

EUROCENTRIC VIEWS OF AFRICA AND EUROPEAN IMPERIALISM

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Abstract

The ideological imperialism by Western Europe is extensively employed across African countries in the 19th and 20th centuries respectively in order to justify the economic and political activities across their borders. The concept of imperialism is critically studied by scholars such as John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson amongst other scholars in the 19th century. In order to corroborate their studies on imperialism, this paper aims to discuss the knitty-gritty of Eurocentric views of Africa and European imperialism with modern day economic and political activities across borders in Africa and European countries.

Keywords: Eurocentric, Imperialism, Economic Activities and Political Activities.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Imperialism is a political and economic ideology of Western Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries employed to justify the economic and political activities history of the western nations across their borders. The notion of imperialism in the 19th centuries were popularly promoted by scholars like John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson who sees European Imperialism as a 'sphere of influence' which can be built without necessarily creating or establishing a formal, legal control by one government over another country, though the idea of an empire can be extended '*informally if possible and formally if necessary*'¹. Eurocentric scholars attempted to distinguish the differences between Imperialism and Colonialism drew a differentiation thus: **imperialism operates from the centre as a state policy developed for ideological and financial reasons**, whereas colonialism is a state policy conceived for development of settlements or commerce purposes.²

The implication from the above is that if imperialism conceived to foist modernisation and to financially engage in overseas development, it should not be seen as exploitative and domineering.

Several writings of earlier European historians, regarded as Eurocentric views European Imperialism in Africa from view-lens of the fact that Europeans were '*been mesmerized by formal empire and maps of the world with regions coloured red. The bulk of British emigration, trade and capital went to areas outside the formal British Empire...*'³

If the foregoing assertion is true, then the basis of imperialism is to merely expand British influence to other nations, with the aim to help develop their potentials and bring modernization to other parts of the world. By so doing, the people and societies of those

¹ Wikipedia Online Resource, Imperialism (2012) Google docs.

² Gilmartin, Mary. Gallaher, C et.al., Key Concepts in Political Geography, Sage Publications: Imperialism/Colonialism pg. 116

³ Louis, Wm. Roger. (1976) Imperialism pg. 4

continents are bound to be enlightened and be integrated as part of the growing modern world. On the other hand, scholars who attempted a reconstruction of African history provided empirical data and historical facts that undermine the intent of European Imperialism in Africa by her prosecution and levels of development attained when the colonizers left Africa at the time of independence.⁴

2.0 THEORETICAL APPRAISAL OF THE NOTION OF IMPERIALISM

Classical writers on the notion of imperialism in the study of human history are Hobson, V. Lenin and Schumpeter among others. The imperative of their concept lies in the argument whether imperialism is an exploitation of economic interests for capital accumulation or the races for highest social efficiency and modernization of the global market and other continents. In articulating the notion of Imperialism, J.A. Hobson asserted that psychological motivation was behind the notion of Imperialism. He argued that 'It is desirable that the earth should be peopled, governed, and developed, as far as possible, by the races which can do this work best, i.e. by the races of highest 'social efficiency'⁵ whose aim consist of the following ingredients: (a) National pride, (b) Quest for glory and (c) Bellicosity.

Beyond these psycho-behavioural analyses lay elements of dominant economic motivations which Hobson also identified as follows:

- a. Development of capitalism and tendency for production to outgrow consumption;
- b. Industrialization and creation of massive production lines in West industry which facilitated need for imported raw materials;
- c. Domestic and social developments in Europe in areas of growing urban population, need for more food and rising cost of standard of living which increased demands for luxury goods;
- d. Opportunities for higher returns on investments and the quest for markets; and
- e. The control, collaborations and eventual cooperation of the political machineries of the modern state system to protect the European economy by increasing purchasing power of the working class through introduction of production quotas, tariff barriers, taxation of goods and safeguarding of investments with acquisition of overseas market.

A general assumption propounded by J.A. Hobson was that in as much as Imperialism brought higher taxation to the European domestic economy, it increased the wealth and foreign investment of Europe as well as her militarization of the world through conquest and occupation. Hence, Imperialism eventually became a vehicle of the growing cosmopolitan of capital, though it was regrettably seen by Europe at an inevitable aspect of industrial progression in human history.⁶ Hobson's definition of Imperialism is likened to what some scholars partly refer to as 'welfare imperialism'.

Joseph Schumpeter essay titled '*Zur Soziologie der Imperialismus*' (The Sociology of Imperialism) dwell extensively on the motivation of European Imperialism as an aggressive expansionism and military adventurism (an atavism) without any rational logic. He noted that imperialism is '*a heritage of the autocratic state...the outcome of ore-capitalist forces which the autocratic state has reorganized and would never have been evolved by the inner logic of*

⁴ Boahen, Adu: *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press (1987) pg. 1-14

⁵ Hobson, J.A, *Imperialism – A Study*, Cosimo Inc, 2005 pg. 154

⁶ Hobson, J.A, *Imperialism – A Study*, Cosimo Inc, 2005

capitalism.⁷ He argued that it was an attempt that did not go beyond the habit and instinctive mode of Europeans to struggle for survival and supremacy in a world of wars and pressures where situation of threats and dangers of survival persists. Conquering the world and expanding sphere of influence was the best alternatives.⁸

Schumpeter disagreed with the notion that Imperialism was basically fuelled by economic desires since capitalism is much more concerned with promotion of individuality and rationalism, democracy, innovative, mechanized and specialized world system, all which does not naturally allow for wasteful and risky adventurism. However, many scholars have rejected that position, noting that most nations in history do not engage in costly military adventurism unless economic interest is involved from the sharing of spoils of war, occupation of foreign lands to acquiring of slaves and cheap labour since the days of Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Grecian and Roman Empires. The failure of Schumpeter's notion of Imperialism to stand as a rational intellectual assumption lies in the very attempt to dissociate it from the goals of capitalism as a basis for economic expansionism.

A widely acceptable fundamental appraisal of the goals of imperialism is embedded in the works of Karl Marx.⁹ Marx saw the Imperialism thrives through a process whereby surplus value is converted to capital accumulation. The need to use the profit to profiteer leads to surplus value and capitalisation.¹⁰ With generation of wealth from capitalisation, a progressive use of surplus value produces commodities which require the intensive use of labour or higher employment ratio. The inescapable consequences are the production of bigger capitalism which inherently is expansionism. Marx however abhorred the gap that usually exist between the capitalist producers and the workers leading to dictatorship, poverty and oppression in the extreme with possibility of a revolt in the positive to eliminate the injustice in the capitalist system while using productive forces to transform the society into a more egalitarian socialist state.

Advancing the learning curves in the Marxian theories, another scholar and follower - V.L. Lenin described Imperialism within the context of economic processes as:

'...Capitalism at the stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established, in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of situation, in which a certain group of countries have their economics conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy, in which the former is subject. The relation of interdependence between two or more economies and between these and world trade, assumes the form of dependence when some countries (the dominant) can expand and give impulse to their own development, while other countries (the dependent) can only develop as a reflection of this expansion. This can have positive and or negative effects on their immediate development. In all cases, the basic situation of dependence leads to a global situation in dependent countries that situates them in backwardness and under the exploitation of the dominant countries. The dominant countries have a technological, commercial, capital resources and social-political predominance over dependent countries (with

⁷ Hobson, J.A, *Imperialism – A Study*, Cosimo Inc, 2005

⁸ J. Schumpeter - '*Zur Soziologie der Imperialismus*' (The Sociology of Imperialism) 1919 translated into English by Heinz Nordon and titled *Imperialism and Social Classes*, Peter Sweezy (ed.) Harvard University Press, 1951.

⁹ C. Ake, *The Political Economy of Africa*, 1980

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow, 1970

*predominance of some of these aspects in various historical moments). This permits them to impose conditions of exploitation and extract part of the domestically produced surplus...'*¹¹

If those conditions highlighted from empirical and causal factors of imperialism in economic history remains in sight, one can assume that any critique or inquiry on European Imperialism in Africa which does not extensively situate her findings on the parameters of modern economic theories, would rub off the basis of European imperialism by looking merely at the value-facts or consequences of colonisation in the evolution of modern African states.

3.0 THE EUROCENTRIC VIEWS OF THE NOTION OF IMPERIALISM

Economic historians have advanced that 1884/85 Berlin Conference on the Scramble for and Partition of West Africa was to fulfil the task of creating interior state in the colonies that are '*commercially open to all nations, but politically shielded from their competition...the bases for economic legislation which was immediately applicable to the central zone of the continent...*'¹² The scramble for partition of Africa was therefore necessary to avoid clashes and wars during their incursion into African territories. European expansionism was designed to foster modernization and development of world society, though aided by economic interest of the Europeans with a view to transform the world into interdependent states where free market and free movement of people are guaranteed. This is why the European imperialistic ambition or aspiration to conquer and develop the less developed African societies could not set aside owing to the nature of the impenetrable and for so long impregnable African continents.

The realities of territorial imperialism and conquest are shown in various works, like the writing of Sir Frederick Lugard, the Governor General of Nigeria in his book titled - the Dual Mandate and his famous quote which is reproduced below:

*'...For two or three generations, we can show the Negro what we are: Then we shall be asked to go away. Then we shall leave the land to those it belongs to, with the feeling that they have better business friends in us than in other white men...'*¹³

Nnamdi Azikiwe (1980) recalled from his book titled Economic Reconstruction of Nigeria (1943:Ch.1) that Major Attlee (the then British Deputy Prime Minister) supplemented ideas of British economic policy and her colonial interest in Nigeria at a House of Common session thus:

*'...guaranteed access to trade and raw materials of the world needed for economic prosperity...provisions directed to the expansion of production, employment, exchange and consumption of goods which were the material foundation of the liberty and welfare of all peoples...'*¹⁴

African experience of European imperialism is not the beginning of imperial tendencies around the world as shown in the stages of human and social development¹⁵. Hence, Walter

¹¹ V.L. Lenin, - *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Moscow, 1965

¹² Ibid. 2

¹³ T. Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa 1876-1912*, Abacus Book, George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1991

¹⁴ Nnamdi Azikiwe, (1980) *Ideology for Nigeria*, Macmillan, Lagos. Pg. 88

¹⁵ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Howard University Press (1972:1-35)

Rodney's analysis of the exploration and consequences of imperialism in Africa within the parameters of the causes of underdevelopment is subjective notwithstanding his ability to identify some structural changes and deficiencies that followed European imperialism in Africa. Many of his assertions are based on the underdevelopment situation of Africa and not the theories of imperialism.

During the era of colonial rule in Nigeria, political powers were designed and driven to promote and preserve economic interests of various participants in the colonial territories, whether colonial masters or their indigenous partners as stakeholders. The objectives of the colonial administration in Africa were limited to maintenance of law and order and creation of atmosphere for development and exploration of raw materials in the colonies.¹⁶ The native authorities and their people benefited for the goals of Imperialism, which is what we now see as modern development. For instance in Nigeria, the structure and her apparatuses were dependent on revenue collection and public works needed '*...to have a transportation network for evacuating produce to the sea ports...Two railway lines were constructed from North to South through the produce belt to the coastal ports of Lagos and Port Harcourt...*'¹⁷

It is a well known unified actors in the political process that usually determines the overall interest of the states. Hence, the way and manner the colonial economy of the Nigerian State was structured managed and the subsequent direction of the economic development of the Nigerian State was an arrangement between foreign powers and their local counterparts for much of the period of our colonial experience.¹⁸

At the worst, both the Colonizers and their African partners particularly in the West Coast are collaborators, if they had no conviction towards embracing the good in European Imperialism for the length of time that they had played along. The only missing issue was that colonialism did not allow for direct participation of Africans in decision making until constitutional changes took place and the Europeans began to appreciate the need to assuage nationalistic feelings and to allow the formation of political parties and tribal associations to promote other interest of the people.¹⁹ Historical value facts have shown that State powers gave sharing access to the indigenous partners (native authorities, merchants and warrant chiefs inclusive) during the colonial era. The profitable opportunities offered to them by the neo-colonial economy were employed to secure the success of colonial trade and businesses which depended on patronages from colonial state and their foreign capitalists (investors and merchants)²⁰.

No country or nation can exist in the modern world system without providing for its government, people and territories. Each nations need to base the economic resources and explore those resources for social-economic development and political advancement of its people. If any social injustice or structural imbalance is observed in Africa during the colonial rule in form of economic domination, it was a natural phenomenon of governance

¹⁶ James S. Coleman, (1958) *NIGERIA: Background to Nationalism*, University of California Press, 1958.

¹⁷ Oladele Olashore, (1991) *Challenges of Nigeria's Economic Reform*, Fountain Publications, Ibadan. Pg.5

¹⁸ Gavin Williams (Pg. 45-62) in Dennis L. Cohen and John Daniel (Ed.), (1981) *Political Economy of Africa Selected Readings*, Longman, London.

¹⁹ Dennis L. Cohen and John Daniel (Ed.), (1981) *Political Economy of Africa (Selected Readings)*, Longman, London.

²⁰ Ibid.

and economic development that cannot be set aside in the development of people and nations. The same persist today in Africa.

Could it be sustained that the introduction of monetary economy, exploitation of mineral resources, introduction of tax and change in land tenure acquisition and concession of plantations, deprivation of equal rights, disparity and payment of low wage to workers, unfair distribution of contracts, discrimination in granting of loans, the problems of urbanisation and rise of professional groups, increasing rise of unemployed white collar job seekers and educated school leavers are factors of structural deficiencies and underdevelopment? Are these not indications of modern development in itself? One need to ask from Afro centric scholars how they would have explored and service the African colonial economies, if there were no exploration of resources to provide the need funds for development in the construction of rails and other forms of government services. No doubt, the burden of the colonial economy was cash crop based without room for rapid industrialization. It was an economy directed at '*...the virtual monopoly of the export and import trade...mining and banking industries by expatriate...the total exclusion of Africans from the fixing of prices...for manufactured goods but even for the raw materials produced by themselves...*'²¹

Post-colonial era and independence in Nigeria for instance, ended direct '*...British control of public investment funds, of tariff and industrial policy, of fiscal policies and the allocation of foreign exchange...*'²², Hence the challenges of the political process and the national economy and the emerging reality for the need to accelerate industrial and economic development of the African State was left in the hands of few people whose overlapping and ambitious political aspirations, ethnic conflict and ideological differences are enormous and too complex to handle a structured post-colonial state, a developing economy and modern infrastructure without efficient, reliable and visionary leadership and harmonious political process.

Many writers of modern African history holding Afro centric views insisted that the consequences of European Imperialism of Africa was to disorganize, disorient, displace or disunite the African continent and her age-long mode of development. Ethnographic and historical studies of pre-colonial Africa showed stages of development of the African Continent before 19th Century.²³ However, they failed to establish the show why Empires have risen and diminish through history and people of different nations or races have continued to survive and live with the transformation of their states, their land and borders and even homeland without necessarily casting the blame of their underdevelopment of modern intervention and imperialistic conquests. What would then be the history to be told about nations and people like the Israelites who transformed to Hebrews and now the modern day Jews from Chaldeans to Philistines, Arabia and Palestine in modern day Israel?

At the worst, the implications of European Imperial conquest of Africa can be drawn from two crux, the '*process of establishing colonial and neo-colonial relationships*'²⁴ and a '*creation and or maintenance of unequal economic, cultural and territorial relationship*

²¹ Adu Boahen:1966:134-155

²² Ibid. Pg. 45

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ D. T. Osabu-Kle, *African Blood for Imperialist Interests: The First and Second Scrambles for Africa – Imperialism, Colonies and Neo-colonies*, Carleton University, US (1990)

usually between states and empires based on domination and subordination'.²⁵ Both terms infer that Imperialism is the characteristics of powerful states that adopt and commonly use military powers and political strategies to dominate other states with lesser military powers or political resistance. Hence, where an imperial power exploits unequal, dominant force or political power to superimpose itself on other subservient (dependent) states, it creates an imbalance in relationship, while serving as a superstructure for the accumulation of capital and expansion of the economy of the two states within the global competitive market.²⁶

The sharp contrast inherent in the Eurocentric and Afro-centric views shows that European Imperialism in Africa goes beyond relationship and expansionism²⁷ of 'sphere of influence' due to the political nature of the colonial structure and the economic arrangement of the colonial state in the exploration of resources to the metro pole where the industrial and technological base as well as the much needed expertises exist for the extraction, manufacturing and distribution of those raw materials as well as their production into goods for world market. Imperialism was not conceived from Eurocentric view point as an economic exploitation of the weaker states by the technologically superior and militarily advanced state, but as a necessity for the collaboration and full propagation of the modernization process. Even if European Imperialism created a sphere of dependency by the weaker states, they needed to also look inward and outward and adopt better alternatives to modern development, if any exist in order to be removed from the apron strings of the advanced economies.

4.0 CONCLUSION- IMPACT OF EUROPEAN IMPERIALISM IN AFRICA

Empirical findings of economic theories and its impacts in shaping society and human activities have shown that theories premised on human economic activities should not be set aside without evaluating their goals and validating their role and reliability in shaping the course of human history. Looking through the eyes of history, Marion Mushkat noted that the imperial aspirations of Tsarist Russia and USA was to advance imperial causes without embarking on large scale conquests like European powers where imposition of over lordship on other people and expansion of their territorial supremacy (imperial frontiers) occurred in the last century.²⁸ He concluded by looking at the differentiation in historical facts between imperialism and colonialism thus:

*'imperialism should not be confounded with colonialism because the latter represents only a special form of expression of the former, which is not a consequence of the mere conquest of a foreign territory and the loss of its national independence, but comes into existence only if the conqueror explicitly or implicitly asserts his superiority over the conquered people, if he considers it as an inferior race, upon whom he imposes his will not only in the political and economic domain, but also in the social sphere by a policy of discrimination and segregation, sometimes even by measures liable to cause it annihilation.'*²⁹

²⁵ Johnston, R.J. *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (4th Ed.), Wiley-Blackwell pg. 375 (2000) ISBN 0-631-20561-6

²⁶ C. Ake, *Political Economy of Nigeria*

²⁷ Adas, Michael; Peter N. Stearns (2008), *Turbulent Passage – A Global History of the Twentieth Century* (4th Ed.), Pearson Education Inc., pp 54-54 ISBN 0-205-64571-2

²⁸ M. Mushkat, *Some characteristics of Colonialism and Its Product African Nationalism*, African Studies Review, Vol. 14, No. 2, Sept. 1971, pp. 219-241

²⁹ *ibid*

The above notion implies that imperialism is a two edged sword, being the economic control and exploitation of foreign lands arising from the necessity for counteracting the impediments to the accumulation of capital engendered by the internal contradictions of the domestic capitalist economy. In the latter, Imperialism is the outward drive of certain peoples, to build empires – both formal colonies and privileged positions in markets, protected sources of materials and extended opportunities for profitable employment of labour; an unequal economic relationship between states, not simply the inequality of large and small, rich and poor trading partners, but the inequality of political and economic dependence of the latter on the former.³⁰

The implication is that if scholars of history, whether holding Eurocentric or Afro-centric views fail to dissect the nature and scope of European Imperialism in the context of European objectives and experience on African soil, they will unwittingly miss the good part of Western imperialism and modernization process in historical inquiry. Imperialism, therefore will continue to form part of the modern political ideologies of western world even when it translates into security mandate under UN Resolutions or NATO Alliances and other forms of international diplomacy such as new world economic order, theories of interdependency, balance of power or the concept of globalization.

³⁰ *ibid*

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