



## New and Old Ideas: African Military Marxism

### Book review: Adam Mayer: *Military Marxism: Africa's Contribution to Revolutionary Theory, 1957-2023*<sup>12</sup>

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Adam Mayer has tackled a Herculean task with this book, a history of ideas around African Military Marxism, encompassing both guerrilla fighters and putchists. After a theoretical introduction, Mayer draws an overview of most cases when Military Marxist governments actually ruled in an African country, and also the cases when insurgencies tried to take power (ultimately without success). This means that he includes Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, Jerry Rawlings' Ghana, Sékou Touré's Guinea Conakry, the Cameroonian insurgency and the Ambazonian insurgency, Modibo Keita's Mali, Moktar Ould Daddah's Mauritania, Cabral's Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, Babu's Zanzibar, Nyerere's Tanzania, Macías' Equatorial Guinea, Sudan under Nimeriri, Benin under Kérékou, Angola, Mozambique, Mengistu's Ethiopia, Somalia under Siad Barré, Madagascar under Ratsiraka, Uganda under its „move to the Left” in the late sixties under Obote, its Gang of Four, Zambia, Burkina Faso in the 1980s under Sankara, Seychelles, and rebellions such as the Simba rebellion after Lumumba's demise in Eastern Congo, the Communist Party of South Africa, Namibian Communists, Kukoi Samba Sanyang in the Gambia, and others. This is a maddeningly complex history and Mayer executes the task well, if briefly, in a single chapter, making it jam packed with detail.

The core chapters of the book are on thinkers though: African Military Marxist theorists who may or may not have ruled. Nkrumah did, Cabral almost did, Mondlane almost did, Sankara did, Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu did, Sam Moyo almost did, Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba did (the latter left a Harvard University professorship to lead a militia in Eastern Congo in the 1990s!). Others such as Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, Issa Shivji, Dani Nabudere, Ruth First, Mahmood Mamdani, Stephanie Urdang, Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, Bernard Magubane were rebel academics. Moyo was the brain behind Mugabe's radical land reform in Zimbabwe. Yash Tandon, a former Ugandan Gang of Four member, came to represent various East African nations at the GATT, to in turn become the harshest critic of free trade regimes for Africa. Thandika Mkandawire, Olufemi Taiwo, Olufemi O. Taiwo, Biodun Jeyifo, and many others are in the United States, but their work touches on militant and Military Marxism, as Mayer

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shows.

Mayer even successfully proves how the Sankarist coup leaders in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have drawn from this tradition in creative ways. He also demonstrates the relevance of secular radical politics in South Africa (with Economic Freedom Fighters), Kenya, Sudan, Nigeria, and other countries today.

I would argue that he perhaps goes a bit too far in celebrating non-democratic solutions in Africa though. Today, when conflict, hunger and the threat of hunger hangs above much of Africa again, when human rights violations are on the rise, we must not let our guard down when it comes to tolerating anti-democratic solutions even implicitly. Where are the checks and balances in Military Marxist systems? Where is the popular will? Where are human right such as the right to assembly? Mayer waxes lyrical about the Cold War record of these systems as well, when Ethiopia had its own Red Terror (memorialized in a Museum dedicated to it in Addis Ababa, as well as numerous statues), when most Military Marxist states have since degenerated into oligarchies (as in Angola and Mozambique), when today's Marxian junta in Burkina Faso has chased away even the United Nations? Relying on cooperation with North Korea will not make up for what these countries have lost in France, the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations!

That said, this is a magnificent history, most of which is unexpected and radically innovative in light of the prevailing consensus on especially the Cold War record of these states. Mayer draws on 1970s US analysis to dig out positive aspects to these systems successfully, challenging our notions that they contained only bad policy decisions. They conducted public health as well as mass literacy campaigns, built prefabricated homes for many urban people, and fought off mercenary incursions successfully, on numerous occasions. Every Africa watcher is familiar with Mad Mike Hoare, Bob Denard, and other early mercenary commanders in Africa. Mayer shows the other side of the coin: the arguments and the driving forces behind anti-mercenary activity.

This brings me to another aspect of the book. Especially given that these thinkers are mostly Communists or at least radicals, it is surprising how nationalistic they tend to be. This contradicts our notions on the internationalism of Marxism, socialism, Communism, and generally the left.

This book does as much as establishing, or attempting to establish, a new paradigm around African Marxism, and claims that its thinkers are theoretically sound, sophisticated public intellectuals who knew their societies intimately. I suspect that this book will become a standard go-to reference work on African Marxism, and also African state socialist systems, and especially the thinkers behind them. Certainly it is a great addition to any library worth its salt on African history!