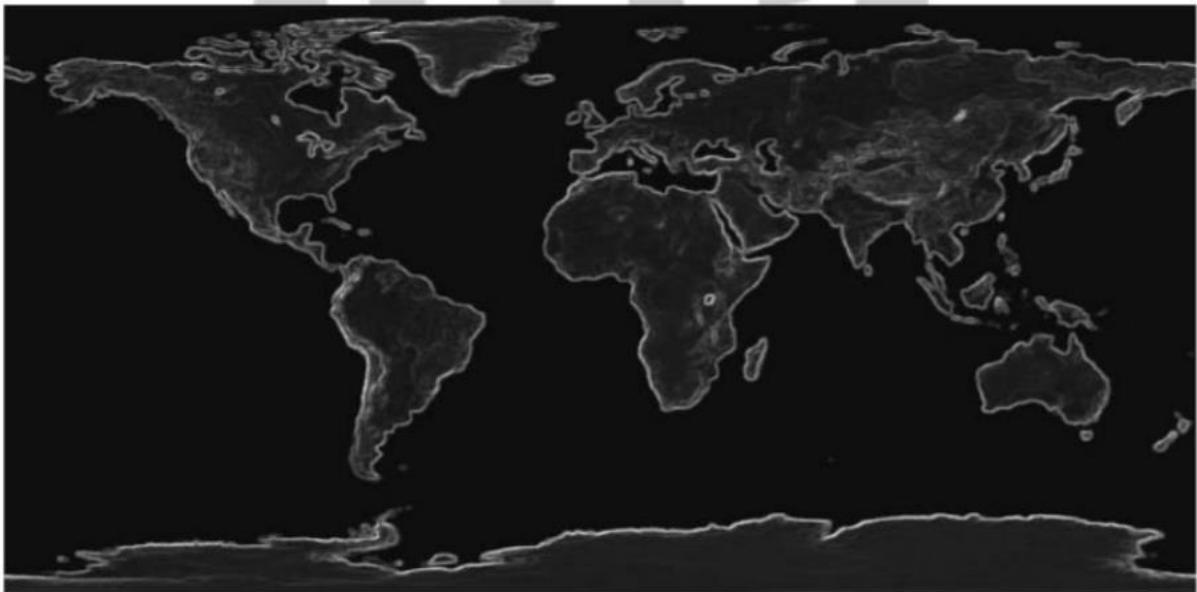




IMAGI-NATION: RESTRICTED SELF DETERMINATION OF AFRICAN NATIONS

Analysing African Self-Determination through Colonial Lens

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Introduction

“It’s the opposite of what one would expect from the runner first off the hook” - Jarred Diamond

Africa, despite having a head start as the place where Homo Sapiens originated two hundred thousand years ago, today remains one of the most underdeveloped places on Earth. This is despite its huge geographical landmass that is, contrary to popular belief, three times bigger than the USA and can fit Greenland, China, India, USA, France, Germany, and the UK and still have space left for Eastern Europe. Owing to its size, the continent had a diversity of regions, cultures, and climates giving rise to an immensity of natural resources. One of the few things that the entire continent had in common until the arrival of the European colonizers was their isolation from the rest of the world, by the Sahara Desert and the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.

When the Europeans finally made it down the West Coast in the fifteenth century, they used their technological superiority to extract natural resources and enslave the natives. Gradually gaining more power and control, eventually the Europeans colonized the entire continent, only to leave behind a legacy of formal divisions after two centuries of exploitation. As colonizers, the Europeans divided their colonies into different countries, giving birth to forced national identities across the continent. These formal divisions were created by drawing lines on maps. Lines that did not exist in reality and gave birth to some of the most artificial borders in the world. Most Africans are now partially the prisoners of this political geography the Europeans created, and of the natural barriers of progression with which nature endowed them. From this, they are making a modern home, and in some cases, vibrant, connected economies.

Today, the right of a people to national self-determination is regarded as a *jus cogens* rule, a cardinal principle of international law. The term ‘self-determination’ is extremely contested and has come to denote the free choice of one’s own act without external compulsions. The authors of this paper, through their extensive research into the case study of Africa’s history, politics and economy wish to bring forth the argument that an imposition of national identities and restricted political self-determination of any people hampers their national development. If people are not allowed to imagine their own national identities, through their lived experiences of culture and geography, the forced national bearings can give way to both political and economic turmoil. Therefore, the argument that this paper establishes is that *European colonialism* and *constructed nationalities* have partially restricted the political and economic development of Africa, shaping the continent’s past, present and future.

Understanding through the Historical lens

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*, depicts a nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as a part of that group.

“Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson, 1991)

While tracing the historical footprints, national centres of political authority slowly established themselves in England and France in the late medieval period, and then more dramatically in



Spain in 1492 (when the armies of *Ferdinand* and *Isabella* drove the last of the *Moors* off the Iberian peninsula), in Austria in 1566 (when Charles II split the Habsburg dominions into two) and eventually in Holland in 1648 (as Spain conceded Dutch independence). That year, the *Treaty of Westphalia* officially ended the Thirty Years War, established in international relations the principle of territorial sovereignty on which, by the twentieth century, the entire global order came to be based. With the establishment of these national territorial boundaries, one institution—the modern state—came to have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and with it a commensurate set of responsibilities: the maintenance of law and order, the regulation of property and trade, the supervision of labour and family life, and the stable banking system and national currency.

This rise of sovereign and secular nation-states was a result of four main factors. First, *Protestant Reformation* or the split in the Catholic Church which loosened the grip of the institution of the Church from over the rulers, giving higher authority and greater powers to one main institution. Second, the *Gunpowder Revolution* gave way to the invention and creation of newer and stronger weapons, altering the military equation in favor of larger political units as smaller units could no longer protect themselves against the newly developed heavy weaponry.

Thirdly, this period also witnessed increasing industrialization across Europe, accompanied by faster *urbanization* and the development of cities. People living in different parts of the region migrated to cities. The absence of a unifying factor amongst these diverse groups of people gave way to the sentiment of nationalism- which acted as the *new common identity*. Cities also became centres of power, where identifying ascendancy of authoritative seats was easier.

As the Protestant Reformation destroyed the authority of the Church, the Gunpowder Revolution destroyed the value of land and with that reduced the power of the small political units or feudal aristocracy. This gave way to the emergence of a new bourgeois commercial class, and the fourth factor which ultimately gave way to a wave of emerging nation-states: the *Commercial Revolution*. The commercial class faced numerous challenges of infrastructure and law order due to the fragmentation of political authority during times of feudalism and there was an upsurge in the demand for centralization of authority and larger political units. A tacit alliance emerged between rulers and traders who wanted to expand their empires.

It was within the legal security of the nation-state that individuals were then able and more reliable to accumulate capital, workers were occasionally able to win employment protection, and borrowers and savers were able to establish relationships of mutual trust. Capitalism did not invent the nation-state, but the rise of nation-states became a vital prerequisite to first the regional and then the global spread of capitalism. It was within particular national boundaries (and under particular national laws) that capitalism became the dominant form of economic life firstly in one nation-state and then another.

The phenomenon of ‘nationalism’ emerged and the first sovereign nation-states developed in Europe. However, colonialism spread the phenomenon to the rest of the world. Most developing nations in Africa and around the world are facing innumerable challenges because they couldn't develop their own phenomena, rather had to follow those of the West.



Source: Wikimedia.org

Political Effects of Colonisation

Africa is a continent of immense diversity- varying languages, ethnicities, cultures and religions that shape the region. However, all the fifty-six nations of the continent have one thing in common: their shared history of the colonial experience. Colonialism replaced the indigenous political systems of the region with its own centralized and authoritarian regimes of administration, paving the path to contemporary corruption.

Autocratic regimes based on uneven development and unequal distribution of political rights have led to conditions of chronic underdevelopment, poverty, conflict, and maltreatment of citizens. The colonial rulers favored social groups that supported their regimes and showered them with special privileges in the form of differential access to education and economic concessions. Until the 1990s, most of the African continent was ruled by authoritarian rulers who demolished the age-old democratic traditions of the region. In this century, the countries have witnessed a wave of democratization. However, in spite of the establishment of democracy, secession, boundary conflicts, civil wars, and ethnic strife are still rampant.

The colonial rule, throughout the world, was based on the policies of *'divide and rule'* and instrumentalization of ethnicities. The fragmentation of diverse groups was so severe during the period that managing the immense diversity of the continent today is nearly impossible. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that lies at the heart of the continent is the best example suiting this argument. The country has more than 200 ethnic groups and is today the world's most under-reported war zone. In 2015, the political violence in the country started increasing and six million people have died since then. The UN Human Development Index placed the DRC in 2014, in the 186th position from the total of 187 countries. The bottom 18 countries on the list are all in Africa. Libya is another very cogent example of where national



boundaries designed by the Europeans did not consider what the people living between the lines felt or how they wanted to organize themselves. Libya is an artificial construct that combines three historically distinct and diverse regions: Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica which were ruled by the Greeks, Turks, and Romans respectively. The country was split into civil war soon after its inception.

Ethnicity forms a crucial base in African society and its history. Across centuries, countries of the region, several wars and conflicts have resulted in the paving of the crooked African history, like the Somali Civil War, Nigerian Civil War, the Rwandan Genocide, Eritrean-Ethiopian War, among several others, plaguing the entirety of Africa. Africa consists of wide-ranging ethnicities, almost going in thousands. Africa has undergone a vast number of civil wars, conflicts, and genocides that have been born along the lines of ethnicity. The colonial rule further complicated the continent's history by abruptly dividing Africa and shaping its present and upcoming future. The vulnerable nature has led to the region being exposed to all kinds of issues, exploitation, discrimination and conflicts, especially based on the ethnic lines.

One example of the horror that followed due to ethnic extremism is *Rwanda Genocide*, wherein in the year 1994, in about 100 days, approximately 800,000 people were slaughtered. (BBC News) It was a conflict between the Hutu extremists and the minority Tutsis who were prey to this genocide. Although their history is complicated, it is not difficult to comprehend the conflict that occurred due to the simple reasons of hatred and bitterness between the two groups.

Another example is that of the Nigerian civil war which lasted for three long years between 1967-1970. (Olasupo et al.). This also rose out of the convenience that the British tried to chalk out for themselves by poorly redrawing the boundaries during independence. It was followed by the secession of the south-eastern region of Nigeria, Biafra. With more than a million people dying due to the war, the country after its independence experienced uncertain peace and ethnic instability between three groups Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba spread across Nigeria (and Biafra). Such kind of political exclusion would understandably have led to frustration and anger further leading to conflicts and rebellion.

Corruption has always impeded growth and development of Africa, increased cases of bribery, poor governance, and capitalism were additional factors leading to the same. The widespread corruption and corrupt leaders across the government institutions of the region is alarming. Corruption is also referred to by the term "state capture," which means the efforts of people to gain benefit from illicit activities and private gains from the public sector and the government. It is another massive reason causing damage to the African economy and being an obstacle for the development of the region and hindering the efforts to rise out of the serious socio-economic issues and poverty, with corruption impacting mostly the poorest, and the rich becoming, even more, richer and the poor becoming even more downtrodden. As per data by Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the public sector in the African region is far more corrupt than any other region across the world. A report by the African Union has pointed out that about 25 million children in primary schools have been inflicted by the aftereffects of corruption (African Union). With the lowest ranking region as per the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 2019 published by Transparency International, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) scored about 32 out of 100, with an average being 43. According to the Afrobarometer survey that measures the social, political, and economic atmosphere across African countries, reports that approximately at least one in every five people have admitted their indulgence in bribery



for accessing public services in the region. In post-apartheid Africa, ethics and norms have been disregarded, and the citizens have been severely exploited. The newly formed states after independence have, for decades now, showcased characteristics of autocratic states, alongside being political and economic monopolies. Due to colonialism, corrupt governments and poor decision making, the region lacks accountability, transparency, and the rule of law, among the other issues that it grapples with, and it has resulted in poor governance and management along with instability.

Economic Effects of Colonisation

The trauma and aftermath of colonialism is one of the major reasons for developing countries to be poor. The reason they're poor is that they've been organized by a very small section of the population that benefits few at the expense of the rest of the population. Political power has been narrowly concentrated and has been used to generate great wealth for those who possess it. The condition of Africa under colonialism and after the division of the continent in an arbitrary manner, the administration was left in a haphazard manner. All of this has culminated into the 'Africa' that we know of today; one of the poorest and underdeveloped regions, suffering and starving. With the Berlin Conference and the origins of Scramble for Africa, the administration and the rule of the Europeans began as per their own will. Apart from being a major highlight of African history, Europeans also played their due share in excessively stunting their economies and the repercussions of which are still being observed in the continent to this date.

From an un-industrialized region of the world, the history and story changed when Europeans set foot in Africa. The British started to expand their bases, captured and dominated Africa. 1. They captured the innumerable labor supply and the raw materials, along with taking advantage of the comparative edge of production across the continent. The dependence of the citizens on primary activities and the risks associated with it also came along with insecurity in the region. The British took advantage and utilized this opportunity by selling the commodities in European markets.

In 1935, almost all of the trade by the British formed approximately 85% of Africa's trade (Tang and Gordon). Not just in terms of production, but Europeans also tried to bring about advanced technology, and with that, more stability in states such as Uganda and pre-colonial states such as Bunyoro, Ankole, etc. It led to an increase in real wages in the formal sector and the period showed signs of greater prosperity, with rising income, the introduction of railways, and greater trade opportunities. But this came with its own baggage of issues. Although the living standards were rising, they did not for everyone, with inequalities shooting off the roof and diminishing purchasing power. This includes countries like Libya, Tunisia and Mauritius, ranked 64, 77 and 94, that stood way ahead than countries for instance Democratic Republic of Congo which stood last, ranked 187, in the 2011 Human Development Report, largely because of the country and its history with armed conflict and no significant efforts being made for development. Others like Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana have made steady progress with now having medium human development. (Africa Renewal, 2011) There was upsurge in racial and ethnic-based conflicts. after the colonization that would not have taken place, and the image and fate of Africa would have been different. The upwardness in technology and stability couldn't last when the Europeans left in 1962, leaving countries that couldn't function without administration and a proper social contract for the society to function and poor administration.



Post-independence, the countries saw a massive decline in several aspects including an economic downturn. The region has suffered more not because of itself but due to the after-effects of colonialism. Output per head in Sub-Saharan Africa has only dwindled substantially since the independence of the region and has been the lowest compared to any other region globally. Although structural changes have taken place from that of administration to market resource allocation, they haven't been effective, which was and is still of greater need and importance to bring the region back on the map and for the betterment of nations and citizens. . It is a proven fact based on pieces of evidence that Africa would have been better off had it not been colonized because substantially it paid a very high price for colonization.

Even the civil wars in Africa have been more recurrent than in the third world countries and the failure of the state to control them and tackle the other issues as mentioned previously speaks volumes about what has become of the region with civil wars still being one of the biggest challenges, like very recently in Burkina Faso, Mali and other regions due to the insatiable nature of governance and administration. (Allison) The impact these wars had on economic growth indicated instability, high unemployment rate, weak central authority, and low capital stock. The impact of the wrongdoings of the colonizers and formation of artificial boundaries caused immense demographic damage to the region, fractionally divided the region and stunted the economic potential of it. All these factors in the end struck the economic nerve of Africa.

Today, another nation that has a large influence in determining the African economy and its future is China. It seems like 21st-century colonization, resembling what the Europeans did decades ago. China became Africa's largest trading partner back in 2009, along with being Africa's largest bilateral source of loans and an economic partner..China exceeds the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) in being a rising global power. Investments by China in Africa are not only by the government but also by large Public and private enterprises. The trade between the two has grown excessively from USD 9 billion in 2000 (i.e. 3%) to USD 160 billion in 2011 (i.e. 13%). But there is a whole other reason behind the Chinese interests in Africa. (Cisse)

China's influence has impacted the region in subtle ways for longer than we know, with a boom in prices leading to a rise in the gross domestic product way more than ever before. Apart from playing an important role in economic growth, skill development and technological development, China is playing a role of catalyst for better changes and greater opportunities in Africa. . In recent times, apart from the huge oil and raw materials market that the Chinese wish to tap, the Chinese also wish to tap into the *labor market* in Africa. Raw materials have been an important trading factor for the African economy to rely upon, along with the export of oil. China has been heavily investing in oil-rich companies in the region. This has, in turn, also led to rising concern over the future of developing an industrial sector and establishing better trade relations in the region. This issue also contributes to increasing competition by the inexpensive Chinese goods and imports resulting in an underdeveloped manufacturing sector. China also imports a large number of laborers from the country into Africa, both skilled and unskilled. The majority of positions are now occupied by the Chinese and are also paid much more than the Africans. It also includes the massive trade surpluses of China with Africa, and several countries in the region have huge trade deficits as well, all of which owes to the large-scale loans contributing to the debts.



There has been a severe impact on economic activity even in recent times due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With lower growth, fall in jobs along with export of essential commodities, and challenges across the region in terms of the living standard, about 640 million are still living without electricity, and approximately 416 million are still living in abject poverty. These issues don't even form the tip of the iceberg. Today, these issues are a culmination of several events that have shaped the long history of Africa, with Europeans colonizing the region and expanding across the world. They had a very straightforward aim in mind, but, the sour fruits of their rule are still ripening in several nations and regions across the world.

Conclusion

Africa is a living testament to what comes out of force, wrongdoings, misconduct and *colonialism*. Africa unlike other countries across the globe, even today has underdeveloped economic indicators, conflicts and is highly 'indirectly' colonised by China. The divisions of the region in an erratic manner have betrayed the geography and the process of development leading to a battleground for conflict and strife. With no say of the natives, the African population, it seems, has been shunned away with the profit eyeing and the socio-cultural and political domination of the colonizers. While the rest of the world has moved forward and developed, Africa still struggles to weed out the difficulties from decades ago that are being and acting as the impediment to its growth. The undedicated leadership of the institutions, poor governance with over-flowing corruption, biases, and ethnic majoritarian rule have moulded Africa to what it is today and what will continue to be in years and decades to come until unity and development can rise, once again.

A better political power-sharing between the groups, a stop to the undemocratic acts, no human rights violations is what the people of Africa yearn for. Although the region and countries are trying to pull up their socks, there is still a long way to go, and the government, along with the administration, needs to take charge and tackle the situation for a better and improved future for the Africans and the region, that is broken and in utter despair.

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