

THE EFFECTS OF WESTERN CIVILISATION AND CULTURE ON AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The central argument of this paper stems from the submission that colonialism, slave trade and missionary are the platform upon which Western civilisation and culture thrive and are sustained. While insisting that Western civilisation and culture has precariously contaminated the traditional values of Africa, the paper contends that Africa had established, well before the advent of colonialism, a pattern of home-grown political systems, governance process and generally acceptable institutional rule-making arrangement, such that there was progression in the pace of civilisation of Africa and self-styled tempo of technological development. The paper further submits that the dynamism and significance of Africa on the global continuum tends to support the argument that Africa would have evolved and sustained level of development and civilisation without the retrogressive contact with imperial forces. The paper adopted descriptive analytic model to drive home its points and relies on neoliberalism, liberal democracy, colonialism and missionary to prove the effects of Western civilisation and culture on Africa. It concludes by putting forth viable options as a panacea for Africa to come out of its cultural logjam.

Keywords: Colonialism, Culture, Development, Governance, Liberal Democracy, Missionary, Neoliberalism, Political System, Western Civilisation

INTRODUCTION

For a start, I argue that colonialism, slave trade and missionaries are the bastion of Western civilisation and culture in Africa. This is correct to the extent that colonialism serves as a vehicle of implantation of cultural imperialism in Africa. Colonialism, perceived in this context, is an imposition of foreign rule over indigenous traditional political setting and foreign dominance and subjugation of African people in all spheres of their social, political, cultural, economic and religious civilisations.

Western civilisation and culture began to creep into African socio-cultural milieu, first, with the contact of Europeans with Africa, a consequence of Berlin conference in the quest for imperial pilfering of African resources and, later, consolidated by the unstoppable wave of globalisation. It is important to stress that colonialism distorted and retarded the pace and tempo of cultural growth and trend of civilisation in Africa. One of the most profound consequences of colonization has been how the political and economic rape of the colonies has also led to what sometimes seem to be an unbridgeable cultural gap between the nations that were the beneficiaries of colonization and those that were the victims of the colonial assault. The era of colonial pillage and plunder led to the relative stagnation and often precipitous decline of traditional cultural pursuits in the colonies.

With Africa subjugated and dominated, the Western culture and European mode of civilisation began to thrive and outgrow African cultural heritage. Traditional African cultural practices paved the way for foreign way of doing things as Africans became fully ‘westernised’. Western culture now is regarded as frontline civilisation. African ways of doing things became primitive, archaic and regrettably unacceptable in public domain. Not only were certain aspects of the material culture in the colonies lost or destroyed, colonial societies also lost the power and sense of cultural continuity, such that it became practically impossible to recover the ability to strive for cultural progress on their own terms. As argued by a scholar:

The social fabric was completely devastated and a new culture of violence was implanted. Traditional African systems of conflict resolution were destroyed and, in their places, nothing was given. The democratic process, rudimentary though it was, but with great potential as accompanies every human institution, was brutally uprooted and replaced by the authoritarianism of colonialism. A new crop of elites was created, nurtured, and weaned on the altar of violence and colonialism armed with the structures of the modern state to continue to carry out the art and act of subjugation of the mass of the people in the service of colonialism (Mimiko, 2010:641-42).

The above assertion was corroborated by Kasongo (2010:314) when he submits that “one could infer that when westernisation was imported to African countries, the hidden side of modernism was materialist interests. Civilisation was just another concept of domination: imposition of incoming new culture over traditional cultural values”. It is important to emphasise fundamentally that urgent and more decisive steps need to be taken in order to reorder and reverse this evanescent trend of cultural emptiness, without which Africa may experience seasons of cultural extinction and drought of African values. It is appalling

to note that two hundred years or so of colonisation were not only destructive in terms of cultural heritage and values for which Africa was famous before colonialism but also precariously retrogressive as the continent was robbed of decades of opportunities- opportunities of self-development, opportunities of self-government and, indeed, opportunities of self-styled technological developmental pace.

There is need, therefore, for the flogging of the negative impact of Western civilisation and culture on Africa in all fora; so that policy makers can begin to see the need to reappraise their policies that contribute to the cultural dearth of Africa or the ones that negate the principles of cultural revival. The focus of this paper, therefore, is to have a holistic appraisal of culture and Western Civilisation to the extent of distortions and retardation it caused to Africa and its pace of development, and also, by the same measure, illuminate into the options that are left for Africa.

Western Civilisation and Culture: A Conceptual and Contextual Framework

What is culture? What is civilisation? When people think of culture, they often tend to do so in very simple and more monolithic way. Culture is not only about dancing, it is not limited only to music; it is not about costume alone. It is beyond pattern of social celebration, rituals pertaining to birth and marriage, cuisine or sport. Beyond that and this is important, culture is about people's total way of life; the way people live, eat, worship, produce, create and recreate. It is the totality of a set of bequeathed ideas, belief system, values and norms, which constitute the common bases of generally agreed social action.

Charles A. Ellwood, an American Sociologist brings out the multifacetedness of culture when he encapsulates it to mean:

“a collective name for all behaviour patterns socially acquired and socially transmitted by means of symbols; hence a name for distinctive achievements of human groups, including not only such items as language, tool making, industry, art, science, law, government, morals and religion, but also the material instruments or artefacts in which cultural achievements [sic] are embodied and by which intellectual cultural features are given practical effect, such as buildings, tools, machines, communication devices, art objects, etc.... The essential part of culture is to be found in the patterns embodied in the social traditions of group, that is, in knowledge, ideas, beliefs, values, standards, and sentiments prevalent in the group. The overt part of culture is to be found in the actual behaviour of

the group, usually in its usages, customs, and institutions.... The essential part of culture seems to be an appreciation of values with reference to life conditions. The purely behaviouristic definition of culture is, therefore inadequate. Complete definition must include the subjective and objective aspects of culture. Practically, the culture of the human group is summed up in its traditions and customs; but tradition, as the subjective side of culture is the essential core (Cited in Amponsah, 2010:597).

Culture can also be conceived of as the collectivity of human activities and general principles that tend to guide ideas of a group of people with shared traditions (general acceptability), which are passed on, instilled into generation (socialisation) and reinvigorated by members of the group (sustainability).

Conceptualising civilisation will facilitate grasp of western civilisation. Civilisation is a conceptual term. It is a totality of people's history, way of life, their expectations, their frustration, their desire, and their aspirations. It is proper in this context to talk of Chinese Civilisation, African civilisation. Civilisation is a term used to describe a particular level of improvement on the development continuum. It is also more often used as a synonym of culture. Culture, defined as "the arts, customs, habits, beliefs, values, behaviour and material appreciation that constitute a people's way of life" (Standage, 2005), is more general, more loose than civilisation. Whereas civilisation tends to dwell on a particular lifestyle, a peculiar way of life but culture is perceived as holistically inclusive comprising the way of life and people's philosophy of life, the ideas they share and general attitude including creativity and production pattern.

However, in its most widely used definition, civilization is a descriptive term for a relatively complex agricultural and urban culture. Civilizations can be distinguished from other cultures by their high level of social complexity and organization, and by their diverse economic and cultural activities (ibid). Civilisation can also be used in a normative way to indicate cultural superiority of one group of country over another. In a similar sense, civilization can mean "refinement of thought, manners, or taste" (Roger, 2009). This normative notion of civilization is heavily rooted in the thought that urbanized environments provide a higher living standard, encompassed by both nutritional benefits and mental potentialities. Civilization requires advanced knowledge of science, trade, art, government, and farming, within a society (ibid). Western civilization, therefore, is a particular way of life, considered as superior and advanced identifiable with the people of the West. In the context of this paper, civilisation can be used as a complementary concept to culture

The historical context of Westernization in Africa is the contact with Europe through Atlantic slave trade, missionary and imperialism. The forced acculturation of the black populations in the New World, already in full swing by the mid-eighteenth century, represents the first sustained assimilation of Western culture by Africans. It is significant to note the contribution that Diaspora blacks were later to make to the process of Westernization in Africa, notably through their role in Christian evangelization and education (Standage, 2005).

Africa

Africa is the world’s second-largest and second most-populous continent, after Asia. At about 30.2 million km² (11.7 million sq mi) including adjacent islands, it covers 6% of the Earth's total surface area and 20.4% of the total land area (Sayre, 2009). With a billion people (as of 2009), in 61 territories, it accounts for about 14.72% of the world's human population (Sayre, 2009). Table 1. below shows clearly the population figure of Africa vis-à-vis the world. This is an indication of a pivotal role of Africa in the world as indicated by its population as well as its endowed natural resources:

Table.1

S/N	AFRICA REGION	POPUPALTION (2010 Estimate)	POPULATION (% in World)
1.	Total for Africa	1,013,779,050	14.8%
2.	Rest of World	5,831,830,910	85.2%
3.	World Total	6,845,609,960	100.0%

(source: US Census Bureau)

The continent is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, both the Suez Canal and the Red Sea along the Sinai Peninsula to the northeast, the Indian Ocean to the southeast, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The continent has 54 sovereign states, including Madagascar, various island groups, and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, a member state of the African Union whose statehood is disputed by Morocco (Asante, 2007).

Pre-colonial Africa had as many as 10,000 different states and polities with sundry political systems and groupings (Meredith, 2006). These comprised small family groups of hunter-gatherers such as the San people of southern Africa; a more structured unit of social groups such as the family clan groupings of

the Bantu-speaking people of central and southern Africa, heavily structured clan groups in the horn of Africa, the large Sahelian Kingdoms, and autonomous city-states and kingdoms such as those of the Yoruba and Igbo People in West Africa, and the Swahili coastal trading towns of East Africa (Mokhtar, 1990).

By the 9th century AD, a string of dynastic states, including the earliest Hausa states, stretched across the sub-Saharan savannah from the western regions to central Sudan. The most powerful of these states were Ghana, Gao, and the Kanem-Bornu Empire. Ghana fell in the 11th century but was succeeded by the Mali Empire which consolidated much of western Sudan in the 13th century. Kanem accepted Islam in the 11th century (O'Brien, 2005).

In the forested regions of the West African coast, independent kingdoms grew up with little influence from the Muslim north. The Kingdom of Nri of the Igbo was established around the 9th century and was one of the first so established. It is also one of the oldest Kingdoms in modern day Nigeria and was ruled by the Eze Nri. The Nri kingdom is famous for its elaborate bronzes, found at the town of Igbo Ukwu. The bronzes have been dated from as far back as the 9th century (Oliver and Anthony, 1994).

The essence of this brief historical analogy is to present a clearer perspective of and deeper insight into pre-colonial African societies, how well they had established their own mode of governance, attained their own pace of civilisation, evolved home grown political systems and processes of rule making- a process that guaranteed and sustained the peace on the continent. The point is that Africa is a dynamic continent with spirited efforts at democratising and developing. Africa is not a monolithic concept; there is a degree of differentiation in Africa measurable in terms of governance and identity. For instance, few countries (like Senegal, Namibia, Ghana, South Africa, Botswana) that are doing well in Africa in terms of good governance and democratic consolidation have begun to take exceptions to the definition of Africa as a failed state. Also, cultural heterogeneity of Africa has started to play out as countries in the North Africa (Morocco and Tunisia for instance) see themselves as part of Arab rather being African. So, there is a great deal of disparities on the continent.

The Effects of Western Civilisation and Culture on Africa

Indeed, the significant fact about African cultural history is the convergence upon the indigenous tradition of the two external influences—the Arab-Islamic and the European-Christian—to which the continent has been exposed for well over a millennium. The values and lifestyles associated with these traditions have been assimilated and to a large extent indigenized on the continent. This observation provides a broader perspective on the phenomenon of Westernization in Africa, an observation made as early as the late nineteenth century by the great African cultural theorist Edward Wilmot Blyden and summed up in the late twentieth century by Ali Mazrui as “the triple heritage”. (Irele, 2010).

The effects of western civilisation and culture on Africa are in several phases. It is the desire of this paper to bring out three of these phases, viz: political effect, economic effect and social effect. By and large, the scope of this paper shall be confined to those concepts that drive western civilisation: neoliberalism, liberal democracy, globalisation, individualism/family values, etc. Again, all these can conveniently be accommodated under the scope of wider phases of effects of western civilisation. Western civilisation is a commitment to neoliberalism, commitment to liberal democracy, commitment to consumerism and commitment to Christian worldview as the origin of western civilisation. Colonialism and liberal democracy will be put under political effect, neoliberalism under economic effect and missionary to be under social effect.

1. **Political Effect**

The colonial factor was essential to the understanding of the process of Westernization in Africa itself. The holistic distortions of the hitherto well organised African societies in every sphere of life pointed to the depth and effectiveness of colonisation in the process of westernising African societies and their cultures. Political effect includes:

- Distortions of natural boundaries without due recourse to antecedent institutions and cultures.
- The western civilisation submerged and dismantled indigenous institutions and, in its place, a foreign rule was established. Traditional institutions before then were regarded as not only political authorities but also custodians of cultures.

- Introduction of Westminster liberal democracy: This does not just work in Africa. It is not that Africa did not have its own pattern of democracy before imposition of liberal democracy but the typical democracy in Africa and its processes were submerged by westernisation. As insisted by Mimiko (2010:640):

But the point is that the so-called Kabiyesi syndrome, which has been accorded as an explanation for the shortage of democracy in contemporary Africa, is actually a betrayal of inadequate understanding of the workings of the African traditional political systems. I strongly dispute this proposition as unhistorical and therefore invalid in the context of Africa. Our hypothesis is that in the epoch before contact between Europe and Africa, the latter not only developed relatively advanced state structures, but that emergent pre-colonial African states also had “sophisticated systems of political rule” with strong democratic foundations. I argue that the basis of the advertised inability of these societies to sustain democracy in contemporary (postcolonial) times could not have consisted in the absence of a democratic culture on their part. Rather, it is the residue of constraints that were attendant upon imperialism, which has been the dominant experience of the African peoples since the fourteenth century – defined most profoundly by slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and their handmaiden, military governance.

- Liberal Democracy: The question is: what is the effect of embracing Western democracy on Africa? A lot of people will say it is the right way to go as it creates opportunities to participate in affairs, that liberal democracy promotes development. Should democracy be defined and contextualised on the principle of or rather than substance? Is it not evident that Africa is not able to do business with liberal democracy? Is it compulsory to use western type? Is it not feasible and appropriate to arrive at the principles of democracy using African forms, patterns and processes? For instance, in Nigeria in 1993, the country adopted open-secret form in her general elections which was largely acclaimed to be much more successful in terms of voting. Look at National Assembly members; they have not demonstrated deep understanding of the concept and philosophy behind law making. Is it out of place to return to and improve on the traditional model of rule making?

2. Economic Effect

- A major effect of European colonialism was the progressive integration of Africa into the world capitalist system, within which Africa functioned primarily as a source of raw materials for Western industrial production.
- There was imposition of taxation, which forced Africans into wage labour

- Colonial economy also caused agriculture to be diverted toward the production of primary products and cash crops: cocoa, groundnut, palm oil, sisal, and so on.
- There was sudden shift in production mode from production of food crops to cash crops, a situation that caused hunger and starvation in Africa. Africa began to produce more of what she needs less and produce less of what she needs most.
- Africa was perpetually turned to producer of primary raw materials, a situation that caused unequal exchange
- The plunderage method and systematically kleptocratic enterprises established in the colonies to expropriate natural resources of Africa to Europe has, in the perspective of Rodney, facilitated “underdevelopment of Africa while engendered the development of Europe”
- This required a total reorganization of African economic life, beginning with the introduction of the cash crop and inexorable alteration of economic pattern. In the settler colonies—notably in Kenya and Rhodesia—the alienation of native land complicated the economic situation of the indigenous populations (Alkali, 2003).
- Economic Plan: it also altered the way we produce, create and recreate as well as what we consume.
- The infrastructure undertaken by the colonial administrations was minimal, developed strictly as a function of the requirements of the new economy, which saw the rise of the colonial cities such as Dakar, Lagos, Nairobi, and Luanda.
- Neoliberalism: It is an economic process that distrusts the state as a factor in development; it is a nineteenth century philosophy that has continued to be repackaged, its latest form is monetarism. It believes that market mechanism is the most efficient allocator of productive resources and, therefore, to have an efficient and effective economy, forces of demand and supply must be allowed to play a leading role. This changed economy of Africa from communalism to capitalism and, lately, neoliberalism.

3. Social Effect

- Family/Social Relations: Extended family giving way to nuclear family. Traditional African family values breaking down very rapidly. Extended family that was wonderful instrument like a social verve, social security in our community has given way to nuclear family. Little wonder that

there is no more respect for age; no more respect for values that we held sacrosanct in Africa; younger ones now find it very difficult to greet elderly ones.

- Individualism: We now have children of single parents, a phenomenon that is identifiable with America. People no longer communalise, nobody wants to be anybody's brother's keeper.
- Building Pattern: The way we build now is different from the way it was; we no longer take into cognizance our own peculiarity in the building process. We now build houses without ventilation.
- Urbanization: It led to rural exodus and the displacement of large segments of the population.
- Corruption: western civilisation has promoted corruption in Africa; leaders in Africa now look up to Europe and America as safe havens for looted funds. It is a consequence of Western civilisation.
- Sexuality: The conception of sexuality has changed completely; the desire to be like Westerners by our children has suddenly made them promiscuous; doing things that were never imaginable several years ago. This does not, however, in any way support cultural isolationism. Cultural isolationism is not possible in the context of globalisation. Cultural ideas and values grow and flow across borders unimpeded, but that should not make us lose sight of the fact that the weaker you are; the more likelihood of cultural dominance. Africa has been very weak and vulnerable since the last century. Africa now suffer from level of mental enslavement; cultural imperialism; the need for decolonisation of the mind. The trend of Western civilisation in Africa is pathetic, the strength of wave of Western civilisation is such that Africa is hardly capable of resisting it. The wave is so strong that it has become irresistible.
- Language: Proficiency in our language is declining in Africa because we are compelled to embrace Western culture and civilisation as Western language; Western language has created a dichotomy between an elite and mass of our people who still can not do business with foreign language. It causes alienation for people who can not speak English or French. Language is a vehicle of culture, we are in a very serious problem. Professor Babafunwa project on local language as a basic tool of teaching in Nigeria was aborted because of the nature of our country. We must define and design means of helping Africa out of this language, cultural logjam.
- Christianity: The impact of Christianity has to be considered, for this has been the most important single factor in the process of Westernization in Africa. Western education, involving literacy and the mastery of a European language, became the condition for entry into the modern sector. For

most of the colonial period, education was in the hands of the Christian missions, who sought not only to convert Africans but also to inculcate Western values. Christianity challenged traditional belief systems and promoted the diffusion of new ideas and modes of life; in particular, it sought to impose monogamy and the nuclear family as the norm.

- Ironically, the drastic reduction of infant mortality it has made possible has also complicated the demographic issues in Africa, with consequences for agriculture and social services. Although no major effort of industrialization took place during the colonial period, and there has been no significant development since, Western technology has long entered the lives of Africans through familiarity with manufactured products imported from the West.
- The cultural alteration provoked by the pressures of colonial rule and missionary in all spheres of life are pervasive enough to qualify as the signs of a new cultural coup in Africa. This is more noticeable in the area of science and technology on African experience and consciousness. Modern medicine has largely taken precedence over traditional methods in matters of health.

Conclusion

The trend of cultural westernisation of Africa has become very pervasive and prevalent, such that Western civilisation has taken precedence over African values and culture and the latter is regarded as inferior to the former. As with other societies and cultures in the so-called Third World, the impact of Western civilization on Africa has occasioned a discontinuity in forms of life throughout the continent. This has led to a cultural dualism that often presents itself as a real dilemma in concrete, real-life situations. In other words, the African experience of modernity is fraught with tensions at every level of the communal and social settings. The post independence Africa is confronted with how to have a true identity, a new culture that is African in nature. It is on this basis that the paper argued that Africa must begin to relate with countries that have “de-westernised” and have attained some level of appreciable economic development. The focus is to evolve viable options for truly African culture.

What Options Do We Have?

In order to nip in the bud the ugly trend of cultural drought and dearth of values in Africa, the following options should be considered:

- It is important to continue to talk about the way to reorder this trend of cultural emptiness in Africa with a view to attaining a robust understanding of the situation.
- Africa should honestly admit its weaknesses. Imagine the former Nigerian President, Umar Musa Yar'adua, in the presence of the erstwhile American President, George Bush, saying that "I count myself lucky to be here, it is a day I would never forget in my life". That shows how small African leaders are and how weak the continent is. A state that is not capable of protecting itself against this cultural onslaught. Yet it must do something to stem the tide of Western cultural domination. This is highly possible by first "decolonising the mind" of Africans and their leaders to begin to see what options are possible in the process and efforts of "de-westernise" cultural orientation of Africans.
- Cultivating the culture of interacting with non Western culture is germane, collaborating with countries like Malaysia, Tunisia, etc.
- African countries should be interested in what other countries that stood against Western culture have achieved; it is important and significant, for instance, that countries like Taiwan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, that have chosen to de-emphasise foreign language ended up becoming great economies. At a time, India banned importation of Western clothes. Today, India is one of the largest producers of textiles in the world.
- It is not without reason that France is spending so much in the development of French language; it is not without reason that the Anglo-Saxon communities of Western Europe and North America are spending so much money to ensure the continued development of what they now call the language of diplomacy and commerce.
- Indigenous African languages should be mounted in schools as a compulsory part of the curriculum lessons in African culture, not as General Studies (GST) but as core courses.
- Africa should link up with people of African descent in other continents. There is no reason, for instance, why Africa should not have very strong paternal relations with those people. The kind of cultural revivalism in Brazil will begin to serve as a trigger of the interest of Africa in African culture.

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