

AFRREV IJAH

An International Journal of Arts and Humanities

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 1 (1), February, 2012:123-131

ISSN: 2225-8590

The Colonial Legacy: the Hidden History of Africa's Present Crisis

Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony

Department of Philosophy
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Ikee_mario@yahoo.com

Phone: 08036345466

Abstract

By the 19th C, the scramble for territories by the European powers took a new turn as they began to make significant advances into tropical Africa. By 1913, European powers had divided the African continent into a patchwork that showed little regard for ethnic and linguistic boundaries. In this piece, the researcher makes a study of European colonization of Africa. The researcher also tries to trace how the foot prints of colonialism still looms at the horizons of Africa's present crisis. As a way forward, the researcher proposes that Africa must stop crying over split milk and begin to raise her own cows. She must stop blaming the whites for the evils of the past and begin to face the challenges of the present. This is a process that must involve the governments and peoples of Africa.

Introduction

October 12, 2011 marked the 519th anniversary of what the historian Kirkpatrick Sale calls the beginning of “the European conquest of the world” (Kirkpatrick quoted in Feliz, 1998). A time when Christopher Columbus, the middle aged Italian Sailor, an admiral of the ocean sea, and a one-time colonial governor whose haphazard voyage across the Atlantic set in motion the Colonial Era. Driven by a frenzied greed, which found expression in his hunger for gold, Christopher Columbus set the stage on the Island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) where he forced the Island’s inhabitants to bring him a ‘hawk’s bell’ full of gold. Those who failed to meet his demands had their hands hacked off, or were murdered outright (Koning, 1991).

Bartolome de Las Casas, a Catholic priest wrote his famous *Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies*, in which he graphically described the depredations of the European fortune seekers. He said that they hurled themselves on the Indians ‘like wolves after days of starvation’ (Bartolome quoted in Felix 1991). The cries of the Indian nations capture the terror of the times:

Great was the stench of the dead.... After our fathers and grand fathers succumbed, half of the people fled to the fields. The dogs and the vultures devoured the bodies. The mortality was terrible. Your grand fathers died, and with them died the son of the king and his brothers and kinsmen... oh, my sons! We were born to die! (Woodward 1985, p.8)

This is a history that has not left the Indian Americans, as their natural wealth has been plundered, their wild life exterminated, the land, air and water poisoned. Since 1942, more than 140 of their animals and bird species have become extinct. Its memory carries with it a feeling of nostalgia. Profit has come before people!

These notwithstanding, during the 19th C, the scramble for territories by the European powers took a new turn as they began to make significant advances into tropical Africa. By 1913, European powers had divided the African continent into a patchwork that showed little regard for ethnic and linguistic boundaries. In this piece, it is the primary concern of the researcher to show

how the hidden history of colonialism still looms at the horizons of Africa's present crisis (Hodder, 1978).

The colonisation of Africa

Before 1830, European settlements were for the most part restricted to small coastal trading stations. Both physical and economic factors combined to retard penetration. Once having landed on the coast, penetration inland was discouraged by varied physiographical features. Economically, it did not seem to them that there were any valuable mineral to be found inland – a contrast with South America where the search for gold and silver led the Spaniards to some of the most inaccessible parts of the continent (Mountjoy & Embleton, 1966).

But during the mid 19th C, European explorers began to make significant advances into tropical Africa. First among these included Mungo Park, Clapperton and Lander – all in West Africa- and during the middle years of the 19th C exploration extended further inland and included the great trans-Saharan Sudanic journeys of Barth. Meanwhile between 1841 and 1863 the likes of Livingstone and Grant increased Europe's knowledge of and interest in the east and south-east of the continent. This opened up the Congo to European influence- an influence which, it was hoped would open a path for commerce and Christianity to destroy what the whites and their missionaries considered the evils of African society and the Arab slave trade. As a result of these and numerous other explorations and journeys, too, many of the great puzzles of African geography for Europeans – notably the course of the Nile, Niger, Congo and Zambezi rivers – were solved within the space of half a century (Hodder, 1978).

During this same period, missionaries took an increasing part in extending European interests. All this exploration and evangelism frequently led to trade. Yet it soon realized that profitable trade depended on maintenance of peace and that this peace could not be assured without administrative intervention and control in the hinterlands. Because the explorers came from several different European countries – Spain, Portugal, France, Britain, Belgium and Germany – Africa soon became a field for the conflicting ambitions of the major European colonial powers. By the early 1880's these conflicting ambitions were beginning to be expressed territorially. Sections of the coast were being claimed by traders and administrators of one or other of the European powers. Missionary, trading, military and administrative

activities were beginning to expand. The stage was now set for the European scramble for Africa, finally to be set in motion by the 1884-5 Conference and Treaty of Berlin. This laid down that European colonial claim to territory could only be secured by what was termed 'effective occupation'; in other words European powers with interests on the African coast to move inland to secure their hinterlands. The subsequent scramble for territory by European powers took place so rapidly that within a decade the outlines of most of the colonial territories- and, significantly, of most of the present independent African states – were laid down (Hodder, 1978). As pointed out earlier, it was so rapid that by 1913, European powers had divided the African continent into a patchwork that showed little regard for ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

The colonial legacy and Africa's present crisis

The significance of recent changes in Africa, be it economic, political or otherwise, can only be assessed in the perspective of history. It is true that the colonialists helped in the development of Africa, but these developments were versely disproportionate to how much African resources and man power contributed to the development of Europe. In fact these developments were indeed the fruits of African labour and resources for the most part. Rodney Walter brought this to bear when he said in his famous book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, that 'What was called the development of Africa by the colonialists was a cynical short-hand expression for the intensification of colonial exploitation of Africa to develop capitalist Europe' (Walter, 1978, p.244).

The European culture of the late 19th C introduced racism and social Darwinism in Africa. The elevation of the white race above blacks had lasting repercussions in lands with significant European immigration, notably South Africa and Rhodesia. Even more damaging was the inauguration of the idea that the Northern Hamates such as the Ethiopians and Tutsi's were racially superior to other Africans. This division of society into rival ethnicities have had long-lasting negative influence, especially in places like Rwanda and Burundi. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda was an offspring of such mentality, where the Tutsi's saw themselves as being superior to the Hutu's, and so to exterminate them was a way of ensuring the preservation of the superior race.

With the dawn of the colonial era, former independent African communities lost their political liberty with the division of the African continent into a patchwork that showed little regard for ethnic or linguistic boundaries. With this, the communities were squeezed into about 50 colonies marked out now by frontiers that took no account of the interest of African convenience. The Somali people were divided into four colonial systems: some were under the British, some under the Italians, some under the French and others under the Ethiopians. We also have some Hausas under the British rule in Nigeria and others under the French in Niger (Davidson, 1995). As a result, people who were bound by ties of culture, language or even blood were divided by new territorial frontiers, which made them citizens of different states. This is one of the primary sources of tribalism in African Countries, tribes that have nothing in common were brought together to live as one. In Nigeria for instance, the Hausas, Igbos and Yorubas were brought together as a country, creating a situation of more allegiance to the tribe than the nation. Political parties are formed across tribal lines. And today nothing in African history captures her problem of national integration more graphically than the chequered fortune of the word *Tribe* in her vocabulary. Tribe has been one time accepted as a friend, rejected as an enemy at another, and finally smuggled through the back door as an accomplice (Achebe, 1985).

Most often, the colonial government exploited the people and their natural resources. Only a very small share of profit was given to them. The colonies were used as sources for the raw materials and markets for the finished goods. This badly affected the native economy as this period of carnage went on for a very long time. The money generated by these colonial governments did not benefit the people of the colony. Many African countries are still on the ride in this regard. We still hear of African oil producing countries like Nigeria, taking their crude oil for refinement in western countries after which they are brought back to Africa for sale. Unfortunately, these African countries have refineries or at least can afford one.

When the industrial revolution of the 19th C and 20th C brought increased exploitation of Africa due to the European demand for large quantities of raw materials, imperial overseers geared the economies of Africa towards exporting raw materials. Egypt produced cottons, Rwanda-Urundi was almost completely dedicated to growing coffee, and Upper Volta specialized in palm oil. Basing an entire nation's wealth on one commodity in this way would have debilitating effects later. These monocultures left national

economies vulnerable to price swings, making economic planning difficult. These colonial policies are directly responsible for many of Africa's present problems. This could be the cause of institutional hunger in Africa. These export crops were actually imposed on Africans; as a result they lost some of their foods meant for their subsistence. Many African countries are still to trace their way back.

The genetic code of the new African states was already imprinted on its embryo within the womb of African colonial state. The colonial government was one in which the bureaucrat was absolutely king. In the absence of meaningful development among the legislative, executive and judiciary, the task of administration and adjudication, as well as the formation and implementation of policies were in the hands of the bureaucrats. The colonial administrators were like elites, a chosen few who did not need to keep in touch with the lives and interests of the ordinary people, who were regarded as being at the lowest level of existence after the lower animals, incapable of rationality and insensitive to their environment (Gimba, 2006). Many African leaders now conceive themselves as chain minorities very often clung to power and privilege, advancing individual rather than corporate economic and political development. In this, one sees the roots of the dominant hegemonic and patrimonial nature of many African governments (Mark, 2008).

The true effects of colonialism are psychological. This is because domination by a foreign power creates a lasting sense of inferiority and subjugation that builds a barrier to growth and innovation. Many Africans have lost confidence in themselves and in their abilities. This has been extended to indigenous industries; whatever comes from the African is tagged 'inferior' by other Africans. This ranges from simple machines to simple things like clothes, furniture, bags, shoes, belts etc. Indigenous industries now prefer to tag their products 'made in USA' or 'made in China or Taiwan', giving the impression that local products are not of desirable standards. Inferiority has turned our eyes to be 'outward looking' rather than 'inward looking'.

Colonialism has been described as a moral vice and a cultural bully of the Europeans, clearly elucidating the vices of the western culture in Africa. When the colonial masters came, they gave us the impression that they were a superior race. In French colonies, through the principle of 'assimilation', they tried to stop the indigenous languages of colonies, which they considered inferior to the French Language. For the French colonial masters,

they looked forward to a day when all their colonies would speak one language, namely French. In British colonies, English was taught at schools. As such, many Africans have grown with the impression that their language is inferior (Gimba, 2006). Today many Africans have forgotten their languages, especially the young, and they feel that there is nothing wrong with that. It is in this regard that Leonard Senghor said that 'African misfortunes have been that our secret enemies while defending their values made us despise our own' (Senghor 1976, p.17).

Colonialism inflicted not only physical but also spiritual domination over young Africans who began to see their traditional poetry, including freelancing with songs, dancing, and theatrical renditions as pagan. Gabriel Ajobodun once observed, 'our cultural values ranging from the sense of the sacred to respect for life and elders, respect for marriage institution, premarital sex, virginity, honest labour and communalism, are being submerged with the appreciation of the alien culture of materialism, nudity and hedonism' (Ajobodun 2001, p.15). We are loosing a great deal of our cultures, and imbibing more of the western culture. On the level of 'cultural diffusion or borrowing' there is nothing wrong with that, however, when we begin to borrow the western culture at the expense of our own culture, something is wrong. When we lose our culture, we lose our identity, we suffer self-alienation because we become less African, and unfortunately never a European (Gimba, 2006).

The schools instituted by the colonial masters were meant to teach colonial values. The subjects in schools were taught from racist standpoints. In history for example, the British colonial schools taught about British kings and Queens, while in areas like Geography, the four seasons of the autumn, the summer and the winter were prominent topics. The African read all these, but could find in them no application for his continent. He learnt about realities that would imply a change of environment if he must be relevant. This accounts for the movement of highly skilled and qualified sons and daughters of Africa to countries abroad. They personally conceive of Africa as underdeveloped, and are not ready to face the challenge of making efforts for authentic development. We hear of people like Philip Omeagwelu in America who has given the world the fastest computer ever known. We hear of Dr Badero Oluyemi in New York who is decorated as one of the best doctors in the state. He is presently the chief cardiologist at St John's Episcopal Hospital (John, 2006).

The way forward for Africa/conclusion

It is true that the colonial government exploited the people of Africa and have contributed to the many crises that now plague Africa, but is it enough to remember the past and then seat on its traumas? Africa must seek ways that would push her forward. Africa must stop crying over split milk and begin to raise her own cows. She must stop blaming the whites for the evils of the past and begin to face the challenges of the present.

The African man and woman must have living hopes for their continent. Our leaders must burn with zeal for their ‘father’s house’, a kind of zeal that gives birth to charismatic characters that can transform the darkness that lours over Africa into light. If we have lamented the evil of white colonialism and are today lamenting a new kind of colonialism by brother and sister Africans; if we rejoice over our independence and are today ruled by African dictators, if we blame the whites for the much orchestrated rape of Africa and are today realizing in the breed of African heads of state people committed to worse atrocities, then Africa has only taken a U-turn into a darker age than she has ever experienced.

The government of African countries need provide a conducive and enabling atmosphere that can provoke in Africa the spirit of mental and physical revolution akin to the industrial revolution, which made Europe the master of the civilized world; a conducive atmosphere that would challenge the sons and daughters of Africa in Diaspora who have been able to register the highest degree of academic feats in Europe and America to come and at least register some rudimentary technological and scientific breakthroughs at home. This forward movement of Africa is one in which every African must be involved; let Africans rally themselves into a formidable group defined by solidarity that would create a movement for the rise of Africa.

References

- Achebe, Chinua (1985). *The trouble with Nigeria*, Taiwan: AI-united Industries & Shipping
- Ajobodun, Gabriel (2001). *Philosophy as a vital tool for social reconstruction in Nigeria*, in *NAPSSEC, Journal of African Philosophy*, Vol. 1, NAPSSEC publication Nig
- Ankpa John (2006). *The Guardian Magazine*, Sunday, 6 March 2006, p.11

- Davidson B. (1995). *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History*, London: Longman, 1995
- Dikop, Gimba (2006). Lecture Note on *African Traditional Society*, St Augustine's Major Seminary Jos
- Ferkiss, V. C (1987). 'Colonialism', in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* Vol 3, London: Chapman Ltd
- Hodder, B W (1978). *Africa Today: A Short Introduction to African Affairs*, London, Methuen & CO Ltd
- John Mark (2008). *Political Instability and Crisis in Africa: Problems and Prospects*, A Paper presented at the 12th NAMSPAN Conference held at St Augustine's Major Seminary, Jos
- Koning, Hans (1991). *Columbus: His Enterprise, Exploding the Myth*, Monthly Review Press?
- Mountjoy, Alan & Clifford Embleton (1966), *Africa: A Geographical Study*, London: Hutchinson Educational
- Rodney Walter (1976). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, London: Bogle 'Overture Publications
- Senghor L., (1976). *Prose and Poetry*, Trans. Keed & Wake, London: Heinemann
- Sigmudo Feliz (1998). "Columbus on the Couch", *In The New Internationalist*, No. 226, Australia: York Press
- Turner, Fredrick (1983). *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit against the Wilderness*, Rutgers University Press
- Woodward, R L (1985). *Central America: A Nation divided*, Oxford: Oxford University Press