

The colonial testament: An economic re-interpretation of Europe's motives for colonizing Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the motives put forward by European statesmen and historians for the formal annexations or colonization of Africa. An explanatory and argumentative paradigm to historical research is adopted to dissect the 'public explanations' proffered by statesmen and historians of Europe for the colonization of Africa. The reasons given for colonization were political, economic, humanitarian and moral, and religious in nature. Though this paper does not wholly refute the authenticity of these claims, it posits that there was an overriding economic concern that underlay the formal annexation of Africa and the carving out of spheres of influence by European nations. It examines the four main explanations European historians have offered for colonization and argues that the economic and commercial motive was the chief reason for the formal colonization of the continent of Africa.

Key words: Africa; Colonialism; Economic; Europe

Introduction

Scholars of African History agree that by the nineteenth century (C19th), the European presence in Africa had succeeded in endowing Europe with the natural, human, and mineral resources which laid the bedrock for its prosperity and advancement (Rodney, 1971; Nkrumah, 1965). By the end of that century, pressing economic and other needs in Europe compelled a reluctant continent to engage actively in carving out spheres of occupation and influence in Africa. Colonialism dawned on the continent of Africa. Iwe (1985) describes colonialism as:

“... a phase in the evolution of Africa characterized by intensive geographical explorations, the slave trade, the scramble for Africa, the territorial ambitions and pretensions of the Western nations, the imposition of alien rule and institutions, the planting of Western forms of Christianity, acculturation, racialism and exploitation...”(quoted in Okon (2014:193)

Similarly, Dumor (1993) holds that colonialism is a system of governance involving the administration of law and justice, and the organization of an economic system in such a way that the social, economic, and political interests, and the fundamental rights of the colonial subjects

become subservient to that of the colonizing power. Such subjugation as colonial rule did in Africa was not done without an explanation. To offer what will today be ‘public explanations,’ to use a modern journalistic term, for the subjugation of Africa, political, religious, moral, and economic motives were vigorously mooted by European statesmen to justify colonization. It is the view taken in this paper that behind all reasons given for colonization was a desire to position Africa well to exploit her economically for the well-being of Europe. This paper contends that it was purely economic motives that pushed European statesmen to undertake effective colonization of the continent of Africa.

Europe’s Motives for Colonizing Africa

Political Reasons

Europe, in support of its colonization drives in Africa, put forward that it had an obligation to provide political order on the chaotic political planes of Africa (Crowder, 1968; Dei-Anang, 1964). It was thought that there was a dearth of law, order and stability on the continent due primarily to inter-tribal wars, civil strifes within states, and the activities of other undesirable beings. Again, it was held that Africans were incapable of providing for themselves any form of protection and security through organized governments and that they must be guided by the superior political organization of European nations (Okon, 2014). The statesmen of Europe held that colonial rule was a necessary step to provide for the institutionalization of organized structures and institutions to regulate human behavior, protect lives and property, and assure liberty. But this political view of colonization hid a far greater fact: that it was European ammunition which helped keep tribes at each other’s throats. The policy of ‘divide and rule,’ a popular African quote to describe political divisions engendered by imperial powers among locals, was very much practiced by trade companies and European administrative representatives to help provide political leverage conducive for the conduct of trade. On the Gold Coast, for instance, the physical confrontations between Asante and the Fante city-states were propped up by Dutch and English support, respectively.

But even more important was the situation of Europe’s politics within the contemporary economic climate of the late nineteenth century (C19th). The great economic depression of the late nineteenth century (C19th) compelled most scholars, statesmen, and leading citizens to look away from Europe and the Americas for resource control in Africa as an answer to the fundamental questions of economic sustainability of Europe (Bolt, 2013). Bolt (2013:14) observes that:

“...at the time Europe found itself in the depression, the reports of explorers on the African continent that reached Europe never failed to emphasize the riches of the continent. By the 1880s, the general belief in Europe was that Africa was the world’s last great untapped reservoir of markets, resources and possible investment opportunities.”

It was these great markets, resources and investment openings that needed tapping by Europe. And the most efficient way of realizing these visions was to press for complete, unbridled political control of Africa through colonial rule.

Also, widespread unemployment and decreased investments throughout Europe in the nineteenth century (C19th) threatened the social fabric and political sanity of European society (Boahen, 1965). Industrialization meant more redundant human resource in Europe which needed to be put to work. In England of the 1870s, there was an estimated one million paupers, according to Boahen. These posed political threats to the established order of European society.

For instance, some monarchies lost power due to the pressure and the agitations of rowdy, unemployed people whose energy was ably used by revolutionaries to cause instability or even overthrow the establishment. To avoid the likely negatives associated with a large unemployed population, European politicians sought more resources to facilitate job creation and prosperity. For this reason, Europe turned to Africa as a centre to supply the resources and goods for reestablishing economic sanity in Europe through employment creation for political and social stability (Padmore, 1956). So, instead of colonization becoming a means to bring the much talked about political order in Africa, it became, contrastingly, a means of arming Europe financially so it could avoid the fragility and friability brought about by unemployment and decreased investment. These then were another stellar economic reason which compelled the formal launch of colonization in Africa by European nations.

An equally pronounced political factor for colonization was Legitimate Trade. Legitimate Trade involved trade in goods like cotton, oil palm, timber, rubber, and precious minerals which brought about reciprocal prosperity for the parties involved (Boahen, 1965). It replaced the obnoxious slave trade. It helped position the African as a trading equal with the European merchant. This equality enabled the native Africans pick and choose trading partners based on informed economic interest. Trade companies, according to Boahen, became engaged in competitive struggles for African goods. It was, however, the autonomy Africans enjoyed in their trading activities with European traders which became greatly detested by some European merchants. Legitimate Trade failed precisely because many Europeans hated the parity trade relations between them and their African counterparts (Crowder, 1968). These European mercantilists sought opportunities for monopoly and thus, supported colonization. They lobbied and pressured their governments to exercise political control over areas of interest to aid them, the merchants, exercise monopoly over the same areas (Boahen & Webster, 1967). Howard (1978) captures it succinctly when she contends that traders from Europe, for economic reasons, became advocates for colonial occupation for obvious reasons. One of the obvious reasons was the desire to have the power to decide how trade was to be conducted to their African colleagues rather than dealing with these local merchants on more equal terms. Political colonization was therefore a means of substituting Legitimate Trade with one in which European merchants will exercise monopolistic rights in their commercial enterprises on the continent.

It is therefore significant to note that the desire to institute law and order was not for altruistic reasons but for economic considerations. Colonization was to help Europe gain uncontested access to the natural and mineral resources of Africa. It was also to help each imperial nation carve out a sphere over which it could effectively exercise trade monopoly as a means to bettering its own national economy.

Humanitarian and Moral Reason

European statesmen who advocated colonization also held a moral belief that Europe owed it a duty to colonize Africa so as to open it up to the benefits conferred on Europe by scientific progress and technological advancement (Crowder, 1968; Boahen, 1965). Modern rail technology, architecture, roads, hospitals and manufacturing industries were still much unknown or underdeveloped in Africa. Europe thus made it its crusading mission to bring the African into the light of such civilization which it held to be synonymous with human progress and betterment. But this moralistic contention was informed by racialism and a lack of understanding of the culture of the people. Crowder (1968:5) explains that:

“Christian Europe, which had abolished the slave trade, felt itself morally superior to heathen Africa....This sense of moral superiority was reinforced by theories of racial superiority which placed the white man at the top of the hierarchy, the black man at the bottom. Thus, the European colonial powers

found nothing wrong in occupying and ruling lands belonging to African peoples....”

He continues to explain that European statesmen held that complete control of Africa, justified by superior moral and scientific resources, would enable Europe push back the environmental and technical barriers to progress on the continent and open up the land to the light of modern civilization. But a careful look at the impact of technical and technological improvements in Africa reveals an economic and commercial undertone. The impressive East African rail system, the famous triangular rail system in the Gold Coast, the great ports on the African seaboard, extensive inland roads network, and social improvements were meant to help move experts and resources around the continent with ease and to help cart goods to Europe without difficulty. So technological and scientific progress, on one hand, and commercial or economic exploitation, on the other hand, were bedfellows. In effect, the introduction of technological and scientific know-how furthered the cause of resource exploitation in mining, agriculture, and logging. The fellowship between the two was to be seen in how they complemented each other. For instance, hospitals aided the fight of malaria; schools produced the clerks and interpreters who oiled the communications system of the colonial administration; sophisticated equipment bettered the methods for mining operations. All these added to the economic well-being of Europe “in such a way that the fundamental rights of the colonial subjects become subservient to that of the imperial power” (Dumor, 1993:153).

Religious Reasons

At the Berlin Congress in 1884-85, Leopold II, together with other altruistic politicians of Europe, propagated the idea that Europe needed to bring Africa effectively under the light of Christianity and to halt the slave trade which was unchristian (Foeken, 1995). However, the notion that Africa should be evangelized was not a novelty. In fact, the evangelizing zeal for Africa had begun with the first Europeans on the continent in the fifteenth century (C15th) (Sanneh, 1983). But the powers of Europe argued, from a new dimension, that the dearth of legitimized political authority on the continent thwarted missionary efforts of European clergy on the continent. Colonial rule, it was supposed, would create the security and stability necessary for effective Christianization of Africa. Bolt (2013) indicates that the annexation of the Bugunda Kingdom reluctantly by Britain was necessitated by pressure from missionaries who thought that without formal political control, they would be kicked out of the kingdom. He argues that missionaries supported colonialism as a means to help further the spread of the Gospel message throughout the continent. However, one question that begs an answer is whether colonization was the best way to achieve the evangelizing mission. Critical thinking, however, reveals that Christianity created a favourable ground for the implementation and sustenance of colonization and exploitation. The gospels preached submission, long-suffering, meekness and surrender which all fit the exploitative intent and matrix of colonization. Rodney (1972:278) reiterates that:

“The church's role was primarily to preserve the social relations of colonialism... the Christian church stressed humility, docility and acceptance. Ever since the days of slavery in the West Indies, the church had been brought in on condition that it should not excite the African slaves with doctrine of equality before God.”

By preaching submissiveness, the Christian religion produced a class of passive, malleable citizens who readily bore human indignities and the natural resource exploitations that marked the rise of colonialism all in the name of religion.

Equally significant about Christianity was the fact that the clergy subtly and overtly promoted the political agenda in their missionary work. This was pronounced in Southern and

Eastern Africa where the clergy assumed roles of preachers, administrators, negotiators, and traders (Okon, 2014). In the opinion of Rothberg (1964), missionaries in Eastern Africa became vanguards of the West rather than of Christ. So the Christian clergymen became vehicles through which the flag of political control was planted on many African lands. The promotion of Christianity by the clergy was only a first step to the eventual manifestation of alien political control and effective resource exploitation of the people. As preachers, the clergy modeled a submissive citizen; they negotiated his relations with all who wish to contract with him; they themselves sold to him and bought from him; they administered his political life for him by making decisions for him because the clergy had preached all rational sense out of the citizen and replaced it with submission.

Economic Reason

Once this paper highlights the economic undertone in every argument raised by proponents of colonial rule, it is important to review the economic and financial motives of Europe in colonizing Africa in itself. At the turn of the last half of the nineteenth century, the general decline in the slave trade fueled hopes that Africa would become a large market for manufactured goods from Europe (Koponen, 1993). Sir John Kennaway of the Church Missionary Society affirmed this in a parliamentary debate in 1889 on the continued intra-Africa slave trade that:

“We cannot find that outlet for our manufactures which is so necessary to our commercial existence in communities which have been deprived of all their inhabitants” (British Parliamentary Hansard, 1889).

Africa’s significance as a market was therefore never in doubt. Europe saw colonization as an effort to secure viable markets for each state’s trade goods which were increasing in the numbers, thanks to cheap African raw material and the benefits of technology (Webster & Boahen, 1967). Indeed, Sir George Goldie saw the Niger Delta as a prized commercial possession so much so that he organized his fellow British competitors into a monopoly to fight off other European nationals (Crowder, 1968). In this way, British merchants will secure the monopolistic benefits of trading surplus goods in those parts of the continent. What merchants like Goldie sought was the formal annexation of defined territories to help further the trading activities of the monopolies and guarantee the economic good of Britain.

But an even more pronounced reason for colonization was the economic promise Africa gave rival powers against the evils of trade protectionism which was at the forefront of Western economic thought in that century. Protectionism denoted the practice of charging high import tariff on goods from other countries so as to favour local industrial growth. For this reason, all rival powers sought to acquire as many colonies as possible to safeguard their industrial outputs from being blocked out by the probably extended protectionism of other imperial powers who equally sought colonies for similar reasons (Webster & Boahen, 1967). The French statesman Jules Ferry sounded this concern in the French Chamber of Deputies saying:

“Is it not clear that, for all the great powers of modern Europe, since their industrial power commenced, there is posed an immense and difficult problem, which is the basis of industrial life, the very condition of existence- the question of “markets”? Have you not seen the great industrial nations one by one arrive at a colonial policy? And can we say that this colonial policy is a lunacy for modern nations? Not at all, Messieurs, this policy is, for all of us, a necessity like the ‘market’ itself.” (quoted in Crowder, 1968:58).

But Britain and Germany, especially, feared that an extended France in Africa would be a threat to free trade while France was desperate to impose her authority in Africa for similar reasons. So, purely economic or commercial factors were keys in promoting the advance of colonization. The returns, in financial terms to Europe, were unquantifiable. Even right up to the post-colonial period, these commercial ties continue to exist on the continent of Africa and manifest themselves in the Commonwealth and the International Organization of La Francophonie.

Conclusion

The colonization of Africa by Europe was one motivated greatly by economic and commercial purposes cloaked in different ways. Whether moral, political, religious, or purely commercial reasons were given, the facts point to an overriding economic impulse for colonization which left an eternal mark on Euro-African relations into the twentieth century. The idea of promoting the Christian enterprise fell in sync with the real commercial intentions of colonization. Market forces forced governments to strengthen political control for monopolistic guarantees. Political conditions in Europe fueled by exacerbating economic realities compelled political actors to fall on Africa to mend the cracks in Europe's political and economic walls through resource supply. A certain moral imperative and drive to share the benefits of modernity helped laid and spread the technology that mastered the exploration and exploitation of the mineral and natural resources of Africa. The Pall Mall Gazette gives an apt conclusion to this paper when it stated:

“Nor have we gone to the equatorial regions from religious or humanitarian motives... still less have we sought out the African in order to endow him with the vices (and virtues) of western civilization... the dominating force which has taken us to Equatorial Africa is the desire for trade. We are in these tropical countries for our own advantage and only incidentally for the good of the African” (quoted in Uzoigwe, 1978:28).

It is therefore succinct to conclude that the imperial flags of Europe were driven by the winds of economics and commerce to Africa during the era of colonization.

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