

HERMENEUTICAL DIMENSIONS OF AFRICA'S COLONIZATION: A ROOT CAUSE OF PERENNIAL UNDERDEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

One of the endemic effects of the years of European colonization of Africa, complemented by the subjugative method of evangelization of the African territory, is the fact that Africans completely lost confidence in their capabilities, values and standards, accepting the contrived notion that only European tastes and values are worth aspiring to. Hermeneutical perspectives were carefully devised to rub in the impression that the African was, *ab initio*, imperiled by divine fate, and could not possibly amount to any good. In particular, these debilitating hermeneutical perspectives, by deriding the facilities in the African environment, have set, for the African, aspirations towards Europeanization, with a deep-seated intention to demean and diminish everything African; a situation which has grossly militated against African development. To make matters worse, European-influenced tastes have created in the African an intense craving for foreign goods, which has left Africa with a desperate import-oriented economy; a situation which has constituted a colossal drain on the African economy. This paper examines deeply the hermeneutical dimensions to Africa's intrinsic colonization as the major cause of Africa's perennial under-development, and proposes modalities for releasing Africa and Africans from a perpetual colonial mentality which is responsible for the non-exploration of the vast resources and opportunities in the continent, culminating in her perennial state of backwardness and under-development.

Keywords: Hermeneutic, Mentality, Colonialism, Economy, Development, Import.

Introduction:

The European incursions into African territories during the early and mid-19th century was multifaceted and strategic, and they have played a significant role in the persistent conflicts and challenges that continue to plague the continent today. This is largely due to the fact that the so-called independence granted to African nations during the period of indigenous agitation for self-rule was, in reality, anything but genuine independence. Rather, it marked a shift in the methods of orchestrated subjugation—an opportunity to install Eurocentric local leaders whose primary function was to facilitate and sustain the continued exploitation of Africa by European powers. The background picture painted of the multiple crises of the concerted European scrambling in the Africa territory by Meredith (2006) could not be any more captivatingly vivid:

During the scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, European powers staked claims to virtually the entire continent. At meetings in Berlin, Paris, London and other capitals, European statesmen and diplomats bargained over the separate spheres of interest they intended to establish there. Their knowledge of the vast African hinterland was slight. Hitherto, Europeans had known Africa more as a coastline than a continent; their presence had been confined mainly to small, isolated enclaves on the coast used for trading purposes; only in Algeria and in Southern Africa had more substantial European settlement taken root. The maps used to carve up the African continent were mostly inaccurate; large areas were described as *terra incognita* (unknown land). In some cases, African societies were rent apart: the Bakongo were partitioned between French Congo, Belgian Congo and Portuguese Angola; Somaliland was carved up between Britain, Italy and France. In all, the new boundaries cut through some 190 culture groups. In other cases, Europe's new colonial territories enclosed hundreds of diverse and independent groups, with no common history, culture, language or religion. Nigeria, for example, contained as many as 250 ethno-linguistic groups. Officials sent to Belgian Congo eventually identified six thousand chiefdoms there. Some kingdoms survived intact; the French retained monarchy in Morocco and in Tunisia; the British ruled Egypt in the name of a dynasty of foreign monarchs founded in 1811 by an Albanian mercenary serving in the Turkish army. In the Sahel, new territories were established across the great divide between the desert regions of the Sahara and the belt of tropical forests to the South - Sudan, Chad and Nigeria - throwing together Muslim and non-Muslim peoples in latent hostility. As the haggling in Europe over African territory continued, land and peoples became little more than pieces on a chessboard (pp.1,2).

It is no longer difficult to see where and how the foundation for unending crisis, conflicts and perennial underdevelopment was laid in the African region through the instrumentality of the European colonial explorers.

Far-reaching hostilities arising from the ethno-linguistic and religio-cultural diversities were deliberately instituted by the European imperialists to ensure that, even long after their direct rule had ended, the African people were kept busy servicing the outcome of the persistent conflicts and hardly able to direct attention at the plundering roles of the imperialists. The hostilities eventually took center stage in African nations till today, leading to armed conflicts that have claimed millions of lives and led to wanton destruction of hardly quantifiable resources in African nations, while, as clearly envisaged, providing huge markets for European arms, ammunition and war personnel, such as jet bomber pilots. In Nigeria, as in other African countries, the situation has remained one of unending conflicts, separatist agitations to undo what the Europeans have done over a hundred years ago, with the resulting resistance from the regions largely favoured and benefitting from the uncanny contraptions presented as nations. Elections in African countries till today are marred by over-whelming ethno-religious interests, leading to a situation in which even invalids are foisted upon the people, for the simple reason that they satisfy the ethno-religious sentiments of the larger and more violent groups. These African leaders whose ascendance to power has been massively influenced by their European overlords work hard to implement the exploitative interests of their masters to the detriment of Africa's overall development.

Induced Racism as Root of Perennial Conflicts

It is already well-known that right from the onset of their explorations in Africa, the Europeans began to set the premise for perennial conflicts in the African region, as a way of preventing internal cohesion for development, while also, with the escalating conflicts creating perpetual market for European arms and ammunition in Africa. Siollun (2021) lucidly explained that:

British stereotyping of Hausas as a martial race led to a deliberately racialized military recruitment policy that would have long-term consequences for Nigeria's military and political stability over the next 150 years. Glover recruited Hausas as fighting troops while other ethnic groups, many of whom were from areas near the southern coastline and whom the British regarded as less-warlike, were used to perform menial duties as porters and interpreters. The diaries, memoirs and recollections of British military and colonial officers are replete with a fascination and admiration for the Hausas as a warrior or martial race. A British army officer boasted that Hausas 'form the best fighting material in Africa: they are short, sturdy-looking men and excellent marchers'. While another Briton spoke of their 'force of character, combined with a physical strength which is, I believe, unsurpassed by any people in the world, that makes the Hausa the efficient soldier he is'. These impressions were reinforced by the history of success in warfare that Muslim states acquired in West Africa. The British regarded Hausas as natural warriors whose religion imposed discipline on them and who were members of a culture accustomed to battle and victory. (pp. 106,107).

This attitude of raising and empowering one ethnic group as veritable instruments for the conquer, subjugation and perennial domination of the others is a common, well-known philosophy of the Europeans, as a way of sustaining their domineering influence over a region, by the use of local militias, long after they have physically withdrawn from a community. Siollun went ahead to assert that:

The British habit of identifying martial races was not unique to West Africa. In its other colonies, Britain had similarly identified races that it considered to be imbued with martial credentials, recruited them into the colonial armies, then used them to conquer other ethnic groups far away from their homeland. The Sikhs were the preferred martial race in India, and the Gukhas were their counterpart in Nepal. Hausas were chosen in West Africa because the majority of British military campaigns at the onset in the area were against non-Hausa and non-Islamic ethnic groups with whom the Hausas had no allegiance. (p. 107).

It is important to point out that Siollun's reference to Hausas in the quotations above is, in actuality, a reference to the period after the 1803 invasion of the Northern part of Nigeria by the Fulani jihadists led by Usman dan Fodio. Kukah (1993) has lucidly explained that the activity of this Fulani jihadist scholar led to the infiltration, assimilation and eventual domination of the Hausa communities in Nigeria by the more radical Fulani war mongers from different parts of West Africa, a situation which has not abated even presently. Kukah added that;

The Jihad of Usman dan Fodio (1754 – 1817), the Fulani scholar who founded the Sokoto caliphate, has been the focal point of the history of Islam in Nigeria, but the undue emphasis on its centrality and dominance has become a source of consternation among other Muslims and scholars in what made up the former Northern Nigeria. (p. 1).

It is equally important to note that when the British came into Nigeria and witnessed the ravaging conquests by these Fulani war mongers, which was already sweeping through the country from the North and swiftly headed down South, rather than confront the Fulanis, which would have resulted in heavy casualties among the British, the British instead chose to have a truce with the Fulanis whom they substantially empowered militarily and

politically to permanently dominate Nigeria long after the withdrawal of the British. Lennox (1905) confirmed that this policy of empowering ethnic militias over the entire populace formed the basis of recruitment in the Nigerian army;

The reason that men are mostly recruited from far away north is because they make far better soldiers...and also because majority of the fighting which now takes place occurs against the tribes in the South, and it is of great advantage to have men who are in no way connected with those against whom the fighting is taking place. (p. 49).

This lopsided recruitment policy in the Nigerian armed forces, originated and instituted by the British, is still in force even until presently, long after the so-called independence in the country. A salient point that must be taken note of here is that as early as 1905, the British in Nigeria had started empowering the Hausa-Fulani militias against southern communities in Nigeria. This objective has hardly reduced today, neither has the alliance between the British and the Hausa -Fulani diminished in any way, all the while achieving the deeply conceived intention of total subjugation and domination of the southern part of the country.

Hermeneutical Colonialism as Evangelistic Policy

That the colonialism of Africa, the art of perpetual domination and exploitation of Africa by the Europeans, has many facets and dimensions, one of which is hermeneutical, is what is being explored in this paper. Hornby (2010) defines hermeneutics as “the area of study that analyzes and explains written texts” (p.703). Quite evidently, one of the groups of Europeans that invaded the African territory in the 19th and 20th centuries were the Christian missionaries. Meredith (2005) observes that:

Through the efforts of Christian missionaries, literacy and primary education were slowly introduced throughout Africa South of the Sahara. By 1910, about 16000 European missionaries were stationed there. With government support, a handful of secondary schools were established, becoming the nurseries of the new African elites; Achimota College in the Gold Coast; the Ecole Normale William Ponty in Senegal; Makerere in Uganda; Kaduna in Nigeria; Lovedale and Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. North Africa’s first Western Style University opened in Cairo in 1909. The small educated elites that colonial rule produced in the 1920’s and 1930’s were preoccupied primarily with their own status, seeking to gain for themselves a role in administration in preference to the chiefs whom they regarded as rivals for power. They paid little attention to the welfare of the rural masses. Few espoused nationalist ambitions. (p.7).

While it is important to acknowledge the contributions of the Christian missionaries in the education of the rural populace, it is equally vital to recognize their roles in the actual formation of the developmental ethos of the people. Particularly noteworthy is the conquest and subjugation motive in the evangelistic methodologies of the missionaries which created in the African a deep-seated revulsion and disdain for everything African. In this regard, Oladunjoye (2005) has observed that:

Some scholars have seen Christianity as a bulldozer leveling the jungle of the uncivilized world in order to allow the builders of imperialism to come and build. Even some missionaries taught that Africans had to be westernized before becoming Christians. Desmond Tutu on the other hand sees the attitude of the colonial interpreters of the Bible as exploitation through colonialism and neocolonialism. The Africans were taught to despise everything African at the time of conversion. (p. 5).

In reality, it is difficult for the present-day African scholar to extricate the European missionaries from the ills of the European colonialists and imperialists. In this regard, Pratt (1997) has lucidly argued that;

In the early phases of Western expansion, the churches were allies of the colonial process. They spread under the protection of the colonial powers. They benefitted from the expansion of the empire. In return, they rendered special service to Western imperialism by legitimizing it and accustoming their new adherents to accept compensatory expectations of an external reward for terrestrial misfortunes, including colonial experience. (p. 3).

In other words, the missionaries taught the members of their new community of faith that it was good that they wilfully submitted themselves to all manners of misfortunes and afflictions, including the misfortunes and afflictions brought upon them by the colonial and imperialist overlord who were deliberately hatching their evil plans of empowering the Northern ethnic militias to subdue and permanently exercise dominion over them. The missionaries raised and interpreted their Scriptures to provide succour and promise of eternal well-being to those who wilfully submit and surrender themselves to be so subjugated and afflicted. And sadly, it is this situation that has laid the foundation for the perennial exploitation and subjugation of the members of this community of faith even until presently. And ironically, the Israelites, from whom this whole evangelistic expedition originated, do not share in this retrogressive attitude of passive admiration and helpless intercession for one’s persecutors, for if they did, they would by now have been wiped out from the face of the earth and consigned to the obsolete pages of history by their perennial aggressors.

On the whole, two components of this hermeneutical colonialism deserve mention here. One is the deliberate reading of the Biblical text to imperil the African to divine fate. The second is the deliberate streams of hermeneutical expeditions which present everything African as unacceptable to God, in preference to things belonging to the European environment. In respect of the first, Ukpong (2005) has lucidly discussed the biblical text, Gen. 9: 18 - 27, in which a hermeneutical perspective is being advanced that a perennial curse was inflicted against Africans. It was the story about the family of Noah after the flood, in which Noah drank of the wine of his farming endeavour and got drunk, and lay down naked, whereupon, one of his sons, Ham, saw him naked and instead of covering him, disdained him, reporting the incident to his brothers who then took a wrapper and went backwards and covered their father. Noah, on waking up and realizing what had happened, pronounced a curse, not on Ham, but on Canaan who was not yet born at the time. Ukpong explains that;

A fifth century Midrash on this narrative places Noah's curse directly on Ham, and adds: "Your seed will be ugly and dark skinned". Also, the 6th century CE Babylonian Talmud states, "The descendants of Ham are cursed by being black and are sinful with degenerate progeny". From these came the idea that Africans are black because of the curse of Ham. (p. 41).

It is actually texts like this, along with their streams of pejorative, often uncoordinated exegesis, that have lent support to the impression of Africa being imperiled by divine fate. And the reference to 'degenerate progeny' seems to support the same Western-induced manipulation of African leaders to act, not in the interest of the masses whose welfare they have taken an oath to pursue, but in the interest of the exploitative capitalist West.

The second component of the hermeneutical colonialism noteworthy is the pronounced intention to despise and denigrate everything African. This is particularly in the area of African indigenous technology and health care administration. For the avoidance of doubt, Africa, like the other continents of the world had their emerging, albeit primitive, technical innovations. These innovations, if they had not been despised and denigrated, would have gradually attained more acceptable forms through, as in other regions of the world, successive stages of technical refining as more knowledge and expertise were gained. However, vestiges of these elements of African technology still persist presently, although having been branded with all sorts of pejorative descriptions by the Eurocentric missionaries, they have continued to elicit a high degree of suspicion, and for that reason, have continued to attract very low patronage. Few instances of such indigenous initiatives need to be mentioned here.

1. Curative Indigenous Roots and Herbs:

It is worthy of note with immense gratitude that indigenous formulations of African roots and herbs for curative purposes are still in existence, and are gradually being granted approval by government agencies in charge of certifying foods and drugs as safe for public consumption. Equally notable is the fact that the formulators of these drugs are largely people who have not benefitted from Western education, and have only their indigenous skills and knowledge to rely on. In quite a number of cases, these formulations have proven quite efficacious in areas where orthodox drugs have proved ineffective. In this regard, Idowu (1973) affirms that:

Traditional doctors in Africa often claim that they are taught medicine by divinities or more generally, in dreams or in trances, or during meetings with spirits in forests... That is why divine and ancestral sanctions are considered necessary before and during preparation and application of medicine. (pp. 200,201).

The fact, in any case, is that Africans, as people of other continents, especially Asians, do have their own indigenous medical formulations which differ from the orthodox medicine, and in parts of Asia, especially India and China, the indigenous, unorthodox formulations have been elevated to levels of acceptance and legitimacy where they are used as alternatives or complements to the orthodox medicine.

2. Rainmaking and Rain-withholding:

These practices pervade the entire African space till presently. Admittedly, this is an area in which very little research has been undertaken. Unfortunately, this is one of those areas in which the effect of the Euro Christian sentiments have led to an outright, total aversion and suspicion. The sustenance of this level of suspicion with hardly any study simply amounts to vestiges of colonial instinct.

3. Detection of Culprits and Divination:

Till presently, African spiritual practitioners have the capabilities to detect culprits of criminal activities when consulted. Divination procedures are engaged to uncover the facts behind mysterious occurrences.

Economic Implications of the Obsession for European Tastes

The denigration of Africa and its resources by the European colonial overlords was part of a clearly contrived scheme to de-market Africa, while finding markets in Africa for European products. Thus, Rodney (1973) points out that:

Imperialism meant capital expansion. It meant that European (and North America and Japanese) capitalists were forced by internal logic of their competitive system to seek abroad in less developed countries opportunities to control raw material supplies, to find markets and to find profitable fields of investment. The centuries of trade with Africa contributed greatly to that state of affairs where European capitalists were faced with the necessity to expand in a big way outside of their national economies. There were certain areas in which European investment was meant to get immediate super profits. The mines of South Africa, the loans to North African governments, and the building of the Suez Canal were in that category. The Suez Canal also ensured the greater profitability of European investment in, and trade with India. However, Africa's greatest value to Europe at the beginning of the imperialist era was as a source of raw materials such as palm products, groundnuts, cotton, rubber. Imperialism is essentially an economic phenomena, and it does not necessarily lead to direct political control or colonization. However, Africa was a victim of colonization. (pp. 162, 163).

The objective was basically to supplant and substitute African tastes and values with the European in order to create in Africa a perpetual European market directly controlled by European factors. Africa remained the exporter of industrial raw materials, the prices of which are determined by European merchants. These raw materials are eventually processed and re-imported into Africa at exorbitant prices. To sustain their markets in Africa, these European lords have, even in the decades after the so-called independence, maintained their interference in the politics of these African nations to ensure that only leaders agreeable to the pro-capitalist-West policies would be allowed to be in power in the African nations. These pro-West African leaders ensure that African nations remain a dumping ground for European commodities. For that reason, development in Africa is kept below par to sustain the trend. For instance, over sixty years since the discovery of crude oil in Nigeria, pro-colonial governments in Nigeria have scuttled the establishment of functional refineries, in spite of the huge revenue from sale of crude oil. The idea is to perpetuate the flourishing market in Nigeria for imported processed petroleum products. The same applies to power generation in Nigeria which has been deliberately sustained below demand levels to sustain the market for power generating plants.

Decolonizing Africa for Productivity and Development

The real challenge facing African nations today is how to truly disentangle themselves from perennial dependence on European powers—a condition that has resulted in massive capital flight from the continent. In other words, how can Africa attain genuine independence and generate the internal resources necessary for sustainable development?

To begin with, it has become imperative for Africa to critically reappraise its developmental ethos in order to position itself on a genuine path toward holistic growth. At present, many African nations are burdened by crippling debt, accumulated over decades of trade imbalances and exploitative foreign aid and loan agreements. It is, therefore, undeniably essential that, for Africa to achieve economic survival and autonomy, it must break free from the exploitative grip of Western capitalist systems.

This process of disentanglement clearly has a hermeneutical dimension. It begins with a shift in perception: understanding that utilizing Africa's natural resources and indigenous knowledge for creative and practical purposes is not an act of mysticism. For example, using naturally occurring roots and herbs to control weather phenomena is no more magical than using a metallic mobile phone to communicate instantly with someone hundreds of kilometers away. Both rely on systems of knowledge—different, yet equally valid and rooted in their respective worldviews.

The colonialist orientation that has made the African detest everything African in favour of everything European has also been firmly built into the educational system, such that people literally spend ages studying what can only be found in Europe, and are therefore fundamentally prepared to be of no practical relevance to the African environment. This also is an aspect of Euro-inflicted neo-colonialism that has survived for too long. African educational system needs now to be completely overhauled and redesigned to emphasize the exploration of the African environment for purposes of greater economic development.

Conclusion

European colonization of Africa was, in reality, a calculated mechanism of debilitation designed to produce generations of Africans who despise and denigrate everything African, and who regard the tastes, values, and environment of Europe as the ultimate ideal. A significant aspect of this colonization was its **hermeneutical**

dimension—the strategic use of textual and doctrinal interpretations to justify and reinforce the denigration of Africa and its environmental resources.

This internalized colonial mentality has driven the pursuit of foreign tastes and preferences, resulting in heavy import bills for African nations. Over time, this pattern has contributed significantly to the continent's mounting debt burden. It has therefore become imperative to dismantle the colonial components embedded in the African psyche in order to inspire a genuine appreciation and pursuit of African-made goods, services, and values.

The remnants of this colonial ideology are still evident in many African educational systems and must be consciously deconstructed. Education in Africa should no longer focus primarily on studying realities that exist only in Europe. Instead, it must be reoriented toward exploring the African environment and harnessing its potential for increased productivity and sustainable development.

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