



Colonialism and the Post-colonial African States: Perceptions, Issues, and Opportunities

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The paper examines the perceptions about the plight facing the African post-colonial states. It examines the main arguments of the Eurocentric school of thought and afro-centrism. The paper states that both schools of thought are responsible for the challenges facing Africa including inequality, rampant corruption, and inequality. On one hand, the interaction between Europe and Africa was an opportunity for the plunder of resources and paved the way for neo-colonialism. On the other hand, Africans, after colonialism, let their people down through unfair distribution of resources. The paper seeks intervention on the way forward by urging both schools to assume more accountability and responsibility in enhancing improved governance and better conditions for the Africans.

Keywords: colonialism, post-colonial African state, eurocentrism, afro-centrism

Overview

The perception of Africa by the Africans themselves, and the Western countries, continues to draw mixed reactions. The discourse is largely based on the political, economic, and social status in Africa, with many aspects deemed wanting. The question, then, becomes who is to blame for the failure of the post-colonial African states. The responses show a diversity of views, experiences, and recommendations.

On one hand, some view the post-colonial African

state from the lens of the Europeans. This is the Eurocentric school of thought. According to eurocentrism, the sources of epistemology are in the Western canon, and the African civilization is ignored. Eurocentrism is shaped by Enlightenment and is based on the historical experiences of the Europeans (Heleta, 2018). Europe is portrayed as an invincible power in global politics, and an entity that signifies the epitome of civilization. Eurocentrism tends to lean on capitalism, globalization and democratic institutions. The European standard of life is assumed to be the norm and the model. It is based on principles such as separateness, the survival of the fittest, compartmentalization, the fear of other races, and the fear of other cultures.

Afro-centrism has been viewed as a counter-offensive to Euro-centrism. This school of thought encourages Africans, irrespective of their geographical location, to be proud and articulate their traditional African values. Afro-centrics celebrate the history and achievements of Africa citing Ancient Egypt as a civilization worth emulation by all global actors including the West. According to Asante (2020), afro-centrism should choose its epistemological discourse to understand knowledge construction in Africa.

The school of thought that one ascribes to, between eurocentrism and afrocentrism, defines academic research, teaching, and policy formulation. It defines one's perception of the architecture of the global system, and the responses to matters arising. The lacuna in this dichotomy is that each school of

thought leans to its philosophy and is quick to blame the other group.

This paper argues that both the West and the Africans are responsible for the plight of the African post-colonial state, and the underdevelopment thereof. The paper deconstructs the Afrocentrism vs Eurocentrism debate intending to initiate a paradigm change from the status quo to an extent of assuming more responsibility.

The Impact of Colonialism

There is no doubt that the era of colonialism in Africa was one of the darkest eras in human history. The experiences in the Congo Free State are a perfect example par excellence of the scars that colonialism left in the lives of the African people. The atrocities carried in the Congo Free State stung the European consciousness to the core, and left behind an African population in lamentations.

Bevernage (2018), states that the international community responded to the bloody regime through an aggressive international campaign, naming and shaming, and protests. It was noted with concern that the Congo Free State was majorly a personal project of King Leopold II where he translated his ambitions into action with a total disregard to human rights and the rule of law. The author notes that with the findings of the Congo Commission, denying that atrocities were committed in Congo Free State was no longer feasible.

There is a strong correlation between the lives that subjects lived during colonialism, and the lives that Africans live after colonialism. Worth noting is that violence begets violence, and the coming of independence is no panacea to such a phenomenon. Today, one of the biggest challenges facing South Africa is security and rampant crime. According to Lamb (2018), the persistent fight against crime in South Africa leads to a state of continued police militarization.

The history of the Democratic Republic of Congo is a history of plunder of resources, and Joseph Conrad admitted this as much in the *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The global appetite for the rubber to make tires translated to the need to collect as much rubber

as possible. The methodology of collecting rubber did not respect human rights as the Congolese people were forced to work, had to work for long hours, and worked in inhuman conditions.

Some scholars argue that colonialism has continued even after independence, albeit in different forms. Terms that are used to describe this phenomenon include neo-colonialism and imperialism. Worth noting is that the new form of colonialism sees an expansion in the colonizers to include the USA. During the cold war, the US flirted with African regimes, turned a blind eye to critical issues such as abuse of human rights, only to play the role of big brother with the end of the cold war.

Closely connected to this is the argument that the infrastructure that the colonialists left behind was, as a matter of fact, a tool of facilitating the flow of resources from Africa to the West. Cooper (2019), states that colonialists constructed railways and roads with the purpose to transport products such as cocoa and copper and send them to European manufacturers. The European industries have an insatiable appetite for raw materials due to mass production and their quest for specialization and economies of scale.

In this context, one of the questions is the quality of education that African people received. Helena (2018), states that the African people received a 'pedagogy of lies'. History was distorted to accommodate the Western narrative at the expense of African civilization, and the dignity of the oppressed was thereof eroded. The notion that Africans had, and still have, their civilization was discarded.

When the Europeans realized that independence was inevitable, they still harbored strong ethnocentric tendencies, one of them being that the African man did not have the capacity to steer the course of development to desirable levels. In other words, the white man desired to leave a system where he could intervene in local political and economic discourse, either overtly or covertly.

Africa continues to receive a prescription on how to run their own countries, and some of the decisions are received as *fait accompli*. The problem with this economic model is that it ignores that one cannot copy a certain economic model from one country and

replicate it in another country. Each country has its unique needs and preferences, and the world cannot be treated as homogenous.

For instance, when some African communities are encouraged to farm cash crops, and neglect local foods, what follows is that they have to sell the cash crops to buy food. Whereas this may look theoretically practice, the reality on the ground is different, and sometimes, such communities cannot afford to buy food reliably. Again, they have to forfeit local food which is sustainable and healthy.

Emmanuel Wallenstein developed an approach to social change and social analysis (Wallerstein, 1987). The author examines the structure of the world system, the development of the capitalist economy, and the crisis thereof. Morelock & Narita (2018), noticed that Wallenstein observed a chaotic transition in the world economic structure. According to Wallenstein, the world has a stratified structure, and inequality, and this is a product of institutionalized exploitation.

Some scholars have observed the relevance of World System Theory in the African continent. Long after independence, resources continue to be redistributed from the periphery to the core countries. They reject the classification of the world into parameters such as the third world, but rather, see a total system, characterized by inequality. A disciple of Emmanuel Wallenstein would hold that the West (core countries), gain the most from a capitalist system, with African countries (the periphery), paying a heavy price in this economic structure.

In the course of history, the modernization theory has received widespread criticism globally. Part of the reason is that it assumes a linear model of evolutionary development; a prescription that some African theorists feel is an imposed model. In the sociology of development, modernization is largely assumed to be a universal pattern. The problem with this assumption is that it denies individual states to customize their preferred economic model based on reality rather than a theoretical framework.

Closely connected to this is the unequal exchange that is observed in dependency theory. In contemporary social sciences, dependency theory shows how the West has underdeveloped African countries. For in-

stance, many African countries include aid in policy planning, and thus, they believe that they will get aid in the next financial year too. Though the theory is dominant in Latin America, it applies to African states as much.

Africa remains underrepresented in international organizations, thereby limiting the opportunity through which it can air its discontent. It could be said that international organizations give a priority to policies that favor them. It is only recently that African countries have started penetrating the global voting system in international organizations and are seen in round tables in global institutions. This is too little, too late.

Liberalism moral assumption, and a wrong one for that matter, is that if there is a free exchange, without a conduit, there is no exploitation. The fact is that in the relationship between the core and the periphery, trade and exchange is largely an affair of the core, which sets the ground rules, and the periphery accepts them. After all, for the periphery state to survive, it has to be responsive to the dictates of the core. Again, it is the core countries which invest in research and development. Consequently, the recommendations and solutions offered as part of research dissemination often advance the interest of the core, neglecting the periphery countries.

The paradox with development, then, becomes the observation that some countries become developed, when other countries in the international system become under-developed. The interaction between states becomes a zero-sum game, with the core countries maintaining the status quo, even if it means through the use of violence or sponsoring a coup. The relationship between states becomes a relationship of exploitation. The Kantian imperative views exploitation as treating another party as a means, and as an end.

The Responsibility of African Themselves

The time of independence was a watershed moment in European-African relations. It was also a time of optimism for the African people as they waited to enjoy the fruits of independence. Africans prepared themselves to reap the benefits of independence, and looked forward to more equitable distribution of national resources. They woke up to a rude awakening. Like dew in a sunny morning, their hopes soon turned to disillusionment and a sense of *déjà vu*.

Instead of equitable sharing of resources, African states embarked on what is now referred to as a patron-client relationship. The patron-client relationship is not necessarily based on class, but rather, it is founded in personal relationships. The pillars of the patron-client relationship are repetition, reciprocity, and hierarchy. It is about *scratch my back, I scratch yours*.

Rather than thinking about serving the African people, African leaders have been obsessed with how they can retain power as long as possible. As soon as one is elected, he or she begins a sustained campaign of getting back to power in the next election. In such a case, time and resources for development are decimated, and the state of development in Africa shows the symptoms of this neglect.

It seems that subjects in African states have accepted their fate, and have resigned to the same. The people live in day-to-day structural conditions which, through tolerance, accept their subordinate position. In addition to that, the surplus that they may have is transferred from them to the national and international system through the high cost of living and a high rate of inflation. Moreover, the people are confined to economic niches where mobility is low.

In some parts of Africa, the quality of life has been decimated to the point of mere survival. The only consolation such a people hold on to is that they are going to “vote them all out in the coming elections.” Whereas “voting them all out” brings some light to the tunnel, it is not a root-cause response to the plethora of problems facing governance in Africa. This is because Africa has not invested in a system,

precedent, and work culture (an umbrella term for institutions). When a state strengthens the institutions, it manages to achieve the rare milestone of diluting the powers of a particular individual. Investing in institutions creates an environment of certainty and predictability.

It could be argued that the African states have failed their people. With the social contract theory of state formation, individuals gave up some of their freedoms and entrusted the state to perform some functions. Hobbes presented a methodological innovation calling the era before the government a mere state of nature, a time where man would do as wished. However, notes Hobbes, such a life would be a *war of all against all*. The most prudent thing was to invite the government to ensure restraint.

The elite can have strong control of the central government, albeit being in the shadow. They are keen to engage in coercive labor to ensure sustained and optimal profits. One of the most notorious cases of the relationship between the relationships of elite with the African state is the case of the Gupta family in South Africa. The term used in the relationship between Jacob Zuma and the Guptas is state capture. In state capture, some individuals can influence the decision of the state in a way that will favor their businesses, of course, with the collusion of the powers that be. This phenomenon can only be facilitated in a political environment where the laws are weakened and the institutions neutralized.

Myburgh (2017), states that an idiosyncratic characteristic of Jacob Zuma was his affinity for tender moguls in mega deals in South Africa. The author observes that Zuma’s relationship with some individuals was all but predatory. Zuma did not hide his philosophy that politics and economics cannot be divorced, and he admitted this as much when he stated that a wise business person should, as a matter of pragmatism, support the ANC. State capture becomes grand corruption in a transitional economy.

The African elite has been accused of making a continuation of the same exploitation that the Africans faced at the time of colonialism. Thus, the elite derives benefit through harming another person, and this economic model is sustained. This

exploitation takes various forms including denial of human rights and paying low wages.

Ethnocentrism was not a preserve of the white man. Africans have been known to believe that what comes from the West is better than what Africa can provide. With such socialization, then, it is not surprising that many Africans seek permanent immigration to the West without careful consideration of the direct and indirect impact of such a critical decision. Some of them get stuck in the West as they find that they are living in an economic model which is incompatible with their education system and other parameters such as language, with some of them coming back home with nothing after years of toil.

The Way Forward

Both the West and Africans have a responsibility in bringing the African continent to the mainstream global system. Keeping on blaming each other is not going to offer concrete solutions to the inherent and structural challenges facing the continent. It is a matter of assuming responsibility without seeking excuses.

It is worth avoiding taking radical measures to the model of governance to minimize risks. Business leaders use a rational decision making model to assess, calculate, and estimate the possibility of risks. Similarly, state leaders should use research and development to calculate the risk to the decisions that they make.

For instance, the land reforms in Zimbabwe overlooked the fact that the economy would have performed better without seizing land from the settlers. Whereas the white farmers were supposed to be compensated, that was not effectively executed. For instance, Robert Mugabe took some land for himself and proceeded to reward some loyalists. Whereas there is a justifiable need for land equity, radical changes should be avoided because they can leave the local economy mutilated.

It is the responsibility of the African people to be proud and optimistic about their continent. Movements such as *Africa Rising* are a good starting point in learning how to appreciate history, roots, and culture. With the rise of the middle class, and the pene-

tration of digital technology, there is hope people can be empowered.

The only way that the current generation can be prepared to make responsible decisions in the future is through ensuring that their curriculum is rich and of high quality, a curriculum that creates a fertile ground for intellectual curiosity. Unfortunately, the current educational curriculum, in most of the African jurisdictions, is still characterized by imposed theories, interpretations, and knowledge.

Scholars such as Vandana Shiva have cried foul over Western science stating that it is not only reductionist, but also a tool of domination. She embarks on epistemological violence and argues in favor of indigenous studies due to their sustainable and holistic nature. Whereas such an approach may not be in tandem with the reality on the ground, African economies should avoid being entangled with the West due to the negative effect that comes with the same.

The post-colonial African state is so extroverted that it relies on developed countries, and multinational corporations. Thus, Africans give a blind eye to what they can do with what they already have, even if not much. For example, when countries such as South Korea are struggling with space, Africa is endowed with sufficient physical space for housing, setting up manufacturing bases, and recreation. Africa enjoys a reliable supply of labor, whether skilled or unskilled, and such availability and affordability of labor can form a strong foundation for economic development.

Lakitsch (2018), states that political authority should reflect the social dynamics, and at the same time, appreciate the inclusion. Such inclusion should encompass every subject that is covered in governance. At the center of this debate is the need to include dissident voices, and at the same time, reconcile opposing voices, and seek a middle ground.

Plato, in the *Apology*, uses the term gadfly to encourage subjects to ask questions to the authorities. When a gadfly stings a horse, the horse swings into action. Africans should not be contented with the status quo, but rather, they should seek to put the authorities to task and demand answers.

Conclusion

It is time that Africa embarked on a paradigm shift and start challenging the status quo. Whereas change may not be abrupt, Africans should make a deliberate step to improve human rights, expand the democratic space, promote better standards of living, and enhanced economic opportunities. Perhaps, making an audit of past mistakes is not a bad way to start.

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