

# Colonialism in Africa: A Revisionist Perspective

by

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## Abstract

This article is not an adventure story or juxtaposition of historical events, nor is it an indictment against colonialism in Africa. Rather, it is an African-based approach that puts under the critical spotlight colonialism in Africa to account for the hallmarks of its societies' fortified political and economic structures before any Western intrusion. This evidences the *revisionist* and *deconstructionist* perspectives that are used jointly to debunk the dubious and quick conclusions of Western scholars on the outcome of colonialism in Africa regarding authenticity. This article will ultimately give useful details about what needs to be known and understood about the powerful systems of Africa prior to colonialism, its cultural wealth and economic stability, seen from an African perspective, free of exaggeration or intellectual dishonesty.

**Keywords:** Africa, colonialism, revisionist, authenticity, perspective.

## Introduction

The history of the African continent is closely related to world history. Many events occurred and influenced its equilibrium. The same is true for imperialism and colonialism:

'Imperialism' means the practice, the theory, and attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism', which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements in a distant territory. (Said)

Said insists on the process of indoctrination in theorizing colonialism. On the contrary, other critics mainly focus on other categories like invasion, imposition of power, naked exploitation and related impacts to define it. In fact, the outcomes of colonialism in Africa have caused a lot of ink to flow. Its impacts on the continent are generally seen from different perspectives based on value-judgment rather than objectivity that should help dissect any discrepancy. Besides, nothing has become more controversial today than the issue of colonialism in Africa in relation to *Eurocentrism* and African perspective. Traditionally, Eurocentrist viewpoints play down African values and categories for Western hegemony, which treads on universalism and diversity.

[If] Eurocentrism was just the expression of European ideas, values, literature, and so forth, there would be no problem. However, the imposition of Eurocentrism as the only way to view reality amounts to ideological slavery and therefore must be rejected. (Asante, 2004: 237)

In his article, “The Case for Colonialism”, the Western theorist, Bruce Gilley not only extols the virtues of colonialism in Africa, but advocates its renewal in some areas for the sake of ‘international order’.

[The] most serious threat to human rights and world peace was not colonialism – as the United Nations declared in 1960, but anti-colonialism. (2017:7)

While Gilley praises colonialism, Adu Boahen queries the satisfactory balance sheet drawn by Western thinkers.

Many European and Eurocentric historians –such as L. H. Gann, P. Duignan, Margery Perham, Peter Lloyd and, more recently, D. K. Fieldhouse- have contended that its impacts are both positive and negative, with the positive aspects far outweighing the negative ones. (1987:94)

It is clear that there is a misconception of colonialism that shows partiality and arbitrariness totally grounded in *Eurocentrism*. Moreover, African scholars and intellectuals do not circumvent such heresies; they systematically counter-balanced them, instead. In this respect, the work of the Guianese historian, Walter Rodney, “The Supposed Benefits of Colonialism to Africa”, deserves further scrutiny for the sake of relevance. He challenges what has been said hitherto about the positiveness of colonialism and singles out its prejudicial impacts on Africa. To Rodney, beside the positive contributions through the network of public services colonial governments have implemented, Euro-centrist historians had better ask whether the benefits outweigh the losses or not.

Faced with the evidence of European exploitation of Africa, many bourgeois writers would concede at least particularly that colonialism was a system which functioned well in the interest of the metropolises.... However, (...) they place both the credits and the debits, and quite often conclude that the good outweighed the bad. That particular conclusion can quite easily be challenged, but attention should be drawn to the fact that the process of reasoning is itself misleading. (1981: 205)

The Guianese historian comes up with a perspective that is different from that of his counterparts. Interestingly enough, he overtly challenges their positive conclusion on colonialism in Africa. This is all the more true, as colonialism in Africa has undoubtedly bequeathed a legacy to the continent that is, more often than not, seen as negative. Thus it should be pointed out here that our aim, as far as this paper is concerned, is to insist on *authenticity* based on factual elements and that will objectively shed light on the connectivity between history and fate. This will ultimately lead to the impacts of colonialism on the continent at different historical stages, which will allow us to see how it has been shaken and transformed, particularly in the political and economic sectors. As a structure, this work hinges on three major points: an overview of pre-colonial Africa, the colonial project and resistance, the colonial project of colonialism and its contribution to the development or underdevelopment of the continent.

## **An Overview of Pre-Colonial Africa**

As earlier said, to broach the subject, we need to delve deep into African history and colonialism. For one cannot draw any scientific conclusion on the issue of colonialism in Africa without laying emphasis on the different stages that allow us to see its moments of glory and decadence. This will ultimately help readers grasp the evolution or regression, at different levels, that followed the transition. The African continent is noted for its historical 'wealth' that indigenous people did not inherit from the colonizer. Rather, it is a wealth that resulted from an overall dynamism of societies' components that are not asynchronous with colonialism:

Through all the centuries since man first appeared, Africans have shaped an independent society which by its vitality alone bears witness to their historical genius. This history, which came into being empirically, 'a priori', was thought out and interiorized 'a posteriori' both by individuals and by social groups. (Hama and Zerbo, 1995:43)

Prior to the intrusion of Europeans on the continent, the pre-existence of African history is irrefutable. As Ki-Zerbo points out, the 'historical genius' was solely empiric; but what clearly comes out from his point of view is the collective effort that helped galvanize and compel people to abide by the mores defined by society.

What is more, even though the 'historical genius' was purely empiric during that time, still it deserves recognition and merit for the cohesion it brought about and for the balance it insured the communities. In fact, the social and economic stability that those people were known for in pre-colonial times was not hazardous; it was essentially grounded in leadership beyond reproach. The legendary empires the continent was crammed with are illustrative of this. This is all the more true as a study of iconic empires in Africa shows a blend of different styles of leaderships marked by the unique goal to foster a social order for the good of the community.

That is what accounts for the various political styles that characterized African empires. Be it pre-Islamic empires of North Africa, Islamic states, the Horn of Africa, the Congo River Basin or Madagascar, they were either despotic, regal, aristocratic, incorporated or federal kingdoms in the way they were managed. The extraordinary ruling of the Mali Empire under Kankan Mussa (1312-1337) is significant in demonstrating the African way of leadership in pre-colonial Africa. The Mali Empire has been proved to be one of the wealthiest empires the continent had ever known before colonialism. Under Kankan Mussa, there was equity in the distribution of natural resources and Timbuktu has been referred to as a hub, mainly because traders promoted cultural and economic partnerships that tied them to different African kingdoms.

Likewise, uncompromising leadership was ingrained in most African communities before colonialism. The sticky question here is how African traditional rulers succeeded in setting up policies to insure good economic balance. In fact, one cannot talk about the reliability of African economy without taking into account its good agricultural policies. But, during the pre-colonial epoch, the African continent did not take advantage of the technological revolution that Europe benefitted from in the nineteenth century. Yet, Africans had full control of their natural environment and a good mastery of the art of agriculture which was at the peak of its success well before colonialism. This is all the more true as the Mediterranean, West Africa, Nilotic Abyssinia, Central Africa and East Africa were referred to as 'the Cradles of African agriculture':

'Even in pre-agricultural times and when agriculture was just beginning, man had carried with him in his migrations implements, techniques, modes of understanding and interpreting the environment, and methods of manipulating and using space. He also took with him a whole range of attitudes and of behaviour that had grown out of his relation with nature in his original habitat.' (Barrau and Portères, 1981: 668-9)

In fact, a good relationship with environment is fundamental for humankind. Research has shown that humanity has always tamed nature according to their needs. In pre-colonial Africa, the same phenomenon occurred. Almost everywhere in Africa, there was a symbiotic relationship between people and nature. What is more, beyond the symbiosis, Africans had succeeded in applying skilful practices to make life on earth possible, and even better. This undoubtedly earned them their mastery of the wheels of agriculture. This is understandable since agriculture was in full swing in pre-colonial times though seen by many as primitive. More interestingly, rich lands were at the disposal of local people for farming and cattle-rearing.

What is more, almost all African iconic empires were gifted with a typical and locally-developed knowledge of agriculture in pre-colonial Africa. From the above, it becomes clear that one of the sectors the African rulers fully grasped in pre-colonial times was agriculture that betokens their good leadership. Agriculture was the first activity natives relied upon to achieve social and economic equilibrium. Moreover, agrarian products were cultivated according to local conditions, which facilitated bartering between people from different villages. The rudimentary equipment indigenous people used in farming did not prevent them from achieving food self-sufficiency in those days. This gives us enough ground to maintain that in pre-colonial times the economic sector was in advance as power lay in the hands of native rulers who, through good managerial skills and leadership, maintained sovereignty.

## **The Colonial Project and Resistance**

Colonialism is part and parcel of African history. However, the colonization of the continent did not happen without a fuss: there were violent resistances. Even though the occupation of the continent occurred in some areas without resistance, there was a movement to counter-balance the invasion in many areas. The most important period in the colonization of Africa happened over a very short period of time as it started in 1879, with the first shots on the continent, and went on until 1884-1885, when the Berlin conference was held in Germany under the chairmanship of Bismarck. As a result, by 1910, the colonial system was imposed throughout the continent. But what were African leaders' attitudes against this imposition of power?

The resistance movement against colonization is unquestionable, and it started, through different methods, long before the military invasion. The imposition of power did not happen overnight; it gradually occurred. It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the invasion became effective with the presence of missionaries on the African soil, who came to materialize, *sub rosa*, the first explorers' goal. Indeed, the missionaries served as "spies" for metropolitan authorities since their ultimate objective consisted in seeing how African lands lay, before resorting to any military invasion. Under such a threat, most iconic kingdoms in Africa, renowned for their military power and good leadership, entered into negotiations with their European counterparts to send back the White invaders. Historians have talked about official messages countless African leaders addressed to colonist authorities to express their determination to retain their sovereignty. More interestingly, those official documents betokened a military resistance towards the White invaders, if need be. A good example of this is the message Otumfuo Nana Prempeh I addressed to the British authorities about his scepticism and intention to ward off invaders:

'... I know that the Whites wish to kill me in order to take my country, and yet you claim that they will help me to organize my country. But I find my country good just as it is. I have no need of them. I know what is necessary for me and what I want: I have my own merchants: also, consider yourself fortunate that I do not order your head to be cut off. Go away now, and beyond all, never come back.'(1985:4)

The above is an excerpt from a correspondence that the king of Ashante, Prempeh I, in Gold Coast addressed to the British authorities in 1891 when colonization was at its peak. It was written following the British authorities' offer to protect his territory. Likewise, in the same year, Menelick of Ethiopia addressed a letter to Queen Victoria of Great Britain and other European heads of states about his protectionist and expansionist determination for the sake of his country's sovereignty:

'I have no intention at all of being an indifferent spectator, if the distant Powers hold the power of dividing up Africa, Ethiopia having been for the past fourteen centuries, an island of Christians in a sea of Pagans.' (2000:4)

Given the crucial historical context, the letters the Emperor of Ethiopia, Menelik, and that of the thirteenth king ruler of the Ashante, Prempeh I, were of paramount importance. In Senegambia, Lat Dior Ngoné Latir Diop (1842-1886), the Damel of Cayor, sent a letter in 1882 to Governor Servetus to show his disapproval of the building of the railway:

'As long as I live, be assured... I shall oppose with all my might the construction of this railway... The sight of sabres and lances is pleasing to our eyes. That is why every time I receive a letter from you concerning the railway, I will always answer no, no and I will never make you any other reply. Even were I go to rest, my horse Malaw would give you the same answer.'

All these official documents were issued on the eve or following the Berlin Conference when metropolitan countries like Belgium, Spain, France, Portugal and Great Britain, to name but a few, worked in cahoots to regulate the colonization of Africa. But one should keep in mind that the conference was also a mere pretext to dismantle the existing types of African autonomy and self-governance, which African rulers who had premonitions about White people wanted to circumvent, by any means necessary. But in terms of weaponry, African leaders did not match the colonizers, and they took it upon themselves to wage a military offensive against the invaders, after they had addressed a series of correspondences to them.

Although they were militarily underequipped, many African rulers were noted for their talent in warfare. Lat Dior, Menelik and Kankan Mussa, not to mention Chaka Zulu in South Africa, are legendary figures in the fight against Europeans. Beside being good leaders, they were also skilful warriors who secured independence and full regional sovereignty. But, however committed to their countries' security, European colonizers eventually conquered their countries by force of arms, except Ethiopia and Liberia who challenged colonial rule.

Power is the ultimate determinant in human society, being basic to the relations with any group and between groups. It implies the ability to defend one's interests and if necessary to impose one's will by any means available. (Rodney, 1981:224)

On the whole, Africans did their best to defend their interests, but the armoury they had at their disposal did not match their opponents'. In the final analysis, one has to bear in mind that, to better understand colonization in Africa, one should not single out Europeans' military power as the root cause of its materialization. There were also some exogenous causes that account for its 'success'. For example, the Arab invasion, which was mainly fuelled by economic interests, not to say religious, exacerbated the transatlantic slave trade in Africa and contributed to the collapse of African societies. For that matter, the scornful reaction of Arabs regarding European imperialism in Africa was solely grounded on safeguarding their own interests and profits in the continent.

There are still countless thousands of blacks who are naive enough to believe that the Arabs' bitter attack on Western colonialism show their common cause with Black Africa. (Williams, 1974:46)

Moreover, if the colonizer succeeded in imposing his willpower despite African rulers' determination to guarantee peace and security, it is because some of them acted as European proxies in the long process of colonization. There are also other causes that should not be played down, including the humiliation and constant intimidation through lynching that the colonized were subjected to that paved the way for their subjugation and the triumph of White supremacist colonization.

## **Economic Project and Contributions**

An in-depth scrutiny of colonialism and its impacts on Africa implies some connectivity to causes and effects. This leaves ground for discussion. But beyond all, what comes out from an economist's point of view or any scientific conclusion of colonialism is a blatant gap between the causes and effects if we merely focus on the poor economic outcome in Africa. Thus, the first contacts Europeans had with Africans were determining factors regarding their future. Indeed, the European's presence on the African soil dates back to pre-colonial times. Once again, it is important to say here that not only had the European and the African been bound by history, but they had also been bound by a commercial relationship during the pre-colonial epoch. But, the peculiarity of their relationship is the unbalanced nature of trade that was amazingly disadvantageous for Africa as the so-called 'co-operation' between Europe and Africa benefitted more the former than the latter.

This is relevant since colonialism coincided with an unprecedented economic context in Europe. Indeed, the nineteenth century was the 'golden age' of Europe. The industrial revolution was prominent in the economic sector, but it struck with its side effects. In other words, the improvement of technology sped up an industrial production that brought about a surplus that metropolitan countries, themselves, could not consume. Consequently, they needed other markets. Ironically, the so-called 'trade' was an uneven relationship: an unfair type of exchange in which there was an exploiter and an exploited one.

From the above, one cannot deny the economic project that was beneath colonialism. Because well before colonization, a defined economic project had already been enshrined in colonial theories, and at that time, economies were based on agrarian activities to insure food self-sufficiency. Still, the question is the extent to which Africa took advantage of the industrial revolution to boost up its agriculture with European machinery.

The paradox is that, with the nineteenth century's industrial revolution in Europe and all its technology, the agricultural sector in Africa did not benefit from it. And Europeans did not help indigenous practitioners with the required machinery to boost the sector. Contrary to Western scholars like Bruce Gilley who draws a positive balance sheet of colonialism in Africa and its reclamation in modern time, some historians like Walter Rodney have wondered whether the European was right to colonize Africa, given that he did not contribute to truly developing the continent.

Similarly, some Africans have clearly demonstrated that it is colonization that turned upside down the way Africans lived and ruled their continent. Besides, scholars and intellectuals have gone further as to conclude that the industrial revolution in Europe contributed in no way to the emergence of the African continent. This holds ground because, to eschew the dearth of technology to help boost African economies, the colonizer often indulged in stereotyping the indigenous African as a Luddite and Conformist. In actual fact, this justifies the non-committal stance on the part of the colonizer, regarding Africa's development. This is what accounts for the ensuing gap between him and the colonized in the economic field. A good illustration of this is that while Africans used obsolete tools to work the land, Europeans used machines to boost agrarian production at home:

The most decisive failure of colonialism in Africa was its failure to change the technology of agricultural production. The most convincing evidence as to the superficiality of the talk about colonialism having 'modernised' Africa is the fact that the vast majority of Africans went into colonialism with a hoe and came out with a hoe. (Rodney, 1981:219)

What is more, beyond the rudimentary technology in agriculture, is how the agricultural sector was negatively transformed by colonization through the types of crops European settlers introduced into the African continent. For, as earlier discussed, before the advent of colonization in Africa, indigenous people had mastered the art of agriculture. A bartering system facilitated trade between people from different areas. Surprisingly enough, staple food was replaced with cash crops: palm oil in Nigeria, cotton in Mozambique and groundnuts in Senegambia, to name but a few. Those cash crops were not produced to improve the economy of African countries. Rather, they were supplied to metropolitan industries as inputs to boost their economic production. Ironically enough, foreign countries returned the finished products to Africans for sale or exchange. Also, the economic exploitation accounted for the construction of a communication network under colonial rule. But, the roads were built for economic purposes: they were ultimately set up to further exploit the continent, but not to facilitate indigenous people's mobility around the continent:



Means of communication were not constructed in the colonial period so that African could visit their friends....There were no roads connecting different people and different parts of the same colony in a manner that made sense with regard to Africa's needs and development. All roads and railways led down to the sea. They were built to extract gold or manganese or coffee or cotton. They were made to make business for the timber companies, trading companies, and agricultural concession firms, and for White settlers. (Rodney, 1981:209)

The above revelation gives credit to anti-colonial fighters like Lat Dior, and their proxies, who flatly opposed the construction of the railway that was to stretch from Saint Louis to Thies, Senegal. On top of the processing of agricultural products in Africa, which switched from staple food products to cash crops, there lay the land issue which has been one of the root causes of ethnic clashes and economic exploitation. This explains the two types of ruling Europeans applied to their colonies: a settler-type colony and an exploiter one. It is paramount to contend that both types of colonies were by far more advantageous for the colonizer than the colonized. More interesting still, in most settler colonies, be it in Kenya, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Algeria or South Africa, never had the colonized experienced dispossession like that of lands. Very often, White settlers deprived local people of their ancestral lands and left them with the poorest ones. As a result, most of the local people who had become peasants eked out a living by working arid lands.

The fact that they became peasants suggested that they could no longer do agrarian activities for trade: while peasants produce to feed their families, farmers produce for sale. In settler colonies, not only had Europeans disowned the indigenous people of their ancestral lands, but they also turned them into mere proletarians. In some of these colonies like Kenya, for example, after Europeans had taken away the richest lands and instituted a system of *passes*, they became the only people entitled to grow *pyrethrum* destined for exportation. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the *Land Husbandry Act* was to reduce the number of landlords in the country by taking strong measures regarding agricultural management:

The act required that the local authorities rigorously demarcate areas for grazing, cropping and homesteads. Behind the Act was a more radical re-imagining of the place of blacks in Rhodesia. (Chennells: 2001: Xii)

It is important to point out that, in a settler-type colony, local authorities represented colonial power. Therefore, any decision they made was totally in accordance with colonial policy. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the authorities' propensity to gather the indigenous people into a specific area was an act of dispossessing them of the lands which were theirs by right of legacy.

Besides, it is in those settler-type colonies that the African continent experienced its bloodiest episodes of colonial exploitation. This is understandable since local people felt the injustice in their bones. There had been guerrilla warfare between local people and the 'White usurpers' from whom they wanted to wrench lost lands. In fact, this accounts for the South African crisis attached to Apartheid. What is more, the Mau Mau (Kenya Land and Freedom Army), the Algerian and Rhodesian revolutions were fuelled by a cry for social justice issued by progressive movements engaged in a struggle for independence. Another important impact of colonial dispossession that is related to the land is its denial of ownership to women. For, whereas in pre-colonial Africa women had the possibility to own land that they could bequeath to their offspring, in colonial times they were systematically denied that right. Naturally, this had a bad impact on their social status which only degraded with colonialism.

Another negative social impact of colonialism was the down-grading of the status of women in Africa. During the colonial period, there were fewer facilities for girls than for boys.... The colonial world was definitely a man's world, and women were not allowed to play any meaningful role in it except as petty traders and farmers. (Boahen, 1987:107)

Most Western scholars pass over the fact that colonialism in Africa has exacerbated the triptych: sexism, class and racism. As a matter of fact, this heresy has a biased impact on their superficial interpretation with regard to the question of gender, to name it. Bruce Gilley's article, "The Case for Colonialism", is a good example of misinterpretation of the vicinity between gender and colonialism. He rather sees women's subjugation as a mere result of "patriarchal society", and not as an outcome of colonialism. Therefore, he spurns the fight for social change regarding 'the protection of indigenous land rights' in some colonized countries because, to him, it was ill-considered and would be more justifiable if "progressivists" rooted their action in the empowerment of women and not in land (Gilley, 2017: 2).

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that to have a fuller grasp of the impacts of colonialism in Africa, it is essential to broach the topic through two periods: pre-colonial and colonial times as the shape of the continent with regard to its economic development during each period helps gauge the impacts of colonialism. Surprisingly enough, an overview of the economic shape of the continent in pre-colonial Africa has shown people who had a perfect mastery of the environment. This allowed them to adapt their agrarian activities to local conditions to insure food self-sufficiency. Similarly, kingdoms were rigidly managed with a full control of power which helped them run internal and external affairs. Thus, pre-colonial Africa coincided with the old good days of the continent when power lay in the hands of Africans, themselves.

Unfortunately, with the advent of colonization the situation took a new chaotic turn. The process of colonization was difficult for both colonizers and indigenous people, to some extent. Despite diplomacy and the military resistance Africans put up against European settlers, they succeeded in imposing their will on indigenous Africans. In fact, their effort to colonize the continent brought to light the economic project they came to Africa to materialize. The colonial project had not left the continent unscathed; it had shaken it and then left it like an “empty shell”. From the above, we can safely draw the conclusion that good leadership is not alien to Africans. Contrary to popular opinion, mostly held by Western scholars, the African continent was not a place ‘ruled by anarchy and amateurism’ before colonization. Rather, it is the loss of power that brought about colonization and impoverishment in Africa, which even accounts for the unusual undercurrent situations that prevail on the continent, today. Even though there was a resistance movement against colonialism, White settlers ingeniously destroyed the economic and social fabrics of the continent, except in Ethiopia and Liberia, two countries which challenged colonial power, to say nothing of their attempt at destroying the Black civilization as a whole. Chancellor Williams objectively maintains that Western writers may view African societies, prior to any intrusion, as “stateless societies”, “societies without chiefs” or “primitive democracies”, but they only evidence the opposite as “primitive” also means “the first”, the beginners. This leads us to say that, even though some Western researchers turn a blind eye to it, the managerial and economic advancement of Africa in relation to any other continent is reckoned by history prior to colonialism.

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