

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE THE AFRICAN SYSTEM

By
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An important question for students of African politics to reflect upon is whether African states can ever affect international relations positively in order to erase their present image of chaos and stagnation. Reflections of this kind will as well suggest a reconsideration of African societies from a historical perspective, and the place of the contemporary African state system in interstate relations. The significance of this exercise arises from the rather sordid state of affairs on the continent, itself derived partly from the legacy of colonial domination and exploitation along with the problems of externally imposed state structures.

The work evaluates some of the most important theories in the field of international relations and their relevance to the problem of state formation and state-building in Africa. The recent spate of political instability and conflicts on the continent leaves one wondering about possible alternatives to existing systems of social and political organization. The steadfast belief is that African states will become viable if only they adhere to internationally accepted norms, standards and practices of good governance and economic development. One wonders whether post-independence realities on the continent point in this direction. Some would argue that essentially, only few African states are encountering the problems of social strife, political instability and conflicts. Certainly, our minds would go to such countries as Angola, Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Somalia. Realistically, however, almost all the countries on the continent, generously dubbed as "nation-states" in the literature, as well as in general international legal discourse and practices, are prone to the perennial problems of political crisis and internal conflict.

Ultimately, the objective here is to provide an assessment of the post-colonial state, the significance of which need not be overstated. Intellectual considerations of the system of states in its current constitution and composition, of "weak versus strong states", or the dichotomous distinction between "quasi-states" and "core states", often generate analytical paradigms which usually preclude a historical content. Descriptive concepts and reference terminologies such as the "Third World", "Developing Countries" or "Under-development" should be contextually analysed with forward and backward linkages. This can be done in terms of what Henrique Cardoso, writing in the 1970s, referred to as "historical structuralism." The implication is that "history becomes understandable when interpretations propose categories strong enough to

render clear the fundamental relations that sustain and those that oppose a given structural situation in its globality."¹ In perspective, historical evidence should provide the foundations and frameworks for factual analysis and intellectual enrichment. Ideas that reduce the past into irrelevance in order to sustain the present, refutes the truth. One would also agree with Jean-Francois Bayart that the isolation of Africa and Africans from the rest of the world and the denial of their past achievements is "a negation of their historicity."² He went on to say that "the historicity of sub-Saharan (Africa) societies was identified with that of the Western world which had made them dependent."³ The result is the denigration of the distinct cultural, political and socio-economic systems of the African people.

The State and Historical Evidence

The central image in current international relations theory revolves around the state. The question to ask is how were societies organized in Africa before the emergence of nation-statism? What kinds of political, social and economic systems were used by communities in their everyday survival? How were intra- and inter-community conflicts resolved? How have these social and political systems been affected by the emergence of the modern nation-state which in the Africa context, are crude products of European colonization? In particular, it appears that while there is a vigorous application of the concept of the nation-state in everyday vocabulary, the fact that these are, universally speaking, institutional constructs resulting from human agency and enterprise, is often overlooked. The historical foundations of the nation-state in its Eurocentric form, contrasted with recent artificial creations in the developing world (Africa, Asia and Latin America) must be understood and the shortcomings of the latter category explained by the facts of history.

The classical international theory of state survival in an anarchical international system through the use of force,⁴ warrants some serious attention. Looked at from a purely international relations perspective, one would easily conclude that all nation-states started off at a classical point in time and then embarked on self-interested projects of system creation and maintenance. How do we, for instance, interpret the use of force by European powers in foreign regions resulting in their enslavement, subjugation and integration into the system of states?

Similarly, the history of community formation and the transition from tribal and feudal societies to nation-statism was largely evolutionary and permeated all societies. But in current discourse, it would appear as if precolonial African societies lacked the basic institutional and administrative frameworks for political and social organization. In the estimation of Basil Davidson.

What European and American experts and legislators held to be patently true—that pre-colonial Africa had acquired no experience relevant and valid to any process of self-government — was simply accepted. One of the consequences of this acceptance became a general debasement of the argument about institutions to the level of what was said to be "democracy" versus "tribalism" or some comparable dichotomy.⁵

The Europe of Austria-Hungary, England, France, the Ottoman Empire, Portugal, Prussia, Russia and Spain co-existed with similar phenomenon of empire building and consolidation in other parts of the world. Pre-colonial Africa boasted of such centralized kingdoms as Ghana (the Soninke Dynasty), Mali, Songhai, Kanem-Bornu, Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Egypt. They established extensive trade relations throughout the continent reaching as far as Southern Europe and the Near East. By the nineteenth century there were in existence centralized as well as acephalous societies all over Africa. These included the Asante, Sokoto, Oyo, Dahomey, Benin, Buganda and Zulu kingdoms (centralized) and the Mossi, Ibo, Tiv and Nuer (acephalous). All these societies put in place effective systems of political administration (with inbuilt mechanisms for debate, compromise and consensus) and met the challenges of economic production and trade. Consider the following:

Africa has always been open to trade with the rest of the world, particularly, as an exporter of gold...and ivory. The survival of Christianity in Ethiopia, the spreading of Islam on the coast, the installation of Indonesian colonies in Madagascar, regular trade with India, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, all revealed the centuries-old integration of West and East Africa into the pre-modern world economies.⁶

The advent of European imperial adventure and colonization suddenly changed the African political and social landscape. Conquest by external actors through the use of force soon converted Africa and Africans into possessions of European nations. It was a development that almost completely destroyed the existing socio-political institutions and systems of organization. This phenomenon of international acquisition, the use of force to expand the frontiers of empires and kingdoms has implications for the present day states of Africa.

Anarchy and State Survival

International relations or politics, in its realist formulation, stipulates that the system of states is anarchical with no central authority to regulate it or punish offenders. This induces states as the principal actors to resort to the use of force, in a self-help situation, for survival. While security or self-preservation becomes a primary preoccupation, it also encourages other kinds of vices and ventures. Conquest of territory, far and near, goes beyond the limited specification of self-preservation and has been utilised for the purposes of territorial aggrandizement, material acquisition and the accumulation of wealth. In the view of Willian Pfaff, "Western exploitation

and colonial expansion in Asia, Africa and Latin America...not only saw their political and military power overturned" but also "constituted a challenge at the most profound level, because it involved primordial issues of human destiny and the values of life."⁷

In the specific circumstances of African societies, this imperial conquest resulted in the dislocation of existing social formations and the structures of political cohesion and the creation of newer and often despotic systems of social organization and political jurisdiction. The concrete evidence of African participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, "legitimate trade" and later on, a monetised economy is a testimony to the imposition of foreign forms of economic exploitation and political organization. Fundamentally, it erected a relationship of inequality and subservience.

Security in its realist formulation - state survival - also became a subterfuge for the hidden manipulations of the international system. It often translated into foreign domination and dependency. In addition, the traditional meaning and application of security in typical African societies (which is community preservation) was lost. Of course, African societies did engage each other in wars for territorial expansion, material accumulation and other kinds of pursuits. The argument here is that the continuation of these processes might have resulted in a natural growth process with more elaborate and sophisticated systems of political and social organization by now. The supplanting of these formations through foreign rule and the accompanying international practices and norms destroyed such transformation. The lives of whole societies, in terms of daily substance and social reproduction, was now determined from metropolitan France, England, Spain, Portugal or Germany. In the estimation of Basil Davidson, it resulted in the alienation of Africa and Africans from their own roots.

In practice, it was not a restoration of Africa to Africa's own history, but the onset of a new period of indirect subjection to the history of Europe. The fifty or so states of the colonial partition, each formed and governed as though their peoples possessed no history of their own, became fifty or so nation-states formed and governed on European models, chiefly...Britain and France.⁸

The incidence of colonialism and the partition of Africa among European powers, thus, constituted the beginning of the state and the project of state-building. Issues of the nonviability of the state in Africa, or the associated problems of ethnic conflicts, despotic rule, patronage, clientelism, and patrimonialism, cannot be blamed solely on African rulers. The idea that political modernization and economic development conforming to Western models and techniques would resolve these problems has so far proved unworkable. The application of strictly Western methods of political administration, modernization and religion so as to reform or destroy African traditional institutions affected the way of life of almost all indigenous peoples throughout the continent.

The problems of political and economic development arise from both the denial of Africa's own institutional and normative frameworks, as well as from the superimposition of foreign ideologies and structures. In the estimation of Bayart, "the vicissitudes of the conquest and the modalities of colonial economic exploitation make up the genes of the contemporary state."⁹

Political Independence and International Law

Any serious consideration of the state and state-building in Africa should therefore include the discontinuities and transformations in African political practice and custom. By independence, colonial possessions, with all the baggage of imperfection, had been transformed into political structures for national administration. Equally important is the protection the young states have been accorded through a conferred sovereignty under international law.

Robert Jackson refers to this development as the granting of "negative sovereignty", as opposed to "positive sovereignty" of Western societies.¹⁰ He offered the following explanation:

Third World states (consist) not of self-standing structures with domestic foundations- like separate buildings - but of territorial jurisdictions supported from above by international law and material aid a kind of international safety net. In short, they often appear to be juridical more than empirical entities: hence quasi-states.¹¹

He went on to explain that such conventions and ideas as international equality, self-determination, non-discrimination, anti-colonialism, and international aid are concrete manifestations of the "negative sovereignty" regime. This is certainly a realistic appraisal of the condition of African nation-states. But Jackson's analysis precludes any serious explanation of the processes of their creation and the adverse impact of imperial domination on the societies affected. The shortcomings of "negative sovereignty" are directly linked with the effects of Western imperialism and colonialism. The nation-state in Africa is a product of European partition of Africa. With the exception of few territories in Africa such as Ethiopia, Lesotho and Swaziland, the post-colonial state is anything but an amalgamation of disparate groups with often distinct cultures confined into political borders that disregard ethnic loyalties and proclivities.

For Basil Davidson, "the frontiers of the colonial partition, however inappropriate to an independent Africa, became the sacred frontiers which it must be treason to question or deny."¹² In this regard, past and current conflicts in Burundi, Liberia, Nigeria and Rwanda, or the alleged domination and marginalization of groups by ruling elites in Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Togo or Uganda can be understood by reference to

their colonial roots. The task of creating nations out of this collectivities cannot be mechanistic. It is easy to mirror the failures of African governments and states by easy contrasts with the West while disregarding the inconsistencies in historical experience.

In the absence of any clear formula for national unification (since a nation in its homogeneous sense does not exist in the African context), political elites resort to the use of varying modes of administration. In the estimation of Patrick Chabal,

The formation of nation-states, and more importantly, their consolidation into political entities free from the threat of disintegration, demanded the creation of national culture capable of overriding ethnic and regional forms of self-identity. Equally, it required the construction of political structures strong enough to withstand local pulls but flexible enough to allow representation.¹³

In the African situation, given the difficulty of attaining a workable political culture that transcends ethnic and regional claims (it does not matter anymore whether the government in power is civilian or military, one party or multiparty), the goal is to acquire and monopolize power. In a large sense, politics in its present form is loosely "institutionalized" and based on governmental regulations that are rather porous. This problem reduces politics into "unsanctioned use of coercion and violence" It translates into "personal rule"¹⁴ a situation under which politics is less restrained and open to abuse with higher stakes and grater risks. "The consequences of such politics have usually increased political instability and occasionally the deterioration of the game of politics into a "fight" among personal and factional contenders for power."¹⁵

This quest for power and control sets Africa apart to a significant degree on the question of security of the state. Security in the African context is less the protection of the state from other state actors in the international system and more the insecurity and lack of protection of civil society groups, sectors, factions, associations, organizations and parties from the vagaries of political repression. In this regard, the insecurity dilemma facing the African state is internally generated and is often a problem for the citizen rather than the political or ruling class. The consequence for the state and society is the increased risk of external intervention from the larger international system.

Stagnation or Disintegration?

Recent events on the continent such as the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone and the unstable political environment they have created in the West African sub-region are reflective of this problem, and constitute a potential crisis for the future of the continent.¹⁶ With a measure of over-generalization and a touch of premonition,

Robert Kaplan saw the situation in West Africa as representing "the coming anarchy" that will engulf the human race and the planet earth.

West Africa is becoming the symbol of worldwide demographic, environmental, and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real "strategic" danger. Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders, and the empowerment of private armies, security firms and international drug cartels are now most tellingly demonstrated through a West African prism. West Africa provides an appropriate introduction to the issues, often extremely unpleasant to discuss, that will soon confront our civilization.¹⁷

What Kaplan refuses to acknowledge in his work, however, is the fact that Africa, as it stands today, with all its attendant problems of ethnicity, conflict, despotic rule, poverty, drug-trafficking, disease and marginalization, is the creation of international politics. The history of the continent is replete with varying epochs of external intervention, subjugation and exploitation.¹⁸ The difference in achievement between political systems which have never been conquered and those that have suffered the fate of Africa bears testimony to this fact. Basil Davidson had this to say regarding the transformation of imperial Japan:

For African self-adjustment to the challenges of the West, went by the board: constitutions were to be London's initiative, work and decision. The contrast with Japan after 1867 (the Meiji Restoration) could really not be more acute. Japan was able to accept "Westernization" on its own terms, at its own speed, and with its own reservations, ensuring as far as possible that the new technology and organization was assimilated by Japanese thinkers and teachers without dishonour to ancestral shrines and gods. Japanese self-confidence could be salvaged. Such an outcome was impossible in dispossessed Africa.¹⁹

What international commentators and theorists have done so far is to see Africa in the light of the present - a band of malfunctioning mini-states headed by despotic rulers, with societies plagued with disease, hunger and poverty. Once again, the conclusion from such observers is that Africans cannot govern themselves or lack the institutional and political know-how for national development. There is the need, however, to reflect on the following questions. What kind of "nations" or "institutions", or what kind of development are we referring to in the African context? Should we continue with existing models, borrowed from elsewhere as has been done since independence or should these be replaced or adapted into Africa's own historic circumstances? Political institutionalization, national unification, mass participation in political processes, class differentiation and the social basis for economic development require a concrete historical content.

Nation-building in Africa and the practical demonstration of politics on the continent is handicapped by what I label as the "*paradox of political universalism*". The African state as a colonial and artificial construct is protected internationally through

existing legal norms and practices. Non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the non-violability of territorial borders, and representation in all existing international organizations (the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity are examples) which provide the state with the survival traits in the system of states. But it is these same international legal guarantees that create the gap of non-achievement, peripherality, marginalization and dependency. The glamour of political sovereignty and statehood projected on the international scene is facade. Directly contradicting this hard image are weak, unintegrated, conflict-prone, fragile polities headed by insecure despots and demagogues. Left on their own to function in the international system of states, without the necessary international legal regimes, financial support and the coercive infrastructure of foreign patrons, most of these states would have collapsed and become extinct by now.

Politics in Africa today demonstrates this "*paradox of political universalism*". Africa is presently governed as nation-states even if these lack the requisite attributes. Although the majority of Africans belong to polities where they should be guaranteed protection by the governments of the day, they are constantly persecuted by the same. Most African governments certainly understand the needs and aspirations of their peoples but are unable or refuse to generate a welfare regime that can distribute wealth equitably. Political elites accumulate the limited resources and dispense them through the existing lines of patrimonialism and clientelism. Some writers go as far as to interpret this phenomenon as uniquely African, an "economy of affection."²⁰ The gap between political performance and public expectations further explains this contradiction. Over time, the system, unable to sustain itself, is plunged into conflict and crisis. Abuse of power, the marginalization of groups and the denial of rights and freedoms easily translate into opposition and repression. Military intervention and the struggle for power becomes the order of the day.

The shortcomings of international relations theory in its application to African states are thus obvious in this regard. The issue here is "intra-state" conflicts contrasted with the classical paradigm of "inter-state" conflicts in an anarchical system of states. African states are not fighting each other for territorial acquisitions or survival. Governments are more concerned with their own survival and political power, hence, the spate of intra-state conflicts. But the perception of African states in international relations and international law has not been denied or rejected. What is open to question so far is their viability. That is why the right questions have to be asked. How were they created in the first place? Will they persist or will new systems of political and economic organization emerge?

Economic and Political Integration

In the opinion of some writers, modern African states, with minor exceptions of ethnic and territorial claims, arising from arbitrary and inappropriately imposed borders, have not resorted to inter-state conflicts in their forty or so years of life, and for reasons inherent in their nature, are unlikely to do so in the future.²¹ What Basil Davidson, for instance, has projected for the continent is "the invention of a state appropriate to a post-imperialist future." This has already begun on a limited scale and is directly linked to the issue of cooperation among existing African states for the purposes of regional economic and political integration.

It was already beginning to be thought of, even during the dreadful 1980s, in the projects of the sixteen-country Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and, potentially again, in those of the nine-country Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) launched a little later. Each set of project has supposed a gradual dismantlement of the nation-statist legacy from imperialism, and the introduction of participatory structures within a wide regionalist framework.²²

The vision of an Africa reconstituted on past socio-economic and political institutions is certainly attractive. But in the light of the hard realities of global transformation - economic production, communications, technology, investments and the complexities of international life - how plausible is such an idea? In looking at the present-day composition of individual states, how can this suggestion be concretely implemented without provoking ethnic sensitivities and territorial questions? The contemporary shape, form and substance of the nation-state in Africa is definitely not the way for the future. Leaving the present behind does not necessarily call for a return to the past in its totality. Regional integrative schemes that transcend the fault lines of ethnicity, power and economic marginalization combined with novel ideas which bring the strengths of the African past in fusion with current achievements may constitute the way ahead. This is where the practical importance of groups such as ECOWAS, SADCC, the Maghreb Union or the newly reconstituted East Africa Economic Community (EAEC) becomes relevant. Africa does not need any more fragmentation but integration schemes that will move the continent along the path of recovery and development.

This final point brings to mind the recent reflections of the renowned scholar, Ali Mazrui on the need for African governments to redraw the arbitrary boundaries imposed by Otto von Bismarck of Germany, King Leopold of Belgium and their European cohorts at the late nineteenth century Berlin Conference. Mazrui is not merely pushing for the formation of expanded political federations throughout the

continent but a programmed "recolonization" of weak, conflict-prone African states by their bigger and more stable neighbours in order to prevent external intervention.²³ Recolonization of any kind, whether by Africans or outsiders, is not acceptable; neither will it be politically sound to redemarcate existing African state boundaries as a way of inducing any real prospects for peace, stability and development on the continent. The end result would be social and political upheaval. Voluntary economic and political associations emanating from the mutual recognition of a need for social progress and advancement should determine the future of the continent.

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BANKING ON POVERTY AND CRISIS: THE IMPACT OF WORLD BANK AND IMF POLICIES ON SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA *

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IMF prescriptions are designed by and for developed capitalist economies and are inappropriate for developing economies of any kind; the severe suffering imposed on a developing society through IMF conditionality is endured without any real prospect of a favourable economic outcome and without an adequate foundation of social-welfare provisions to mitigate the hardships experienced by the people. "Michael Manley".¹

When did the IMF become an international Ministry of Finance? When did nations agree to surrender to it their power of decision making?... The problems of my country and other Third World countries are grave enough without the political interference of IMF officials. If they cannot help at the very least they should stop meddling. "Julius K Nyerere"²

...the World Bank was not created with the problems of the Third World in mind and has always been dominated by the Western powers. "R. Cranford Pratt"³

African nations are, today, practically under the hegemonic control of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), donors, and other international financial institutions. In most African countries, national budgets and development plans are made known to and discussed with officials of the World Bank and the IMF before they are made known to nationals. Educational policies, social programs, foreign trade and all international economic transactions are determined, conditioned and in many instances, dictated by officials of the Fund and Bank. As well, many Central Banks are under the control of both institutions. The powerful influence exerted by these institutions on African states, has generated a new debate on the recolonization of Africa. African states are having to deal, not only with profit and hegemony-seeking transnational corporations, but also with these powerful financial organizations backed by the Western powers.

If nothing can be said about their role in the consolidation and reproduction of Africa's marginalization in the global division of labour and its chronic underdevelopment, we can state with certainty that Africa's pitiable conditions today attest to the irrelevance of **orthodox** IMF and World Bank programs, prescriptions and meddling in African affairs. Their so-called experts, planning missions, expert reports and development models have failed woefully in addressing the specific of Africa's underdevelopment, and have, in fact, deepened contradictions, conflicts and crises in African social formations. This is not to argue that adjustment is not necessary in Africa. As well, we are not contending that in a handful of countries, **some** sectors have experienced some **growth** due to programs imposed by the Bank and Fund. While both institutions were originally not designed to respond to the problems and