

Alison Jones

Ph.D candidate, Political Studies, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

MENTALITE. 'HAVE CONCEPT, WILL TRAVEL'.

ABSTRACT

The paper is derived from a chapter which forms part of the introduction to my Ph.D in progress, titled: **Modes of Cognition in Africa: Philosophy and Mentalite in Opposition to Ideology**. The hypothesis from which the argument develops is that a contributory factor to the crisis of the state in Africa is the failure of state ideology in its legitimating capacity. The first chapter of the thesis examines state crisis in Africa as well as the phenomenon of dysfunctional ideology. The second chapter (this paper) ● defines, examines and analyses the concept of *mentalite*, taken to mean (following the Annales school) a system of interconnected cognitive realities which, taken as a whole, amount to a world-view 'from below' ● argues the case for inclusion of an historical, cultural and anthropological concept within the current discourse of political analysis, especially in regard popular resistance to state orthodoxies

● offers *mentalite* as a creative methodological alternative to the more narrowly focussed and Eurocentric notion of civil society (in opposition to the state) ● indicates the uses to which I put the concept within the overall context of my dissertation.

(Apology: my computer is not French language-friendly. The spelling of 'mentalite' is therefore technically incomplete)

1. Positioning the concept.

1. (i) Mentalite and human agency (Burke and Vansina)

In deploying the concept of *mentalite* as an analytical device for unpacking relations of domination and resistance I have found a number of authors particularly instructive. Among them are Peter Burke, socio-cultural historian and interpreter of Annales concepts, and Jan Vansina, anthropologist and sociologist.

In Vansina's book **Paths in the Rainforest**, he alternates between the terms 'collective representations' and cognitive reality' in his understanding of millennia of political tradition in Equatorial Africa. These are recognised synonyms for *mentalite* which are more common in current usage than the word itself which, as academic currency, carries the unfortunate shadow of its first minting by Lucien Levy-Bruhl in the 1920s. Vansina's preoccupation is not so much with *mentalite* in opposition to elite dominance as with the lack of fit between long duration cognitive reality and current (postcolonial) political conditions in Africa. This

he attributes partly to the effects of colonialism and partly to an insufficient amount of cognitive recovery and renewal in the post-independence period. His closing comment on the cognitive ruptures attendant on colonialism is as follows:

The equatorial tradition finally died in the 1920s, killed by two simultaneous developments. First, in the realm of physical reality, the conquest prevented the tradition from inventing new structures to cope with a new situation. Instead the colonial governments invented them. Its agents preserved some of the old practices, but the whole structure made sense only in the cognitive realm of the Europeans, not in the Equatorial tradition

...

.. cognitive reality was challenged by foreigners, whose own success seemed to bolster their claims to cognitive superiority. As the result, *the cognitive part of the old tradition, its very core*, went into an irreversible crisis. The peoples of the rainforest began first to doubt their own legacies and then to adopt portions of the foreign heritage. But they clung to their own languages and to much of the older cognitive content carried by them. Thus they turned into cultural schizophrenics, striving for a new synthesis which could not be achieved *as long as freedom of action was denied them*.

When independence loomed, insecurity exploded. The rural population sensed that there was no turning back to an unsullied age of ancient tradition. What was the future then to bring? So violent was this insecurity among the central Kuba that, within a few months in 1959, they administered the poison ordeal to 500 suspected witches, in the hope of cleansing the social system of its colonial past and entering a happy millennium. But this was the last desperate action of an ancient order. At the same time, variants of neo-African tradition were gestating in the cities and the countryside. The transition to independence occurred, however, without the guidance of a basic new common tradition. Today that is still the situation and the people of equatorial Africa are still bereft of a common mind and purpose. (1990:247-248) (Emphases added)

Vansina's approach to the question of cognition does not contain any major differences from the Annales approach in general in as much as he, like the Annalists, gives cognitive reality a significant, indeed a singular role in processes of change. His approach is worth summarising, although I should add that in doing so, I am adding examples and conclusions of my own. In as much as key aspects of the following summation may be justly attributed to Vansina, they are drawn from pp 71-263 of his book (ibid).

Having first stated that reality is multiple, Vansina distinguishes between two broad categories of reality, that is, physical and cognitive. Physical reality is that interpretation of actions, situations or objects shared by or common to all observers, irrespective of cultural background. It includes, for instance, descriptions of physical habitats: forests, plains, mountains, rivers, coastlines and so on. Records of physical reality are therefore accessible to the historian/anthropologist no matter how remote from his or her home base is the area of research. Cognitive reality is the product of collective representations formed and articulated within a specific cultural setting. For instance, you and I may recognise a plant as having the same restorative properties but we may put it to quite different uses depending on our

respective cultural practices and priorities. Records of cognitive reality may pose a problem of interpretation for the observer in as much as they may not make sense within his or her cultural framework. This poses a test of 'difference'. A solution to the test which locates 'difference' within one's own referential matrix is the beginning of all cognitive and cultural reductionism. From there, it's all downhill, as it were. To call an 'alien' cultural phenomenon 'irrational' is to infer the existence of a rational standard and in this way raise the flag of one's own culture. Similarly, to call a cultural phenomenon nothing but a product of material forces such as modes and relations of production is to raise one's ideological flag and for much the same reason: a retreat into the safety of explanations which 'make sense to *me* (and my ilk)' In these ways an observer may seal him or herself off from the cognitive reality of participants - an action which may sooner or later let one in for unpleasant or disconcerting surprises, bearing in mind the 'Horatio's philosophy' principle. (Hamlet, Scene 1, Act 2)

In a situation where observers interact with participants, the cognitive reality of observers shapes interpretations which in turn - if observers are sufficiently influential - shapes the cognitive reality of participants. The only cultures which survive in their pristine state are those which are effectively sealed off from the outside world. Most cultures, however, are shifting conglomerates of diverse influences. The input of observers may be deemed more or less benign, more or less malignant, depending on their attitudes to participants and therefore on whether they develop relatively peaceful and egalitarian relationships with participants or, alternatively, relationships defined by coercion and cultural prejudice. One has only to think of, for instance, the relationships developed by Quaker colonists with the native peoples of North America compared with the attitudes displayed by other early settlers to understand this as a *choice* or an act of human will.

In a situation not yet informed (whether positively or negatively) by strong input from outside, physical and cognitive realities interact in a dynamic relationship in which, according to Vansina, the latter normally takes precedence over the former. By 'normal' he means the times when 'the cognitive inventory of their environment practically matched the wealth of the physical reality around them'. At such times, 'the inhabitants of these habitats had a wide range of choices. This knowledge allowed them to adopt a chosen strategy of resource exploitation, not have one forced upon them... this constant striving to match both realities is the essence of science, and in that sense science was practised.' (Ibid:255-256) What Vansina seems to be saying or implying is that the essence of (relatively) free agency is located in an inter-relationship between the two realities which enables the primacy of cognitive reality. Physical reality is then understood, literally, as an enabling environment. In situations, however, when the always slightly imperfect fit between realities becomes a 'systematic divergence' the situation alters. 'In such cases cognitive reality is usually brought more in line with physical reality'. (ibid:72) Vansina then explains his understanding of the continuity of tradition as 'primarily a phenomenon of cognitive reality.' (Ibid)

Given that in times of 'fit' or congruence between realities, human cognition enjoys a maximum amount of free play, the defining characteristic of a cognitive reality or mentalite may be presumed to be its ability to create itself, to imaginatively interpret physical contexts within its own endogenous matrices and canons. Where physical reality imposes sufficiently harsh constraints, agency is minimised. The sides of one's world close in. Vansina lists a

number of alterations in physical reality which reduced the play of agency throughout the long duration in Equatorial Africa, confining cognitive reality to narrow even inescapable choices. Among these are marked changes in climate or alterations in demography. But there is no doubt that the seismic alteration in the physical reality of the inhabitants of the rain forests was colonialism, perpetuated to this day by the ambiguous inheritance of postcolonial states. In cases of draconian colonial overlordship, mentalite is replaced by 'the vision of the vanquished' (see below). This, as I understand it, is the text of Vansina's meaning when he writes of a people bereft of a common mind and purpose.

Returning to the genesis of mentalite as a concept: it goes without saying that historians of mentalities do not subscribe to hard theories of materialism and determinism. Central to the formation of a mentality *qua* world view is the factor of human choice or preference - in short, the exercise of some form of (relative) free will. Instructive in this regard is the example provided by Lucien Febvre, a forerunner (in the 1930s) of the Annales school:

A river - to quote one of Febvre's favourite examples - might be treated by one society as a barrier, yet as a route by another. In the last analysis, it was not the physical environment that determined this collective choice, but men, their way of life, and their attitudes. (Burke,1990:15)

In any political and social system which hinges on the active oppression of one group of people by another, the (measure of) free will previously enjoyed by the oppressed is among the items lost to them. Now they dance to the tune of the 'other' as opposed to the tune of the 'self.' Their choices are not only informed but to a significant extent determined (given the prominent role of coercion in a relationship of active oppression) by the new forms of physical reality imposed upon them, just as their cognition is reconstructed within categories invented and owned by the oppressor. Where change is largely involuntary as in the case, for instance, of colonial conquest, the emergent thought systems are not the product of endogenous imaginations. Instead they are an unhappy (given a relationship defined by the use of force) hybridization of 'self' and 'other'. As long as a relationship infiltrated by the use of force remains extant, so mentalities remain under siege, surviving only in the sites which Scott has designated 'hidden transcripts'. Even when protected by hidden transcripts, the ever-present threat of coercion necessitates disguises of various sorts which may well influence the 'purity' of the transcripts themselves, producing distorted versions of pre-conquest 'truths'. In short, more may be lost than is immediately apparent. 'Invisible loss' may in turn seriously undermine the viability of the independence project in the sense that the leaders of the drive for independence have neither understood nor anticipated the sheer extent of cognitive confusion and cultural *anomie* among their own peoples.

The connotations associated with Vansina's term 'cultural schizophrenia' are echoed by the notion of 'acculturation'. Burke, following Wachtel, defines acculturation as:

the snapping of the links between different parts of the traditional social system. Traditional institutions and customs survived the conquest, but the old structures disintegrated. (1992:155)

Wachtel, says Burke, extends the definition to cover (following Gramsci), "culture contact in

a situation in which one culture is dominant and the other is subordinate.” Furthermore:

An important feature of Wachtel’s version of acculturation is that it is concerned not only with ‘objective’ culture contact, but also with what he calls the ‘vision of the vanquished’, in other words the subordinate’s image of the dominant culture.

(Ibid: 156)

In a subsequent book, Burke makes an instructive comparison between ‘acculturation’ and ‘transculturation’. The comparison has the advantage of emphasising the importance of agency or choice - put another way, of *voluntarism* - in the organic, fertile, adaptive growth of mentalities. Transculturation may be termed a ‘happy hybrid’ as opposed to the unhappily febrile hybridization of cultures attendant on conquest through force. Certainly any given world-view is changed by its contact with another, but uncoerced change, taking place as it does in the context of two cultures meeting as approximate equals, invokes no ‘vision of the vanquished’. On the contrary, it is distinguished by creative and vibrant combinations of difference to the tune of the discovery that difference itself is not infrequently more apparent than real. Appropriately enough, Burke uses ‘Carnival’ as the setting in which cultural synergies of this kind are enacted. Writing of the tradition of carnival in Brazil, he suggests that:

It looks as if there is some kind of cultural magnetism involved, an attraction between similar elements in the African and European traditions, just as there is a kind of circularity or reciprocal influence between elite and popular traditions. For example, the mock combat appears to derive both from the dances associated with the cult of the Yoruba warrior-god Ogun and from the Iberian tradition of representing conflicts between ‘Moors and Christians’ in popular religious dramas. (1997:158)

He goes on to cite the Cuban sociologist and folklorist Fernando Ortiz, who defined transculturation as ‘the reciprocal interaction between two cultures, as opposed to ‘acculturation’ in which the influence is supposed to be one-way.’ (Ibid).

The process of reciprocal interaction may be likened to that of reciprocal learning in which as noted (*supra*) James C. Scott learnt from Malay villagers about himself. The elimination of categories such as ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ - indeed, an avoidance of binary opposites in general - is a necessary (although not sufficient) condition of a method informed and enlightened by a concept of *mentalite*. (Note that something *in opposition to* something else is by no means the same as something which is *opposite to* something else. On the contrary, elements in opposition to one another may share as many similarities as they do differences - as indicated, perhaps, by the ultimate outcomes of a number of liberation struggles in Africa, not least the postindependence retention of oppressive colonial laws.)

The concept of *mentalite* is both flexible and multi-faceted. Sufficiently so - if deployed with a workable minimum of cultural prejudice - to spin away from rigid categories such as ‘modern and traditional’, ‘developed & undeveloped’ into an epistemological frontier between cultural sites as well as historical epochs. As Burke points out, “the trouble with modernity ... is that it keeps changing” (1992:137)

Owing to the constantly mutating nature of so-called modernity, questions of definitional

semantics frequently arise. What if, for instance, ancient methods of cultivation produce a better harvest in a given area of Tanzania than the very latest appliances of agricultural technology? How may we best explain why traditional methods (of healing, for instance) not infrequently work when modern techniques fail? Again, if the traditional mores of a rural locality (complete with potholes) ensure that the casual visitor (with car) is treated with a humbling amount of consideration and kindness (by people lacking even a bicycle for transport) - where then is a smoothly tarred road in the hierarchy of human achievement? The deployment of inclusive, fixed categories as a way of differentiating between cultures (to the inevitable detriment of the secondary category) carries with it both a kind of built-in obsolescence and an implicit value system which is open to criticism.

Further, the phenomenon of simple binaries incorporates a process of overshadowing. Such categories are variations on the theme of 'self' and 'other', with 'other' reduced to what Burke (1992:145) describes as residual categories or reversals, and Mamdani calls the 'residual opposite' of the 'lead term'. The lead term, he points out, has analytical content, whereas the residual opposite lacks both an original history and an authentic future. (1997:9) Both scholars perceive models, in which the supposed 'other half' is no more than a reversal of the features attributed to the privileged half, as the products of a unilinear social science. Ironically, such an exercise in one-dimensional model construction implies a dual loss. As Mamdani puts it:

A unilinear social science involves a double manoeuvre. If it tends to caricature the experience summed up as the residual term, it also mythologises the experience that is the lead term. If the former is rendered ahistorical, the latter is ascribed a suprahistorical trajectory of development, a necessary path whose main line of development is unaffected by struggles that happened along the way. There is a sense in which both are robbed of history. (Ibid:9-10)

Burke articulates the same point more simply:

Such reversals do not make for a realistic analysis. (1992:145)

Where then do we go for a more realistic and holistic perspective? Citing, for instance, a standard model of industrial development which incorporates an assumption about an appropriate, that is, westernised cultural environment, Burke suggests that we examine instead the 'fit' or compatibility between different socio-cultural structures and economic growth while at the same time discarding our assumptions about the axiomatic suitability of western cultures. He offers Japan as an example which reveals 'the association of a remarkable economic performance with values and structures very different to those of the West'. (ibid:140)

The moral of the story is that rigid, ethnocentric models or categories do not travel well. They have a fixed specificity which enables them to look 'good' or 'right' only from the perspective of a given locality in a given era. Transported through epochs or into different cultural localities they operate in the style of the archetypal (imperial) Englishman abroad: if he speaks English loudly, slowly and with excessive emphasis he is bound to be understood. If misunderstandings arise this is due to the wilful obtuseness/extraordinary stupidity/innate criminality of the natives. However, in deploying a concept such as *mentalite* in an effort to

make relevant and fruitful connections between epochs and localities, and to generate a model (of sorts) which helps to account for similarities as well as differences, one should try to avoid falling into either of two traps, set at each end of the methodological spectrum. Firstly: the use of the concept does not, in itself, guarantee avoidance of the closure inflicted by simple dichotomies. Indeed, the word has negative, Levy-Bruhlian connotations which have led recent practitioners of the mentalities method to adopt new labels. However, if one takes the point of view that a rose by any other name is still a rose, the point is not to call a rose a daisy but to avoid the thorns. The second trap I consider more realistically problematic. Empathy, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau noted, is the starting point of humanist understanding. Paradoxically, it is based in selfishness: 'there but for the grace of God go I.' One may therefore lay claim to an empathetic method without necessarily presenting oneself as possessed of an unlikely amount of virtue. The trap lies not in empathy *per se*. It consists in the phenomenon known as 'premature empathy'. Ironically, it is a trap discovered by the ancestral thorn on the rose of *mentalite*, Levy-Bruhl himself. Burke describes Levy-Bruhl's diagnosis as having passed into British social anthropology under the name of the 'If I were a horse' problem.

The point is that to understand the behaviour of people in other cultures it is not sufficient to imagine oneself in their shoes, in their situation; it is also necessary to imagine their definition of the situation, to see it through their eyes. (1997:169)

This is an altogether more daunting exercise than that of mere imaginative empathy. It requires the kind of minutely detailed knowledge enjoyed only by anthropologists of Vansina's stature. However, one need not despair. For the non-anthropologist bent on examining mentalities in Africa, there is a way - if not out - at least around the problem, namely through the world of fiction, artistry and performance. The imaginative arena of postindependence African literature and artistic/performance production in general provides a rich source of insight into cognitive phenomena to which Jacques Le Goff (1974:79-90) has given striking expression as 'the profound song of mentalities'.

1. (ii) Mentalite and the political domain.

For an analysis purporting to deal with 'modern' political phenomena and current issues, reliance on a concept like *mentalite* could be considered dangerous owing to its almost exclusive association with (1) historians of mediaeval Europe (2) anthropologists and sociologists who have a particular interest in uncovering the roots of current cognitive realities. It is not a concept - unlike that of ideology - in common usage by political analysts, indeed could be considered of marginal and equivocal relevance at best or of decidedly dubious relevance at worst. However, a number of factors conspire to provide, I hope, an adequate justification for giving it a significant place in the political realm.

- **Ideology.** There is a not uncommon juxtaposition of *mentalite* and ideology in the work of historians. This juxtaposition, however, does not imply that the two concepts are necessarily or inevitably the same. On the contrary, they are often used to demonstrate the Janus face worn by cognitive realities or thought systems. Much the

same applies when the concepts are transferred to the domain of culture, mentalite being associated, *mutatis mutandis*, with 'low' or popular culture, ideology with 'high' or elite culture. It does not take a great deal of imagination to transpose the concepts to the setting of African politics and portray them as emblematic of cognitive sites no less significant now than during colonial times, that is, the sites of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. While the two categories are not necessarily defined as being in opposition to one another, they certainly are represented as two fairly distinct types within the same genre. Vovelle (in Samuel and Jones, 1982:2-11) tentatively suggests that mentalite is perhaps the part of human thought and behaviour which escapes ideology, existing beneath or beside it. Here one is reminded of the concept of 'parallel society' which developed in Czechoslovakia in the 20 years between the end of the Prague Spring and the end of Communist domination. The concept was deemed to represent a sphere of thought, belief and behaviour - in general, of human interaction - running parallel with state ideology and state orthodoxies. Not actively in competition, yet nonetheless consciously separate, 'parallel society' encompassed a private realm or site of escape from the overwhelmingly intrusive presence of the state. Only with the formation of Charter 77 did parallel society develop overt political objectives which clashed, more and more openly, with the objectives of the state, evolving into a mentality of resistance instead of simply a mentality of retreat. Yet Vovelle (ibid) concedes that the two concepts are difficult to compare with any precision, given that ideology is an 'elaborated concept' whereas mentalite is 'undeniably fluid and bears successive layers of meaning'. He refers to a conference held in Aix in 1980 under the rubric 'History of mentalities, history of survivals or the 'prisons of the long-term'. Bearing in mind that another seminal concept associated with the Annales School, in particular with Fernand Braudel, is *longue duree*, that is, the time of the slow moving structures of social life, the indication is of the long-lived nature of mentalities as compared with the 'short duration' of the life of any given ideology (as exemplified by the fate of communist ideology perhaps - while Czech society goes on, as it were, forever.) As Vovelle (ibid) remarks, tongue slightly in cheek: 'In grandma's cupboard are to be found the things that really matter'. There is an extent, then, to which mentalite is found in the realm of memory, of reverence for tradition, beliefs of enduring value and so forth. However, to take the image of 'grandma's cupboard' too literally is to mistake mentalite for a fixed principle or verity. This is not the Annales approach. Braudel was careful to distinguish between *longue duree* and 'the eternal and unchanging universal' (Outhwaite & Bottomore *et al*, 1993:17) Mentalities, therefore, are both part and product of the long duration, but not inextricably tied to it. Nor are they necessarily static. As Peter Burke points out: 'It is all too easy to reify mentalities, to perceive them - in Fernand Braudel's famous metaphor - as prisons from which individuals cannot escape.' (1997:172) If this were the case, how would we account for change and modification in world views - or for the existence of utopian or millenarian mentalities which contain more-or-less explicit agendas of political, social and economic change?

- **Attitudes.** An additional and related incentive for including an analysis of mentalities in an examination of political change is that the investigation of political attitudes is an exercise commonly undertaken by political scientists and sociologists when considering, for instance, voting patterns in societies divided along lines of class, caste

or ethnicity. For example, the phenomenon of deferential socio-political attitudes among fractions of the British working class, inducing them (as it were) to vote for the Conservative Party has been extensively investigated by mainstream political scientists who are either unaware of or indifferent to 'mentalite'. It could be argued that 'attitude' constitutes a form of mentalite, albeit in a much more limited, narrow sense. It should also be noted that in the phenomenon of 'deference' one finds an attitude which supports the cause of a dominant or elite ideology. From this one may deduce that mentalities not only exist as sites of retreat or sites of resistance, they may also actively cooperate with ideologies. One can, of course, say much the same about 'attitudes' - but should at the same time note that while the concept of mentalite encompasses the phenomenon of attitude, it is not restricted to it. The scope of mentalite is wider and deeper than implied by mere 'attitude'. Here it is pertinent to include Burke's summation of the current approach to mentalities by historians associated with Annales methods of analysis. The approach has three distinctive features:

- It stresses attitudes in the collective, particularly the collective attitudes of 'ordinary people'.
- The approach does not place as much emphasis on conscious, elaborated thought (as exemplified above in Vovelle's definition of ideology) as on taken-for-granted assumptions and perceptions, the operations of everyday thought and the 'common-sense' (or 'practical reason', more colloquially known as the 'university of life') aspects of world-views.
- The approach concerns itself not only with the content of thought but also with structures which both inform and reveal the meaning of content, for example, categories, metaphors and symbols.

Burke concludes that: "... to assert the existence of a difference in mentalities between two groups is to make a much stronger statement than merely asserting a difference in attitudes." (1997:162)

An exploration of mentalite is therefore informed by a notion of 'structure'. This is a point to which I shall shortly return. In the meantime I move on to another factor which has specifically political connotations, that of ...

- **Interests.** Here my argument is not so much that of what mentalite can do for political analysis as of what inclusion in the world of political concepts can do for mentalite. Burke (ibid:175) considers it 'odd' that Annales historians have failed to take into account the elementary question of whose interests are served by a given mentality. It is not least for this reason that the classic Annales tradition, exemplified by the work of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, has been criticized for excluding politics. The illustration on which Burke draws is Bloch's book, **The Royal Touch**. A supernatural belief in the healing powers of mediaeval French monarchs was seemingly shared by sovereigns and subjects alike. Yet Bloch's treatise discounts the political context within which the monarchs of the time were operating, namely recurrent civil wars which threatened their status and position. To promote and sustain a belief, despite knowing that it was contradicted by the scientific discoveries of the time, was manifestly in the interests of the monarchs concerned. This example

could be cited as evidence that an 'innocent' belief was deliberately exploited and in effect elaborated into a 'mystifying' ideology. This in turn may suggest that it is generally pertinent to examine whose interests are served when an aspect of any given mentality (for instance, certain witchcraft beliefs still current in areas of Africa) has a shelf life well beyond its expiry date. Elites who hold the reins and resources of power are in a position to keep non-elites confined within the Braudelian metaphor of cognitive prisons. To expand this point a little further: historians of mentalities tend to see thought systems as relatively innocent in so far as they are formulated and nurtured independently of conscious political agendas. By contrast, historians of ideologies, particularly those in the Marxist camp, see thought systems as strongly shaped (soft version) or determined (hard version) by material forces and hence by the political interests which ride on the back of relations of production. For Marxists, then, 'innocent mentality' is the fairy tale of which 'false consciousness' is the grim and abiding reality. Historians outside the Marxist camp emphasise instead "the cunning (conscious or unconscious) by which a particular view of the world is presented as natural.' (Ibid:173) A perspective on ideology which focuses on the attempt to present relations of power and subordination as in some way natural or inevitable is in accord with the Gramscian concept of hegemony. A hegemonic elite is one which has achieved a workable consensus with subordinate groups based on a reasonably widespread belief that the political order is 'in the interests of the majority'. Mentalite has thus been subverted or seconded to the service of an ideological corpus of thought.

At this point, I shall include Burke's comments on this distinction between systems of thought, not least because his comments provide an introduction to the penultimate argument in this chapter, which is also another leg of the argument (*supra*) for deploying mentalite as a travelling concept.

It is not easy to combine what might be described as the 'innocent' and the 'cynical' views of thought, but a synthesis may be possible along the lines of the study of the unconscious harmonising of ideas with interests. *Conflicts of interests make the unconscious conscious and the implicit explicit, and in this way they lead to change.* (Emphasis added) (Ibid:176)

2. Expanding the concept.

Where there is a conflict of interests between the state and that section of society which is characterised by relative powerlessness, fortune (unsurprisingly) favours the state. It may take many generations before the tide of fortune rolls back, leaving the state and its ruling elite fully exposed and vulnerable. A section in Scott's book, **Domination and the Arts of Resistance**, makes the reader aware of a common fallacy that revolutions, in the sense of reversals of power, occur as the sole result of direct revolutionary action. Even if one softens the fallacy to include, for instance, indirect causes of revolution, it is certainly true that revolutions tend retrospectively to be mapped in terms of momentous events - the storming of the Bastille, for instance, or the events leading up to Sharpeville. Yet behind the record of momentous events culminating in revolutionary or radical change is what Scott calls 'prehistory'. Referring specifically to historic events in communist Poland, for example the sacking of party headquarters in Gdynia in 1980, Scott notes:

Behind 1980 ... lay a long prehistory, one comprising songs, popular poetry, jokes, street wisdom, political satire, not to mention a popular memory of the heroes, martyrs, and villains of earlier popular protest. Each failure lay down another sedimentary layer of popular memory that would nourish the movement of the 1980s. (1990:212)

Revolutions are 'great events' generally associated in popular consciousness with one or more 'great men' (or more unusually, 'great women'), as well as in the documents or legends which recall revolutionary moments in history. Where, in this heroic mode of recollection, are 'ordinary people'? (In Marxist versions, they are represented by a collective noun: 'the masses'. This seems to me an apotheosis of vulgar reductionism, in which the highest state of collective being is represented by the notion of 'mass'). It is here in the realm of obscure and ambiguous struggles, waged in small but cumulative ways by 'little people' that mentalite comes into its own. It is here also that the rationale underlying the methods of Annalistes is at its most convincing. Rejecting methodologies which focus on outstanding historical figures and events on the one hand, and 'iron laws' on the other hand, they instead have developed concepts and research methods which enable them to decipher 'the history of those who have suffered, worked, declined and died without being able to describe their sufferings.' (Burke: 1990:8). 'Mentalite' has been widely used by Annalistes themselves (as well as by historians and anthropologists who, while not card-carrying members, have adopted Annales perspectives) to explain the phenomenon of collective resistance in its various forms: religious, ritualistic or symbolic, active (revolts and uprisings), passive (withdrawal of participation and cooperation).

In **Montaillou**, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, drawing on records kept by inquisitors, documents the history of a village in the Pyrenees during the 14th century. The book depicts a clash between the ideology of a theocratic (Catholic) state and the religious mentality of the villagers who were Cathars and therefore heretics. In normal times, Ladurie tells us, a measure of negotiation and compromise between villagers and (elite) representatives of state and church was possible. The villagers and peasant farmers had little money, power or prestige but were nevertheless not infrequently able to 'slip between the interstices of the various encircling powers' (1981:13) Obscurity, it seems, has its own rewards. However, the rise of a strongly felt, strongly believed Cathar mentality brought the villagers to the attention of the state. Their new and unwelcome significance was entirely the result of the (real or imagined) threat they now posed to a theocratic state. Whether or not adoption of Cathar beliefs was consciously intended as a challenge to the ruling ideology, the representatives of the Inquisition construed it as a challenge and treated the villagers accordingly. As a result, Cathar beliefs evolved into a mentality of resistance. Sites of negotiation were closed, sites of compromise hardened into polarities. To paraphrase Burke, *supra*, the unconscious was made conscious and the implicit explicit. Yet until Ladurie and the ethos of Annales made an appearance, the custodians of history had quite failed to notice the existence of an obscure group of reluctant rebels in a remote corner of France.

Another distinction between mentalite and ideology is drawn by Levack in his book **The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe**. Again, the states in question are theocracies in which temporal power is fully supported by the power of religion, and where Lords Temporal

and Lords Spiritual form a more-or-less cohesive alliance, but in this case the ideology (or elite belief) concerns the works of the anti-Christ and his legions on earth, while the mentality is a simple (pre-Christian) belief in magic. Witches have the power to make things happen, sometimes good, sometimes not so good. They may, on occasion, be scapegoated and persecuted. On the other hand, having cured cases of warts or of infertility, they may receive surreptitious gifts from their grateful, if nervous clients. The active and systematic hunting down, trial and execution of 'witches' was the mediaeval equivalent of *state policy*, justified by a (purportedly Christian) ideology which had embroidered naive beliefs into a complex, finely detailed (familiar, night flights, covens, black masses... all operating under a convenient cloak of invisibility) mythology which was then deployed in service to the state. Here the issue is not so much that of mentalite developing into conscious resistance to state orthodoxies, as a case of naive belief borrowed by ideologues and expanded out of all recognition in order to serve elite purposes.

Levack describes the early-modern period in Europe as the 'age of anxiety'. It was the age of reformation and counter-reformation, of new values attendant on the 'christianising' of a rural populace which still retained elements of pagan belief, of religious wars, plague and famine, of the introduction of early capitalism and peasant rebellions. (1987:101-140) 'Witches' were pressed into service as official scapegoats, not least as a means of distracting attention and releasing furies which may otherwise have been turned against the hegemonic bloc of church and state.

In sum: the terrain of mentalite has been expanded in at least two ways:

- An 'innocent', unselfconscious collective cognitive reality may, under certain circumstances, evolve into a consciously oppositional, even potentially revolutionary mentality. Here mentalite expands beyond its former limits in response to overt oppression and the polarization of positions which accompanies a definition of the 'other' as not merely other but also *hostile* to 'self'.
- A naive belief may be expanded into an official ideology which by definition serves elite interests. Here mentalite is instrumentally conceived and purposefully developed by an educated elite.

At this point I should note in the interests of precision that both the concept of ideology *per se* and the appearance of substantive ideologies date (in Europe) from approximately 1790 onwards. When analysing social and cultural phenomena in early modern Europe, Annalists and associates, if they use the word 'ideology' at all, use it loosely. A more common contrast is between low and high mentalities, popular and elite cultures. Nevertheless, to the extent that the *raison d'etre* of 'high' mentality or elite culture (or aspects thereof) is to secure and maintain 'the power of the powerful', not least against the incursions, conscious or unconscious, of relatively powerless groups, it may be deemed ideological. In other words, thought is or may become ideological when harnessed to the service of power. In a later chapter I shall analyse in more adequate depth the concept of ideology and the welter of definitions which have coagulated around it, primarily in the 20th century when the concept 'went global'.

Having followed through on Burke's distinction (*supra*) between innocent or naive thought on the one hand, and cunning or cynical thought on the other, and having provided illustrations of two distinct paths along which mentalite projects itself or is projected into an ideological domain, what remains to be accomplished is a viable distinction between a mentality of resistance and a revolutionary ideology. At first glance they may appear to be much the same thing. Yet two items taken in conjunction suggest that the phenomenon of resistance to state orthodoxies in postcolonial Africa is more pertinently analysed within the frame of reference denoted by (a concept of) mentalite. than in terms of ideologies which aim to abolish the status quo and radically transform the state. The first has already been suggested (*supra*) by James Scott. A revolution, according to this picture, is no more than the tip of the iceberg. The same metaphor may be applied to ideologies: they are drawn from and shaped by their interaction with mentalities. As R.M. Andrews puts it:

... ideologies of elites are not universal or consensual systems, but are bounded by time, class origins, and functions, and depend for their force on their relations with popular mentalities. In the phrase of Georges Duby: 'It is this system of values (that of popular culture) which makes tolerable the rules of law and the decrees of power, or renders them intolerable' (in Review, 1978:178)

The second item is perhaps more obvious. With the notable exception of South Africa's widely acclaimed transition from minority to majority democracy with all attendant global publicity, political changes which have taken place in sub-Saharan Africa since the beginning of the 1990s on the whole have been relatively undramatic; certainly have taken place outside the glare of world attention. In a number of instances, change has been limited to turning *de jure* one-party states into *de facto* one-party states. During this decade of circumscribed change, ideological alternatives where they existed were usually the property of intellectual elites somewhat removed from grassroots localities. It is therefore more relevant to speak of mentalities of resistance undermining or pressuring state elites and ideologies from below than of 'direct action' ideologies with explicit *modus operandi* for ousting incumbent regimes and transforming the state. It is here that postcolonial Africa parts company with East-Central Europe where, over the decades, mentalities of resistance did evolve into specific ideological alternatives, consciously pursued by dedicated and cohesive groups of political activists and intellectuals buttressed by massive popular support - a scenario which applies to Africa only during her colonial period. Since independence, opposition political parties in African states, whether potential or actual, have been and mostly still are critically enfeebled by the relative absence of forceful and convincing critiques of barren justifications mounted in support of the status quo. Rather there is an extent to which explicit political opposition is not much more than tactical - designed to persuade exclusionary elites to open ranks and make room for associates and potential successors. It is a matter, then, not of replacing one ideology with another but of expanding ideology *in situ* in a way designed to pacify people who might otherwise cohere into credible opposition groups. Given this process of expansion and accommodation in the domain of 'high politics', the initial (nationalist) ideologies may become distorted out of all recognition into litanies of 'sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Overall, I think it fair to say that in postcolonial Africa, 'movements from below' - for instance, associational groups of variable lineage and preoccupation such as Burial societies in Zimbabwe or informal cooperatives of peasant farmers in Tanzania or Asante associations in Ghana - informed more by mentalite (in the flexible and multi-textured sense in which I

have tried to understand the concept) than by ideological formulae - in general have been more effective in the shift towards democratic forms of government than have explicitly political groups. My point here is that it would be a mistake to underestimate the strength and incremental efficacy of such movements. Politically unformed and seemingly undirected they may be - but perhaps they appear ineffectual only to the western or western trained eye which is in crucial respects blind to cognitive systems which do not necessarily conform with orthodox notions of modernity.

Neutralising, not least by substituting for the functions of an oppressive yet ineffective state - as did Asante Kotoko in southern Ghana in the 1970s and '80s (Appiah:1992:274) - may be as significant in its own politically idiosyncratic way as the more dramatic and clearly defined 'epoch changing' events in East-Central Europe in the run up to that momentous event, the dismantling of the Berlin wall. Assuming that the two main imperatives which construct ideological, revolutionary discourse are (1) capture of power (2) retention of power, these drives may seem somewhat lacking among non-elite Africans in postcolonial times when energies appear to be directed to avoidance, modification or manipulation of power-laden discourse. Although an obvious departure from the norm may be found in confrontational Trade Union movements (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland, post-apartheid South Africa ...) such cases are the exception rather than the rule. Yet if one pays careful attention to the structural similarities outlined by Scott, one may see an emergent pattern of resistance to domination in which 'African singularity' seems less particular and more general in both form and content. Paradoxically then, to extend the concept is also to refine it in the sense recommended by Scott of narrowing one's focus to structural similarities.

3. Refining the concept: 'hidden transcripts' (Scott)

Here I return to a statement made by Scott (*supra*):

I believe there is something to be said across cultural and historical epochs where our focus is narrowed by structural similarities.

To which structural similarities is Scott referring? In the general sense:

... to the degree structures of domination can be demonstrated to operate in comparable ways, they will, other things equal, elicit reactions and patterns of resistance that are broadly comparable. (1990:xi).

To what class of persons is Scott referring? Initially he seems to restrict his focus to 'slaves and serfs' (ibid). But shortly thereafter, the reader finds that he extends these broadly comparable patterns of resistance to 'the caste system, colonialism, and racism' (ibid); 'peasants' (ibid: xiii) and, some chapters further on, the working class in liberal democracies (ibid:112). He also includes, particularly in chapters 6 and 8, a number of examples drawn from the response of the Polish working class to communist oppression and the domination of an elite (*nomenklatura*) class. At the end of the day, then, Scott covers a lot of ground in his search for patterns of resistance that are broadly comparable. He ranges far and wide, both in terms of geographical location (India, South-East Asia, Africa, Britain, North America and Europe) and historical epochs and ideological eras (Imperialism; the class system in Britain; slave-owning America; liberal democratic America; early modern Europe; communist

Europe; apartheid South Africa - and enduring caste systems in Asia.) The concept of 'hidden transcript' is therefore both a 'modern' and 'pre-modern' phenomenon, as well as a (relatively) global one. In other words, that which initially seems no more than a modestly well-travelled concept, mainly restricted to pre-industrial or rural areas, turns out to be a globe-trotting time traveller!

To bring a sense of consistency and coherence to this rather sprawling canvas, Scott has to narrow his analysis down to a particular discourse of oppression plus modes of resistance. This he first achieves by inference. It is only approximately half-way through the book that he becomes fully explicit:

Just as traditional Marxist analysis might be said to privilege the appropriation of surplus value as the social site of exploitation and resistance, our analysis here privileges the social experience of indignities, control, submission, humiliation, forced deference and punishment.

In short, of ...

...systematic social relations of subordination that impose indignities of one kind or another on the weak. (Ibid: 111)

Emotions (anger, indignation, frustration and swallowed bile) 'nurture the hidden transcript' (ibid). Scott's analysis, while it does not ignore the material realm, focusses, as does Vansina's, on cognitive reality as the primary (or core) area of human experience and exchange. His reason becomes clearer if one returns to a statement in the foreword relating to his experiences among Malay villagers, namely the discovery that the gap between 'hidden' and 'official' transcripts is greatest ..

...among the poorer and most economically dependent villagers. *The dependence was as important as the poverty* since there were several fairly autonomous poor whose expressed opinions were both consistent and independent. (Ibid: ix) (emphasis added)

Scott's analysis, therefore, may be deemed to apply to unofficial yet entrenched patronage systems rooted in socio-economic class differentiation in 'free countries' as well as to officially institutionalised systems of oppression in materially unfree countries (such as apartheid South Africa). Indeed, it may be deemed to apply to any situation in which adults are reduced to depending like children on 'superiors' for their livelihoods, perhaps even - in extreme cases - for their lives.

3. (i) Private and public transcripts: an ambiguous relationship.

As well as drawing out and illustrating the ubiquity of hidden transcripts, Scott makes another significant contribution to a more realistic understanding of the nature of resistance to oppression, that is, it is by no means clear cut or neatly definable. There are no straight and simple paths through the labyrinthine composition of hidden transcripts. Situations of domination and subordination may well be as complex and contradictory as the human emotions they reflect. A submissive attitude to an ostentatiously superior other - 'he who must be obeyed' - may today be experienced as relatively genuine, tomorrow as a knowing act

of expediency and the day thereafter as nothing short of forced submission and barely repressed rage. Scott refines the raw material of hidden transcripts, drawing out threads of ambiguity and nuance to a point which makes the reader irresistibly aware of how blurred the boundaries between 'hidden' and 'official' not infrequently are. There is an extent to which the beliefs of all protagonists, not least the official elite, are constructed by official discourse which raises mental barriers against conceptualising existence - whether elite or oppressed - in any other way. It is, for instance, a function of officially conceived and administered rituals in power-laden situations to reinforce the belief that an oppressively hierarchical order is (somehow) natural and therefore inevitable. Indeed, a recurring feature of an authoritarian polity is the resort to 'performance', whether it occurs in the form of flag-raising ceremonies on the lawn of Government House, or carefully staged mass rallies in dusty rural arenas, or ritualistic displays of military hardware and row upon row of endlessly marching, precision drilled cogs in the intricate mechanisms of 'advanced' systems. In all cases we can see the same performance at work, no matter how widely separated the polities in space or time. The ritual mythologising of power relations and the mystifying function of official performance provide constant (structurally similar) factors among a host of variables, enabling us to track the trajectory of official rationales in any given place or time. Equally, the manner in which such mythologies and performances are *reversed* to create a 'world upside down' (in which the last shall be first) enables us to chart the course of unofficial repudiations. In all such situations there is, as Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o points out, a battle for performance space.

Thirty years after the British colonial state was established in 1895 the Agikuyu community was involved in a flurry of activities to celebrate the Ituika ceremony, but this was stopped by the colonial state. The performance of Ituika was taken as a challenge to its power. The annual parade of British military might at the opening of the new sessions of the legislative assembly replaced Ituika-type performances. (1998:38-39)

The question of performance space, says Ngugi, is equally pertinent in the postcolonial state ..

.. where the dominant social stratum is often not sure of its hegemonic control ... (and where) the gap between the poor and the rich is so glaring, so immediate, and so visible, that the state may want to get rid of the performance spaces which keep on chafing this area of friction. (Ibid: 41)

Like Burke (*supra*) both Scott and Ngugi conceptualise Carnival or the 'carnival spirit' as a dual purpose site. On the one hand, it is a site of enacted transculturation (*supra*). On the other hand, it is a site where private and public discourse meet, compete, and sometimes conflagrate. Carnival at one and the same time operates as a creative release of accumulated tensions in a stratified society and as an 'art of the possible': a kind of portent of things to come. It may also incorporate a revenge theme rendered all the more sinister by symbolic performances in which the poor first massacre the rich and then feed on their flesh (Le Roy Ladurie: 1980:173-4) There is a sense, I think, in which Carnival may be conceptualised as the *mentalite* curtain-raiser which, at the height of its raw power, may be elaborated and then staged as an ideology of revolution. At these unguarded junctures we encounter a phenomenon which Scott, citing events in Poland, calls 'political electricity'. (1990:206-212).

Mentalities *per se* are too diffuse, too politically undirected and, in power-laden situations too 'hidden', to directly and successfully challenge status quo ideologies. Yet, ironically, it is a real and chilling possibility that a mentality of resistance, disciplined and organised into an ideology of purposeful change, contains the seeds of its own corruption. Scott's book was published some time before Lech Walesa, spokesperson and hero of the Polish revolution, deployed the Presidential power of veto in a manner which threatened to return Poland to authoritarianism. And much the same tragic alteration in *persona* overtook Frederick Chiluba, formerly an intrepid architect of Zambia's transition to democracy. It seems that the act of elaborating mentality into ideology may distance a leader from the very people whose collective representations shaped the core of resistance to authoritarian control..

3. (ii) **Hidden transcripts and ideological insubordination.**

More usual in postcolonial Africa than the example indicated above (in which an organised and ideologically primed Trade Union movement pressured major concessions out of a beleaguered party-state elite) are 'subversive mentalities' which, for the purposes of my thesis, I am equating with Scott's 'collective hidden transcripts of subordinate groups' (ibid: 115)

In ordinary circumstances subordinates have a vested interest in avoiding any *explicit* display of insubordination. They also, of course, always have a practical interest in resistance - in minimizing the exactions, labour, and humiliations to which they are subject. The reconciliation of these two objectives that seem at cross-purposes is typically achieved by pursuing precisely those forms of resistance that avoid any open confrontation with the structures of authority being resisted. Thus the peasantry, in the interest of safety and success, has historically preferred to disguise its resistance. (Ibid:86)

Scott (ibid: 114-166) indicates a variety of ways in which subordinate groups elude the demands and impositions of a predatory state and in the process incrementally undermine its ideology.

- limiting contact with the state to a bare minimum. This is easiest to accomplish in states with predominantly agricultural economies, wobbly infrastructures and limited reach.
- the systematic use of ignorance or 'playing dumb'
- a collective will to resist derived from a sense of shared struggle. Collective solidarity is shored up by practices designed to prevent the development of internal differentiation
- a system of internal sanctions deployed to shield sequestered sites, that is, the sites in which hidden transcripts are nurtured and developed, from the onslaughts of state officials and functionaries, or betrayal by state informants.
- enlargement of the sphere of oral culture to incorporate rumour, anecdotes and stories which ridicule or defame the regime and its lackeys.
- creation or elaboration of folk heroes in the form of trickster figures who take advantage of the greed or pomposity of elites.

- gradual infiltration of elements of popular culture by metaphors, symbols and gestures signifying resistance, albeit in coded form. Examples of infiltrated elements are;
 - rituals: religious, cultural and social
 - artistic modes of expression: prose and poetry recitals; dance; street and village theatre; carnival
 - traditions, and myths of origin or lineage
- creation of alternative support and survival networks to reduce dependence on and therefore bondage to state functionaries and elite patrons, while at the same time ...
- manipulating, whenever possible, the texts and canons of official discourse as well as the semantic and ritual niceties of patronage systems.

Scott bestows on phenomena such as the above the generic label: 'voice under domination'. I think it more appropriate in an African context to conceptualise such phenomena as a series of more-or-less habitual (largely unthinking) survival tactics which acquire an element of conscious 'staging' when assimilated into the performance aspects of popular culture, all adding up to an overall strategy of survival adopted by grossly under-resourced and over-exploited sections of society. Under these circumstances, survival strategies operate in both the physical and cognitive realms. One could further argue that it is the cognitive reality of the oppressed which preserves them from even greater material hardships or physical extinction threatened by *raison d'état*. In support of this argument one may cite the example of the Rwandan National Dance Company which somehow managed to retain a supportive and protective ethic throughout the horrors of genocidal civil war ... and emerged at the conclusion of hostilities to stage a triumphant and ecstatically received tour of neighbouring countries. Here one can see 'art at war' with a state ideology of brute force and senseless retribution, and the Rwandan dance troupe as today's exemplars of all that is best in Africa's long duration.

4. Mentalite as methodology in an African setting.

4.(i) Systems of thought in opposition to domination.

In his revolutionary text, **The Wretched of the Earth**, Frantz Fanon acknowledges the definitive significance of cognitive reality in the struggle firstly to survive, secondly to reject colonial domination. Having worked as a psychiatrist in an Algerian hospital, he came to the conclusion that his patients were not so much mentally ill as tormented and frustrated by the coercive imposition of a western grid of value systems on indigenous society and culture. In the condition of the mentally ill he diagnosed a deep seated psychological neurosis implanted by colonialism. In his letter of resignation to the colonial government he noted that there existed a massive degree of alienation among the indigenous population: he wrote of a mental state of absolute depersonalization. Fanon's diagnosis was based on the case histories of his patients and the notes he made during consultation and treatment. Among the conclusions he drew, one supports Vansina's thesis that cognition is the core of existence: ultimately, colonial power does not depend on military and administrative structures and institutions; it

depends on the creation of a certain attitude in the minds of the colonized people, that is, an attitude of subjection. (1969: 200-250). Fanon's 'attitude of subjection' and Wachtel's 'vision of the vanquished' (*supra*) amount to much the same thing, it seems. Both terms suggest that in the final analysis, control is achieved *via* a deliberate distortion of pre-colonial *mentalite* - or cognitive reality - by colonial ideology, which implants in the minds of colonised peoples a feeling of helpless ('natural and inevitable') inferiority.

Perceptions of 'otherness' were imposed on colonized peoples. Colonial ideology fed and grew fat on perceptions of 'other' which sustained and shored-up notions of (colonial) 'self'. As J.N. Pieterse remarks: 'An ideology of alter involves an ideology of ego. Representations of otherness are also indirectly representations of self'. (1992:232) Pieterse suggests that the origin of the image or concept of civilization arose as a process of opposition to that which was defined as not civilized. Terms which have been used to denigrate the colonized peoples and justify the imposition of alien rule are to be found in the history of Europe and in the way in which Europeans defined themselves and distinguished the 'other'. The first recorded distinction was made by the Greeks as a way of separating themselves from other people in general and Persians in particular. A similar distinction was later made between people who were part of the Roman Empire and people who were not - and later still between the Saxon mainstream in Europe and the Celtic fringes. A distinction which in its original form referred to the frontier between cultivated and uncultivated land (forests and mountains inhabited by mythical beasts and half-human creatures) was developed into a distinction between cultures. These attitudes and relations between societies, pioneered and developed in Europe, were in later centuries utilised to define relations between European and non-European worlds. *Terra nullius*, usually interpreted as meaning uncultivated land, became a mental image which sanctioned invasion, conquest and domination. (Ibid)

The power of imagery should not be underestimated. In the mirror held up by Europe, Africa's reflection was that of empty land inhabited by shadow people. The poetry, for instance, of Rudyard Kipling, imaged Africa in terms of wide open spaces, limitless horizons and so forth, giving the impression that it was materially unpopulated, indeed a space created especially for European minds and images to fill. In such an ideological climate it is unsurprising that colonially inspired education systems were able to envisage pre-colonial history only as an infinite vacuum, and that a common question on settler lips in response to news of liberation struggles starting up in various 'dark' corners of the sub-continent was: 'but what are they fighting *for*?' It is the special ability of hegemonic culture to iron out the alternatives, not least by denying their previous existence. Expunging *memory* (in the African case, of a richly textured discourse of autonomous societies and sovereign self-rule) is a necessary part of the process. In the British policy of indirect rule is an instance where 'Custom' is allowed to survive - but only where expedient - and in quaintly archaic, frozen-in-time form. Africans were presented to themselves as one-dimensional figures, trapped between an annihilated past and an imitative future, clutching a few nondescript 'African customs' by way of consolation.

It follows that in Africa 'to fight back' has meant and continues to mean a great deal more than armed resistance to the material manifestations of colonialism. It also means, in a phrase which has resonated throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, *decolonising the mind*. This is a struggle which by definition takes place in a cognitive realm:

We say firmly that Algerian man and Algerian society have stripped themselves of the mental sedimentation and of the emotional and intellectual handicaps which resulted from 130 years of oppression ... (Fanon, 1959:159)

Liberation struggles on the ground were invariably joined by their cognitive companions: ideologies of liberation which undertook to free African minds from colonial fetters. In such ideologies, mentalities almost invariably played a formative part, depicted as a 'return to the source'. Only Afro-Marxism held aloof from this trend, focussing instead on a universal image, that of world socialism and the triumph of the (global) working class. Fraternal ties were established with the Soviet Union, a host of Eastern bloc countries, Cuba, China and North Korea. This was, in effect, an ideologically driven denial of African singularity. African experiences of colonialism were generalised into the global experience of oppressed peoples in capitalist or quasi-capitalist systems. Paradoxically, this required a perspective on the (pre-colonial) past as irrelevant to - or of no more than very minor importance in - the big picture of workers and peasants v comprador bourgeoisie and global capitalism. African mentalities were incorporated only to the extent that they were useful to the struggle: their value was conceived instrumentally. An example of an instrumental approach to mentalities can be found in **Guns and Rain. Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe**. David Lan describes the process in which guerrillas, having abandoned a policy of decrying local 'superstitions' (and endeavouring to re-educate and conscientize the peasants), instead made a strategic and notably successful use of long duration beliefs in spirit possession and the seminal social role of seers and prophets. In this way, previously wavering sections of the rural population were conclusively won over to the liberation cause.

I can add to Lan's narrative with an illustration of my own. The Rhodesian Security Forces, alarmed by this ominous development, launched a counter-campaign known as 'Operation Hearts and Minds'. To this end they wheeled out their own version of seers and prophets: a team of clinical psychologists, seconded from their civilian jobs and transported to remote rural areas, accompanied by heavily armed escort. A newspaper cartoonist marked the occasion with a 'hearts and minds' cartoon which graphically depicted the sheer improbability of the operation. Centre stage is an ingratiatingly smiling psychologist with several tomes, prominently labelled 'Freud', under one arm. Under the other is a sticky looking packet. In the background lurks a grim-visaged Rhodesian soldier, FN rifle prominently displayed. In the foreground is a reception committee of village dignitaries, politely concealing their sniggers behind their hands. The cartoon is captioned: 'I bring you Freud and Cream Buns.' It is sub-captioned ... 'There is no fool like a colonial fool'.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum from Afro-Marxism was Leopold Sedar Senghor's version of Negritude which advocated a blessed return to a glorified past in which a variety of pre-colonial world views and life styles were blended together to create a pan-African Golden Age of autochthonous beliefs and value systems. Senghor's was a return to the source distinguished by poetic lyricism and compelling imagery. Yet Negritude mimicked the colonial tendency to see African cultures as (1) largely indistinguishable from one another and (2) static. Another weakness is that Negritude in effect offers a simple inversion of (European) values as a solution to the conundrum of the colonised mind. (Senghor's essentialist version of thought systems in resistance to domination has since been

termed 'reverse discourse'. As such, it is discussed in greater detail in a later chapter) In sum: Negritude is not so much an ideology as '*mentalite* writ large'. It is a kind of 'virtual reality' which constitutes both a glorification and a vulgarisation of collective mentalities. However, in its original form - prior, that is, to Senghor's reformulation of his ideas into the Senegalese (presidential) contribution to the ideological theme of African Socialism - it contained the quality of innocence which Burke (*supra*) attributes to *mentalite*, in as much as it is the vision of a poet, not an ideologue, and a paean to culture, not to power.

Moving from colonial to postcolonial modes of ideological oppression and *mentalite* in opposition: it is my contention that an analysis of postcolonial African states should not give so much weight to the defeat of a racist construction of the 'vision of the vanquished' that other factors are if not ignored, at least overshadowed by the victory of African nationalist ideologies, and the Africanization of the state. On a continuum of inequality and discrimination, racism is one of the more offensive manifestations but is not unique. Among other features which have (post-independence) manifested themselves to the detriment of Africa's 'little people' is the ubiquitous presence of what John Ayoade calls the 'Afropean class, whose members formerly criticized the very colonial privileges which they have now inherited and protect.' (In Rothchild and Chazan, 1998:109). It is an irony of the desire to acquire, maintain and enhance privilege that it not infrequently operates as a cross-cutting cleavage, overcoming, for instance dissonances of race, ethnicity and gender to become an ideology in its own right, within the framework of which other exclusionary discourses serve instrumental or diversionary purposes. The defeat of racism has not alchemised African states. The attitude of subjection described by Fanon has been perpetuated to serve the interests of postcolonial elites, and the two opposing modes of thought which characterised the colonial era, that is, modes of domination and modes of resistance, are as familiar a refrain in Africa now as in Africa then.

4.(ii) Surviving the postcolonial state.

In approximately the mid-1980s, events in East-Central Europe triggered a process of diverting Africanist scholars from a focus on the activities and institutions of state to isolating and examining certain recurring features in the reaction of African societies to (1) state impositions (2) state incapacities.

Naomi Chazan described the new trend in analysis as follows:

Society based approaches ... have sought to focus more squarely on survival strategies in changing economic and political circumstances. Starting from a society vantage point, work carried out in this vein has explored how specific social groups define their identity and interests, how they mobilise their resources and construct alliances to protect their goals, and how they cope with their fickle environment ...

Explanations for the present situation on the continent are offered in terms of social predilection, action and behaviour. (In Rothchild & Chazan (eds), 1988:122)

Drawing on the work of a number of scholars, I have compiled a list of features common to the broad phenomenon described by Victor Azarya (*ibid*, 5) as 'disengagement from the state'.

- Azarya's definition of 'disengagement' reflects the generality of informed opinion:
 - the tendency to withdraw from the state as a way of insuring oneself against its instability and diminishing resource base
 - accompanied by scepticism concerning the effectiveness and legitimacy of the state and hence ...
 - subtle means of popular evasion and dissimulation
 - alternative markets and smuggling
 - a fall in official production
 - an array of popular art forms and oral modes depicting cynicism, satire and ridicule of both the state and the difficulties of everyday life
 - traditional structures and sources of authority provide an alternative (to the state) site of allegiance and values
 - as do narrower (than the state) support and resource bases such as ethnic group, local community and village, and extended family. (Ibid, 3-19)

 - John Ayoade analyses the same general phenomenon - but takes it further back (to the colonial state) as well as deeper (to repeating patterns of alienation between elites and people). He cites, among other things ..
 - the philosophical alienation which was engendered by the authoritarian and extractive colonial state. This was emphasised and exacerbated by nationalist leaders whose aim was to make the colonial state ungovernable. Colonial states were therefore 'states without citizens' - a phenomenon which was to be repeated after independence, not least owing to ..
 - the large expectations generated by nationalist promises - expectations which postcolonial states lacked the infrastructures and resource bases to fulfil
 - hence the (passively punitive) practices of economic disengagement were adopted by disillusioned sectors of - mostly - the rural populace, thus making a significant contribution to ..
 - the debt trap in which most African states found themselves by the mid to late 1970s.
- As contributory factors to the deepening crisis of the state in Africa, Ayoade cites:
- corruption and economic mismanagement. These factors may in large part be attributed to exclusionary one-party politics which provide a blank cheque for elites. In the absence of mechanisms of accountability associated with separation of powers and competitive party politics, corrupt and/or incompetent Presidents, ministers and high ranking bureaucrats cling to office, thereby substantially contributing to the ruination of the state.
 - the contraction of the political arena set in motion the departicipation of the people ... except ...
 - where they were encouraged to form People's Defence Committees and the like by 'populist ideologies of doubtful local integrity'. In the case of populist polities fitfully managed by authoritarian heads of state, 'politics degenerated into riding the tiger.' (Ibid, 101-116)
-
- Naomi Chazan offers an interesting addition to this list of features. Having mapped

the disengagement process in a manner not dissimilar to Ayoade's (*supra*) she sums up *cognitive* disengagement from the state approximately as follows:

- in general a syncretic blend of 'traditional' and 'modern' world-views, all operating as far as possible beyond the reach of the state. (Ibid, 121-141)

In a subsequent publication, however, she underlines the limitations and frailties of disengagement in its capacity as a harbinger of change. The general thrust of the phenomenon is defensive. It is primarily a quest for protection from uncertainty, reflecting a desire to minimise vulnerability. It 'chips away at the foundations of state power from below, thereby undermining its viability without altering its form'. (In Chazan, *et al*, 1992:198)

Chazan's analysis helps to explain why, in the era of democratisation which began in the late 1980s, the cumulative effects of political and economic reforms have not, so far, significantly transformed African states - and hence why so many states have remained crisis-ridden. Two factors operate in conjunction: a hegemonic *quest* (as opposed to hegemony *per se*) by weak yet persistent power elites which is countered yet also complemented by defensive *tactics* (as opposed to counter-hegemonic strategies) on the part of non-elites.

If, as Chazan and others seem to suggest, the 'power of the powerless' in Africa is largely restricted to tactical and primarily defensive disengagement from official power structures, including ideologies, where then may one find Le Goff's 'profound song of mentalities' operating as a beacon to light the way ahead? In order to indicate the place of *mentalite*, both in its epistemological and analytic forms, I return in the next and final section to Vansina. I supplement Vansina's findings with a chapter from Anthony Appiah's book: **In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture** (1992).

4.(iii) Self-governing societies in the long duration. (Appiah and Vansina)

Tradition and cognitive representations.

In Vansina's examination of the history of a tradition in equatorial Africa, his focus is on political history, more specifically, the history of institutions. The first item he notes in this regard is that the history of tradition in equatorial (Bantu language speaking) Africa 'provides us with a sense of long-term continuities which lasted here for millennia, a very long time perspective indeed.' (1990:251) Secondly, the continuities themselves were offset by a process of ceaseless change. However, he modifies the effect of the latter factor by noting that ideas and artifacts from other cultures - even a culture as different as the Christian-European one - were not so much borrowed and replicated as transformed in a way which enabled their assimilation in the core of continuity within the process of change. The example he gives is that ...

... after centuries of trading, goods still retained their value as items for use rather than for exchange. Whenever possible, wealth in goods was still converted into followers. The principles underlying markets for land and labour were still rejected.

(Ibid)

What particularly distinguishes the tradition, Vansina believes, is the fidelity with which it held to its own concepts, values, institutions and tools despite the arrival in its midst of radically different artifacts and ideas. In other words, the people of equatorial Africa were active in the making of their own history and self-determining in the construction of their own tradition.

The tradition collapsed only when its bearers were conquered after 40 years of war and *lost their independence of action with their self-determination.* (Ibid)
(Emphasis added)

Having noted the circumstances under which a self-regulating tradition met its nemesis, Vansina defines what he believes to be the central dynamic of the tradition, namely, 'a tension between the desire for local autonomy and the need for security'. (Ibid:252) He attributes the survival of the first segment of the tradition throughout the millennia to, among other factors, very low population densities which enabled threatened groups to move away from an area in which the balance of power had shifted to favour the dominance of one group or combination of groups. Furthermore, the low population densities combined with high mobility levels meant that 'big men' in any given region competed to attract immigrant groups to their domains. Given the shortage of manpower and the highly mobile nature of African societies, it is no wonder, comments Vansina, that equatorial Africans thought of people as wealth, power, and mutual security. The more economically productive areas generated social wealth as well as generously inclined 'big men' who enjoyed commensurate success in attracting migrant groups of settlers. Hence ..

The history of political institutions is fully interwoven with the history of economic production and distribution, but the history of strong personalities is equally important. (Ibid)

In some areas, says Vansina, the scale of population growth led to the development of centralised state structures, not least in the drive for peace and security. Here one may trace the trajectory of the second segment of the tradition which emphasises centralisation of power and the dominance of 'big men'. Yet this segment of the tradition, while it took hold of increasingly large areas, bringing them under the sway of 'divine kingship', never managed to overwhelm or subdue substantial pockets of autonomy in which power was widely dispersed among approximately equal localities. Vansina refers to the myriad societies everywhere that refused to follow the path of state formation:

Despite the threat to security entailed by decentralisation, local leaders insisted on autonomy to the point of limiting cooperation at higher levels to such specific endeavours as trade, the preservation of health, or occasional military assistance. One must admire the ingenious solutions found to allow for both almost total local autonomy and cooperation where needed. That is the distinctive contribution and the special lesson to be learned from equatorial Africa in the world's panoply of political institutions. The inexorable march forward from local community to chiefdom, to principality, to kingdom or state, proposed by unilineal social evolutionists was not the only possible option. (Ibid:253)

In support of this finding he points out that the economic development which took place in the nineteenth century, along with military innovation and increasingly complex administrative structures, did not automatically trigger the appearance of larger-scale polities. Indeed, it is apparent that the autonomy-oriented segment of the tradition was more prominent than the centralizing one, and that this is in itself a measure of the dominance of cognitive reality over physical habitat. 'The distaste for centralized government lay in the dominant tradition, not in the natural environment.' (Ibid: 257) Even in large and relatively complex states such as the Akan state (in the southern part of modern Ghana) one can trace the parallel tradition of local autonomy in the relative freedom of villages, either deep in the forest or on the far-flung periphery, from interference by the state - except in the matter of annual payment of tribute.

A tradition, concludes Vansina, is 'a moving continuity'. (ibid). It is a self-regulating process which consists of a changing, inherited, collective body of cognitive and physical representations shared by their members. Of these collective representations, cognition is the living core. Cognitive representations (or mentalities) 'inform the understanding of the physical world and develop innovations to give meaning to changing circumstances in the physical realm, and do so in terms of the guiding principles of the tradition.' (Ibid: 260) It is precisely because 'traditions are so massive and long-lived that they carry along and leave their imprint on huge segments of history.' (Ibid)

The imprint of mentalite on Ghana's recent history.

The 'moving continuity' of tradition is the overall theme of Chapter 8, 'Altered States', of Appiah's book (1992). The terms Appiah uses to exemplify the two spheres, sometimes overlapping, sometimes pulling apart, within which the present day inhabitants of Ghana operate, are 'society' and 'state'. This is, of course, very much the usual way in which to delineate areas of conflict and cooperation in modern politics. Society and the state co-exist in a kind of dual-entity equilibrium in which the state, with its monopoly of coercive force, is usually perceived as the dominant partner. However, the notion of 'civil society fighting back' has recently entered the language of political science and has become a paradigm to be juggled with - as noted above. Appiah to some extent adopts this particular mode of political analysis with his state-society distinction, and his emphasis on the latter. However, his analysis mines a vein of richly textured ideas and activities which brings him closer to Vansina's style of discourse than the perhaps more clinical analyses of Chazan *et al.* In short, Appiah, like Vansina 'tells a story'. The story he recounts is that of the Akan people who no longer have their own state, having been swallowed up by the modern version, but who are still and - or so Appiah seems to suggest - shall always be *a society*.

The state as Appiah describes it is familiar territory to academic travellers in Africa. Fragile; predatory yet weak; containing pockets of civil disorder along with spreading areas of severe dysfunctionality, any idea of the state as provider would be, as Appiah puts it, 'laughable'. (ibid: 273). But - in an ironic reversal of the usual procedure - what Appiah describes is the withdrawal, not of society, but of the state.

For a Hobbesian, I suppose, the withdrawal of the Ghanaian state, in the face of its incapacity to raise the income to carry out its tasks, should have led to disaster. Yet, despite the extent to which government was not in control, Ghanaian life was not a

brutish war of all against all. Life went on. Not only did people not 'get away with murder'
People made deals, bought and sold goods, owned houses, married, raised families.
(Ibid)

The perseverance of society in the face of ever-diminishing state capacity is attributed by Appiah to the activities of organisations and groups who were taking over functions formerly reserved for government. The (somewhat residual) role left over for government was to facilitate (not to direct) the mobilisation of 'social allegiances that are largely autonomous'. (ibid:274) These autonomous, largely self-regulating groups, as listed by Appiah, represent an interesting mixture of traditional and modern influences and styles. Churches, Masonic Lodges, Traditional leaders (chiefs and elders), leaders of Muslim communities, business and professional organisations, and associations like Asante Kotoko with roots in the past but skills and ideas for the present, carried out a variety of functions in southern Ghana in the 1980s: they financed, built, equipped and staffed 'state' schools and hospitals; maintained 'state' orphanages and old age homes; maintained 'public' roads and supplied soup kitchens, as well as mediating between labour and management in industrial disputes. In short, society substituted for the state in a myriad of indispensable ways, achieving results the state seemed unable to achieve, and managing their finances and responsibilities in an orderly, formal fashion which emphasised the accountability of social leaders and organisers in a manner which clearly suggests that people *do not* get the government they deserve.

These organisations and the experiences of autonomous and relatively democratic organisation they provide are, I believe, of tremendous significance for the development of public life in Africa; and for the simplest of reasons: they give people a chance to practise participatory modes of organising communal life, they offer the experience of autonomy. As a result it will become increasingly difficult for weak states to maintain legitimacy without offering such forms of democratic participation.
(Ibid: 277)

Appiah is not alone in his opinion that societies in Africa, in significant instances, do not so much passively disengage from the state as actively provide a substitute for it. The late Claude Ake acknowledged, like Appiah, the ethnic origins of such groups but saw no reason to apply a blanket definition of ethnicity in Africa as 'problematic'. On the contrary, during colonial times ethnicity functioned as a centre of resistance, a means of self-affirmation and a network of survival strategies. (1993:3) This function has continued into postcolonial times: 'ethnic groups are often the major engine of development in rural Africa and the closest thing in existence to a social welfare organisation.' (Ibid: 4) Echoing Vansina, Ake describes ethnicity as a living presence, an important part of what many Africans are. And asks:

'Surely part of what we are is people who must find themselves ...? ...
For those who do not know who they are cannot really know where they are going.
(Ibid: 13-14)

Appiah and Ake describe much the same phenomenon: the autonomous, self-regulating society whose leaders and organisers are more than capable of substituting for the state in a number of essential ways, as well as providing a superior (to the state) level of performance,

fiscal efficiency and accountability to the generality of people on whose behalf they operate. According to this depiction, a return to the source does not involve uncritical idealisation of the past or the construction of a 'noble lie'. It is a straightforward depiction of what some African societies have proved capable of achieving under the most unpromising of circumstances, and will doubtless continue to achieve - quietly and without ideological fanfares. Vansina's account of the history of political institutions in equatorial Africa suggests a connection, for anyone who cares to make it, between an analysis of the present and an understanding of the past. In the process of linking Vansina's findings with Appiah's and Ake's accounts of present day African societies, Vansina's statement that the people of equatorial Africa are 'bereft of a common mind and purpose' emerges as somewhat too wholesale an hypothesis. If one argues, as Vansina does, that the moving continuity of tradition in Africa, along with the collective representations or mentalities which have fired and shaped its core, has survived a very long time indeed, then it may equally be argued that so remarkably durable a moving continuity is unlikely to be killed stone dead by a couple of hundred years of colonialism which, in the millennial scheme of things, was no more than a moment in time. I would argue that colonial ideologies and their postcolonial successors have created noisy diversions which have distracted attention from the profound - and enduring - song of mentalities. Yet perhaps one has only to listen in order to hear it.

References.

- Ake, C. 'What is the Problem of Ethnicity in Africa?' in
Transformation, 22, (1993)
- Andrews, R.M. 'Some Implications of the Annales School and its Methods for
a Revision of Historical Writing.' in
Review, Vol 1, No 3/4 Winter/Spring 1978
- Appiah, K.A. **In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture.**
(Methuen, London, 1992)
- Burke, P. **The French Historical Revolution. The Annales School.
1929-89.**
(Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990).
- Burke, P. **History and Social Theory.**
(Polity Press, Oxford, 1992)
- Burke, P. **Varieties of Cultural History.**
(Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997)
- Chazan, N. *et al* **Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa.**
(Lynne Reiner, Boulder, Colorado, 1988)
- Fanon, F. **A Dying Colonialism.**
(Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1959)
- Fanon, F. **The Wretched of the Earth.**
(Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963)
- Lan, D. **Guns and Rain. Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in
Zimbabwe.**
(James Currey, London, 1985)
- Le Goff, J & Nora, P. **Faire de l'histoire. Nouveaux Objets.**
(Gallimard, Paris, 1974)
- Le Roy Ladurie, E. **Carnival in Romans.**
(Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981)
- Le Roy Ladurie, E. **Montaillou.**
(Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981)
- Levack, B. **The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe.**
(Longman, London, 1987)
- Mamdani, M. **Citizen and Subject. Contemporary Africa and the Legacy
of Late Colonialism.**
(Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996)
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. **Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams. Towards a Critical
Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa.**

- Outhwaite, W & Bottomore, T *et al* (eds) (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998)
The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth Century Social Thought.
- Pieterse, J.V. (Blackwell, Oxford, 1993)
White on Black. Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Political Culture.
- Rothchild, D & Chazan, N (eds) (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1992)
The Precarious Balance. State and Society in Africa.
- Samuel, R & Jones, G (eds) (Westview Press, Colorado, 1988)
Culture, Ideology and Politics.
- Scott, J (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982)
Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts.
- Vansina, J (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1990)
Paths in the Rainforest. Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa.
 (James Currey, London, 1990).

