

Out of Africa: An Ecological Critique of Colonialism and Nationhood

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ABSTRACT Many of the postcolonial nations of Africa have had armed conflicts and civil wars, which are thought to have their roots in ethnic differentiation and inter ethnic hatred among the native groups. The present critique uses a political ecological framework to analyze three factors: apartheid, ethnic distinctiveness and the rigid belief of ethnic immutability, which were used by the colonial rulers to their advantage in traditional Africa. They justified a colonial administrative system based on these dogmas, many of which persist and have directly or indirectly contributed to the present situation in the African continent. The critique illustrates various dogmas in ecological terms and attempts to show that processes of adaptive change in institutional frameworks have been denied—to take their normal course of transformation, while economic change from the use of renewable to the use of nonrenewable resources was taking place in the Colonial Africa.

Colonialism has been ‘out of Africa’ for the last couple of decades but for a majority of states¹ and their populations there have been some ruinous implications as an aftermath. The present paper attempts to examine three important facts of colonial rule and their misinterpretations, which had helped the European colonialists in Africa. These issues have a bearing even in the postcolonial era of nationhood in Africa. The aim is to trace these key historical-political issues in an analytical framework, which would help to critically explore the consequential pseudo ethnological dogmas affecting the international understanding of the processes of development of nationhood in the African context. The broad framework of Political ecology is used to integrate and analyze the various dimensions of issues raised in this critique. An attempt is being made to acquire a comprehensive and an alternative set of views to certain persistent issues

POLITICAL ECOLOGY

Originally some of the political economists infused the aspects of cultural and human ecology to widen their paradigm to understand the issues of natural resources (Bryant 1992). Initially this laid the foundations for the field of political ecology, which examines the issues of resource access and utilization with an overarching world-system framework (Peet and Watts, 1994, 1996). In the last two decades this

political economy driven political ecology absorbed elements of poststructuralist analyses of knowledge, institutions, development, and social movements (Peet and Watts, 1996). Political ecology focuses at “the relations between human society, viewed in its bio-cultural-political complexity, and a significantly humanized nature” (Greenberg and Park, 1994: 1). As a theoretical perspective “political ecology concentrates on the history of capitalism and its critique and in particular on the unevenness of development that that history has produced on a global scale” (Smith, 1984). But theoretical work in political ecology had began only about a decade ago (Escobar, 1999: 2). Political ecology shares with political economy the theme of seeing the “role of power relations in determining human uses of environment” (Bates and Lees, 1996: 1) but goes beyond political economy, political ecology concerns with “local-global, national-global, and national-regional articulations and complex causation power asymmetries that are discursively created” (Biersack, 1999: 10) it focuses on a range of differences: class, gender, race, and ethnicity and the politics differences.

The implicit ambition of this paper is to create an alternative awareness in a broader conceptual framework of political ecology where colonialism and environmental relationships of ethnic groups with resources are focused. It is clear that colonialism—founded upon myths of ‘race’, ‘progress’, and ‘civilization’—is evidently

'cultural' than global capitalism (Said, 1993). But colonialism's historical relationship to capitalism is undeniable and political ecology traces "the links between ecology and imperialism" (Peet and Watts, 1994: 248) which would widen the scope of our understanding the facts.

THE REALITY OF CONFLICTS

The African example is presented in this paper due two significant reasons: one, the concept of tribe or an ethnic group is highly developed in the context of Africa continent, although the exact definitions of these concepts are a matter of debate. The second reason being the idea of a nation is seriously challenged in the postcolonial history of Africa in form of ethnic cleansing and civil wars, which have caused the killing, and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people (Reno, 1998). These two aspects are the widely accepted cause and affect factors. In recent times there has been some attempts included other factors as causes for conflicts in Africa, one such attempt ties to show that economic poverty as main of the reason for the chaos among the African nations (Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2000).

Various states in the African continent have undergone different types of struggles; the fundamental one was the process of gaining independence itself from the colonizing country. The most pathetic outcome of the process of gaining independence has been the ensuing power conflicts between the powerful groups within most of the newly formed nations-states. Serious violence often erupted against the background of one major ethnic group having strong political grievances against another. Some of the conflicts were full blown civil wars and long lasting armed and brutal violence, which at times lasted over decades.

There were hostilities in different regions of African continent: Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Eritrea were all consumed by guerrilla war and Somalia was in anarchy. Sudan has a north-south civil war and also in Darfur province in western Sudan. In western Zimbabwe, government troops massacred *Ndebele* who had supported a liberation movement. A bizarre campaign of terror was waged by what is known as the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda. Burundi and Rwanda suffered from serious *Hutu-Tutsi* clashes and Morocco waged a full-scale war against *Polisario*

rebels in the Sahara. Africa's biggest and most developed country, South Africa writhed till recently under the brutal apartheid regime. A multisided war dragged on in the eastern Congo. There are serious tensions between the Muslims of northern Ivory Coast (Cote-d'Ivoire) and Christians of the south. Almost all of these conflicts are tribal in nature; some of them have an undercurrent of Muslim-Christian hostility.

THE THREE FACTORS

Colonialists in Africa to further their own advantage to control tribal groups had used many pseudo ethnological dogmas: three of these dogmas are discussed in this critique as factors. It would be useful to identify these factors at the start of the present critique. The first and the most significant factor was an extreme expression of hegemony manipulated by an immigrant minority in the southern part of the African of continent in form of 'separateness'. 'Apartness' or apartheid (in *Afrikaans*) can understood as the artificial separation of human groups on the basis of certain physical characteristics which are mostly morphological variations like skin colour, nose length, hair texture etc. In reality these are mainly manifestations of environmental adaptation (Demon, 1975). The second factor is the belief that the human societies can be unambiguously differentiated on the basis of their ethnicity alone. The separation of human groups into various identifiable and discrete units² is complex and at best 'arbitrary' (Naroll, 1964: 283-312). One of the most fruitful approaches to the study of human ethnic group interactions has been ecological (Barth, 1956: 1079-1089). But many anthropologists have challenged the concept of immutability of ethnic units, and they are now keen on understanding the variability of ethnic boundaries (Maquest, 1971: 3-13). The third factor is the non-recognition of the possibility of the emergence, decline or transformation of socially significant ethnic groups as an internal process of natural change. An ethnic group is dynamic unit, which may change as an adaptive response to the changing material demands imposed at a community level (Despres, 1975). All the three above mentioned factors have been interpreted and exploited to varying degrees at and different points of time during the colonial period to the ultimate benefit of an alien and powerful minority in Africa: the legacy of which still echoes in the modern era.

THE TRADITIONAL ETHNICITY AND RESOURCE USE

Originally one can see that 'Traditional Africa' (Hallett, 1989: 6) consisted of numerous ethnic groups² each of them: a successful adaptive system to the type of resource it exploited for subsistence. The development of wide range of ethnic groups in Africa can be viewed as essentially due to the varied environmental conditions present on the vast canvas of Africa. The natural resources⁴, which were utilized by these groups till the European Powers formally launched the scramble for the territorial occupation of Africa, were basically renewable (Leach, 1957). The colonization of Africa paved way to the exploitation of non-renewable resources (Selman, 1981) in the form of minerals, metals and petroleum. This dichotomy is important to understand the present issues³.

The societies in Africa had no need to recover diamonds, gold, copper, tin, uranium for their livelihood, in fact they depended basically on more ecologically sound renewable resources like animals, fish, plants, etc. Extensive agriculturists, pastoralists and hunter and gatherers were major types of subsistence groups, which existed at the time of the formal colonization of Africa. Some of these societies ranging from *!Kung Bushman*, *Masai*, *Zulu*, *Nuer*, etc. are still found⁴. These people have often been described, as societies, which have evolved overtime and their mode of subsistence, is (was) highly adaptive. In one of the analysis the *!Kung Bushman* have been shown as having one of the most efficient subsistence systems in the terms of energy, input/output (Lee, 1972: 54 -70). In the same way the pastoralists of East Africa have been studied carefully in their own environment (Dyson-Hudson and Dyson-Hudson, 1969: 76-89). The agricultural societies both intensive and extensive systems ranging from *Kofyar* (Netting, 1968) to *Zande* (Schlippe, 1959) have also been ecologically examined by anthropologists.

The inter-relatedness between the traditional economic organization and other institutions of a given culture has been established (Steward, 1955). Taking a cue, it can be argued that in 'Traditional Africa' the political systems were fundamentally dependent on the mode of subsistence (Herskovits, 1955: 15-19). But in essences this causal relationship is empirically unsustainable in the postcolonial era, because

imperialism and colonialism has lead to inequalities in environmental risks and degradation (Kottak, 1999: 29).

IMPLICATIONS OF COLONIAL RULE

The arrival of colonial powers with their ruthless attitude towards the exhaustible resources created a vast change in labour requirements for mining and industry. Farming and commercial crops were also introduced which shifted peasant economies to wage labour (Coleman, 1960). All these changes happened without the accompanying restructuring of the political systems, which would have otherwise taken place in a normal situation. Logically the political institutions in Africa could have evolved and modified over a period of time if colonialism had not taken over the vast African humanity. Further some of the ethnic boundaries could have been possibly reinterpreted if colonialization had not occurred (Abruzzi, 1982: 13-35). But none of this happened. In fact, a reversal was pressed in the shape of colonial policy of administration. At the zenith of colonial influence in Africa almost the entire Sub-Saharan region was under different forms of European colonial rule (Coleman, 1960: 266). This rule was theoretically superimposed on the native political systems (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Daryall Forde, 1951: 471-489; Vansina, 1962: 324-334) and has been categorized as 'indirect' and 'direct': these typologies are not mutually exclusive. In practice, they only varied in the degree. The British policy of 'differentiation', the Portuguese policy of recognizing traditional 'native authorities', Belgian policy of 'indirect rule' (in the Watutsi Kingdoms of Ruanda) and the French policy of 'direct rule': all these methods contributed to the suppression of individual rights. When useful, colonial powers exploited the native ethnicity to achieve control and when needed they created arbitrary divisions of territories without regard to social units destroying the very basis of the ethnicity (World Bank, 2000: 127).

Whatever happened in the 75 years or so of colonial rule was nothing but the 'forceful halting' of the normal mechanisms of adaptive change in political institutions which would have otherwise occurred in free societies. The extreme form of this 'forceful halting' is the reinterpretation and creation of artificial ethnic boundaries coupled with racial segregation. This policy of apartheid

was followed in South Africa, which is well documented (Magubane, 1990). The creation of Reserves, Homelands, and Bantustans in a way was a policy of separation of human communities, which enabled colonial powers to capture human energy to exploit the resources. The vast non-white humanity experienced among other things, nothing but a form of slavery: the control over primary motive force was available in the form of labour to the colonial powers. This form of exploitation can be said to be most inhuman but it is also an illogical system, which has no parallel in the energy exchange system in any human ecosystem.

THE CRITIQUE

Using the ecological perspective of adaptive change (Orlove, 1980: 235-273) an alternative view to the causes and continuance of discrimination found on the African continent can be established. This is not an altogether new innovation, but a synthesis of varied points of view. The implicit ambition of this paper is to create an alternative awareness in a broader conceptual framework of political ecology: which would widen the scope of our understanding the facts. The most unreasonable practice of apartheid in South Africa—is now dismantled. It was an illogical system of racial segregation. In this regard the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' appears to have achieved its goal at least politically (Wilson, 2000: 75-98). The other notion is the static view of ethnicity, the truth is that the human societies all over the world are dynamic and are constantly changing and readapting themselves. This fact needs a careful thought; for example it has been often cited that colonization created unsustainable nations in independent Africa across multi-ethnic groups. Socio-politically, how useful is such an understanding without an examination of the economic dimension, which is fundamentally dynamic in nature?

The essential fact would be clear, if one is open to an understanding that some of the old ethnic boundaries need not be ecologically, nor socio-politically adaptive in the present situation. Human groups are in constant state of change: African societies would have adapted socio-politically to new situations, which in turn might have lead to necessary readjustment of ethnic boundaries but this is not the case in postcolonial Africa. The movement from small-scale to large-

scale economies is nonreversible; and is inevitable in a more integrated regional and global system. Ideally it would be for the free people of Africa to readjust without external political influence. Modern democracy would have been the answer but the paradox is that in Africa democracy is a sort of double-edged sword. The very nature of ethnic fragmentation, which has surfaced in the light of wealth inequalities, and resource availability useful for a modern economic growth, is based on global economics. Most of the African nations remain deeply influenced by the colonial era. They are highly centralized states. Time and again, the collusion between centralized decision-making processes and heterogeneous societies has led major equalities in the wealth, which have in turn led to violence. Compounding all this is the weakness of civil society in most of Africa. African leadership faces real dilemmas. How should they protect the rights of minorities, when modern democracy is based on the concept of majority rule? How should they promote reforms when potential beneficiaries are poorly organized? . Some of these questions may be only dealt with formation of some sort of loose federation type of states—This is one of the most popular views expressed by political analysts.

Finally it can be said that the colonial rulers used apartheid, ethnic distinctiveness and the rigid belief of ethnic immutability to their advantage in 'Traditional Africa'. Colonialists justified and evolved an administrative system based on these pseudo ethnological dogmas. The new rulers of postcolonial nations in Africa, in many instances have persisted and even exploited these dogmas directly or indirectly contributing to the present situation in the African continent. The critique shows on the basis of established theoretical relationship between political systems and economic systems there has been a discontinuity, which accrued in Africa. The critique endeavored to show that processes of adaptive change in institutional frameworks have been denied to take their normal course transformation while economic change from the use of renewable to the use of nonrenewable recourses was taking place in the Colonial Africa.

NOTES

1. European Colonialism in African continent is over. The African Union, which is formed by the independent countries, was established in July 2002.

The African Union replaced the old Organisation of African Unity. At present there are 53-member countries form the African Union.

2. Before the year 1885 it is considered popularly as the period of 'Traditional Africa' (The Treaty of Berlin) This does not mean that traditional societies are not found in Africa now.
3. Renewability of resources depends upon the rates of natural replenishment: These resources also become scarce through over exploitation. For example shifting cultivation is ecological suitable only if the fallow period is long enough for the forest to regenerate.
4. The ethnographic literature of Africa is vast. The groups, which are cited in this paper, are some of the better-known ones.

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