

Introduction: the historicity of post-colonial Africa

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*Oji achina anyi
Na nke fa chili achi na aru aforo
Ono-kpom! Afo beer!*

In Nigeria a popular song exists which, translated into English, runs like this: 'Let the black not rule, since their leadership so far has brought us no comfort. They are only greedy! Beer bellies!'¹ Nigerians refer to this song when lamenting about the mounting cost of living, the erratic supply of water and electric power, or when discussing the political situation of the country. The opinions expressed in it seem to be shared by many. In the song, Nigerian leadership is accused of being more interested in accumulating personal wealth through office than in serving the country, as a result of which the population is said to be suffering. Not only does the song express the disappointment of Nigerian citizens with the performance of their leaders, it also refers directly to the colonial period, implying that the British used to manage the country better than the Nigerians are doing since independence. The same opinion can be found in other songs and stories as well as in the popular press, while similar expressions of popular discontent have been recorded for other African countries.² Although when given the choice between their own leaders and a second colonization, Africans would no doubt prefer the first option (they have a lot to blame the colonizers for as well), the memory of the colonial period is an important aspect of the African debate on politics. In view of these frequent references to the colonial era it seems appropriate to characterize the current era as 'post-colonial Africa'.

While in the expression of popular discontent the memory of the colonial experience is invoked to prove that leaders do not live up to their heritage, African leaders often consider current problems to be the result of the colonial period (and of subsequent activities of former colonizers). Indeed, it has often been emphasized by Europeans and Africans alike, that the colonial experience was a traumatic period, during which the Africans were oppressed by the European colonizers. Their wealth was stolen and their traditional forms of organization were destroyed. But more than that, during the colonial era in African history, enormous changes were brought to the continent in a short time span: out of the whole of thousands of years of African history, the colonial era covers a mere fifty to hundred years, depending on the country one considers.

Apart from the tangible physical and economic effects, colonialism had important consequences for African intellectual history, since the colonial era functions as a conceptual and intellectual watershed in African history. It separates the traditional Africa of tribes and chiefs from the modern Africa of nation-states. Whether pre-colonial Africa is understood as a 'dark' continent

where warring tribes prohibited any development, or as a place where life was peaceful and well-organized, it is perceived as fundamentally different from post-colonial Africa.

But when and where was this post-colonial Africa? If we rely on the official dates of independence, the start of the post-colonial period can easily be defined for each African state. However, this does not necessarily mean that from this date onward these states were totally independent from their former colonizers and it has indeed been argued that officially independent African states are *de facto* colonies still (see below). Indicating the beginning of the post-colonial period for Africa as a whole is an even more dangerous affair, since different countries had different colonizers and went through different colonial experiences.³ These differences are also reflected in the different dates of independence; some countries gained their independence relatively early (Ghana in 1957, for instance) and others only recently (Zimbabwe 1980; Namibia 1991). However, since most African countries gained their independence around 1960, this date can be taken as the starting date of the post-colonial era.

The post-colonial experience

Thus, when the Europeans retreated from Africa in the 1960s, they left behind a continent that was fundamentally different from the one they had found on their arrival. Apart from the physical memorabilia that the colonialists left behind in the form of roads and buildings, they had also shaped the boundaries of the newly independent states, and, to a large extent, the new countries' forms of government, systems of education, business operations, trade contacts and cultural networks.

All the same, independence was experienced as constituting a new start. It was thought that an Africa that was no longer repressed by foreign powers would be able to use its resources for the Africans, building strong nations with strong, healthy economies, providing medical care, education, and a good standard of living. Thus, the 1960s were characterized by an optimistic view of Africa's future. Now, in the 1990s, it would be an exaggeration to regard the history of post-colonial Africa as a success story. During three decades of independence, expectations of a free, stable and prosperous Africa have not been met. Following a period of relative stability and economic growth during the 1960s, many countries have experienced severe economic problems since the 1980s. After thirty years of independence, peasants and urban labourers are worse off than before decolonization. Nowadays, their positions are deteriorating even more, in consequence of the measures resulting from the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that are imposed upon African economies by the World Bank and IMF: food and petrol subsidies are discontinued, currencies devaluated (making imported goods even more expensive), while minimum wages are reduced or discarded entirely. According to a recently published World Bank report entitled

'Reforms, results and the road ahead', it will take at least forty years before prosperity in Africa will be back at the same level as it was twenty years ago.

Generally speaking, contemporary Africa appears to be in bad shape. In many aspects the situation is even worse than during the worst moments of the detested colonial domination. Often economic growth did not keep up with the growth of population, resulting in food shortages. In the countries of the Sahel region, but also in Zimbabwe, famines occurred as the result of periods of drought.

The African crisis, however, is not merely an economic one. To a large extent it is also a political crisis: in the three decades since decolonization, governments that started out as democracies were either overthrown by military coups or turned into dictatorships themselves. In a number of countries, (in Nigeria and Mozambique, for instance) famine and economic decline resulted from warfare. But African economies are suffering even in politically relatively stable states. This is for a large part the result of an African political culture that allows for corruption on a scale that undermines both politics and economy. In many African states, political power and economic gain became synonymous and political leaders accumulated enormous personal wealth. Often the politicians' hunt for lucrative deals totally dominated other aspects of the administration of their country. Nigerian politicians, it was said, transformed their system of democracy into a 'contractocracy': 'a government of contractors, for contractors and by contractors'.⁴

Corruption was not restricted to the realm of top-politicians: on every level politicians and civil servants tried to enrich themselves. And not just out of greed. For many civil servants, corruption was a bitter necessity because, as a result of inflation, their fixed salaries were no longer sufficient to live on (provided their salaries were paid at all). Apart from outright corruption, the functioning of African administrations was undermined by the trade going on in the offices, which took up time and energy that should have been spent on administrating the country. Piles of clothing could be found on office desks, while the corridors of Cameroonian ministries have been characterized as 'the market place *par excellence*'.⁵ Furthermore, 'politics' often came to mean the distribution of subsidies and positions to the supporters of the winning party. Therefore, the Tanzanian CCM party was sometimes referred to as 'Chukua Chake Mapema': 'Dig In and Help Yourself', while a Nigerian political party chose the name 'I chop, you chop' ('I eat, you eat').⁶

Modernising Africa

To reactionary western commentators, this has not come as a surprise. In their view, the population of the former colonies was simply 'not yet ready' for independence and Africans still needed the guidance of the colonial powers in order to govern themselves. This explanation of the post-colonial African trauma reflects the traditional ideology of 'the white man's burden': the idea that it was the task and the obligation of the superior white race to bring

civilization and prosperity to the backward non-European peoples. It was in the name of this civilising mission that large portions of the globe had been placed under European rule in the nineteenth and twentieth century, and it was the early decolonization of the colonies that had prevented the fulfilment of this mission.

In other words, according to these commentators, modern African problems originate from the fact that the continent is still too African: traditional tribes still exist and backward tribal usages and notions still hamper the development of a modern Africa. Conflicts that are fought along ethnic lines are considered 'tribal wars', reflecting irrational, traditional antagonisms, rather than competition for resources in a modern state. Curiously enough, this opinion is shared by many Africans, especially by those in power.

After decolonization, the African political elites were dominated by the members of the nationalist movements that had championed for independence during the colonial period. These nationalist movements were a product of the educated elite, which was also the group closest in contact and collaboration with the colonial government. The members of these movements (and of the later independent governments) combined a sense of African awareness and dislike of colonial government with a very western political ideology. Indeed, they shared most western, 'modern' ideas concerning 'primitive' rural Africans, such as the need for modernization and nation-building. Therefore, their political programs were aimed at national integration and rejected the idea of a government based on ethnic groups, tribes being regarded as old-fashioned relics that were doomed to disappear into the twentieth century.

Both liberal and socialist politicians and commentators believed that the breakdown of the traditional African societies, together with nation-building, would allow the new African states to transcend their ethnic differences to become stable and peaceful nation-states. When confronted with the failure of these politics, most African national governments tended to regard this revival of 'tribalism' as an unwanted and inexplicable regression into a traditional culture of undeveloped rurals that had to be combatted with all available means. Significantly, the African political debate is still conceived in terms of modernity and backwardness. Modernization and nation-building still feature on the political agenda, while more 'developed' groups continue to look down upon the rural population on the grounds of their 'backwardness'.

The colonial heritage

Other approaches to Africa's problems existed as well. In opposition, it was pointed out that the colonial period brought many changes to the continent, and it was asserted that at least part of the problems of post-colonial Africa sprang from the colonial heritage. Instead of being the saviour of Africa, Europe came to be regarded as the destroyer of Africa.

One way in which Europe is believed to have destroyed Africa, is by exploiting both its people and its natural resources. Initially, Europe did this

by exporting a large proportion of the African population to the Americas in the Atlantic slave trade. Later, by plantation farming, mining, and by proletarianization of the African people.

Similarly, modern ethnic conflicts were regarded as resulting from the way in which the continent had been divided during the colonial conquest. It is often claimed that the European colonizers did not pay any attention to the existing African political situation, as a result of which states and regional boundaries cut through the territories of African peoples, or brought formerly independent peoples into one territory, thereby creating the problem which of these groups would lead the country after independence.

It is not quite true, however, that Europeans were not interested in the way African societies were organized. Rather than ignoring the African socio-political structure, they tried to ally themselves with the existing power groups.⁷ The real problem was that the Europeans often failed to understand how African social organizations operated (notwithstanding government-funded anthropological research on 'native' political and judicial institutions).⁸ This was the problem from which the British colonial administrators suffered when they tried to implement their principle of 'indirect rule'. The intention was to govern the Africans through their own political institutions and to interfere only when absolutely necessary, leaving the indigenous political institutions intact. Of course, it is impossible for any colonial administration to use a traditional system without changing it, since the goals of the colonial system were different from those of the native system. A less obvious problem was that the system altered the balance of power in the society under rule (as any colonial system does). Thus, local authorities and chiefs became dependent on the state for support, rather than on their people.⁹ In general, the social status of a 'chief' changed during the colonial era. Sometimes, chiefs were created in societies where previously no chiefs existed, while it also happened that the 'wrong' person was recognized as chief. Many more examples could be offered of the subtle ways in which 'traditional' African societies changed as a result of the impact of colonialism.

According to these views, Africa's problems did not spring from its being African, but rather from the fact that 'authentic' African traditions had been destroyed. Africa ceased to be Africa and modern Africa, it is said, was no longer 'authentic'. That is, the single cultural tradition to which all the people within a country or a larger region could subscribe, has been destroyed during the colonial period, and Africans, bereft of their own culture, are forced to incorporate foreign notions. Nowadays, not even the basic criteria for perceiving reality are commonly shared, while certainly no consensus exists regarding existing choices, objectives, priorities, standards, ethics and legitimacy on any issue.¹⁰ Thus, the traumatic colonial experience led to a situation in which Africans supposedly were alienated from their culture. Basil Davidson has argued that this alienation of Africa from its roots is the main cause for the political problems the continent experiences.¹¹ According to Jan Vansina, the main problem is that the impact of European culture was unbalanced. Although the masses and the leadership were involved with both

Western and non-Western notions and traditions, the minority culture of the ruling group was Europeanized to a far greater extent than the majority culture. As a result of this, there is a culture gap between the African ruling group and the masses, whereby the culture of the majority of the Africans is oppressed.¹²

Dependency and neo-colonialism

In the 1970s, intellectuals (both in Africa and in the West) and African governments reached the conclusion that the so-called post-colonial African states were not really independent, at least not economically. The exploitation of African economies by the West, that had started during the colonial era, continued after independence: the economies of many countries were dominated by foreign companies, while more money flowed from Africa to Europe than from Europe to Africa as a result of the low prices for raw materials like cocoa on the world market and the repayments on loans that African governments had with Western banks. African economies were still dependent on aid and grants from the West, although Western development aid to Africa was meagre compared to the profits that Western companies gained from Africa's productive wealth. This situation did not make things easier for African leaders who wanted to develop their countries. It has been observed that 'deepening impoverishment piled tremendous handicaps on every effort at honesty and hard work.'¹³ Whether they deserved it or not, the African leaders were held responsible by the population for poverty and hunger.

Therefore, African political leaders and intellectuals concluded that the 'flag-independence' of decolonization had to be followed by *real* political and economic independence. This 'real' independence still has not been achieved, notwithstanding programmes that governments initiated in order to 'nationalize' or 'Africanize' African economies (programs that often succeeded in transferring ownership of businesses from expatriates into the hands of the government elite). The dependency on the West appears to have increased rather than decreased over the past decades. As a result of the continuing underperformance and the heavy debt burdens of African economies, Western governments and international organizations are in a position to demand structural political and economic changes as a prerequisite for support. Especially the World Bank and the IMF are accused of neo-colonialism because of the way they impose their structural adjustment programmes upon African countries, infringing upon the African governments' sovereignty.

African historiography

These different analyses of the problems that Africans encounter were formulated decades ago, but are still important. Over the years, they provided the underlying ideas for many studies by anthropologists and political scientists

and had a profound impact on the way in which African history is perceived. As far as the latter is concerned, African historiography has developed enormously over the past decades, completely shredding the earlier image of an Africa without a history. This does not mean that people actually believed that Africa had no history at all, but rather that its history was considered irrelevant. African communities were considered to be 'pristine societies' whose modes of living had not significantly changed over the centuries. As such, these societies were considered to be inferior to Western societies and, ultimately, bound to disappear into Western civilization. The future of Africa was to be found, not in its past, but in the hands of colonial administrators and missionaries.

During the post-colonial period of nation-building, historians had the important task of providing Africa with a past. In doing this, their primary aim was to explicitly prove that pre-colonial Africa had a history. They furthermore assisted in legitimising the newly independent states by proving that African states were not merely colonial creations, but that already in pre-colonial Africa there had been tendencies towards centralization of power (the strengthening of a single political authority) and enlargement of scale (territorial expansion, usually by conquest). Thus, all efforts that could be seen as furthering centralization were considered as positive, with little regard for their meaning in their own time and place. As Caroline Neale puts it, 'it was the direction, more than the process, of change which was important.'¹⁴ She illustrates this point with a quotation from R. Oliver, who in a 1963 publication had applauded the strengthening of the Ganda monarchy (which is remembered in oral tradition as a time of 'bad and bloody tyranny'): 'Without doubt ... strong government was an aid to expansion ... (It enabled Buganda to move) from a feudal to a bureaucratic system.'¹⁵

Generally speaking, historians have not been very concerned with the post-colonial history of Africa. Until recently, to them the end of colonialism was the end of history. When attention was paid to post-colonial Africa, this was usually in the form of some remarks on this period, included in a final chapter. It hardly ever constituted a research topic in its own right. The post-colonial period was left to the anthropologists and political scientists. Furthermore, it was not expected that the period would provide necessary clues for understanding contemporary Africa. These clues were thought to be found in the colonial period, a popular topic of research. When the colonial past was discussed, the rights and wrongs of the colonial conquest and the colonial rule that followed were presented and its influence on contemporary Africa assessed.

What historians have started to question, however, is how important the colonial period actually was. It has been asserted by some that the colonial period cannot have been really influential because of its limited time span (as already mentioned, a mere fifty to hundred years). Others claim that the control that the colonizers had over their African colonies is overestimated. Kwame Anthony Appiah narrates that:

Most of us who were raised during and for some time after the colonial era are sharply aware of the ways in which the colonizers were never as fully in control as our elders allowed them to appear. We all experienced the persistent power of our own cognitive and moral traditions: in religion, in such social occasions as the funeral, in our experience in music, in our practice in dance, and, of course, in the intimacy of family life. Colonial authority sought to stigmatize our traditional religious beliefs, and we conspired in this fiction by concealing our disregard for much of European Christianity ...; the colonial state established a legal system whose patent lack of correspondence with the values of the colonized threatened not those values but the colonial legal system.¹⁶

Although some restraint as to the impact of colonialism indeed seems appropriate, this poses an interesting problem for the study of post-colonial African history. On the one hand, there is the notion of the shallowness of colonialism, while at the same time it is argued that the period had a devastating impact. Furthermore, it has been argued that post-colonial Africans are alienated from their authentic pre-colonial tradition and that, without such a tradition, there is not much hope for the continent (see J.-B. Gewald's review of Jan Vansina's *Paths in the rainforest* in this volume). Still others have argued for considering modern African states as postcolonies and, finally, there is the notion that Africa was never really decolonized since it is still economically dependent on its former colonizers.

In this volume it was decided not to take any one of the above approaches as a starting point but, rather, to select a number of topics that are important in modern Africa. Thus we take our cue directly from the post-colonial African experience. From there, we can go back in time in order to assess to what extent the post-colonial situation has to be explained from colonial or pre-colonial influences, what can be explained out of post-colonial history and where the impact of a wider global context can be found.

One of the topics selected was ethnicity. As mentioned above, reactionary observers tend to perceive African tribes as primitive and unchanging. It is also believed that pre-colonial Africa was characterized by utterly destructive tribal wars, the results of which were graphically described by missionaries and other European authorities. Modern ethnic conflicts are often still perceived as 'tribal wars' in which the different groups have no other motivation for their actions than that tribes generally tend to fight one another. According to this perspective, Africans are still 'primitive'. During the past decades a lot has been written to refute this idea, both by anthropologists and historians. It has been claimed that the tribes concerned were not at all primitive and primordial, but rather colonial inventions, that is, 'modern'. Sometimes it was even stressed that ethnic identities were actually imposed on the African population. However, both perspectives fail to explain why ethnicity is such a

strong force in post-colonial Africa. The strength of ethnicity is that it combines an image of traditional, unchanging authority and authenticity, with an enormous flexibility in practice. The contributions on ethnicity in the current volume demonstrate this, as both Jola (Senegal) and Luba Kasai (Zaire) identity went through significant changes over the past century and both have been implied in (the memory of) ethnic violence in post-colonial Africa. The articles furthermore illustrate that ethnic identity is important, both as providing meaning to the individual person's identity, and as a basis for political mobilization on a larger scale.

The debate on religion in modern Nigeria represents another hot issue, that of the role of the state in religion and the place of religion in society. It has been argued that in pre-colonial Africa, religion - be it animist or Islam - was omnipresent in African societies and that the distinction between religion and state is a recent (colonial and post-colonial) phenomenon. Furthermore, the religious experience of most individuals appears to include elements of both 'traditional' animist and modern monotheist Christianity or Islam. On the other hand, both Christianity and Islam tend to dominate the state and argue for a strong alliance of religion and state. In recent years especially Islam has been successful in dominating the state and enforcing the recognition of Islamic law as the official law. In Nigeria, Christianity and Islam are both important religions, and their fears and desires made it necessary for Nigerian politicians to turn their attention to a discussion of the role of religion in the Nigerian state.

Compared to the political debate on the role of modern religions, nothing seems more primitive than witchcraft. The abundance of witchcraft practices in many African countries would thus illustrate the 'primitiveness' of Africans and the limited impact of colonialism. Peter Geschiere's article on the modernity of witchcraft, on the contrary, shows that witchcraft changes and develops in post-colonial Africa. He demonstrates that when society changes, witchcraft changes, and that in post-colonial Africa even the state is forced to acknowledge the existence of the witchcraft menace.

A final problem addressed is how these different elements and interests of post-colonial African political society can be integrated and represented in a viable political system. Although 'democratization' has been on the African political agenda for decades, the results so far have been disappointing. Experiments with different types of political system and different types of democracy have led in most African countries to a situation characterized by nepotism and corruption. If we agree with Vansina that explaining this situation out of a 'lack of ethnics' is nothing but an ethnocentric judgement,¹⁷ and, thus, we cannot blame the politicians themselves, then we must shift our attention to the political system in which these people operate, and be prepared to consider what the options are for establishing truly democratic African political systems.

Notes:

1. I am grateful to Frank Uyanne for discussing this song with me.
2. See for example Achille Mbembe, 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', *Africa* 62,1 (1992) 3-37; there 6-7.
3. Strictly speaking 'post-colonial Africa' should encompass all those states in Africa that at one time were European colonies, that is the whole of Africa, including South Africa (which is now ruled by people not of European descent) and excluding Ethiopia (which has never been a European colony) and Liberia (which was founded in 1848 as a homeland for freed American slaves). In practice, however, we also exclude the African states to the north of the Sahara. Not because these states were not colonized, but because it is assumed that these states have more in common with the Mediterranean and the Middle East, than with the rest of Africa. Geographically speaking, therefore, post-colonial Africa coincides with what used to be characterized as 'Black Africa'.
4. Jean-François Bayart, *The state in Africa. The politics of the belly* (London and New York 1993, translated from the 1989 French edition: *L'État en Afrique. La politique du ventre*) 80.
5. Mbembe, 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', 28.
6. Bayart, *The state in Africa*, 89.
7. *Ibidem*, 120.
8. Helen Lackner, 'Social anthropology and indirect rule. The colonial administration and anthropology in Eastern Nigeria: 1920-1940' in: Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the colonial encounter* (London and Atlantic Highlands, N.J. 1973) 123-151.
9. A.E. Afigbo, *The warrant chiefs: indirect rule in southeastern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (New York 1972; London 1979) 256.
10. Jan Vansina, 'A past for the future?', *Dalhousie Review* (1992) 8-23; there 9.
11. Basil Davidson, *The black man's burden. Africa and the curse of the nation-state* (London 1992) 50.
12. Vansina, 'A past for the future?', 21-23.
13. Basil Davidson, *The black man's burden*, 221.
14. Caroline Neale, 'The idea of progress in the revision of African history, 1960-1970' in: Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury, ed., *African historiographies. What history for which Africa?* (Beverly Hills, London and New Delhi 1986) 112-122; there 116.
15. *Ibidem*.
16. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In my father's house. Africa in the philosophy of culture* (New York and Oxford 1992) 7-8.
17. Vansina, 'A past for the future?', 9.