



# Mitochondrial Eve

*Journal of Humanities Post Graduate Studies Imo*

*State University, Owerri, Nigeria.*

**Vol. 1 No. 4 December, 2024**

<https://mejhpqs.online>

## The Role of Marxism in the Decolonization of Africa

**Olaedo Ngozi**

Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria

### Abstract

This paper takes a look at the role of Marxist ideology in the decolonization of Africa, focusing on how Marxist principles informed and shaped liberation movements across the continent. In history African nations struggled to free themselves from European colonialism and imperialism, Marxism provided a critical framework for understanding the economic exploitation and social oppression inherent in colonialism. African leaders and intellectuals, such as Kwame Nkrumah, and Patrice Lumumba, adopted and adapted Marxist theory, interpreting it through the lens of their own experiences with colonial oppression. Marxism offered a way to critique colonialism's extractive economic practices, which exploited Africa's labor and resources for the benefit of imperial powers. In response, African Marxists promoted ideas of collective ownership, self-reliance, and the overthrow of capitalist structures imposed by the colonizers. Additionally, Marxist thought encouraged pan-African unity as a means of resisting colonial division and fostering continental solidarity. This abstract concludes by reflecting on the legacy of Marxist thought in postcolonial Africa, noting both the successes and limitations of Marxist-inspired policies in achieving true liberation and development. Ultimately, Marxism played a complex but pivotal role in the decolonization of Africa, providing ideological fuel for anti-colonial struggles while also prompting critical discussions about Africa's path to political and economic sovereignty.

**Key Words:** Colonialism, decolonization, Marxism, Africa, nationalists.

### Introduction

The decolonization of Africa was a transformative period in the continent's history, marked by a fervent struggle for independence, sovereignty and self-determination. As African nations sought freedom from European colonial powers, various ideological frameworks provided

intellectual support for these liberation movements. In other words, the colonial experience defined Africa epochally and revolutionarily across all spheres of life and the challenge of the post-dependence era is the rediscovery of Africanity, especially the cognitive and organizing genius of Africa so as to achieve self-capacitation, wellbeing and

development on the African continent, that is, in a nutshell a satisfactory and fecund philosophy of education and development.

However, Marxism emerged as a particularly influential philosophy, offering a critical analysis of colonial oppression and a blueprint for social and economic transformation. Rooted in the critique of capitalist exploitation, Marxism resonated with African leaders and thinkers who saw parallels between the exploitation of workers under capitalism and the subjugation of African people under colonial rule.

In this context, Marxism served as both a theoretical guide and a practical tool, inspiring many African anti-colonial leaders who sought to dismantle the structures of economic and political domination imposed by colonialism. Figures like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Amílcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania integrated Marxist concepts into their visions for a post-colonial Africa, advocating for policies that emphasized collective ownership, social justice, and equality. These leaders believed that genuine independence could only be achieved if Africa broke free not only from political domination but also from the economic

exploitation inherent in the capitalist system left by colonial rulers.

The influence of Marxism on African decolonization also extended beyond ideas, as the international socialist movement provided crucial political and material support to anti-colonial struggles. The Soviet Union and other socialist states, for example, offered resources, training, and solidarity to African liberation movements, cementing Marxism's role as a foundational ideology in the fight against colonialism. Additionally, Marxist ideology fostered pan-African solidarity, uniting diverse African nations under a shared commitment to dismantling colonial structures and creating a new socio-economic order rooted in equity and mutual support.

However, the application of Marxist thought in Africa was far from straightforward. Africa's diverse societies, with their unique cultural, social, and economic landscapes, often required adaptations of traditional Marxist theories. The rise of "African socialism" was one such adaptation, blending Marxist principles with indigenous African values to create an ideological framework that was both revolutionary and culturally resonant.

This article exposes the multi-faceted role of Marxism in Africa's decolonization, analyzing how it shaped anti-colonial thought, supported revolutionary movements, and influenced the socio-political structures of post-independence African nations. It also examines the tensions and adaptations that emerged as Marxism encountered Africa's complex realities, reflecting on both the achievements and challenges faced by Marxist-inspired liberation movements. Through this lens, the article provides insight into the ways in which Marxism became a powerful tool for envisioning and building an Africa free from colonial and capitalist exploitation.

### **Understanding Colonialism**

The history of the African continent is closely related to world history. Many events occurred and influenced its equilibrium. One of them is colonialism. In other words, colonialism is part and parcel of African history.

The word, colonialism can be seen as a system of control, possession and domination. In other words, Colonialism is a practice of domination, and control which involves the subjugation of one people to another.

Jürgen Osterhammel argues that colonialism is the system of domination put in place to serve the interests of empire and is to be understood as the operational dimension of imperialism.<sup>1</sup> He further identifies seven broad categories of analysis of colonialism:

Conquest and resistance; the formation of colonial administration and the role of collaborators; economic policies and the impact of capitalist structures; the colonizer's social structures; the cultural encounter of colonizer and colonized; and the role of ideology in determining colonial governance.<sup>2</sup>

According to M. Merger analyses of colonialism:

Colonialism begins with a forced, involuntary entry. The colonizing power alters basically or destroys the indigenous cultures. Members of the colonized group tend to be governed by representatives of the dominant group and the system of dominant-subordinate relationship is buttressed by racist ideology.<sup>3</sup>

There are the colonized and colonizer, who see the colonized people as uncivilized, undeveloped, crude and in need of help, civilization and discipline, which can only be provided by a superior race.

## The Concept of Decolonization

Decolonization is the process of a colony becoming independent. Decolonization refers to the attainment of political sovereignty. In other words, it involves a handover of political forms and institutions. This process leaves behind some of the narratives that accompany coloniality, even if refashioned versions of these. This enduring coloniality resides within and proliferates through the categories of political discourse. Franz Fanon defines it as simply the replacing of a certain spaces of men of another species of men<sup>4</sup>. It is a historical process, i.e. that it cannot become intelligible, nor clear to itself except in the exist measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content it is:

Decolonization is the meeting of two forces opposed to each other by their very nature which in fact owe their originality to that sort of sub substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies.<sup>5</sup>

It however influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally, as such, decolonization never take place unnoticed, it transforms spectators crushed with their

inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlight upon them.

## What is Marxism?

Marxism is, first and foremost, the system of thought created by Marx, any account of what Marxism is must refer to what Marx himself thought and did. The scholarly study of what Marx actually said, and of the historical context in which he worked, is an important field of study...Josiah Heyma explains:

Marxism stems from the work of Karl Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels. Marxism (sometimes called "political economy") provides anthropology with fundamental theoretical concepts, especially with regard to deep human history and social change, conflict, social inequality, economics, and labor.<sup>6</sup>

Marx's ideas were first presented in popular form in the "Manifesto of the Communist Party," written jointly with Engels and published in 1848. It begins with the bold statement, "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism" (Marx and Engels 1848). This was more an expression of hope than a description of the actual

situation as it then was. The “Manifesto of the Communist Party” was written for the Communist League, a tiny revolutionary group that had just been formed in the ferment leading up to the revolutions of 1848. Soon after it was published the uprisings that erupted across Europe in that year were defeated. The Communist League and other revolutionary groups were smashed. Marx and Engels were forced to flee from Germany and settled in England... Marxism is therefore a theoretical adherence to at least some of the central ideas of Karl Marx.

However, Marxism can be seen as a humanistic philosophy that is opposed to exploitation and colonialism. In other words, it is a philosophy of self-realization, that raises the desire among African nationalists to be free. Marxism considers the social, political, actual and practical life and as a philosophy of humanism, it centers on human welfare (human dignity and goodness), human perfection and self-realization. In other words, Marxism is opposed to alienation, exploitation (colonialism) and capitalism. Alienation is the most important word in Marxism. It means separation or estrangement from something. In his economic and the manuscript, he explained four kinds of alienation, namely:

- 1) From objective of production or specie being
- 2) From oneself
- 3) From one’s human nature
- 4) From ones follow

Marxism therefore is anti-colonialism, alienation, exploitation as well as devaluation and de-personification.

Marxism begins with a materialist understanding of the world. Materialism prioritizes the history and arrangement of practical activities rather than the unfolding of abstract ideas. These practical activities are done by people in social relationships, rather than as self-contained individuals, utilizing the human capacity for reasoning, and they engage the natural world beyond humanity.

### **How Marxism contributes to the Decolonization of Africa**

Marxism contributed to the decolonization of Africa through several key roles that supported anti-colonial struggles, inspired revolutionary ideologies, and guided post-independence governance.

Marxism as a humanistic philosophy is opposed to exploitation and colonialism, hence, it raised the desire among the Africans and African nationalists to be free. African

nationalists having acquired education abroad where grandly influence by Marx's humanistic philosophy and Heideggerian existential of Dasen, hence agitation for decolonization or independence of Africa. This is to say that, Marxism encouraged African intellectuals to challenge colonial cultural dominance. This aspect of Marxism supported a renaissance of African culture, values, and identities, helping African nations reclaim their heritage and self-worth in opposition to colonial narratives that had often portrayed African societies as inferior. Some of the African nationalists include: Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Franz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Julius Nyere, Senghor. For instance, Kwame Nkruma, the late president of Ghana is known his philosophical consciencism. It is a philosophy, ideology and doctrine of decolonization directed towards the redemption of African society.

The devaluation and alienation of African personality did not ask. In his *History of African People*, R.W July writes:

Colonialism contains the germ that led to its destruction. By conquering it raised the desire to be free. By exploiting, it generated arising resistance against tyranny. By exposing her to the

world, it raced the vision for better life. By educating, it gave a skill for self-direction.<sup>7</sup>

Colonial Exploitation. Marxism provided a powerful tool and critique of the economic and social exploitation inherent in colonialism. Marxist theory equated colonialism with capitalist exploitation, portraying European colonial powers as profiting from African labor and resources. This analysis resonated with African leaders, who used it to explain how colonialism impoverished Africa and why decolonization required a radical overhaul of colonial economic structures.

Ideological Framework for Liberation Movements. Marxist ideas gave anti-colonial leaders a framework for understanding and resisting oppression. Marxism's emphasis on class struggle and liberation from oppression inspired leaders like Patrick Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah among others. They saw colonialism as a class-based system where African people were the "working class," and the colonizers represented the "ruling class," fueling their motivation to dismantle colonial systems.

Promotion of Pan-African Solidarity. Marxism encouraged African unity against colonialism, promoting the idea that

colonialism harmed all African countries and that liberation required solidarity across the continent. Pan-Africanism, influenced by Marxist ideas, became a driving force in Africa's independence movements, as leaders from different countries supported each other's struggles, creating a united front against colonial rule.

**Support from Socialist Countries.** Marxist ideology also brought African liberation movements into alliance with the Soviet Union and other socialist states, which provided material support, training, and financial aid. This assistance was vital for many African movements that lacked the resources to oppose well-funded colonial powers. Support from socialist states helped sustain many liberation struggles in countries like Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau.

**Vision for Post-Colonial Economic and Social Reform.** Marxism offered a blueprint for building independent, self-reliant nations after decolonization. Leaders like Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana implemented forms of "African socialism," incorporating Marxist principles like collective ownership, equitable distribution of resources, and land reform. They saw these policies as necessary for

building societies free from the inequalities imposed by colonial capitalism.

**Empowerment of the Masses.** Marxism emphasized the importance of mobilizing the masses for revolutionary change, a concept that anti-colonial leaders adopted to rally popular support. The focus on peasant and worker involvement helped African liberation movements engage the broader population, fostering a sense of ownership and participation in the fight for independence and nation-building.

In these ways, Marxism shaped both the ideological foundations and practical strategies of African decolonization. In other words, Marxist principles provided a valuable foundation for achieving political and economic sovereignty across the continent.

## **Conclusion**

This exposition has demonstrated the significant role Marxism played in the decolonization of Africa. By providing a critical framework for understanding and resisting colonial oppression, Marxism helped shape anti-colonial thought, inspire revolutionary movements, and guide post-independence governance.

African leaders and intellectuals utilized Marxist principles to expose and challenge the economic exploitation and social injustices of colonial rule, fostering a vision of independence rooted in social equality, collective ownership, and economic self-determination.

Furthermore, the adaptation of Marxism to local African contexts—resulting in ideologies like African socialism—illustrates the flexibility and enduring appeal of Marxist ideas. Despite challenges in fully implementing Marxist principles due to Africa’s diverse cultures and economic systems, the ideology provided a powerful tool for uniting African nations and advancing the cause of liberation. Marxism’s legacy in African decolonization thus remains evident, not only in the continent’s revolutionary history but also in the ongoing quest for political and economic sovereignty across African nations.

## References

Franz Fanon, [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

Josiah Heyman “Marxism” *Historisophy*, University of Texas at El Paso: Upseen, 1990, p.38.

Josiah Heyman “Marxism”, p.34.

Jürgen Osterhammel., “Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview”  
[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)

M. Marger, *Ethnic Relations, Race and Ethnic Relations*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Belmont, 2000, p.132.

Mansour Gueye., “Colonialism in Africa: A Revisionist Perspective”, *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol.12, No.1, September 2018, p. 111.

R.W July., *History of African People*, Washington: Mc-Graw Hills, 2000, p.56.