

THE EUROPEANS AND COLONIALISM AS HARBINGERS OF LIGHT?

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The fact that colonialism proved as ephemeral as any other institution created and nurtured by coercion is not in dispute. Rather, what has remained contentious is the argument by two distinct schools of thought. One maintaining that colonialism was a blessing to Africa while the other regards it as something close to a curse if not completely a curse. However, those in favor of colonialism have been mostly Eurocentric writers while those against are the scholars who are unrepentantly Afro Centric in nature. Writers like P.C Lloyd, Gann and Duignam have continuously maintained that colonialism was a blessing to Africa. In their work, they maintained that the difference between the conditions of an African society at the end of the Second World War was staggering. The colonial powers provided the infrastructure on which progress in the independence period has depended, a fairly efficient administrative machine reaching down to villages in the most remote areas.¹ On the other hand, the black Guyanese historian, Walter Rodney regards colonialism as exploitative, concluding that it was a one-armed bandit.³ Also according to M.H.Y Kaniki, Adiele Afigbo and Ali Mazuri, the positive effect of colonialism were by default. Originally, they were meant only to benefit the colonialist. They regarded these positive effects as unintended consequences.² Such are the two main opposing assessment of colonialism in Africa. So which line do we toe? And why have questions persisted on the legacies of colonialism in Africa? The study will use comparative analysis and will adopt thematic principles to distill information.

Keywords: Colonialism, Africa, European, Impact.

INTRODUCTION

Until the 16th century, it would appear that the Europeans were contented with largely remaining in their home and doing business but because of increase in science and industry, European sea farers began to wield their power to other world including West Africa.³ The first attempt of this voyages of discovery was an attempt which aided this extension launched by Henry the 8th sponsored by Spain. This led to European awareness of the existence of West African coast. The result was that as far back as 15th century they have had knowledge of the coast and the resources in West Africa. Thus between 16th and 18th centuries, what dominated the African history was the Atlantic slave trade⁴ As it is well known, it had adverse effect on the region. For one reason, it is agreed that the slave trade led to depopulation of Africa. Also that the business seriously affected the domestic economy of the region. It enriched the European nations and provided necessary capital for European industrialization.⁵ By the end of 18th century, the trade had made impact and was no longer profitable.⁶ There arose the need to find other ways of maintaining the contact between Europe and Africa. As it is well known, by the end of 18th century, the British was the naval master, the introduction of free trade means no way for the other nations. More importantly by 1850, Britain and France had occupied Mediterranean, the Red sea, the Batik and other world not just Africa and could sell their product. Up to 1880, there was no serious attempt by any of the European powers to take full possession of or administer any of the African coastal areas or the interior.⁷

The scramble and partition of Africa in the 1880s precisely from 1884 to 1885 at the Berlin Conference gave impetus to the colonization of Africa. By 1900, Africa had become subjected by the colonial powers. After the conquest and subjugation of African by the colonial powers, the formal occupation of the entire African continent was carried out by the European powers such as the French, Britain, Germany, Belgium and Italy. What took place between 1885 and 1906 was the military occupation and subjugation of West Africa to an administration they did not want, and whose imposition they often resisted bitterly. The lands so occupied by the European powers were described variously as colonies and protectorates.⁸

The imposition of foreign rule meant that Africa lost her hitherto existing sovereignty and this resulted in the concept known as colonialism. The European colonial powers despite the efforts of their explorers were for the most part ignorant of the peoples they were subjugating to their rule. Indeed, many of them sincerely believed that Africa was a dark continent and that they were bringing the first light of civilization to a benighted people, lost in primitive barbarity.⁹ Eurocentric writers have devoted themselves to the defense of colonialism in Africa by stating that its credit balance outweighs its debit account. Others, mainly African writers, have contended that the beneficial effects of colonialism in Africa were virtually nil. The Afro centric posture of the latter group is understandable because colonialism, generally speaking was a product of the unquenchable desire of Europe to expand its administrative and economic frontier. Furthermore, Europeans have continually claimed that they are “harbingers of light” to Africa while the Africans contend that Europeans turned Africa into “a dark continent”. It is this

conflicting view therefore on the activities of Europeans through colonialism that this paper attempts to discuss.

METHODOLOGY

The method adopted in this work is both descriptive and analysis of contending issues. The work will employ the qualitative and quantitative research method in its discussions. This method investigates the “why” and “how” of decision making and not just “what”, “where” and “when. Qualitatively the work attempt to make conclusions based on verifiable arguments and assertions. Where available the work will present figures and other statistical evidence to prove its points or arguments.

IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON AFRICA

Colonialism in Africa is believed to have both positive and negative impacts. These impacts as perceived are studied under the economic, political and socio-cultural perspectives. Politically, there was relative peace and stability during the period of colonialism in Africa, a departure from the immediate pre-colonial period when there were numerous wars and upheavals in various parts of Africa¹⁰. The Mfecane in southern Africa and the activities of the Swahili-Arab and Nyamweze traders such as Tippu Tip and Msiri in Central Africa, the Fulani Jihads and the rise of the Tukolor and Mandingo empires in the Western Sudan, the disintegration of the old Oyo and Asante empires in West Africa all happened prior to the era of colonialism.¹¹

Furthermore, according to Adu Boahen, there was the introduction of two new institutions- judiciary and bureaucracy or civil service ¹². These institutions which have been maintained since independence exist in Africa even today. These two institutions came with their inadequacies, for instance the introduction of the civil service witnessed the birth of bureaucracy in the continent. The birth of bureaucracy in African has in the most part being negative. This is because it is mostly associated with corruption. Colonialism was responsible for the emergence of a new type of African nationalism and Pan Africanism. This was also another accidental by-product rather than deliberate design of the colonial presence. The colonial masters did not set out to create African nationalism¹³ However if there were positive effects, the negative ones appear greater. Colonialism generated a great sense of anger, frustration and humiliation caused by some of the oppressive, discriminatory, humiliating, exploitive and despotic measures introduced by the colonial rulers. It is in this regard that one notes that one problem faced by rulers of independent African states, was how to replace the negative feeling of the average African towards the state with a nationalist feeling.

The new geo-political entity that emerged created problem in that many of the states were artificial creations. Some of their boundaries cut across pre-existing ethnic groups and kingdoms, causing social disruption and displacement. For example, the Bakongo are found separated by the boundaries of Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo and Gabon. Presently, some of the Ewe lives in Ghana, some in Togo and Republic of Benin, the Somali is shared among Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Djibouti; the Senufo are found in Mali, Cote D'ivore and Burkina Faso. This has led to intermittent and interminable border disputes between some African countries. These include the disputes between Sudan and Uganda, Nigeria and Cameroun, Ghana and Togo among others.¹⁴

The consequences of this arbitrary boundary creation is directly responsible for the chronic dispute which has characterized the post-colonial state in Africa ever since. This is because as Boahen asserts, due to the arbitrary nature of these boundaries, each African nation state is made up of people with different language, origin and cultures. Hence the problems of nation-building posed by such a medley of people have proved intractable.¹⁵ This negative impact have persistently affected Africa since independence.

In a related development, the arbitrary and artificial Colonial divisions of states have created unequal natural resources and economic potentialities among states. This however has resulted in some states having very long stretches of sea coast, others like Mali, Niger, Burkina-Faso, Zambia, Chad, Uganda, Malawi are land locked, others have rich natural resources such as Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, Zaire, while others such as Chad, Niger, Burkina-Faso are not fortunate.¹⁶ Besides, there is the duplication of boundaries in that some states have numerous boundaries to police while some have just one boundary to police. This has endangered national security and poses serious problems such as smuggling in these states.¹⁷ Hence, development problems posed by these limited fertile land and lack of access to the sea are the creation of European colonialism.

It has also been variously argued that colonialism weakened indigenous systems of government. As Sa'ad Abubakar aptly pointed out that most of the African states were acquired as a result of the deposition of the then rulers which "certainly brought into disrepute the whole business of chieftaincy, especially during the period before the first world war".¹⁸ The colonial rulers appointed chiefs from among the people who had no right to traditional stools. These individuals were turned into administrative officers while the colonial masters became overlords to these appointees. A development which meant loss of political power and freedom on the part of Africans. As Walter Rodney contends, Africa political states lost their power and independence irrespective of whether they were big empires or small entities within a short period.¹⁹ Colonialism also brought into existence in Africa, a full time or standing army. There were probably no standing armies in Africa apart from Dahomey which had a standing army with its unique female wing, the famous Amazons. Consequently, one of the major political problem facing African states has been military intervention in the political system of Africa through coup d'etates. This has in most cases created a debilitating dichotomy between civilians and soldiers

and has in most parts introduced the equally debilitating concept of ethnicity which lays emphasis on clan and regional superiority rather than on unity.²⁰

One other important political impact of colonialism was the mentality it created among Africans that public property belonged not to the people but to the white colonialists and should therefore not be taken care of.²¹ In Nigeria there is the saying that “Government’s property is nobody’s property.” This mentality was the direct product of the remote and esoteric nature of the colonial administration and the elimination of an overwhelming majority of Africans both educated and uneducated from the decision-making process²². Even after almost fifty-seven years of independence, this mentality is still with many Africans.

The loss of African sovereignty is an important negative impact of colonialism and with it the loss of right of Africans to shape their destiny or deal directly with the outside world, thereby depriving African States of the opportunity of acquiring experience in the conduct of opinion. As early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the states of Africa such as Benin and the Congo could send embassies and missions to the courts of European kings. Even until as late as the 1890s, some African states could deal with their European counterparts as equal. The Asantehene, the king of Matabele land and the Queen of Madagascar sent diplomatic missions to the Queen of England in the 1890s.²³ The seventy -year period of colonialism in Africa was the period which witnessed tremendous and decisive developments and changes in both capitalist and socialist countries. Had African been free, she could have benefitted from these phenomenal changes, but colonialism completely robbed her of these opportunities.

In the economic sphere, colonialism it is argued has some positive impacts on Africa. These positive impacts include inter-alia; the provision of infrastructure, motor roads, railway, the telegraphy, the telephone which had not existed in pre-colonial Africa.²⁴ From the onset as Njoku puts it, the colonial authorities had realized that the traditional means of transport could not sustain and promote an expanding market economy. This was so because they were inefficient and costly and did not favour exploitation.²⁵ It also facilitated the movement of goods and services in and out of Africa²⁶.

A positive impact of colonialism was the introduction of currency and banking. An important aim of colonial fiscal policy in most parts of Africa was to monetize the economy so as to integrate it into the imperial capitalist economy²⁷. As soon as the British monetary system had been successfully introduced (following the monetization of the local currencies) the need to establish European owned and managed banks to control the use of the newly introduced coin and currency and thereby regulate the cheque system quickly arose.²⁸ This was achieved through the creation of the British Bank of West Africa (BBWA)

Equally, another positive impact of colonialism on African economy is the development of some of the rich natural resources of the continent which was attended by some significant success.²⁹ This goes to say that it was Europeans who during the colonial period helped realize the full

mineral potential of Africa thus leading to the boom in the mining industry. The potentials of agriculture were also realized through the cultivation of cash crops such as coffee, tobacco, cotton, groundnuts among others. This development helped to give a boost to the financial strength of states like Ghana which became a leading producer of cocoa in the 1950s. This growth in agricultural production also led to the infrastructural development of most African countries and thus the rise and development between African and the rest of the world. Locally an increase in cash crop production led to the commercialization of land which made it an asset. It was said that before the advent of colonial rule and the increase in cash crops production huge tracts of land in many parts of Africa were either under populated or underutilized. However, the growing of cash crops changed the social status of the rural Africans through the acquisition of wealth.³⁰ Although it must be noted that most of the roads and railways were constructed not to open up the country directly but merely to connect the areas with mineral deposits and potentialities for the export of cash crop through to the sea ports to Europe. In this regard, the English historian D.K Field house aptly observed that it was, “to link internal areas of production to the world commodity market.”³¹ Thus such infrastructures were meant to facilitate the exploitation of the resources of the colonies and not to promote the overall economic development of Africa.

Given this covert intention Industrialization was not encouraged by the colonialists. Consequently, products such as even matches, candles, cigarettes, limes, edible oils etc. that could have been produced in Africa, were imported from Europe. Thus from its earliest years the African continent became a dumping ground for European finished goods. Not only was industrialization neglected but such industries and crafts as had existed in Africa in pre-colonial times were almost destroyed. It should be emphasized that Africa’s pre-colonial industries produced all that Africans needed including building materials, soap, beads, iron tools, pottery, cloth. Had these manufactures been encouraged and promoted through the modernization of productive techniques, Africa could not only have increased her output but could have steadily improved her technology³². Furthermore, no attempts were made to diversify the agricultural economy of the colonies. On the contrary, by 1935, the production of a single or at best two cash crops had become the rule - cocoa in Ghana, groundnut in Senegal and Gambia, cotton in Sudan, coffee and cotton in Uganda, and so on.³³

This malicious economic policy of the colonialist prompted A.W Gardinail, one of the more humane colonial officers in the 1930s, to lament that Ghana could have by itself produced half “the fresh fish, rice, maize, and other meal, beans, salted and fresh meat, edible oils, spices (imported), and would have saved two hundred thousand pounds”.³⁴ Colonialism also put a stop to inter-African trade. Before the colonial era, a great deal of trading went on between Africans states, as long- distance and caravan trading activities was a very common feature of the economies of Africa. But with the establishment of colonial rule, such inter-African short and long-distance trade was discouraged if not banned altogether. According to Walter Rodney, the arbitrary political boundaries of each colony were generally taken to mean the limit of the economic potentialities. The elimination of this age-long inter-African trade and commercial

relations prevented the strengthening of old links and the development of the new ones which could have been beneficial to the Africans. Africa was also prevented from developing direct trading links with other parts of the globe like India and China.³⁵ In the light of the above, despite the arguments of P.C.Lloyd, Gann and Duignan, the colonial era was a period of ruthless economic exploitation of Africa.

In the social-cultural sphere, some positive impacts have been attributed to colonialism. One such positive social-cultural impact of colonialism was the overall increase in population of Africa during the colonial period.³⁶ This increase in population was attributable to the establishment of an economic base. This was attained through the network of roads and railways which led to the movement of food to famine areas and allowed campaigns against epidemic diseases to directly extend to the rural areas. The growth in population led to an improvement in the quality of life particularly for those living in the urban centers. The urban centres witnessed the provision of hospitals, dispensaries, pipe-borne water, sanitary facilities, better housing and the abolition of such practices as domestic slavery by the colonial rulers as well as the increase in employment opportunities.³⁷ This improved the social conditions of Africans.

Furthermore, the introduction of Western Education and Christianity had far-reaching social effects on the traditional African society. The introduction of modern education for example led to an increase in the number of westernized educated African elite. This elite now constitute the ruling Oligarchy and the back bone of the civil service of African states.³⁸ The spread of education was achieved through the establishment of primary, secondary and tertiary schools fashioned after western systems. The spread of Christianity in itself was responsible for the abolition of obnoxious cultural and traditional practices of African societies like the killing of twins and slave immolation. This on the whole were commendable positive impacts of colonialism on Africans. Colonialism also gave Africa a *lingua franca* for each colony or set of colonies.³⁹ This allowed the official and business language of the colonizers to become the main means of communication between the numerous linguistic groups which dot the landscape of Africa. Besides this, another positive social impact on Africa was the new social structure that colonialism introduced into some parts of Africa. This social structure was based on individual merit and achievement as a vehicle for social mobility rather than on the traditional social structure which was based on birth. This has been attributed inter alia to the abolition of slavery, introduction of western education, the expansion of cash crops which facilitated the acquisition of wealth. Thus within the new social environment created by colonialism, domestic slaves and ordinary people could rise to prominence.⁴⁰

Given these positive attributes of colonialism, why has questions persisted on the legacies of colonialism? In the first place, the increase in population which has been attributed to colonialism may not be true after all. This is because the population rise in Africa may be due to the continuous pull of young men and women to the urban centers given the pressing need for education and employment and the push from areas due to famine, epidemic, poverty and taxation⁴¹. The lopsided facilities concentrated in the urban centers where the Europeans lived is

largely responsible for this drift from the rural areas to the urban centers thus widening the gap between the rural and urban centers even up to present in Africa.

On the provision of social services by the Europeans one must note that these services were either grossly inadequate or unevenly distributed as they too were established in the urban centers where they served colonial interests. As Walter Rodney, observed, the British colonial government maintained segregated hospital services in which about 4000 Europeans in Nigeria in the 1930s had 12 modern hospitals, while the African's population of at least 40 Million had 52 hospitals.⁴² The western Education provided during the colonial period was not only grossly inadequate and unevenly distributed but were badly oriented and hence, could not have been very beneficial to Africa. In the words of Chinweizu; "their education sought to indoctrinate Africans with the colonizers ideology, it sought to internalize in African consciousness, the values of the colonizers, education that sought to automatically uphold and habitually employ the colonizers view point in all matters against everything African, education that sought to withhold the memory of our true African past and substitute instead an ignorant shame for whatever travesties Europe chose to present as an African past. It was an education that left Africans constipated with jargons and dazed with confusion"⁴³ An experience he noted which was thoroughly disillusioning. In this regard how can Europeans claim to be "harbingers of light"?

The negative impact on the African traditional religion (ATR) as regards African beliefs in issues such as death, rain making and sickness are further pointers to the fact that the colonial era shook the foundations of African traditional beliefs societies thus bringing in its trail a sense of uncertainty, frustration and insecurity,⁴⁴ The consequences have been an unending quest by Africans for anything European, while seeing anything African as being "local or native". The impact of a *lingua franca* as promoted through the western educational system has the regrettable consequence of preventing the development of some of the indigenous languages into national languages for Africa.⁴⁵

Finally, colonialism planted in Africans new and wrong orientation of themselves as a degraded and humiliated race. In the words of A.A. Mazrui, "Africans are not necessarily the most brutalized of peoples, but they are almost certainly the most humiliated in modern history"⁴⁶. A system that humiliated a people in their land has no right to claim in whatsoever sought to be 'harbingers of light'. One is thus forced to subscribe to the view of A. Adu. Boahen that, Africa's heart was beating except that the Europeans were deafened by their own prejudices, preconceptions, arrogance and jingoism to hear it⁴⁷. The need for education and employment led to rural-urban migration in an alarming rate, culminating in the total neglect of the rural areas which is still evident today. Again, the migrants did not find the urban centers to be safe and rich as they had expected. Most of them found themselves crowded into the suburb and shanty towns where unemployment and crimes became their lot⁴⁸. So, colonialism not only worsened rural life, it also bastardized urban living conditions. The consequences of the appalling urban conditions were felt directly in the aftermath of the second world war as the vanguard of the nationalist movement was formed by elements from this group.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

Probably, no subject has become as controversial in historical scholarship as the impact of colonialism on Africa. To some writers on Africa such as Grann Duignan, Perham Lloyd, its impact was on balance either an outright blessing or at worst not harmless for Africa. On the other hand, Africa scholars have mainly contended that the benefit of colonialism in Africa was almost nil. One cannot however outrightly write off the colonial impact in the political, social, economic and cultural sphere of Africa. Colonialism did have some positive impacts, as stated in the work. But on the whole it would appear on balance that the negative aspects of colonialism largely overshadow whatever purported benefits that made Europeans being referred to as ``harbingers of light`` to Africa. In fact, the positive impacts were by and large, rather accidental by-product of activities or measures intended to promote the interest of the colonizers in other wards they were the outcome of changes which were inherent in the colonial system itself.

Thus from the above analysis one can say unequivocally that, prior to colonialism, Africa had her system that she judiciously followed in her own pace to develop, but the coming of the Europeans and colonialism forced on Africa, an alien system so strange to the continent that “darkness” nearly eclipsed Africa. Hence, the hitherto shining political, economic, social and cultural lights in Africa were almost blinded and quenched by European exploitative activities, which turned Africa into the “dark continent”. Seen from this light, the claim by Europeans to be the “harbingers of light” to Africa cannot be effectively substantiated.

END NOTES

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