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Basil Davidson and the Culture of the African State¹

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Basil Davidson (1914-2010) was introduced to the toils of African scholarship through taxing experiences of practising journalism in South Africa in the post-war formative years of apartheid (see Davidson 1952) and in the even tougher environment of opposition journalism that exposed the most horrendous forms of European oppression of Africans in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau. By the time Davidson settled down in the late 1950s to serious intellectual analysis of African achievements in statecraft and human civilization, African studies were already dominated by colonial social anthropology with its unabashed imagery of “primitive” Africa. Davidson had few sympathizers and no companions among those of his powerful British countrymen and women who provided definitive standards of what were proper and acceptable in African studies.³

There are three main reasons why I have chosen to hang the argument of this lecture, which seeks to examine the character and culture of the African state, on Basil Davidson's encounter with the meaning of the African state. First, in his African studies Davidson offered compassionate constructs that sharply challenged the moral

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³ Among Basil Davidson's predecessors in British public affairs with similar passion for freedom for Africans and their societies may be mentioned E. D. Morel (1873-1924) whose Congo Reform Association achieved a great deal in rescuing the misnamed Congo Free State from the horrors of King Leopold II's misrule in the Congo (see Morel 1904). It is remarkable that Morel used *The Black Man's Burden* (1903) as the title of a manuscript in which he sought to refute the claim of Rudyard Kipling's poem of four years earlier, titled 'The White Man's Burden' (1899), with illustrations from the brutalities borne by Africans in the Congo. The adoption of the same title of *The Black Man's Burden* by Basil Davidson (1992), some ninety years later, to discuss a different aspect of Africa's predicament probably illustrates the kindred spirit of compassion for Africans that E. D. Morel and Basil Davidson so abundantly shared with each other.

devaluation of Africans in the concepts and terms employed in colonial scholarship – be it social anthropology, history, literature, or economics. Second, Davidson’s African studies were premised on expansive social and historical realities whose existence was denied by established colonial scholarship on Africa, up to the 1950s. Third, when his expectations of African futures were not realized, Davidson bravely offered reasons as to why Africans are failing in the modern world in sharp contrast to their ancestors’ outstanding achievements of the past. While I wholeheartedly embrace Basil Davidson’s scholarship for confronting the abuses in the major themes of colonial history and colonial social anthropology, I believe that his interpretation of African failures in post-colonial times is inadequate. Permit me to elaborate on these reasons for thus importing Basil Davidson’s scholarship into this Lugard Lecture.

Basil Davidson’s Contributions to African Studies and to the Scholarship of the African State

It is probably difficult for modern scholars of African affairs to imagine how much colonialism invested in its efforts to belittle the moral worth of Africans who were subject to its rule. In a contemporaneous reaction to what he clearly saw as the moral belittlement of Africans by the intellectual agencies of colonialism, the late Ugandan scholar Okot p'Bitek (1970: 20) once expressed amazement at Western scholarship’s “almost morbid fascination and preoccupation with the ‘primitive’, and the hostile and arrogant language of the philosophers, historians, theologians, and anthropologists. Like the ogres of the tales of northern Uganda, unprovoked, Western scholars seek out peoples living in peace, and heap insults on their heads.” Why would Western Europeans, who had achieved a civilization that is justly reputed to be rational, spend their intellectual capital inventing insults that they “heaped” on innocent distant “peoples living in peace”? The truth of the matter is that these were ideologies that allowed European imperialists to justify their colonization of Africa and to rationalize imperialism’s misdeeds. In his reaction to the insulting language in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe offered a reason for the brashness of these insults that is grounded in European ideologies of imperialism. Achebe sees in these insults

the desire -- one might say the need -- in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest (Achebe 1988: 2).

These ideologies of imperialism were ultimately reducible to an article of faith that underlined the work of the intellectual agencies of imperialism. They regarded Africans as humans who were qualitatively different from Europeans and who did not share fully in the human nature that served as the springboard for Europe’s spectacular achievements. That was why it was acceptable to govern colonial Africa in ways that would be objectionable in Europe. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Lady

Lugard phrased this point rather bluntly in her essay on British administration of Northern Nigeria:

The administration of this quarter of the [British] Empire [lying within the tropics] cannot be conducted on the principle of self-government as that phrase is understood by whitemen. It must be more or less in the nature of an autocracy which leaves with rulers full responsibility for the prosperity of the ruled. The administration of India, where this aspect of the question has long been appreciated, is among the successes of which the British people is most justly proud. The work done by England in Egypt is another proof of our capacity for autocratic rule (Lady Lugard 1906: 1).

Such an outlook that empowered Lady Lugard's declaration was still very much rampant and unchallenged when Basil Davidson arrived on the African intellectual scene in the middle of the twentieth century. The moral degradation of Africans and their cultures, with the use of insulting epithets like "primitive" and "simple societies" in the titles of serious publications on Africa, was readily accepted across the entire spectrum of African studies up to the mid-1950s. In the introduction to *The Lost Cities of Africa*, his first major book on Africa, Davidson (1959: ix) derided those reckless views that held that "these [Africans] . . . were naturally inferior or else they were 'children who had still to grow up'; in either case they were manifestly in need of government by others who had grown up." In a series of provocative book publications, Davidson engaged in what may be called the moral revaluation of Africans and their cultures. Whereas settled colonial scholarship described African peoples as tribes, Davidson named many of them as 'nation-states.' For acts and activities denigrated by his European colleagues as "tribalism," Davidson employed the uplifting construct of "nationalism" to depict African political activities in search of their freedom as a people. Whilst colonial administration and colonial social anthropology reduced pre-colonial political entities in Africa to simple "chiefdoms," Davidson accorded them their rightful term of "kingdoms."

The upgrading of the moral worth of Africans was most forcefully expressed in Davidson's *Black Mother: the years of the African slave trade*. Unlike most established Western scholars of the slave trade who regarded it as a natural economic transaction and were pleased to treat the victims of the evil trade as economic goods, Davidson saw the African slave trade as an unjust and irresponsible turn of events in the normal and decent relations between European nations and African peoples and nations over the course of several centuries, following Portuguese explorations in Atlantic Africa. He assessed the slave trade in human terms and weighed its consequences on the scales of human history. Davidson (1961: xiv) regretted "the steady year-by-year export of African labour to the West Indies and the Americas that marked the greatest and most fateful migration - forced migration - in the history of man." He was offended by the shameless dehumanization of its victims as hapless slaves abusively regarded by numerous writers as articles of economic exchange. Instead, in full respect for their

humanity, Davidson branded them as “captives” of the slave trade. Before the publication of *Black Mother* in 1961, the slave trade was largely treated as an aspect of European and American international trade which obtained its human commodities from Africa. Basil Davidson added much value to the scholarship of the slave trade by examining its harmful consequences for existing African states and societies.

Basil Davidson helped to redirect the course of African studies in a more dramatic way other than through the means of such nuanced moral reevaluation of Africans and their cultures. Well up to the 1950s, the view that Africans had their own history -- outside of their contact with Europeans -- was widely and authoritatively discouraged. Colonial social anthropology was adamant in its rejection of such a viewpoint. Its dean, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown of Oxford University, taught his followers that unlike the situation in Europe, "We cannot have a history of African institutions" (Radcliffe-Brown 1950: 2). Dominating the methodology of African studies well up to the 1950s, colonial social anthropology contended that Africans and their cultures were best studied by adopting and adapting the tools of the natural sciences. They propagated the view that the human sciences of history and philosophy, which they thought were especially invented for the mastery of European civilizations, were inappropriate for the study of African societies.⁴ Up to the mid-1960s – even after the designated year of African independence from colonial rule, that is 1960, and even after the rise of what was proudly named as the Ibadan School of History at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria – there was lingering resentment about any attempts to pursue independent African history. Thus, for a prominent example, is the case of Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford University. Documenting the rise of Christian Europe in a lecture series that was broadcast on BBC television in the mid-1960s, Trevor-Roper scoffed at demands by undergraduates for courses in “the history of black Africa:” “Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is

⁴ Colonial social anthropology distanced itself from the progressive attributes of 19th century doctrine of evolutionism. While accepting its biological organismic model as an appropriate one for studying "primitive societies," Radcliffe-Brown defined the processes of interactions in such "simple societies" in a way that precluded progressive social change (1952: 7-9). It is important to note that biological naturalism as a model for human societies was already discredited in Europe before colonial anthropologists applied it to Africa. Radcliffe-Brown thought that it was uniquely fit for Africa, arguing that “analogies, properly used, are important aids to scientific thinking and there is real and significant analogy between organic structure and [primitive] social structure” (1952: 195). However, there is very little room for social change in the societies which this analogy begat for colonial social anthropology. Radcliffe-Brown's "primitive societies" were also retarded societies. Nor did colonial social anthropology's biological paradigm for studying African social structures allow historical thinking. The organismic paradigm also disallowed any comparisons between imperial Europe and colonized Africa. Thus, the influential editors of *African Political Systems* saw no use in their African studies for the comparative insights provided by European political philosophy (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940: 4-5).

largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America" (Trevor-Roper 1965: 9).⁵

Basil Davidson's greatest achievement in African studies is that he pioneered credible publications that confronted such outlandish prejudices as Trevor-Roper's. Davidson's towering feat was that he assembled and provided scholarly illumination on an assortment of archeological, artistic, anthropological, and indeed historical data and evidence that others had ignored. Freed from institutional prejudices that European imperialism had implanted into its intellectual agencies, Davidson shed new light on ancient African societies and offered a fresh interpretation of African history. The inclusion of the civilizations of the Sahara, Egypt, and Kush in his work enabled Davidson to lend respect to the chronological time-depth of African history, reckoned in millennia rather than in centuries (see, e.g., Davidson 1966: 184-85, also 1969). The dramatic degeneration of the Sahara – from its green age of pioneering agriculture and animal husbandry to its subsequent fateful desiccation that has laid waste a huge portion of Africa – is an important item of genuine African studies whose inclusion in the panorama of African history was successfully espoused by Davidson. Nor did he bow to the vigorous campaign by prominent schools of history in his homeland that sought to separate ancient Egypt from African history. Although he might have used different words and phrases and would probably not go as far as the Senegalese scholar did, Davidson would seem to share in the sentiments of Cheika Anta Diop's declaration: "Ancient Egypt was a Negro civilization. The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt.... The African historian who evades the problem of

⁵ Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper's attack on the validity of African history was made in a book on the Roman Empire of no immediate concern with Africa. He apparently wanted to construct a foil for the graciousness of European civilization. His full outburst was as follows: "Undergraduates, seduced ... by ... journalistic fashion, demand that they be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America ... Please do not misunderstand me. I do not deny that men existed even in dark countries and dark centuries, nor that they had political life and culture, interesting to sociologists and anthropologists; but history, I believe, is essentially a form of movement, and purposive movement too" (Trevor-Roper 1965: 9). Of the many denunciations of Trevor-Roper's assertions on the validity of African history, anthropologist Stanley Diamond's reply stands out: "Africa is the locus of predominantly unwritten, deeply self-conscious human experiences, the ensemble of which constitutes the only authentic definition of history. Even so, documents exist; in the Western Sudan, for example, the Kano chronicle provides information about ten centuries old.... But Trevor-Roper is, in a sense that he will not admit, perfectly correct: most men, whether Africans, medieval Europeans, or working-class Englishmen, have lived in the "darkness" to which they have been confined by those who record and rationalize the career of civilization. For their histories, in Africa, for example, were of no use to the European historian -- not being reified, they could not be endlessly mined for the sake of either the academic specialist or the establishment he represented. When Trevor-Roper claims, therefore, that Africa has no history, he means that Africa has no history that *he can use*" (Diamond 1974: 3).

Egypt is neither modest nor objective, nor unruffled; he is ignorant, cowardly and neurotic" (Diop 1955: xiv).⁶

The expressed purpose of Basil Davidson's ambitious adventures in African historiography was not limited to unearthing the depth of ancient African history. Davidson was insistent that knowledge of the African past would help us in the appreciation of the African present. Writing in 1961 about the purpose of his first two major works in African history, Davidson (1961: xi) proclaimed as follows: "As with its predecessor, *The Lost Cities of Africa*, the aim of this book [*Black Mother*] is to reassess the past of Africa, and thus contribute to a fuller understanding of the Independent Africa of today." His faith was that Africa's rich history of the past would be leveraged into prosperous and worthy postcolonial states and societies in the modern world. By the end of the 1960s, despite such disappointing and ugly developments as Nigeria's civil war and a rash of abrasive and bloody *coup d'états* across the continent, Davidson seemed confident in Africa's potential to rebound – as the hopeful title of his last major work of historical synthesis, *African Genius* (1969), boldly proclaimed. However, by the late 1980s, Davidson could painfully see that there was a glaring historical dissonance between a rich history of ancient African states in pre-European times and the wretched performances of African postcolonial states in modern times.

Davidson framed the terms of this form of dissonance between the miserable African present and the substantial achievements of the African past in somber and realist language in a page of *The Black Man's Burden* that is worth quoting from:

The history of Africa's self-development, before foreign rule began, has shown that these peoples achieved much in the past, and will in all likelihood achieve much again.... But the actual and present condition of Africa is one of deep trouble, sometimes a deeper trouble than the worst imposed during the colonial

⁶ Martin Bernal rewards the sociology of knowledge infinitely by showing how one model that tied the origins of Greek civilization to Africa was supplanted in the age of imperialism by a more ideologically sanitized, and therefore a more acceptable, version of history which rejects any African connections to the origins of Greek civilization. In Bernal's own words: "Volume I of this series was concerned with two views of the origins of Ancient Greece. In the first of these, which I called the Ancient Model, it was maintained that Greece had originally been inhabited by Pelasgian and other primitive tribes. These had been civilized by Egyptian and Phoenician settlers who ruled many parts of the country during the 'heroic age'. According to the second view, the Aryan Model, Greek civilization was the result of cultural mixture following a conquest from the north by Indo-European-speaking Greeks . . . I tried to trace the processes by which the Ancient Model current in 5th -century Greece survived until the end of the 18th century and was overthrown in the early 19th century to be replaced by the Aryan model in the 1840s" (Bernal 1991: 1). No publication has done more than Bernal's to show the ideological origins of the campaign to deny the independence of African history. Ancient Greek history was revised precisely because Africa was no longer acceptable as the worthy source of Greek civilization. A related fragment of this ideological package is the separation of the history of Egypt from the African experience against which Cheika Diop protested.

years.... And so the historian, emerging from the study of past centuries when Africa generally knew no such misery and crisis ... meets questions not to be avoided. What explains this degradation from the hopes and freedoms of newly regained independence? Where did the liberators go astray? (Davidson 1992: 9).

The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State was Davidson's (1992) effort to account for such an historical dissonance in Africans' experiences with statecraft. *The Black Man's Burden* is a complex book. In it, Davidson was intensely self-reflective, betraying shades of doubts about the boundless enthusiasm in his previous interpretations of the African state. He did offer an explanation for the failure of postcolonial states in Africa to measure up to the high standards of their predecessors in ancient times. To begin with, Davidson ruled out inherent internal weaknesses - of "human blunders and corruption" -- as too "easy answers" (1992: 10) to the fundamental question of near-catastrophic failures in modern African statecraft. Instead, Davidson blames the abnormalities of modern state formation in Africa on the advent of European imperialism and its powers to alienate colonial societies from the traditional virtues of ancient Africa. He also blamed these modern failures on the structure of African nationalism that unwisely appropriated the vices of the colonial state. In Davidson's estimation, the main culprit is "nationalism which produced the nation-states of newly independent Africa after the colonial period: the nationalism that became nation-statism."⁷

⁷ Compare the following fragments from Derrick Grose's learned review of *Black Man's Burden*: "Basil Davidson's *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* refutes any claim that Africa is condemned to endless political and economic turmoil as a consequence of any inherent defect in African culture or indigenous African politics. He asserts that indigenous political systems with checks and balances on power were evolving in the years before Europe intruded in Africa and that contemporary Africans can draw on their own experience to develop grass-roots political structures appropriate to Africa. Davidson blames many of the political weaknesses of Africa on the pace of change and the alienation of political structures from the lives and needs of the population. He identifies the nation-state as a European structure that is at the root of many of Africa's problems. He points out that it has not always worked well, even in Europe, and that the prototypical European nation-states, England and France, are evolving within the context of the E.E.C. (that is, European Economic Community, now European Union). Davidson pins his hopes for the future of Africa on more participatory political structures, recognizing real differences through decentralized federal structures that will be based on the realities of Africa rather than some colonial legacy.... Davidson shows how the nation-state has contributed to the evolution of Europe but not without catastrophic consequences most dramatically exemplified by the second world war. Europe is adjusting and may avoid self-destruction. Davidson's hope is that Africa will be permitted to draw upon its own experience to find practical solutions to the problems that plague it largely as a result of the failure of the nation-states imposed on Africa as part of the colonial heritage. He emphasizes the need for African nations to be governed on the basis of their own moral principles derived from popular participation in government that will eventually dissolve the artificial boundaries of nation-states. There may be set-backs but there is also evidence of positive change." (Grose 1999)

As Davidson so strategically phrases this point,

This nation-statism looked like a liberation.... In practice, it was not a restoration of Africa to Africa's own history, but the onset of a new period of indirect subjection to the history of Europe.... Liberation thus led to its own denial. Liberation led to alienation (Davidson 1992: 10).

I praise Basil Davidson's work for the invocation of these constructs of "nation-statism," which developed from a destructive mimicry of the manners of the colonial state, and of "alienation" of the post-colonial state from the ethos and morality of ancient African states (see, e.g., Ekeh 1975, 1982, and 1990). However, most of the ailments that Davidson includes in these constructs were already evident in African statecraft before the advent of Western European imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. For instance, many items of Frederick Lugard's critique of the Fulani Sokoto Caliphate at the onset of British colonial rule in Northern Nigeria,⁸ at the beginning of the twentieth century, already foreshadowed Davidson's complaints about Africa's post-colonial states at the end of that century. While I do not deny the existence of paralyzing flaws in post-colonial African statecraft that Davidson so capably identifies, I doubt that European imperialism is their point of origin. It is more likely that European imperialism accelerated the crisis of the culture of the African state.

In my judgment, Davison's thesis on the malformation of the post-colonial states of Africa suffers from a faulty but widespread assumption on the culture of African states. This is the notion that the character of modern African states dates from contacts established with European imperialists in the late nineteenth century. This assumption has been fueled by the practice of African social science that has hinged its scholarship on the events of European imperialism of the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, leading to the questionable notion that the colonial state is an entirely new social formation in the history of the African state. On closer inspection of African history, it will be established that the essential character of the colonial state, as well as that of the post-colonial state, is remarkably close to the behaviours of most African states in the two centuries before the arrival of Western European imperialism in Africa in the late 19th century. By this time, many African states had significantly degenerated from the classic norms of state behaviors in ancient times.

⁸ See, for example, Lugard 1912-1919: 56: "The population of North [Nigeria] -- described some 60 years ago [in the 1850s] by Barth as the densest in all of Africa -- had by 1900 dwindled to some 9 million, owing to inter-tribal war, and, above all, to the slave raids by the Fulani.... A rapid deterioration had ... followed the decay of the religious zeal which had prompted the Fulani jihad ... in 1900 the Fulani Emirates formed a series of separate despotisms, marked by the worst forms of wholesale slave-raiding, spoliation of the peasantry, inhuman cruelty and debased justice."

The Maghreb and Degeneration in the Norms of the Culture of the African State

Where else then can we look to for the origin of the difficulties that have plagued the culture of the African state? It is an aspect of African history with which Basil Davidson was fully familiar but one whose significance is badly understated in his historical analysis of the African state. It is my argument in this Lugard Lecture that the degeneration from the noble norms of governance in ancient African states followed from the fateful impact of the invasions and conquests by Arabs in the Sahara and sub-Saharan Africa. African history will continue to pay a heavy price for its failure to recognize that the Arab invasions and occupation of North Africa and the Sahara in the last fourteen centuries have had a greater moment for the African historical experience than European imperialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Arab incursion into Africa not only disrupted the African historical experience; it has also reconfigured the geopolitics of the continent. The historic irony, of course, is that Arabs of the Maghreb⁹ and Africans in sub-Saharan Africa were colonized by Europeans at the same time, thus blurring the significance of Arabs' unequal relationships with Africa in prior centuries.

If such statements appear unusual and surprising, it is so because the dominant narratives of African historiography have unwisely treated African history as an exclusive subset of European history. Perhaps we should begin with a large comparative context: Africa has borne the brunt of the expansion of Islam. Following the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 C.E., the ideology and religion of Islam spread eastward -- from Arabian lands through Persia and Eurasia to vast areas of Asia -- without the migration of large Arab populations into these areas. In contrast, the westward expansion of Islam into Africa was accompanied by invading Arabs who repopulated North Africa and absorbed the civilizations of the ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians and of other Mediterranean cultures of North Africa. By the 13th century, some six centuries into the Arab conquests and occupation of North Africa and the Sahara, the changed geopolitical realities of the continent had yielded to a new Arab geography of Africa which persists to the present time and which was adopted by the Europeans on their arrival on the African continent. In the North, in lands abutting the Mediterranean Sea, is the *Maghreb* into which the Arabs settled as their New World. The *Sahara* spreads into the Maghreb as well as into large areas to its south. Next, Arab geography of Africa recognized as the *Sahel* a stretch of patchy and marginal lands

⁹ The Maghreb in North Africa -- made up of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco -- is the Arab's equivalent of the Western European New World in the Americas. That is, the Americas are to Western Europe what North Africa is to Arabia. Of course, the Maghreb is much older than the European New World in the Americas. A great deal of the achievements of Arab civilization and culture, since the expansion of Islam and Arab populations to North Africa beginning in the middle decades of seventh century, C. E., has been wrought in the Maghreb, rather than in Arab lands in Asia Minor.

south of the Sahara. To the Arabs, the rest of the African continent, south of the Sahel, was the *Sudan* – the land of the Blacks.¹⁰

For centuries, before the arrival of European imperialism, the peoples and states in strategic areas of the Sudan¹¹ – that is, sub-Saharan Africa – struggled to redefine and establish their new modes of survival under the shadows of the Maghreb. Significantly, Arab conquests crushed the traditions of statehood that had emerged from early Christianity of the Coptic Church in Northeast Africa. Coptic Egypt was the first to fall to Arab military forces who invaded and occupied Egypt in 639 C.E. Christian Nubia, successor to the Kush civilization of great antiquity, fell to Muslim Arabs in 1276, leaving Ethiopia as the sole Coptic state to survive Arab invasions of Northeast Africa. But the most problematic impact of Arab conquests in Africa was in West Africa where the outcomes of the contentious relationship between Morocco and Songhai reshaped the culture of African states in significant ways, persisting into our modern times.

Songhai was the beneficiary of the history and traditions of a well coordinated state enterprise that spanned close to a millennium in the Western Sudan. As a state organization, Songhai inherited the principles of government that the pagan state of Ghana (c.550-1250) innovated in the sixth century C.E. and that were carried forward by Mali (c.1250-1350), Ghana's successor state. Ghana, Mali, and Songhai exploited their opportunities near the edges of the Sahara to build a state system that was heavily reliant on international trade across the vast Sahara. But all three of them also emphasized internal stability and justice in their public affairs. These were states that were clearly on the side of their citizens, not ones inclined to sacrifice the welfare of their peoples for the comfort of friendship with foreign potentates.¹²

Although it arose as a pristine state in the mid-sixth century, that is, before the birth of Islam, and although it lived most of its existence outside Islamic contact, Ghana was already exposed to Arabs and their religion from across the Sahara before it expired in the 13th century. Its successor, Mali, was from its beginning a Muslim state. Both of these African states were well liked by Maghreb Arabs.¹³ However, Songhai's vast

¹⁰ It is striking that these terms of the Arab geography of Africa – Maghreb, Sahara, Sahel, and Sudan – are Arabic in their origins, although they have been adopted by Western geography of Africa.

¹¹ "To the Arabs, the whole of Africa south of the Sahara was the *Bilad as Sudan* -- the Land of the Blacks. The name survives today only in the Republic of the Sudan on the Nile, but references to Western Sudan in early times concern the zone presently occupied by Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta, and Niger, plus parts of Mauritania, Guinea, and Nigeria" (Rodney 1972: 56).

¹² See Fage 1964 and Levtzion 1973 for discussions about the integrity and sense of responsibility in the governance of these states.

¹³ "Among the virtues of the Sudanese, Ibn Battuta (an itinerant Arab scholar) counted the care they took in protecting the trade routes. On his way from Walata to the capital of Mali, he traveled with only one

territory spilled over the land holdings of its predecessors' and rapidly attracted resentment from the Maghreb.¹⁴ Although it, too, was a Muslim state, Songhai practised its traditional modes of governance, much to the annoyance of Arab powers in the Maghreb who were clearly troubled by this Black power whose authority disallowed Arab interests in West Africa from being exercised freely. Songhai was particularly engaged in disputes with Morocco touching on boundaries between the two nations and on mining and trading rights in Songhai's territory.

Some details of the dispute between Morocco and Songhai in the last two decades of the 16th century will reveal how much its violent resolution contributed to the perennial crisis of the African state afterwards. The dispute between Morocco and Songhai turned violent in 1584-85 when Morocco sent two military expeditions into Songhai's territory to seize mines and lands. Songhai easily routed Morocco's invading forces.¹⁵ The dispute was harshly escalated when the King of Morocco, Ahmad al-Mansur, insisted that Songhai, as a Muslim state in the Sudan, was bound by religious precept of world-wide Islam to make its vast military and economic resources available to Morocco in its wars and campaigns on behalf of Islam. Ahmad al-Mansur threatened that "his armed forces, which were being 'kept ready' for campaigns against Christendom, could as well be used against [Songhai's King] the Askiya, 'if he stood in the way of God.'" Infuriated, [Songhai's King] Askiya Ishaq II "replied violently by sending home the [Moroccan] envoy with 'a javelin and a pair of iron-shoes', thus declaring his intention to go to war to preserve his sovereignty over the Taghazan" salt mines and making clear his nationalist position that the ruler's primary responsibilities were on behalf of Songhai and its people (Yahya 1981: 155-6).

guide, because it was not necessary to go in caravan. In these conditions trade flourished and foreigners settled and conducted business in the Sudan" (Levtzion 1973: 163).

¹⁴ See Ekeh (2000): "Songhai faced sustained campaigns against its image from Arab sources. While Arab scholars and travelers were fond of Ghana and Mali, earlier versions of these triple civilizations of the Western Sudan, they were increasingly intolerant towards Songhai on whose powers they clearly had designs and whose territorial extent many Arab states envied. The first of these recorded complaints came from Leo Africanus (whose Muslim name was Al-Hassan Ibn-Mahammed Al-Wezaz Al-Fasi, a Moor, baptized as Giovanni Leone, but better known as Leo Africanus). He visited Hausa country shortly after Askia Muhammad, Songhai's king, conquered several Hausa states, probably in the 1520s. Leo Africanus (1600: 828-31) criticized Askia Muhammad's treatment of the Hausa in rather harsh terms: 'Afterward,' he wrote, 'he sent gouernors hither who mightily oppressed and impouerished the people that were before rich: and most of the inhabitants were carried captiue and kept for slaues by [Askia]' (1600: 828)."

¹⁵ "In 1584-85 two expeditions were hastily dispatched (by Moroccan authorities), into the Mauritanian desert and along the Sahel (*Sahil*) in the lands of the Jallof and the Fulani and the other to Taghaza. Both expeditions met with total disaster" (Yahya 1981: 152).

The nature of the conflict changed dramatically when Morocco was able to secure arms from a European source. Spain, Morocco's northern European neighbour and long-time enemy, was entangled in a North Atlantic dynastic struggle with England in the 1580s at the same time as Morocco and Songhai had their problems. Following what Morocco saw as England's great defeat of the Spanish naval invasion of England in 1588, known to history as the Spanish armada,¹⁶ the envoys of King Ahmad al-Mansur of Morocco made requests to Queen Elizabeth of England for arms that would enable his nation to wage war against Spain. The King of Morocco did receive shipments of English cannons and other means of firepower from Queen Elizabeth's England.¹⁷ In 1591, Morocco launched a war against Songhai. The bravery of Songhai's soldiers, mainly equipped with bows and arrows and javelins, was no match against Morocco's English weapons. Militarily, Songhai was defeated very badly. Its university town of Timbuktu on the River Niger was particularly targeted, with many of its intellectuals captured and taken away to the Maghreb. However, Morocco's supreme strategy appeared to be neither occupation of Songhai's West African territories nor their rule by the Moroccan Caliphate. Rather, it was to teach a lesson that would ensure that no Black power of Songhai's character and strength would be allowed to function anymore in sub-Saharan Africa. That is to say, Morocco carried out its intention to destroy rather than merely defeat or conquer Songhai.

The consequences and lessons of Songhai's downfall and its destruction were devastating for Africans and their traditions of statehood. Songhai typified traditional African states that cared for their people and that survived when they paid attention to the needs of their populace. Following Songhai's fall, in the region under the sway of the sacked Songhai Empire, any African states that disregarded alien Arab claims in favour of their local and native interests were now imperiled. From ancient Borno to newer Muslim states in sub-Saharan Africa, there was a redefinition of what the purpose of the African state should be. As new but smaller states emerged from the downfall of Songhai, they became manifestly subservient to Arab notions of how African states should behave. In order to survive in the new realities of post-Songhai West Africa, it was often necessary that African states refrained from challenging Arab interests, even if the welfare of their citizens had to be sacrificed. The gradual expansion of this redefinition of the purpose of Muslim African states to the rest of Africa, in the centuries following Songhai's fall, constitutes the fundamental change in the history of the African state.¹⁸

¹⁶ "The defeat of the Armada was an important factor in the Moroccan decision to send an expedition to the Sudan" (Yahya 1981: 135).

¹⁷ "Morocco's military power, augmented by weapons and naval shipment smuggled from England by English merchants, placed the country in a good position militarily" (Yahya 1981: 151-2).

¹⁸ The terms of the expected deference of African states in the Sudan to the will of Morocco was spelt out in the last letter that Morocco's King Ahmad al-Mansur sent to the King of Songhai Askiya Ishaq II, before Morocco's invasion of Songhai: "The letter questioned the legality of the Askiya's government and

The rise of Sokoto Caliphate at the beginning of the nineteenth century, two centuries after the destruction of Songhai, was the clearest affirmation of the new realities of statecraft in West Africa. Uthman Dan Fodio -- the leader of the revolt of immigrant Fulani who toppled kings of their host indigenous Hausa -- toed the ideological line of Moroccan suasion on the inherent subjection of African states under a global religious mandate. First, Uthman Dan Fodio challenged the Hausa Kings' authority to levy taxes outside of those allowed by Islam, as interpreted and authorized by learned theologians. Second, Fodio accused the Hausa Kings of moral permissiveness in their policies on women affairs because they allowed women to play public roles in cultural festivities and in the economy, thus violating sharia laws requiring women to be secluded or else to be fully and strictly clad in the public. Third, Fodio accused the Hausa Kings of being weak rulers, failing in their required duties of enforcing Islamic laws that regulated the conduct of individuals. (See Fodio 1803 and 1805; also, Johnston 1967: 30-5.)

A further vehicle for this transformation of the character of the African state was the international slave trade. In an important sense, the expansion of the slave trade was one clear consequence of Songhai's fall. Like its other contemporary in West Africa, namely Benin Empire in the forest belt of West Africa, Songhai was a state whose manpower needs in bureaucracy, military, and public works were labour-intensive. In its circumstances, Songhai was not an essential slave-trading state. It is significant that Songhai's disputes with Morocco did not involve theories of slavery. But the slave trade in the territories of the defunct Songhai Empire and arguments about Islamic theories of slavery, particularly in the works of Ahmad Baba, grew rapidly. Following the

asked the Askiya and his government, in particular, and the peoples of the Sudan, in general, to submit to the authority of Ahmad Al-Mansur. This should be done, it was said, because God had invested the Sharif [that is, King of Morocco] with 'the right to inherit the Earth and all that is on it,' and with the responsibility to unite the Muslim Community and protect it. The Sudan and its resources should be used for this purpose according to the divine will" (Yahya 1981: 162).

teachings of Ahmad Baba,¹⁹ the Sokoto Caliphate became a slave-raiding and slave-trading state in its official duties (see Balewa 1967; also see Mary Smith 1964). Thus, a major consequence that followed from Songhai's downfall was turning the state into an agency of the international slave trade.

Conclusions: French Revolution and Fulani Revolution and Ownership of the State in Europe and Africa

In concluding, I must now return to Basil Davidson and the questions that I asked of his *Black Man's Burden*. The grand Scotsman deserves a salutation from all of us for using his stature to highlight the character flaws of the post-colonial state in Africa. However, I must re-emphasize the point that, historically, the problem that Davidson so courageously analyzed has been with Africans since the end of the sixteenth century, since the fall of Songhai in 1591. It is certainly older than European imperialism of the late nineteenth century and twentieth century which Davidson blames for planting the seeds of the crisis of the modern African state. We must look to earlier experiences in African history for more likely probabilities of the origin of this perennial crisis of the state in Africa. The Fulani state formation of the Sokoto Caliphate at the beginning of the nineteenth century was the clearest outcome of the new political realities that followed from Songhai's fall in the Western Sudan. By incorporating the Fulani state and its central principles of governance in the construction of the colonial state, Western imperialism did tap into an existing culture of the state that was enforced from the Moroccan destruction of Songhai. Thus, although Western European imperialism was clearly implicated in it, the chain of causation of the crisis of the African state began

¹⁹ Arguments about Islamic theories of enslavement were intensified when, on his return from captivity, Black theologian Ahmad Baba (1556-1627) of Timbuktu, who was among those taken away to the Maghreb by Moroccan invading forces, challenged Arab practices of enslaving Black Muslims. Arab authorities based their practices on the grounds that Noah's curse on Ham marked Blacks for enslavement and excluded them from any considerations safeguarding Moslems from such a fate. Instead, Baba proposed that Moslems among the Blacks could not be enslaved, although non-believers among them could be enslaved. It led him to categorize enslavable and non-enslavable Blacks, as follows: "The Muslims among [the Blacks], like the people of Kano, Katsina, Bornu, Gobir, and all of Songhai are Muslims, who are not to be owned. Yet some [Muslims] transgress on the others unjustly by invasion as do the Arabs, Bedouins, who transgress on free Muslims and sell them unjustly" (see Hilliard 1985: 162). But he allowed enslavement of the following non-Moslem groups: "Those who come to you from the following [sic] clans: the Mossi, the Gurma, the Busa, the Yoroko, the Kutukul, the Yoruba, the Tanbugbu, the Bobo are considered non-believers who still adhere to non-belief until now.... You are allowed to own all these without questioning. This is the ruling about these clans, and Allah, the Highest, knows and judges" (Baba c1622: 137). Uthman dan Fodio, who led the 1804 jihad revolt against Hausa Kings and established the Sokoto Caliphate, accepted Baba's theory of enslavement which was put into practice in the Sokoto Caliphate, perhaps the worst exemplification of the ill-consequences of Songhai's fall.

with intervention from the Maghreb in the conduct and culture of African states in sub-Saharan Africa.

We may profitably illustrate the outcomes that followed from Songhai's fall by examining changes in the concept of ownership of the African state. We may indeed deepen our appreciation of the direction of those changes by examining the contrasting purposes and outcomes of two political revolutions that transformed the culture of the state in Europe and Africa. These are the French Revolution and the Fulani Revolution which occurred within fifteen years of each other. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* of the French Revolution of 1789 had as its primary goal the transfer of the ownership of the state from the monarchy and aristocracy to the people. It thus advanced the earlier successes made on behalf of freedoms for citizens in the English *Magna Carta* of 1215, the *Dutch Declaration of Independence* of 1581, and the *American Declaration of Independence* in 1776. These democratic revolutions cumulatively transformed Western political culture by empowering the individual and by transferring ownership of the state from kings and aristocrats to ordinary citizens. In contrast, the Fulani Revolution of 1804 was a campaign against what its leaders complained to be too much freedom in the hands of ordinary people, particularly women, and lack of firmness in rulers' control of the people. Its main outcome was the shrinking of the political space allowed to ordinary men and the disappearance of economic activities by women who were now forbidden to compete with men.

In constructing the prototype colonial state in Northern Nigeria, Frederick Lugard (later Lord Lugard) declined to borrow from the lessons of democratic revolutions in Europe. Instead, he embraced the theories of Fulani statecraft as more appropriate for colonial Africa. Frederick Lugard, the foremost policy mogul of British imperialism in Africa, saw Africans' lots under colonialism as their historical and inherited legacy that did not have to entail an Englishman's concept of government or freedom. As he put it, "the true conception of the inter-relation of colour: complete uniformity in ideals ... [but] in matters social and racial a separate path, each pursuing his own inherited traditions, preserving his own race-purity and race-pride" (Lugard 1922: 87). This was the intellectual premise of the doctrine of indirect rule which created numerous "native authorities." These had very little individual freedom in their practices. Rather, the doctrine of indirect rule²⁰ borrowed from the Fulani system its notion of the ownership

²⁰ The British colonial doctrine of indirect rule emerged in its first historical instance from negotiations on power-sharing between Frederick Lugard, representing the British, the new conquerors of Hausaland, and the Fulani aristocracy, its old conquerors. The outcome was that the Fulani remained the direct rulers of Hausaland while the British emerged as its indirect rulers. What was at issue here was not the straightforward adoption and respect for local traditions. In Northern Nigeria the British were operating on the basis of dual conquest. The British conquest of Northern Nigeria did not terminate the Fulani conquest of these areas a century earlier. Rather, in its pristine Northern Nigerian format, indirect rule was a theory of dual conquest in which the newest conquerors recognized the rights, albeit now circumscribed, of the previous conquerors and rulers of these lands. It involved power-sharing between the old and new conquerors in an arrangement that recognized the system of government devised by the old conquerors

of the state by its rulers. Just as the Fulani had alienated the landed possessions of the Hausa by right of conquest, so did Lugard and subsequent British governors proclaim ownership of land by the colonial state in Northern Nigeria (see Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1993: 127-58). Above all else, the colonial doctrine of indirect rule led to the anti-democratic principle that the public domain is the sole property of rulers and that it is theirs to control as they please -- perhaps the most damning consequence of colonialism and the bane of democracy in modern Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. This is to say, the craftsmanship of the colonial state, especially in the British sphere, had a greater kinship with Dan Fodio's theory of the state than with Western notions of the state. In his most authoritative jihad memorandum Dan Fodio declared, "The government of a country is the government of its king without question" (Fodio c.1811: 53).²¹ This notion, medieval by European standards, was woven into the craftsmanship of the colonial state by Frederick Lugard. It is remarkable, however, that Lord Lugard did his utmost to ensure that the colonial state, which he helped to construct, was separated from Sokoto Caliphate's twin evils of slavery and forced labour - perhaps a befitting tribute to the great Englishman in whose memory this lecture is named.

as a proper basis for their mutual administration of the conquered lands. (See M. G. Smith 1960: 203; also Perham 1965: xl.)

²¹ Earlier in his 1803 jihad memorandum, Uthman Dan Fodio pushed the point that "the status of a town is the status of its ruler: if he be Muslim, the town belongs to Islam; but if he be heathen the town is a town of heathendom" (Fodio c.1803: 240). More ominously, Fodio endorsed the views contained in the warning from the Arab theologian Sheikh Abd' Rahman As-Suyuti to the Hausa King of Kano: "[The King] is the Shade of God . . . on the Earth, for verily if he has done righteously, he has the Reward and grateful remembrance, but if he does evil, the Bondage awaits him and *his people suffer*" (Fodio: c.1811: 57; emphasis added). Apart from so explicitly stating that the state is owned by its rulers, this last statement reduces the status of individuals to the behaviors of their rulers. They are judged according to their rulers' faithfulness to the precepts of an established religion. Since the ultimate arbiters of the rulers' conduct were Arab theologians and chieftains, the net result of Fodio's campaign was a revolutionary change in the conception of the ownership of the state in Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Basil Davidson's publications on the history and culture of the African state began in an era when it was fashionable to deny that Africa had any history or states before the arrival of European colonialism at the end of 19th century. His faith in the strength of African achievements in indigenous statecraft was strong and unique, enabling him to offer extraordinary descriptions of African statehood. However, Davidson's robust characterization of African traditional states of the past was in sharp contrast to his concerns about the misbehaviours of African rulers and the woeful failures of African states in modern times. Davidson's attempt to explain this form of historic dissonance is offered in his last major book on Africa with the gloomy title of *The Blackman's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Modern State*. This Lugard Lecture is at once a tribute to Basil Davidson's scholarship of the African state and an examination of its limitations. I argue that Davidson misunderstood key points in the evolution of the African state, particularly the role played by Muslim Arabs in re-directing the character of the African state. This lecture thus attempts to offer an historical perspective on the difficulties that have plagued the history and culture of the African state.