Colonial Identity and Underdevelopment in Africa: A Critical Theory Perspective

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Abstract: **Colonial identity is one of the legacies of colonialism on the African continent, and has lingered on long after many African states have attained their independence. The Critical theory as advanced by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School, questions social systems that have emerged throughout human history. Socio-economic development is a concept common to all human races, including Africans. A common belief held and propagated by Nineteenth Century colonizers was that Africans lacked the capacity for industry, creativity, and advancement of society, hence the need for a colonial master to introduce the necessary civilization. Specific images and narratives were actively manufactured and propagated to justify the colonization of a people. Through this, the colonizers could rationalise the subjugation of Africans to anyone that would question the practise. Africa's performance record since independence in the mid-20th century has been disappointing. Poor economic performance, environmental degradation, political instability, and a host of other negative trends, have plagued the continent for generations. The abundance of evidence provided by scholars reveal the ability of Africans to do that which the European colonialists claimed was beyond African capacity. Africans need to take ownership of their development agenda, and wean themselves off dependence on Western states. This can be done through intellectual enlightenment, educational reforms, and developing country ownership.**

Keywords: **Colonialism, development, critical theory.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Colonial identity is one of the legacies of colonialism on the African continent, and has lingered on long after many African states have attained their independence. The phenomenon is characterized by an infusion of European culture with the various myths propagated by the colonialists about intellectual inferiority, and inability of Africans to self-govern. The effect of this is the dependence of African states on former colonial masters to formulate, finance, and materialize their development agenda.

The Critical theory as advanced by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School questions social systems that have emerged throughout human history. It challenges the generally accepted beliefs about society, and is among the theories used as a platform for changing the *status quo*. The Frankfurt School critical theory will thus serve as the theoretical perspective for this paper.

This paper sets out to establish the origins of the colonial identity created for Africans, examine the consequences of this identity to the socio-economic development of Africa, apply the Critical Theory to challenge this identity, and finally offer insights on how this identity can be supplanted for the sake of development on the continent.

II. PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA

Socio-economic development is a concept common to all human races, including Africans. A common belief held and propagated by Nineteenth Century colonizers was that Africans lacked the capacity for industry, creativity, and advancement of society, hence the need for a colonial master to introduce the necessary civilization to the so-called 'savages'. This idea is however discredited by the mounting evidence to the contrary. Before the advent of colonialism on the continent, Africa boasted of diversity in national identity and development, coupled with domestically created economic and political structures. (Morgenthau, 1963)

Writing at the height of colonialism in Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta describes the culture and traditions of Kenya's Gikuyu community, and captures some of the changes that resulted from the colonial experience. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, he highlights characteristics of the society such as land ownership and transfer systems, economic organisation and mercantile practices, dispute resolution and legal procedures, among others. However, European accounts of African communities at the time portrayed them as uncivilized and unstructured. (Kenyatta, 1965)

The ability of Africans to govern themselves and maintain systems of order and development is not unique to Kenya. In his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Walter Rodney (1972) reveals that pre-colonial Africa possessed systems of industry, trade, transportation, and infrastructure, which equalled and at times rivalled those of Europe. For instance in Egypt, science flourished and thrust industry to new levels. Windmills and waterwheels were introduced from Persia in the 10th century, and new industries such as paper-making, sugar-refining, porcelain works and the distillation of gasoline were created, while the older industries of textiles, leather and metal were improved upon. Apart from the Great Pyramids of Giza, Egypt was renowned for building canals, dams, bridges and aqueducts that stimulated its trade with Europe. Rodney similarly unveils the high standard of living Ethiopia, Nubia, and the Maghreb, characterized by well-established systems of governance, trade, and agriculture.

III.   THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE

Specific images and narratives were actively manufactured and propagated by colonizers to justify the colonization of a people. Through this they could rationalise the subjugation of Africans to anyone that would question the practise. These images and narratives discredited the domestic systems of Africans at the time, and forcefully became their identity. Without these narratives, the actions of the colonialists would appear shocking, if not outright criminally inhumane.

A. *Creating a New Identity:*

Among the earliest written accounts of Africa's colonial experience is the 1784 *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* by James Ramsay, a surgeon and Anglican minister working in Britain's West Indian colonies. Dismayed by the inhumane treatment of African slaves, Ramsay gives a first-hand account of the relationships between slaves and their masters. His book details the common attitudes and practises used by Europeans colonizers to ensure the subordination of Africans.

In the fourth chapter of the book Ramsay analyses three common objections to the natural capacity of Africans to self-govern, think independently, own property, and enjoy the same basic rights as other races. These objections were used as a justification by colonial governments for the practise of slavery, seizure of lands, and the exploitation of natural resources without the consent of the native communities.

The first objection to the natural capacity of Africans was drawn from the field of philosophy, relying heavily on the writings of David Hume. According to Hume "…Negroes are naturally inferior to the Whites as there scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion…no ingenious manufacture among them, lacking in the arts and sciences". (Hume, 1777) German philosopher, George Friedrich Hegel adds to this perspective arguing that "Africa is no historical part of the world…have no sense of personality; their spirit sleeps, remains sunken in itself, and makes no advance, and thus parallels the compact, undifferentiated mass of the African continent". (Ramsay, 2013, pp. 197-262)

The second objection to the natural capacity of Africans was drawn from the appearance of Africans. The list of features used to describe Africans include "…flat noses, prominent chins, woolly hair, black skin…" and more importantly "smaller heads with skulls left capacious." (Ramsay, 2013, pp. 213-121) According to this argument, Africans are supposedly not endowed with sufficient brain matter to be able to think independently or realise any meaningful achievement, because the ability to reason is in direct proportion to the size of the head. This belief created the notion that the blacker one was, the less intelligent they were. Through decades of social conditioning, the ideology became widely tolerated. Colonizers reinforced the belief by showing favour to those of lighter complexion, until its acceptance by slaves.

The third objection to the natural capacity of Africans was drawn from observation of the lifestyle of Africans. Because the customs, dressing, food, and other aspects of culture were vastly different from those of Europeans, it was concluded that those of Africans were inferior and barbaric. Garments made of animal skins, celebrations that involved animal sacrifice, religious beliefs that were not Judeo-Christian, and any other practises that were foreign to the colonizers, were used to reinforce their argument. (Ramsay, 2013, pp. 222-230)

Although Ramsay's book chronicles the Caribbean colonial experience, the underlying philosophies and practises of the British were applied across all their colonies, including East Africa.

B. Behavioural Conditioning:

The myth of inferiority of Africans was instilled in slaves through a system of intense, and often violent, behavioural conditioning. In *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* Kenneth Stampp provides insights as to how this was carried out. The first step, he writes, was to establish and maintain strict discipline by all means. The slaves were to "…obey at all times, and under all circumstances, cheerfully and with enthusiasm." The obligation of diligent obedience without the avenue for questioning authority severely damaged the capacity of African slaves to think critically, weight their options, and make decisions after serious and analytic consideration. (Stampp, 1956)

The second step was to implant in the slaves a consciousness of personal inferiority. They had to know and keep their places, feel the difference between master and slave, and understand that bondage was their natural status. The idea was to make them believe that their African ancestry had tainted them, and that their dark colour was a badge of degradation.

The third step was to rely more and more on the power of fear. The slave masters were determined to continue in that role, and did so by drawing the rein tighter day by day to be assured that the slaves remained under complete control. This was a systemic way by slave owners of controlling and changing behaviour.

According to Stampp, a wise master did not take seriously the belief that Negroes were natural-born slaves. He knew better and recognized that Negroes freshly imported from Africa had to be broken in to bondage, and that each succeeding generation had to be carefully trained. This was no easy task, for the slave rarely submitted willingly or completely. In most cases there was no end to the need for control by the slave owners, except until old age reduced the slave to a condition of helplessness. (Stampp, 1956)

C. Religious Conditioning:

Christian missionaries in Africa fulfilled two distinct roles in the colonial era. The first and official purpose on the continent was to spread the Christian faith, which the missionaries hailed as a civilizing experience that would uplift the Africans' lives. This was done by establishing churches, schools, and healthcare facilities. The second role was to aid in the process of colonization, by softening the attitude of Africans towards colonialism from one of rebellion to complacency.

In 1883, King Leopold II of Belgium wrote an open letter to missionaries, clarifying their assignment on the continent. He conceded that Africans already possessed an established form of religion and morality. Missionaries were to manipulate Bible scripture to convince Africans that poverty was noble, and passively accept exploitation. Leopold writes:

> "They know that to kill, to sleep with someone else's wife, to lie and to insult is bad. Have courage to admit it; you are not going to teach them what they know already. Your essential role is to facilitate the task of administrators and industrials, which means you will go to interpret the gospel in the way it will be the best to protect your interests in that part of the world. Your knowledge of the gospel will allow you to find texts ordering, and encouraging your followers to love poverty, like "Happier are the poor because they will inherit the heaven" and, "It's very difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." You have to detach from them and make them disrespect everything which gives courage to affront us." (King Leopold II of Belgium, 1883)

Kenya's founding father, Jomo Kenyatta, captured in summary the essence of the experience with missionaries in his famous quote:

> "When the Missionaries arrived, the Africans had the Land and the Missionaries had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible." (Hochhuth, 1964, p. 144)

Through the introduction of Christianity on the continent, Africans were pacified to the extent that they graciously accepted exploitation and subordination.

D. Colonial Education:

Missionaries came with the attitude that all things European were superior to those of Africans, which were regarded as pagan and barbaric. They went on to demonize African gods, Anglicize African names, and teach Africans European culture, history, mannerisms, and values. Through 'mis-education' of the African, the idea that knowledge did not exist before Europeans was propagated. A common practise was the renaming of prominent landmarks on the continent, which already had local names. The false idea that these geographical features and were not 'discovered' until the advent of Europeans supports the myth that Africans lacked the capacity for knowledge creation and transmission. King Leopold II's letter adds that:

> "You must singularly insist on their total submission and obedience, avoid developing the spirit in the schools, teach students to read and not to reason… Institute a confessional system, which allows you to be good detectives denouncing any black that has a different consciousness contrary to that of the decision-maker. Teach the niggers to forget their heroes and to adore only ours." (King Leopold II of Belgium, 1883)

The Tuskegee Institute established by Booker T. Washington in 1881, exemplifies educational systems designed with the sole purpose of training people of black skin in trades that would ensure their perpetual economic subordination. Trades that were considered suitable for Blacks were the likes of tinsmith, harness-maker, brick-layer, and shoemaker. (Guridy, 2010) The supplantation of African education and belief systems by those of Europeans has served to undermine native African knowledge, and diminish confidence in the ability to self-govern.

IV.   IDENTITY CRISIS IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

By the late 1950's, the prospect of self-governance of African states seemed ever more likely. This is thanks to the efforts of the various liberation fronts like the *Mau Mau* rebellion, coupled with the onset of colonial fatigue on the part of European governments. Addressing the Parliament of South Africa on 3rd February 1960 in Cape Town, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan officially announced his government's position in his famous 'Wind of Change' speech. He stated that "…the wind of change is blowing through this continent. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact." (Macmillan, 1960) This later saw the British Government grant independence to many of the colonized territories in the 1960s.

Africa's performance record since independence in the mid-20th century has been disappointing. Poor economic performance, environmental degradation, political instability, and a host of other negative trends, have plagued the continent for generations. In her controversial 2007 book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Canadian author Naomi Klein argues that there exists a deliberate strategy by some political leaders to exploit crises and states of emergency, in order to push through controversial exploitative policies. According to her, in such man-made crises, citizens are too emotionally and physically distracted by these disasters to mount an effective resistance. (Klein, 2007) Often, the policies introduced amidst the chaos are neo-liberal economic policies as advocated by Milton Friedman, and his counterparts from the Chicago School of Economics. These include free-market principles, government deregulation of the economy, privatization of state corporations, and higher taxation. (Kaufman, 2010) The Structural Adjustment Programmes suggested by the International Monetary Fund rife in the 1980's and '90's were based on these neo-liberal economic principles, causing Africans to lose bargaining power in the international economic system. This further entrenched the dependency of Africa on the West, both financially and policy-wise. This allowed forces external to Africa to set the development agenda, and determine the country's diplomatic and economic priorities.

V.   FRANKFURT SCHOOL CRITICAL THEORY

The Frankfurt School Critical Theory was originally proposed by Max Horkheimer in his book, *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937). He presents the objective of critical theory as the pursuit of the improvement of society, by emancipating people from the circumstances that enslave them. Critical theory then becomes a theory of change. Horkheimer writes:

> "Critical theory strives for a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression. This emancipation from slavery in positive terms would bring happiness and self-determination for all. Mankind will then become conscious of its existence: The corresponding theoretical procedure in critical theory is the method of negation: the denunciation of everything that mutilates mankind and impedes its free development." (Horkheimer, 1937)

Horkheimer states the general normative principles of critical theory as:

1. Cultivate a multidimensional understanding of society that is guided by a concern for equitable conditions of life.

2. Develop a multidisciplinary theory which reveals the inherent conflicts within contemporary society, and condemn all existing negative social conditions.

3. Develop a fundamental critique of society, which envisions the need for a modification of society as a whole. (Horkheimer, 1937, p. 218)

VI.   MOVING FORWARD

A. Intellectual Enlightenment:

More than half a century after African states attained independence from colonial Europe, the idea of decolonization remains relevant. In the 21st century however, the primary concern about decolonization is not territorial, as it was with the *Mau Mau* uprising, but intellectual and ideological. Marxist philosophy teaches that an uprising of the oppressed can only happen when those oppressed experience enlightenment, and realize that the *status quo* need not persist. (Marx, Engels, Moore, & McLellan, 1992) This view is shared by Vladimir Lenin whose argument proposes that a communist revolution must be led by a vanguard of "professional revolutionaries… men and women who are fully dedicated to the communist cause and who can then form the nucleus of the revolutionary movement." (Lenin, 1972)

The vanguard of an intellectual revolution against colonial identity cannot be led by armed rebels, but academia and opinion-shapers. An ideological shift from reverence of all things European must be replaced by a positive image of African identity and capacity, through a rebirth of cultures that were dismantled during colonialism. Native American philosopher, Vine Deloria, proposes that this can be done through teaching of traditional knowledge, values and lifestyles, in order to transcend the half millennium of culture shock brought about by the confrontation with Western civilization. In that way, those afflicted by a colonial identity can be masters of their own fate again, and be able to determine for themselves what kind of lives they desire to lead. (Deloria, 1999)

B. Educational Reforms:

Going hand-in-hand with intellectual enlightenment is reform to education systems. Noticing that the post-colonial education systems in Tanzania were not adding much value to the citizens, President Julius Nyerere instituted education reforms because he felt that "…Education has to increase men's mental and physical freedom." Some of his suggestions include orientation of school to rural life, developing self-confident and co-operative students, ability for graduates to engage in self-reliant and productive work when they leave school, and most importantly to develop critical and inquiring minds. (Nyerere, 1973)

Another giant leap in this direction would be to rename African landmarks to their original, and have a corresponding change in the literature containing this information. Names such as 'Mount Kenya', formerly known as '*Kiri-nyaga'*, 'Lake Victoria' formerly '*Nam Lolwe*' among others, all are elements of the colonial legacy.

In 2013, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe advocated for the need to change the name 'Victoria Falls' back to *Mosi-Oa-Tunya.* This was in line with the move at Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 to rename most major towns and landmarks. An ardent anti-colonialist, Mugabe stated at his political party's conference that year that the natural wonder cannot continue to honour the legacy of colonialism.

> "Institutions bearing colonial names must be changed and be given indigenous names . . . School syllabuses must also change. We should teach our children about Mbuya Nehanda, Sekuru Kaguvi, General Josiah Magama Tongogara and other gallant fighters of our liberation struggle." (Shoko, 2013)

The mood is similar in Kenya, where Cabinet Secretary for Education, Dr Fred Matiang'i, made a directive that all international schools in the country should teach Kenyan history, and the national language, Kiswahili. (Wanambisi, 2016)

C. Country Ownership:

The question of aid assistance towards impoverished nations has long been a subject of contention among scholars. Proponents of aid argue that African countries can only achieve economic stability through financial assistance from wealthy donors, as this helps them develop the necessary systems to do so. Critics of foreign aid highlight the inverse

relationship between aid and financial stability in Africa and Latin America. The poverty rate in 1970 Africa for example was 35% of the population, while receiving foreign aid of about $40 billion. In 2015, despite foreign aid of $120 billion, the poverty rate in Africa is nearly 60%. (International Financial Centres, 2016)

This situation has been subject to scathing criticism by African economist and author, Dr Dambisa Moyo. She argues that the regular injection of large sums of money to governments, without any accountability requirements by the donors, encourages corruption by officials. Government posts then become desirable because of this opportunity, especially to the less ethically inclined. These corrupt officials interfere with the establishment of functional domestic institutions, causing an unattractive investment environment that is not conducive to economic development. This leads to less job opportunities, and more poverty, prompting the donors to give even more aid, resulting in the recipients being dependent on the donors henceforth. This is what Moyo describes this as the "vicious cycle of aid". (Moyo, 2011)

In February 2005, the international community came together at the Paris High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, hosted by the French government and organised by the OECD. The Paris Declaration contains 56 partnership commitments aimed at improving the effectiveness of aid. It lays out 12 indicators to provide a measurable and evidence-based way to track progress, and sets targets for 11 of the indicators to be met by 2010. (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2007) The first of the five guiding principles is the concept of 'country ownership'. Country ownership is characterized by a country's government, communities, civil society, and private sector taking a leading role in prioritizing, implementing, being accountable for, and eventually financing their country's development projects. (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2013)

Through country ownership, developing countries are to lead their own development agenda and its implementation on the ground. This is essential if aid is to contribute to development. Donors are now supporting developing countries in building up their capacity to exercise this kind of leadership, by strengthening local expertise, institutions and management systems. The target set by the Paris Declaration was for three-quarters of developing countries to have their own national development strategies by 2010. (Kaufmann, 2009)

VII. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that missionaries brought some benefits such as introducing formal education and modern medicine, the true and impure motives behind their actions cannot be ignored. Missionaries were instrumental in ushering in colonialism, an era characterized by the plunder and devastation of African society, and its legacy continues to date.

The abundance of evidence provided by scholars such as Jomo Kenyatta (1938), Walter Rodney (1972), and Bethwell Ogot (1976) reveal the ability of Africans to do that which the European colonialists claimed was beyond African capacity. The myth of African inferiority is thus discredited.

Frantz Fanon however argues in *The Wrenched of the Earth*, that a return to an exact pre-colonial situation is impossible. (Fanon, 1963) Despite this, applying critical theory to the post-colonial situation would lead to an improvement of the society by rejecting the colonial identity. In its stead, an identity of independent thinking Africans, with the ability to efficiently and effectively self-govern should be adopted. This way Africans can rise to the challenges of 21st century, and live in a dignified manner. Add to this fervour of academics and ideologues involved in educational reforms, and true decolonization of the African mind is possible.

As donor fatigue sets in, Africans need to take ownership of their development agenda, and wean themselves off dependence on Western states. This is reminiscent of the colonial fatigue experienced in the 1950s that led to liberation of territories. The principle of country ownership thus can serve as a starting point for states to formulate strategies to regain control of development agenda, by working hand-in-hand with development agencies while they still can. The rise in popularity of nationalist leadership in the Western world should signal to African leadership that the crutch of donor aid will soon be a thing of the past, hence the necessity to take charge of their own development.

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