

The Phenomenon of Colonialism in Africa: Contending Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract. This paper examines the contending theoretical perspectives of colonialism which violently spread into Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Colonialism has posed a daunting challenge to researchers and scholars on the use of theoretical perspectives to scholarly investigate, analyze, evaluate and interpret its phenomenon, nature and fundamental principles. Using the diverse historical methods and combine evidence, this paper traces the bases of colonialism to two distinct and opposing intellectual groups. The first group is the Eurocentric school of thought which tries to explain the rationale behind the colonization of Africa from mainly European viewpoints. In this category are the Economic necessity, Marxist theory of economic exploitation, technological superiority, civilizing mission, social Darwinism, social atavism and national pride and prestige perspectives. The second group is the Africa dimension Theorists. While trying to debunk the claims of the Eurocentric theorists, African school of thought contends that the historical events which occurred in Africa prior to the nineteenth century contributed largely to the subjugation and conquest of Africa. The paper argues for the use of integration of theories, paradigms and perspectives in historical scholarship for a meaningful narrative.

Keywords: Colonialism, Phenomenon, Theory, Perspectives, Paradigms, Africa and Historical Scholarship.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of colonialism gained currency in international politics as a weapon of radical change of a fundamental nature. It violently spread into Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to mark the sudden and dramatic transformation in the age-old relationship between Africa and Western Europe. Apparently, colonialism propelled the influx of Europeans: Portuguese, Spaniard, Dutch, French, British, German, Belgian, Italian, and so on to Africa, more than before, to satisfy their varied interests (Awortu & N-ue, 2015).

Obviously, a daunting challenge faced by researchers and scholars, especially of History and its adjuncts, is to come to grips with the use of theoretical perspectives to guide the analysis, evaluation and interpretation of the political, social, religious, psychological, and material bases of colonialism. Express in other words, what were the fundamental principles that motivated Western Europe to conquer Africa? Why was African communities partitioned among the European nations? And why was African communities conquered with relative ease as they did? The present study addresses itself to attempt theoretical explanations to the above controversies and emotive questions and many others.

The point to note strongly is that researchers and scholars, especially of History and its adjuncts like History and Diplomatic Studies, History and Strategic Studies, History and International Studies, History and International Relations,

History and Development Studies and so on with new emphasis on scope and content needed the use of theory in analyzing and evaluating historical situations like colonialism. Indeed, no scholar can do without the use of theory. According to Rourke (2008 p. 18) thinking theoretically:

Helps us to build knowledge. If we confine ourselves to treating each event as unique, then our past and present are little more than a complex jumble of seemingly random events. By thinking theoretically, we look for patterns that help us understand more clearly what has occurred and, perhaps, to even predict what may occur. Secondly, thinking theoretically gives us a better chance of evaluating policy. Okpeh (2006 p. 5) strengthens that:

In addition to the fact that they (theoretical considerations) determine the selection and arrangement of facts and our evaluation of them, they also determine what the researcher either observes or fails to observe during the process of gathering and interpreting data. It is therefore, of utmost importance for any researcher to first of all establish the central concepts or theories regarding his subject matter before plunging into the shifting sands of interpretation.

It is therefore compelling relevant to use standard theories, perspectives and paradigms to scholarly investigate any historical event since facts do not speak for themselves. They are made to speak by the practitioners of History employing their craft of scrutiny and analysis for fruitful research and findings.

2. The Concept of Colonialism Defined

In order to get rid of the misunderstanding of our view point and thus enhance the capacity of the readers to follow the trend of the argument, the concept of colonialism that is central to this study is to be operationalized. This hinges on the fact that colonialism as a concept in both the Humanities and Social Sciences is a subjective one which affords windows of opportunities for scholars and researchers to make fuzzy use of it. Colonialism, in essence, has no precise definition.

From the economic angle, Brook field (1972 pp. 1-2) defines colonialism as:

Thorough going comprehensive and deliberate penetration of a local or 'residential' system by the agents of an external system, who aim to restructure the patterns of organizations, resource use, circulations and outlook so as to bring these into linked relationships with other systems.

Toeing the same line, Nkrumah (1957 p. vii) submits that colonialism is (was) a policy through which the colonial power binds her colonies to herself by political ties with the primary object of promoting her economic advantage. On his own part, Ebine (2012 p. 791) posits that colonialism has to do with "the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically". From their view points, *Prima facie*, economic motivation is the primary goal, but they did not entirely expel noneconomic factors such as politics in their definitions.

To Hobson (1902 p. 7) colonialism is conceived in a racial sense. According to him colonialism "in its best sense, is a natural overflow of nationality, its test is the power of colonialist to transplant the civilization they resent to the new natural and social environment in which they find themselves". Other scholars like Tangban (2008), Osterhammel (2002) and Okpeh (2006b) conceive colonialism in both economic and political sense. In his position, Tangban (2008 p. 10) argues that colonialism "is the exploitation by a foreign power and its agents who occupy the dependency to serve their own interests and not understands colonialism to be 'a system of foreign domination that had no calculation about the development of the natives, but how to ensure the objective condition for the exploitation of the economic and human resources of the colony". Colonialism to Osterhammel (2002 pp. 16 – 17) means:

A relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decision affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the

colonial rulers in pursuit of interest that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and of their ordained mandate to rule.

Truly, colonialism has variously been defined and so it means many things to many people and nations. However, a more comprehensive definition which underscores its essence and *raison d'être* is that which holds that it is the “political, social, economic and cultural domination of a territory and its people by a foreign power for an extended period of time” (Kottak, 2004 p. 669). As this study seeks to demonstrate, several assumptions were propounded to justify the philosophical, social, economic, religious and political bases of the imposition of colonial rule on the erstwhile independent African states, communities and empires in order to dominate them economically, socially, culturally, religiously, politically and otherwise.

3. Colonialism: A theoretical Overview

There are plenteous contending theoretical perspectives and paradigms that emerge to offer explanations for the phenomenon of colonialism that took place in the world between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Let it be noted *ab initio* that “theories are not metanarratives; that is, ultimate truth. Rather they act as guides to organize one’s view to enable the researchers to select and analyse appropriate facts for fruitful research and findings” (Akpan, 2012 p. 107). Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1981 p. 11) extend the argument by noting that:

No matter how aesthetically or intellectually satisfying a neat, logically unified theoretical system might be, none at present can adequately explain international reality (such as colonialization) in all its complexity. The theoretical analyst who makes a significant contribution to the field must choose a coherent intellectual framework within which to work on a specific problem.

Basically, the main business here is to examine the kernels or central thrusts of a few of these

theoretical perspectives which throw interesting light on the concept of colonialism.

A. Economic Necessity

This theoretical construct variously dubbed “economic imperialism”, “under consumption”, and “accumulation and expansion of capital” was first propounded by John Atkinson Hobson (1854 – 1940), an eminent economist and publicist, in the wake of the twentieth century. In his seminal work entitled *Imperialism* and published in 1902, Hobson theorizes that the under - lining factor that specially motivated the colonies in parts of the globe was certainly economic imperatives. According to him, the selfish excessive accumulation of capital and over-saving by the wealthy as well as surplus production leads to under consumption or insufficient demand by the lower classes on the home market. The central argument of Hobson’s notion seems to be located in the expansion of British trade and provision of maximum security for worldwide trade.

In outlining his hypothesis, Hobson incisely notes that non-economic factors (like politics) played crucial role in the aggressive expansion of British’s capital outside the area of their influence. In his words, though “an ambitious statesman, a pushing trader may suggest or even initiate a step of imperial expansion, may assist in educating patriotic public opinion of the urgent need for some fresh advance... the final determination rests with the financial power” (i.e. economic factor) (Hobson, 1902 pp. 80 – 81). The validity of this school of thought was given vent in the works of the proponents of this perspective like Winslow (1948) and Platt (1968).

A major strand of the economic school of thought which believes that economic factors have a fundamental contribution to thinking theoretically about colonialism is the Marxist perspective of economic exploitation. This theoretical model with exponents like the Marxism and Marxist scholars, Radical Western Scholars, Liberal – nationalist, Dependency and Afro-centric scholars, speculates that colonialism was stimulated by the need to

exploit the colonies it acquired through force of arms politically, culturally, and economically.

Spurred by the urge to exploit, European capitalists/investors, and industrialists penetrated the landscape of the world, especially Africa and Asia. They were the *bourgeoisie* (wealthy class) that sucked the resources of the colonized for their own selfish ends. Marx & Engels (1932 p. 11) contend that:

The bourgeoisie ... has left no other bond between man and man than naked-interest, than callous cash payment. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of Philistine sentimentalism, in the key water of egoistical calculation ... the bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo, every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up with reverent awe.

The disciples of this theoretical vision, especially the African(ist) Marxist scholars believe that Africa and by extension other colonies did not benefit from colonialism and if there was any beneficial effect it was sheer accidental or unintended. The argument is simple: “Gold was the motive, God and glory the excuses”.

Ironically, the non-Marxist scholars, Western bourgeois and colonial apologists whose intellectual gods were Lugard (1926), Field house (1973), Gann & Duignan (1967), Lloyd (1972) and Perham (1970) to mention but a few had pretty convincingly refuted the Marxists’ economic exploitation vantage point. These enthusiastic supporters of this position espouse that colonialism was an engine of cultural transformation, arguing that it was for the dual benefits of Europeans and Africans. To them, colonialism was either a blessing or at worst not harmful to the Africans. Although, the economic theory was mainly propounded for a European capitalist society, the perception of this intellectual model significantly influenced the scramble for and the partition of Africa as well as the colonial ideology of competition, domination and exploitation of the colonized and their resources.

B. Technological Superiority

The philosophical premise of this perspective is that the British desire to embark on colonial expansion to Africa in particular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was occasioned by the Industrial Revolution which resulted in the mass production of sophisticated technological and military weapons. The Industrial Revolution which commenced in England in the eighteenth century was characterized by phenomenal and revolutionary changes in military technology in which deadly high calibre weapons were manufactured. From the middle of the nineteenth century, superior fire power like handfire arms with rifled barrels, repeater rifle and machine guns (such as the American Gatting gun) were invented and massively produced.

However, a major breakthrough in European scientific tactics and approach to fighting was the invention of Maxim gun named after Maxim its inventor in 1889. The Maxim gun had comparative advantage over all other guns before it as it is light, easy to manipulate, and could “fire an almost continuous stream of bullets” (Gavin, 1971 Pp. 16-17). In point of fact, the novel “Maxim gun inspires the most profound respect “(Webster, Boahen & Idowu, 1971 P. 241) needed to break the spine of the brave African fighters equipped with out-dated and out-modelled dane guns. Crowther (1968 P. 2), an ardent advocate of this model, gives a sharper perspective:

The imperial conquests of the nineteenth century were the outcome of a technological revolution that put the industrial nations of Western Europe in an absolutely commanding position *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world. Before that time Europe was not markedly in advance technologically of most other parts of the world, and in certain instances was behind but by the opening of the twentieth century Europe, with America had achieved a technological supremacy that Africa and the rest of the world, with the exception of Japan, were in no position to challenge.

Continuing,

One of the distinguishing features of early twentieth century colonial rule was the overwhelming technological superiority of the colonial powers over their colonial subjects. And if Africans seem to have been somewhat passive

in their situation once subjected to it, this resulted from a realisation of the uselessness of resisting conquerors so manifestly superior to them technologically.

Another outstanding exponent of the technological superiority model is Hilaire Bellve, an English poet. He powerfully strengthened the idea when he writes:

Whatever happens we have got.

The Maxim-gun and they have not (as cited in Perham, 1961 P. 32).

C. Social Atavism

This theoretical model, which uses the sociological prism, is a major departure from the economic theory. The chief exponent of this school of thought is Joseph A. Schumpeter, an accomplished economist. He contends that Europeans' imperialistic drive was propelled by psychological motives rather than economic imperatives.

Schumpeter insists that it was "the natural desire of man to dominate his fellow men for the sake of dominating them. This native impulse to aggression is governed by man's universal thirst for usurpation" (as quoted by Uzoigwe, 1985 P. 23). He simply posits that the new imperialism (colonialism) was atavistic in nature, meaning that "it was a reversion to earlier primitive political and social instincts in man which may have been justified in pre-modern times but were certainly not in the modern world" (Uzoigwe, 1985 P. 23). This hypothesis has been faulted by some prominent scholars. For instance, Uzoigwe (1985 P. 23) protests that:

In spite of the attraction of this argument, its major weakness is its nebulous and a historical quality. While the psychological theories may have an element of truth in them as an explanation of the partition, they do not explain why the partition occurred when it did. They do suggest, however, why it was possible and considered desirable.

D. Racial-Cultural Superiority Theory

i. Social Darwinism

A prominent paradigm of Racial-Cultural Superiority theory is social Darwinism. This robust theoretical construct is a product of fertile intellectual thinking of Charles Darwin in the second half of the nineteenth century. Though the belief in the superiority of the European race has been conceived in the seventeenth century, Charles Darwin's publication: *The origin of species by means of natural selection* (1859) and *The descent of man* (1871) actually popularized the notion and provided basic scientific premise for the renewed European philosophical thinking, especially in the bizarre changes witnessed in both intellectual and attitudinal lives in Europe.

The kernel of this perspective is anchored on the view that the evolution and development of life relied wholly on the inevitable procession of "natural selection" by which the stronger suppresses the weaker in the struggle for existence. This idea, therefore, spread the notion of the game of the survival of the fittest and the strongest as some species were eliminated while some survived largely due to the fact that they exhibited their uncommon and brilliant skill of environmental adaptability. The European racists cashed in on this assumption to stress that the so called 'master-race' (the whites) should conquer the 'subject races' or 'backward races' like the Negroes (The Blacks), hence, the rapid feeling of European superiority, authorizing the forceful subjugation of other backward cultures of the world.

ii. Civilizing Mission

This is another notable variant of the racial cultural superiority theory which is couched in the costume of shouldering the burden of the less developed nations of the world. Thus European humanitarians, philanthropists, missionaries and other proponents of the supposed theory of African backwardness and its inferiority believed in the regeneration of Africans through the avowed "civilizing mission" project in Africa which to them was not part of the world march to civilization. To most of them, Africa was inhabited by barbaric savages.

Against this backdrop, Rudyard Kipling, an English poet, called on the missionaries and humanitarians in Europe, especially Great Britain to rise to the occasion and transform the sub-human beings of the world. According to him:

*Take up the Whiteman's
burden send out the best yet breed.*

Go, bind your sons to exile.

To wait in heavy harness.

On fluttered folk and wild.

Your new caught sullen

peoples.

Half devil and half child.

Others like Greene (1971), Palmer & Colton (1965) and others argue that the central ideology of colonialism transcended exploitation of the peoples' resources to the duty of the civilized or advanced European nations to civilize and Christianize the citizens of the so-called backward nations of the world. To this end, the European powers saw colonization as their moral duty, a 'sacred trust', or at best God's given burden to enlighten and liberate the heathens and less civilized peoples of the world to the path of progress and development.

On the other hand, scholars of African descent and other socio-cultural backgrounds and leanings have argued that the idea was orchestrated by the whites to further their exploitative and monopolistic tendencies. As a screen to becloud the actual exploitative motives, they systematically designated African history, religion and cultural environment and succeeded in softening the minds of the peoples for European colonization (Awortu & N-ue, 2015). In fact, to ensure that the cross preceded the flag in many paths of Africa, Christian missionaries negatively and dangerously coloured the African image of religion and all that it encompassed because they considered African religion inferior to their own (Ayandele, 1966). Indeed the moral and racial superiority and civilizing mission notion were fashioned out by the European intruders to becloud the fundamental urge which was unarguably economic exploitation.

E. National Pride and Prestige

This is another perspective of the theories of colonialism which presents intriguing and penetrating explanation of European occupation of Africa and Asia. The thrust of this hypothesis is that economic impulses were not the only preponderant factors that led to the partition of Africa but also national pride and prestige helped to motivate colonialism. For example, France's imperial interest in the scramble for colonies outside Europe was induced by national prestige and pride. According Beaulieu as quoted by Anene (1977 P. 14) "colonisation is for France a question of life and death, either France will become a great European power, or in a century or two she will be no more than a secondary European power". This was precipitated by France's ruthless humiliation in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) and loss of her overseas territories of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. To redeem its lost national glory, France quickly turned her attention elsewhere like Africa.

Again, Britain's involvement in the acquisition of colonies in Africa was due to national pride and prestige. Britain was in a century-old struggle with its major rivals: France and Germany. So, the British were in the race to assert their leadership and domineering role in Europe. National pride and prestige gained nationalistic currency in Europe to an extent that the possession of territories outside the shores of Europe automatically became a test, proof and measurement of the country's glory and power. Also, the newly emergent European states like Germany and Italy partook in the race for territories in Africa and around the world towards the last half of the nineteenth century not only to maintain balance of power in Europe but also to carve a niche for themselves among the comity of nations.

F. The African Dimension

The African Dimension theory tries to explain the historical events in Africa prior to the nineteenth century which helped to stimulate the spate of colonialism in the Africa continent. For a long time, the Africa-oriented theory had suffered damnable neglect due to much

emphasis placed on Eurocentric perspectives. The total reliance on these external sources fabricated by European scholars beclouded the African realities and its great contributions to the scramble for Africa. For a balanced academic and thorough explanation of theories of colonialism, it is relevant not to neglect the African view point.

Essentially, the central idea of this robust theoretical vision is that the European colonisation of African nations was largely due to the convincing aftermath of the European cautious bite at the African continent dating back to the decades of protracted historic contacts and mutual inter-dependence of diverse cultures and desperate peoples from across the globe. These congenial commercial ties were gyrated through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the staple trade which replaced it.

The African Dimension theorists like Hardy (1930), Keltie (1893), Dike (1956), Hopkins (1973) and Uzoigwe (1993, 1985) posit that the invasion and occupation of Africa did not just happen in the nineteenth century. Its built-up commenced from the fifteenth century when Africa and Europe had smooth trade intercourse. Based on the fifteenth century commercial connections, European conquerors came to Africa because the continent could confidently provide the necessary raw materials need for their expanding economies, overseas markets for their excess manufactured goods and ample opportunities for the investment of the surplus capitals acquired due to the advent of the industrial revolution. To achieve these, European powers adopted several means and strategies to force Africans into submission, hence the formal colonization and balkanization of almost all African nations, except Ethiopia and Liberia, amongst themselves. So, to downplay this great African historical contribution while attempting to explain the circumstances which lurk at the background of colonization would be tantamount to bad scholarship and distortion of historical facts.

4. Conclusion

In this work, attempt has been made to analyze the contending theoretical perspectives of the phenomenon of colonialism in Africa. The thrust of our analysis is that theories occupy a critical position in historical scholarship as in other academic disciplines. It was noted that an integration of theories should be adopted to examine an identified historical problem. Plainly, the work traced the driving forces behind European domination of Africa in particular to two distinct and opposing intellectual tents. They are the Eurocentric and Africanist perspectives. These paradigms, in spite of their short comings, help more significantly to explain, in a very important way, the causative factors of colonialism in Africa.

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