

## **Who Owns Africa?: Neocolonialism, Investment, and the New Scramble**

Edited by Bekeh Utietiang Ukelina, Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press. 280pp €45.00 ISBN: 9789462703438

The edited volume, *Who Owns Africa?: Neocolonialism, Investment, and the New Scramble* argues that the control and exploitation of Africa by foreign powers continues to persist under the structures of neo-colonialism. The nine chapters, including the introduction and conclusion, methodically unpack how historical colonial relationships have transitioned into modern economic dependencies. This transition has mainly taken place through investment, aid, and supposedly mutual partnerships which frequently favour the foreign entities involved. Drawing from nine different scholars with expertise in history, political science, gender studies, and economics, the volume offers a multidisciplinary and balanced analysis of Africa's interactions with global powers, particularly focusing on the roles of China, the USA, and former European colonisers. Furthermore, the book's multi-disciplinary approach helps bridge historical analysis with contemporary political science, international relations, and economic theories, reflecting on works like Howard French's *China's Second Continent* and Deborah Brautigam's *The Dragon's Gift*, which discuss China's complex relationship with and possible exploitation of Africa. However, Bräutigam challenges the exploitation narrative, suggesting that China's approach is informed by its own experiences of development and is not necessarily exploitative which slightly contrasts with the perspective of *Who owns Africa?*

*Who Owns Africa?* maintains a cohesive narrative despite the varied academic backgrounds of its various

contributors. The structure of the book facilitates an understanding of the complex dynamics at play, starting from a historical perspective and moving towards contemporary issues. I found the chapters by Seth Asumah, Kudakwashe Chirambwi, Philip Murray and Paul Chuidza Banda and Gift Wasambo Kayira which discuss China's role particularly insightful, as they juxtapose the historical European scramble for Africa with the current new scramble for Africa where China is a key player. The inclusion of case studies on China and the USA provides a nuanced understanding of the modern-day "*scramble*" for Africa, making it a valuable resource for understanding the multi-faceted nature of neo-colonialism today. The volume highlights China's dominant role in the current new scramble for Africa. For instance, Kudakwashe Chirambwi's chapter on China's governmentality explores how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has facilitated China's integration into African economies, often bearing the semblance of mutual economic benefit. Also, Philip Murray's chapter sheds light on China's activities in the energy sector, particularly its investments in African oil production. He describes how Chinese oil companies, backed by state support, have aggressively pursued resource extraction to meet China's growing energy demands. This strategy has created an informal empire of influence, mirroring past European exploitation of Africa's natural resources.

Also interesting is Bekeh Ukelina's chapter on Doing Good: US Aid and Philanthropic colonialism, which traces the rich history of aid work and the focus on Africa and the emergence of foundations. This chapter provides a foundational basis for the start of a decolonial approach to aid work in Africa. Ukelina asserts that a decolonial approach to aid must begin by dismantling the paternalistic ideologies and power imbalances embedded in the global aid system. Central

to this process is recognizing that aid is frequently a tool for advancing the geopolitical, economic, and cultural dominance of donor nations rather than addressing the structural inequalities faced by African nations. This approach, he posits must involve a fundamental shift in how aid is conceptualized and implemented, from one of control and dependency to one of partnership and empowerment, grounded in respect for African sovereignty and led by African voices. This is in line with the work being done by the Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa ([CIHA blog](#)). The CIHA blog through its research and commentaries seeks to transform the phenomenon or notion of aid to Africa into equitable and respectful partnerships that challenge power imbalances, paternalism, and victimization. The work of the blog amplifies critical and religious perspectives, examining the intersections of faith, governance, gender, and race within colonial and post-colonial contexts

Furthermore, Ukelina's concluding chapter of *Who owns Africa?* titled *Reflections on Neocolonialism and the New Scramble*, revives the discussion around neo-colonialism, a term that has often been side-lined in favour of globalisation narratives that emphasise economic integration and cooperation. Drawing on the ideas of Kwame Nkrumah and other theorists of neocolonialism, Ukelina contends that these relationships perpetuate cycles of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. Kwame Nkrumah famously asserted that neocolonialism confers power without responsibility, leaving African states beholden to foreign powers (Nkrumah, 1965). The concluding chapter effectively situates contemporary economic relationships within a spectrum of exploitation that traces back to colonial times. This approach provides a theoretical framework for understanding how past forms of colonial domination have transformed into economic and political strategies that

continue to impede genuine self-determination and development in African states.

Additionally, the introductory and concluding chapters and aspects of other chapters of *Who owns Africa* provide a significant contribution to post-colonial studies as they extend the discussion of colonialism's legacy into the analysis of current affairs, challenging the often celebratory discourse surrounding globalisation's impact on Africa. Despite the political independence of African nations from European colonisers, the economic structures remain largely influenced and controlled by foreign powers. This analysis thus revisits Kwame Nkrumah's ideas on neo-colonialism and extends them into the current geopolitical context, including the implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative and the influence of Western powers through aid and direct investment. The volume dialogues with other seminal works in the field, such as Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, by discussing not just historical exploitation but also contemporary dynamics that hinder Africa's self-sufficiency. This volume also dialogues with, and expands upon, other works in post-colonial studies, adding layers to the conversations carried out by authors like Frantz Fanon. By incorporating perspectives on neo-colonialism's economic dimensions, *Who owns Africa?* complements Fanon's psychological and cultural insights into the effects of colonialism.

One of the strengths of *Who owns Africa* lies in its ability to draw clear parallels between modern neocolonialism and the colonial practices of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Ukelina's introduction and subsequent essays, such as John K. Marah's *Political Economy of Contemporary Africa*, focus on the structural continuities between colonial rule and contemporary foreign dominance. Marah emphasizes that the

mechanisms of exploitation have evolved but not disappeared; the language has shifted from “*civilizing missions*” to “*development aid*” and “*foreign investment*,” yet the extractive relationship between Africa and external powers remains the same. This historical continuity offers a compelling argument that Africa’s economic dependency is not accidental, but a calculated consequence of neocolonial strategies designed to maintain global dominance over African resources.

The edited volume also shifts the discussion from colonialism to neocolonialism as driven by foreign governments and multinational corporations that exploit Africa’s resources and labour under the notion of helping African economies grow. A particularly insightful section of the volume is Tokie Laotan–Brown’s chapter on the economic impact of the new scramble for Africa on West African women. Laotan–Brown explores how international economic pressures and trade agreements disproportionately affect women, especially those involved in small-scale agriculture and local markets. The influx of cheap Chinese goods has led to the displacement of indigenous women’s enterprises, forcing them into deeper economic marginalization. This focus on gendered impacts highlights the nuanced ways in which foreign involvement in Africa with the notions of economic growth exacerbates existing inequalities and widens the gap between global economic powers and local African communities.

While this edited volume covers the economic and political dimensions of neo-colonialism, it would have been enriched by some more focus on the cultural and social impacts of these relationships. Exploring how these economic policies influence African societies on cultural and individual levels could provide a more holistic view of neo-colonial impacts. *Who owns Africa?* in some cases assume a uniformity among African states and could benefit from a more nuanced

exploration of the varied ways different African countries navigate their geopolitical relationships. Furthermore, while it adequately critiques the roles of major state actors on the global stage, it could further explore the responsibilities of international organisations and NGOs within these neo-colonial frameworks. These stated variations could add depth to the discussion of agency and resistance within different political and cultural contexts in Africa. For example, in the edited volume, *Giving to Help, Helping to Give* (Aina 2013) Tade Aina highlights the inherently political nature of philanthropy, framing it as embedded within historical, cultural, and economic power structures that reflect and perpetuate relationships of domination and resistance.

Nonetheless, *Who owns Africa* offers an important contribution to post-colonial studies by actively challenging the prevailing narratives that depict Africa merely as a recipient of benevolent foreign aid and investment. It is an essential text in the study of historical and modern African affairs and post-colonial studies. For anyone engaged in international relations, or African studies, this volume challenges simplified narratives of development and aid offering a critical perspective that dominate discussions about Africa's place in the global economy and re-entering debates around sovereignty, agency, and the continuing impacts of colonial legacies in contemporary geopolitical strategies. For scholars and policymakers interested in the realities of African sovereignty and economic development, this edited volume provides compelling insights and calls for a re-evaluation of the relationships that shape these processes. Its multidisciplinary approach enriches the discourse, making it a must-read for anyone looking to understand the complexities of Africa's past and present relationships with global powers in a nuanced and historically informed context.

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