the Ibo are turning themselves into—lower-middle-class, sociological Protestants. As such they have penetrated all over Nigeria as the clerks and traders and carpenters of the country. They are like the Yankee traders of the last century in America, full of the old P.[rotestant]E.[thic], shrewd business men. ... The Idoma regard them as city-slickers who will cheat you out of your last penny if possible. ... What it boils down to is that the Ibo are much like anybody else when you meet them inside their own world. I have met quite a lot of Ibos who are a lot of fun and very sweet people. [But] the postmaster at Oturkpo is the sort of person I do not warm to so readily. ... [He] refuses to serve Idoma women unless they cover their breasts—tells them that they are a bunch of primitives and should go and put some clothes on. On the other hand he was present with some other clerks at a big dance I attended. We all sat around a little club house drinking beer. I got to discussing talking drums with different people. The most educated literates present did not know the drums they were listening to were talking, but a couple of men were able to point out to us what in fact they were saying (cf. Armstrong 1954). The little postmaster got excited and said that down in his own country ... the drums talk a lot at the dances, and in fact they have a lot of ceremonies "just like" this one. He has been more friendly to me ever since. When you realize that you can see ten thousand years of cultural evolution in an hour's walk in any sizable town here, it is easy to see that some personality difficulties are apt to result. The more so when the body of attitudes we call "lower-middle-class" is probably the least flexible of all in such a situation....[But] enough of the perils of the lmc. Just multiply by two or three what you already know about these gentry and you have it. ...

...Actually it seems to me that ... we have quite successfully taught European superstitious, magical attitudes towards the trappings of "civilization." Civilized people wear shirts. Therefore a shirt equals civilization and when you put one on you become civilized. This is precisely what most Europeans and Americans believe, and I suppose that it is nothing new to anthropology to see

new styles in magic diffuse about as fast as anything diffuses.... I got into a real argument a couple of weeks ago with the school teachers at Igumale. I went down for an afternoon to attend the big feasts (kind of a boy-meets-girl spring festival-cum-Fourth of July celebration). I was dancing with one of the groups, where the boys and girls line up opposite each other and more or less alternately a boy then a girl will dance solo in the middle and receive salutes (a kind of pelvic "kiss") from people of the opposite line, who dance out briefly. The teachers collared me in the midst of this and said that I should not dance myself because people would think that I was encouraging old customs. I said that this was my precise intention. They said they were trying to put a stop to these old customs so people would go to school. I said I saw no reason why the kids could not both dance and go to school, and asked what was wrong with these customs. They pointed out that the girls were wearing camwood [a much favored water-soluble body paint] and could not bring themselves to say that that was all they were wearing. I said I thought they looked very attractive in camwood. After we went through all of this two or three more times, with the dance going on about our ears, I finally decided to pull my rank on them (the literates seldom get around to questioning very deeply the "seniority ideology" as such, apart from rejecting the authority of the elders) and told them that I had been going to school longer than most of them had been alive, and that I had a pretty damned good idea of what I was about, and please clear off. All the way home later, as I thought about the dilute, denatured, castrated "education" I had seen in Idoma schools, I had the phrase from the Messiah going through my head... "They were cut off, out of the land of the living!"

.... Maybe the best introduction to Idoma would be to bring you here the way I came myself, driving the southern route from Ibadan. The over-all impression of this drive strongly reinforces my initial impression of Africa: the fantastic lack of development here. I came by way of Ife, Akure, Benin, Onitsha and Enugu. All the way to Onitsha you drive through miles and miles of semi-arid deserted, cut-over forest.... Onitsha is reached by a long ferry-ride across the Niger....[It] is the most prosperous-looking African town I have seen. Its market is the biggest in Nigeria and probably in West Africa. ... [It] was the only kingdom in Ibo country, and the aristocratic structure is carefully preserved today. In March I stayed for a couple of nights at an African hotel known as the Hotel Bonanza, run by a clever young fellow with a Cambridge degree. He knew [Meyer] Fortes, and we had several long talks about things in general. He sets much the best table I have seen in Nigeria—a real treat in fact. He is attempting the not inconsiderable task of reforming Nigerian eating habits. The minute you leave Onitsha you are in Ibo country for fair. It is far and away the most attractive part of Nigeria...[and] reminds one often of Puerto Rico [P.R.] in being colorful, crowded and closely cultivated.... [T]he most striking thing in Iboland is the great walled compounds with thatch along the top of the walls. The Ibo like to paint their houses and walls too, and that makes things a lot more cheerful. ... The road from Enugu to Onitsha is the only asphalt road east of the Ibadan-Lagos road that I know of. ... As you drive north you pass after a few miles back into the palm-tree cum hardwood forest. If clothes be any criterion of something, one sees an occasional man in a g-string on the Onitsha road (they are never seen in the Western Provinces). As one goes north one sees a lot more of them—I counted one man in fourteen so undressed near the Idoma border. Still the great majority of men dress European style or with long flowing gowns. The women all over Nigeria simply wrap as much cloth around them as will stay up, but will leave their breasts exposed as often as not. Northern Iboland looks less commercial, but retains the crowded neat and "Protestant" look right up to the boundary....

Whatever the virtues of the Idoma, the old PE is not one of them. You can see it the minute you cross the border. The walled compounds disappear, the land looks four-fifths empty, the thatching is just piles of grass on the roof. In fact in southern and western Idoma there are few towns at all identifiable as such. The things that show on the map are really markets, or the location of a native court. In about ten or fifteen miles you pass quite suddenly out of the palm-belt and into an area described technically as "degraded tropical rain forest" and more popularly as "orchard savannah".

[It looks] like a huge Daliesque orchard, gone to rack and ruin. Idoma on the whole is flat. When you have nearly crossed the Division, you come to Oturkpo, the seat of the government, the Native Administration, the missions, etc. It is located at the spot where the only north-south road east of the Niger crosses the railway. In Idoma terminology there are three main parts to the town: the Camp, where the Idoma live, the Market, and the Barracks, where the Europeans live. One thinks of some medium-sized market town in Russia of the tenth century. Or I might make an even larger generalizing comparison: Living in Idoma is like living in bivouac in the army. There is the same impermanence of the particular living arrangements, the same pulsating social organism composed of many people crowded into a space restricted by the living arrangements, the same total lack of privacy, and the same curiously intense feelings you develop [for] the particular place in which you happen to be living. These feelings develop, I suspect, because of the large number of personal associations one has in this situation. It gives your own neighborhood a kind of absolute quality. Idoma villages bristle with sacred places, usually marked with some sort of little "shrine"—a heap of stones, with a couple of broken bottles embedded in them, a juju covered by a little thatched roof a foot or so high and a foot square, etc. ("juju" is Nigerian pidgin for "fetish"—covers in fact the same multitude of theological, sociological and conceptual sins). Except for neighborhoods I knew well in childhood, I have never had this feeling about built up "civilized" places....

My first afternoon in Oturkpo was a Sunday. I met and had dinner with the then Divisional Officer, ...a big, handsome, unabashed careerist from a once-wealthy now impoverished theatrical family in London. A Cambridge man, was in the guards, then in the Burma campaign. In short, how typical can you get? We hit it off very well from the start and got merrily plastered before I had to push on to Makurdi.....

Makurdi is at the point where the road and the railroad cross the Benue ...[Like Oturkpo, it] is a recently arisen town. One thinks again of most ancient Russia. It tells you something too, I think, that in 1951 in the capital of the province, with a quite pretentious lay-out for the Europeans, there is no electric lighting—not even for the resident. Actually, I think Makurdi is the dreariest place I have struck in all Nigeria. It is fancy enough to be full of brass-hat stiffness, and not fancy enough to have any compensations.

I pushed on to Jos for a couple of days, saw a couple of tin workings, stayed for a night with Bernard Fagg [British archaeologist & museum administrator]...Jos itself is a kind of boom town, and the only really prosperous-looking place in Nigeria. This makes it all the more strange to see pagan women walking around stark naked. The men are more shy in town and tend to wear old ladies overcoats[, which] carry prestige anywhere in Nigeria....[I] met an old Alsatian Catholic missionary and a big tin operator at Fagg's for dinner, and after a long discussion there was unanimous agreement that the Berom tribe has not derived a particle of benefit from forty years of tin mining on its lands. They have had the privilege of helping to dig it up, but all the profits of the mining itself have gone elsewhere. Nor could it be said that that they did not realize what wealth they were sitting on. Primitive as they look, the Berom were doing quite a bit of mining before the Europeans came. The Government pensioned off the actual miners and passed the present land law, which in effect prohibits unauthorized persons from mining. And Africans just never get authorized.....

Politically the whole region north of the Benue is organized into Muslim emirates.... [However,] I can see no excuse whatever for the region south of the Benue to be included in the Northern Provinces. The region was never under Muslim rule. The political and social organization is wholly reminiscent of the South in Wukari, Tiv, Idoma and Igala. And you must realize that the boundary is a real ideological one. Policy in the North is based on the Hamitic Hypothesis and the sainted Fulani. The whole Indian business of princely states with their British advisor has been

imported here with a vengeance. And where the "states" were not princely enough they have been made more so. The present D.O.... says he believes the reason for the present boundaries derives from the historical accident that it was the Royal Niger Company (whose successors are now part of Lever Brothers) which first opened up the Benue country.... In any case, what has happened is that the Tiv and the Idoma, who in their separate ways are much the same kind of total democrats, in a headhunterish sense of the word, as the Ibo, have been separated from the only section of the government of Nigeria dedicated to dealing with such people in their own terms (the Eastern Provinces). The Tiv have been converted into something like the national herd of bison in the American national parks. They were actually pushed back into what the Resident thinks was their ancient form of clan organization (extremely dubious, I may say), with the result that the most elementary day-to-day business cannot get done in that Division.... But the Tiv are the Masai of Nigeria, and everybody loves them as Children of Nature. (They do the most astonishing singing I have heard in a hell of a long time—and on the slightest provocation. I hope to hell somebody gets in there soon with some really good recording apparatus.)....

If the Tiv are administratively evanescent, the Idoma have a bad reputation for being obstreperous. The few people to whom they have endeared themselves have not been in favor with the Government. So they have for the last two years been saddled with a quite artificially created emir. ... I bet Ernie Bevin [leader of the British Labour Party] is having a hard time explaining to St. Peter how it happened that in the fourth year of the Labour Government an ocidoma, "Chief of Idoma", was installed in Oturkpo, chosen for life by an "electorate" consisting of the twenty-one district chiefs, removable only by the Resident Commissioner at Kaduna and checked by no elected organ whatsoever. The results are precisely what one would expect. The ocidoma dresses like an emir, has acquired upwards of forty-five wives (if you want a promotion you have to give him a wife), is spending the treasury surplus to build himself a palace, has surrounded himself with henchmen whose demand for graft in every N.A. (Native Administration) operation is inexorable, etc. The Government offers the not inconsiderable excuse for all of this that the ocidoma has vastly facilitated the collection of taxes. Of this I have no doubt (apart from the other things he collects too); and a centralized N.A. strong enough to put its own pressure on recalcitrant taxpayers is an advance which I doubt will ever be given up. ... [Capt.] Money and others have told me there used to be a lot of village-burning in the course of tax-gathering. He insists, however, that this sounds worse than it was. The grass roofs are all that burn and they are easily replaced. "The mud walls are actually improved by the heat. Now if you really want to make the Idoma angry, go in and break all the pots. That means they can't cook or store water. It makes the women furious."

It is certainly true that most of the exposés of "conditions" in Africa miss the point, and lay themselves open to the kind of humor with which the British excuse the real conditions. Much is said about dress, for example, but it is certainly true that the Nigerians are already wearing all the clothes they need in this climate. In fact, the old colonial pattern is very much in evidence: textiles are far and away the main import. I may be prejudiced, of course, but I feel the clothing problem is well in hand.....

The really back-breaking "condition" here is water. Every drop that goes into a village has to be head-loaded from some stream or spring. Water is one of the absolutely prime conditions governing the location of villages, and for the last two months of the dry season the problem is incredible. The whole town of Oturkpo has to go a mile out of town to the one stream for miles around that is not dry. ... Two of the biggest districts, Orukam and Otukpa, with a population of over 32,000 between them... for several months of the year must literally walk ten miles one way for water... Then there is Agala, ... the place I would study if it did not involve a nineteen-mile bicycle ride on bush paths and if the water were not so infected with guinea worm, ... [which]

burrows down into your leg usually, and comes to the surface to lay its eggs. Then it dies, and you are left with the problem of getting all three feet of it out before—or after—it gets infected.

Another “condition” is health. There are two doctors for the whole province with about two million people. One of them, a European, is in charge of the sleeping sickness hospital at Wukari; the other, an African just out from England, is in charge of the hospital at Makurdi. He comes into Idoma only on exhumation cases for the law courts, and inspects N. A. dispensaries along the way. There is, I will say, a fair and growing network of dispensaries, and all things considered, they do good work. One good thing is that they have gotten medicine away from the missions—it is now illegal for them to “dispense.”

Another “condition” is the lack of transport and of roads. Actually, the road network, thin as it is, is miles ahead of what you might call the rolling-stock. You can drive for two hours on the Jos-Onitsha road and not see another vehicle of any kind....When they do come, three out of four are so overloaded they will take on no more passengers....I would not say that these roads are of no use at all. They are much shorter and easier to walk than the bush-paths. And the bicyclists can use them to good advantage. Then too lorries can come in and move the crops and bring things cheaply to the markets... The same people who in the [United S]tates drive Buicks and better have bicycles here. With this exception the wheel is still not part of the technology of Idoma, Tiv, or the northern Ibo towns. (I make the further exception of three N.A. lorries in Idoma, the ocídoma's kit-car and one or two lorries belonging to district chiefs.) Not even the potter's wheel....There is to my knowledge not a single wheelbarrow in Idoma, and only one “push-cart”—an old auto chassis one sees around Oturkpo. Everything else is head-loaded. I guess I have already commented to you about head-loading as the ultimate in pedestrian transport. Within its narrow limits, it is damned efficient. The cotton which the United African Company (U.A.C.—i.e., Lever Bros) buys at Loke, on the north bank of the Benue, ...is head-loaded in eighty pound sacks... . The laborer is cheap, but this is damned expensive labor; and the amount of cotton gathered in this way is piddling by our standards. It goes way down the Niger some place to be ginned.

I could go on indefinitely. There is a new coal mine being opened in southern Idoma. The whole thing is held up because the railroad is unable to move the coal that has already been dug up at Enugu. “Move” means take it to Port Harcourt for shipment to England. Nobody even dreams, in this day of Labour Party socialism, of allowing or encouraging some industry to grow up near Enugu... that would use the coal at the place of mining. ... I had a long talk a couple of weeks ago with a coal-mining engineer in Enugu.... [who] complained bitterly about how much of a loss Nigeria is to the British taxpayer. He was my host and I refrained from pointing out that Nigeria is in this respect like most other colonies in the world. Lever Bros. make big profits; dollars are earned (quite a lot of them); but the taxpayers as a whole foot the bill, and the colony is left gutted too. That is the real “condition” here. It adds up to the total lack of any provision for the growth of the kind of capital or capital equipment that can mobilize productive labor on anything bigger than a yam patch—or the local blacksmith shop.... The British political officers here feel and act much like a fancy kind of social work. The kind of instructing spirit, of which I wrote you from Ibadan, is just as much in evidence, and I am even more certain it forms the basis of the British rationalization of their position. But it is tempered by the much improved human situation here....

There is no doubt that the pax britannica has brought changes which few people would like to see undone. With the stopping of feuds, headhunting, etc., people are moving onto the land, and away from the more or less fortified villages (where they had villages). The population has been climbing rapidly. There really is quite a respectable amount of literacy both in English and in Idoma, considering everything....Actually it is quite fashionable among the British to deprecate the activities of the “Trading Companies,” especially of course U.A.C. I think most people feel that

they are thereby absolved of responsibility. I feel about this absolution the same way I felt towards the German soldier in April of '45 who told me, respecting the horrors perpetrated in Russia, "Das hat die Armee nicht getan; das hat die Partei getan" ["The Army did not commit those, it was the Party"] I wanted to know who brought the [Nazi] "Partei" to Russia and who fought to protect it and keep it there. It seems to me the whole elaborate structure of peace and social services here is basically designed to defend the interests of U.A.C., and where steps are taken to expand the economy a bit, it is done in the directions that will make U.A.C.'s activities still more profitable.

I still have not said much about the Idoma. I guess I won't in this letter, which is long enough and wandering enough already. I will say briefly that they have given me a royal welcome, and my only complaint is that it is a bit too royal. I am treated like a visiting chief everywhere I go. When I get settled into a community for more detailed study, I think this will largely correct itself, but it is a nuisance now, and the auto is a really disruptive factor. (I am picking Igumale for more intensive study, partly because you can't take an auto in there). The Division has 21 districts or "clans." A clan is the largest group of people who in mid 1930s could be persuaded to work together for any political purpose, usually judicial (this is my own definition, but Capt. Money agreed with it. The Resident would split a gut. "Clan" is a sacred cow in this province). Of these, five represent enclaved non-Idoma peoples: an Ibo group in the south; Utonkon, also an old Ibo clan; Akpa, speaking a quite different language called Akiwiya (provenience unknown); Tarku (Tiv—a "semi-Bantu" language); Egedde and Itó, both Egedde speaking, also provenience unknown. As the railroad comes north here, there are six successive station-stops with a different language at each.... What the "true" Idoma culture is I'm damned if I know. The central region, where I now sit, is kind of a vacuum. Whatever trait you care to mention, there is less of it here than at the peripheries. I would say that there are four points of greatest cultural development, all peripheral: in the north there is pretty obvious Hausa influence; Igumale-Agala show Ibo influence; the south-west shows Ibo and Igala influence; finally, there is Oturkpo, recent and artificial, but vigorous. I would insist that "influence" does not equal identity. These districts are by no means Hausa, Ibo, etc. Rather, even in trait details, the extremes have more in common than any of them has with the people in the middle. Also a lot more people live there. It is a strange situation that I am far from having puzzled out. I am taking care too to visit the neighboring peoples just to make sure. Mainly, I have been studying language. Idoma is a bitch, believe me. Four tones phonetically, three phonemically and a series of elisions, tone perturbations, and vowel transformations that amount to a running encipherment of the words. The grammar is fairly simple, once you have the morpho-phonemic situation licked. The previous work by [Roy] Abraham is extremely good, if a bit bush and personal in method. I am making a card-file dictionary, which I feel I need on several counts, one of which is that you can't really do the phonemics and morphology without it. My health here has so far been amazingly good. I have yet to miss a day from sickness, which is not to say I have not had an occasional bout of diarrhea.... I find that I am a bit tired, though, and wish I had not jumped right from the thesis into the field. Maybe too I am in the doldrums stage of field-study. I have the language basically licked, but don't know it yet [to speak?]. I have a nodding acquaintance with most parts of Idoma but a real acquaintance with none of it. My urgent need is for about a month of paper work; [but] my dear Idoma friends get in my hair when they come around to greet me in their utterly African, courteous, time-consuming manner. I could go on, but I think time should cure me of some of this. (I am still having a hell of [a] time getting myself to write up my notes. I [may] try Evans-Pritchard's technique: write the book in the field and to hell with the notes).

I would call the general present day social situation here incipient feudalism. You can't turn around without feudal relations cristallizing [sic] about you. Never a day passes without somebody coming up to me and telling me "You are my father and my mother. I will follow you anywhere. You are my master." By now I can be real brutal about refusing such offers. Chiefs here are addressed as Ágábá! ("Lion"). And the suppliant bows his forehead right down to the dust. But the

minute the argument begins to get hot he is right back up on his feet again, and presently he will be shouting at the lion, interrupting him, even insulting him, be he the ocídoma himself. All this has shed for me a lot of new light on the behavior our history books report for the high and early middle ages. The Lion may have seventeen wives, but nobody obeys his orders, obeisance or no. So I find it less than flattering to be called ágábá myself (‘ is high tone; ^is mid; low is unmarked) (Don’t mind my parenthetical irrelevancies).

I have a lot of stuff on a pet idea of mine: poverty does not breed Communism; reform does, because give them an inch and they’ll take a mile; therefore give them an inch—even two inches. In the first place, as soon as you get into “bush” country—and this holds for Ibo land, too—you notice a quite strange change of attitude towards your car. In Lagos they glower at you fiercely, in Ibadan glumly. In [the] bush, they all run out in front of the compound and cheer as you go past. The deeper you get into the bush the truer this is, to the point where a real celebration follows you. Even driving at night on some of the back roads of Idoma you can hear people cheering. I have occasionally said facetiously that these people are such complete communists (primitive) that they do not realize the man in this car may not be. (I find the primitive communism problem confusing here. What do you do when the chiefs have a hell of a lot of wives, receive first meats of the hunt, can levy fines, receive the degrading obeisance of their people, but cannot enforce their own commands?) I have heard men from Orukpa express their humble gratitude for the coal mining operations: [“]now light will come to Orukpa; before, we knew nothing[”]. The only trouble that has ever come from the extremely “poor” people of the bush has been a certain tendency to run away from the tax-collectors. Agala, 19 miles by bush path from Igumale (railroad stop, but no road) is the quietest little kingdom you ever saw, entirely engaged in its own internal quarrels and ceremonies (the best masks in Idoma). But you should hear the railroad workers! It makes me think of the role of the railway workers in the Russian Revolution! (There are still plenty of illusions about America. Even our southern boys seem to have been on their good behavior in India. Idoma is chock full of veterans of the Burma campaign, and the all say “Americans love Africans.” I suspect it is another case of the southerners getting outside their own district and leaving the whole damned pattern behind them. Being an American here is a major asset in getting rapport. The other two big assets are language and the dance. Every muscle I learned to loosen up at Ernestine’s before the War has paid off big here [Ernestine Bingham, then department secretary, gave frequent parties]. Dancing should be part of the training of every anthropologist). The railway is largely in Ibo hands, but the same principle applies strictly in Idoma. The Hope Rising Movement (“Our local Bolshies”—not really, but so thinks and says the Government--) is made up of Idomas, and in particular of school teachers, N. A. workers, civil service folk, etc. The same people who were the Independantistas in P.R. (Much the same tone in the movement too. I feel as if I haven’t left home when I talk to those guys)

That about exhausts what I have the energy to say now. I could give you a far more detailed account of the Idoma, but it still does not fit into any kind of pattern of interest, and besides, when I have not been working on language, I have merely been trying to get the feel of the place, define what one means by Idoma, etc

If things get moving nicely on the typing of my thesis in Chicago, I may send you the copy I have here. On the other hand, maybe I will need it for the problems I set myself. Also sending it costs over £7, and sending it by sea takes something like two or three months with many a chance of straying. I was subscribed last Christmas to the New Yorker, but have yet to get a copy.

Let me know if you have any change of address. My best to the whole crowd in New York.
Bob.

In the space available here, one can do little more than highlight a number of the important themes and interpretive issues raised by this letter. To begin with, there are Armstrong's observations on the "conditions" of British colonialism as manifest on the ground in Nigeria. If there is nothing here to equal the biting bitterness of George Orwell's "dirty work of empire at close quarters," Armstrong does offer a sharply critical, albeit not unnuanced, view of the operation of the colonial system, at the macro-level of economic exploitation (the role of Lever Brothers, etc.), the intermediate level of local colonial administrative policy (the imposition of emirates in non-Muslim areas) and the micro-level of resident officers' daily practice (the burning of the huts of tax-resisting Idoma). And although he had by this time left the Communist Party, Armstrong's Marxist outlook is abundantly evident, not only in his general emphasis on economic factors, but in the such interpretive categories as "primitive communism" and "feudalism," not to mention his use of Russian medieval villages and revolutionary railroad workers as comparative reference points—although his critiques of lower middle class ideology are perhaps more Shavian in tone than Marxist (he was, among other things, a reader of George Bernard Shaw). Striking also are the evolutionary resonances ("ten thousand years of cultural evolution in an hour's walk")—although these are perhaps as much resonant of the post-war Chicago interest in the work of Gordon Childe, or of the widespread neo-evolutionism of the 1950s, often with Marxist or Marxist undertones. More generally, there is Armstrong's emphasis on "development" in a way resonant of the dominant "development" ideology of the period—marked, however, by an ironic questioning of the idea of "backwardness" and a critique of the imposition of Western standards of "civilization." And yet, even as he rejects clothing as a criterion of primitiveness, Armstrong seems preoccupied with nakedness, and inclined to use it not only as an index, but in as both an adaptive and an feature of African culture—this, despite his apparent skepticism of the Tiv as "Children of Nature."

In summary, one might say that, although Armstrong stood apart in his Marxist radicalism, in many respects he reflected assumptions widely prevalent in the anthropology of his day. Times, of course, have changed since 1951, in anthropology, in Nigeria, and in the world at large. Indeed, they had already changed significantly when Armstrong, after six years of internal academic exile, returned in 1959 to a Nigeria on the verge of independence, there to remain for the rest of his life. Without attempting to do more than hint at the development of his anthropology over that quarter century, suffice it to say that Marxist assumptions virtually disappeared, social organizational themes receded into the background, and that Armstrong's later work dealt largely with the study and preservation of cultural particularity; the collection of texts and the analysis of language, and the encouragement of cultural performance, whether of song, of dance, of drama. Less concerned with bringing the Africans into the modern world, he worked instead to preserve and enhance their various cultural specificities within the modern world. When he died in 1987, he was buried in Otukpo, as Odejo (spokesman) of the Idoma, with full chiefly honors in a two day ceremony (cf. Stocking, in progress). All of this, however, is another chapter in the same story.

Sources

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