Beneath the Rots in Post-Colonial Africa: A Reply to Henry Kam Kah and Okori Uneke

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Abstract

This paper attempts a response to two suggestions regarding the roots of and solutions to Africa’s social, economic and political concerns. Rather than trying to provide answers to the question “who should be blamed for the quagmires of Africa?”, the paper tries to provide further explanations of the problems using a specific case study of two pan-African scholars, Henry Kam Kah and Okori Uneke. Although their suggestions about the situation of Africa have received popular acceptance among scholars, this paper disputes the viability of their assumptions and conclusions. Even if it is true (as the scholars have argued) that Africa is an innocent victim of colonial or post-colonial causes, their arguments fall short of providing a foundation for future, positive development. Instead, this paper attempts to go beneath superficial first layer investigations to identify a more meaningful way forward for the people of post-colonial Africa.
INTRODUCTION

There has been continuous debate on the woes of Africa, considered as the homestead of black people, especially since Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1974) accused Europe of deliberately creating all the misfortunes of the colonial and postcolonial Africa. While this conclusion was disputed by Chinua Achebe (1983:1), who claimed bad leadership has caused the problems of Africa, the debate takes different forms in various fields and disciplines. Some think political officeholders should be blamed for the current problems, while others hold the culture of the people responsible or try to isolate for blame the biological uniqueness of Africans and black people. There are still others who hold responsible the international community (whether labelled as imperialists, colonialists and/or neo-colonialists). The stories have oscillated between how some Africans have doomed Africa or about how the rest of the world, especially the West, has failed Africa.

None of these accounts has ended the debate. Rather than trying to provide answers to the question of who to blame for the postcolonial woes of Africa as Henry Kam Kah and Okori Uneke have done, however, this paper tries to provide further explanations of the question itself. These two scholars are among the most recent to engage in the debate about the quandaries of the black continent. They both have also tried to offer suggestions about what they think could be a solution to the social and political challenges of Africa. Although their suggestions have received popular acceptance among scholars as the “whole truth” about the situation of Africa, this paper attempts to go beyond their superficial first layer investigations towards unravelling a more probable cause of the postcolonial challenges of Africa. Both Kah (“‘Africa Must Unite:’ Vindicating Kwame Nkrumah and Uniting Africa against Global Destruction” 2012, 26-41) and Uneke (“Corruption in Africa South of the Sahara: Bureaucratic Facilitator or Handicap to Development?” 2010, 111-128) have employed weak logical analyses too superficial to support a reliable solution to the backwardness problem of Africa. The unifying position between these seemingly opposing pan-African scholars is the view that the innocent victims of African woes are distinct from the insurmountable and malevolent causes of their problems. While Kah’s analysis leads him to blame the period before the political independence of African states for the current problems, Uneke’s analysis leads him to ignore it and focus on the specific problem of corruption.

WHAT IS MEANT BY “AFRICA”?

Africa has long been the most derided continent with its backward nations. Too often, it seems its people are ridiculed and scorned everywhere and have become
a global laughing stock. Some of the derogatory comments about the continent and its people by others have occupied the academic community and literary circles for decades. Scholars have referred to the continent and its people in reckless and uncharitable terms. Derogatory statements include comments such as “Africa doesn’t Matter” (Boston, 2008; Berlioux, 1872); “a people without a history” (Hegel, 1974, 1975); inferior humans (Yankah, 1999: 9-27, Ranger, 1995, 1999); “inferior others” (Bernasconi, 1998); “a lost continent” or “the wretched of the earth” (Fanon, 1968). Others are: “a hopeless people” and “the monkey folk” (Trevor-Roper, 1966; Wolf, 1982; Fraser, 1911; Hambly, 1920), “mentally sub-standard folk” (Wiredu, 1998: 214), “primarily different and comparable to real humans (i.e., the Whites) merely by analogy” (Hinde & Hinde, 1901; Cooper, 1968; Fitzsimons, 1911) and “mentally sub-humans” (Ivan, 1983). In ways that appear to confirm such derogatory comments, only a few democracies in Africa have been able to escape a cycle of intra-state violent conflicts. It is now almost a truism that Africa’s situation is intractable and irredeemable.

Consequently, debates have shifted from whether or not Africa is hopeless or backward. At a time previously, it was centred on whether Africans could match others in rigorous mental exercises (Feagan, 2007:134-145; Escobar, 2007: 197-210) or whether black Africans could engage in rigorous disciplines such as philosophy before their contact with the West (Castiano, 2005: v-vii; du Toit, 2005:55-93; and Wallner, 2005:46-54). At another time, the debate was whether Africans must return to their primitive knowledge systems or adopt the alleged modern ones often claimed to be of Western origin (Olatunji, 2010: 13-20; Kolawole, 2001: 13-15). The recent focus has been on trying to identify the reasons behind the backwardness of Africa—trying to find explanations for the pitiable condition of Africa and consequently its people. The rationale behind the new project is that the solution could be found more quickly once the root of the problem has been identified.

The suggestions of these scholars result from their perceptions of the nature of the problems. While Kah (2012) believes that the colonial past of Africa explains the post-colonial challenges of the continent, Uneke (2010) holds the view that whatever the past may have been, the post-colonial African office holders should be blamed for postcolonial African problems. Although the positions of the two scholars appear to be in opposition, Afrocentrism, Pan-Africanism and Afro-optimism may easily be read in between the lines of their texts. (The concept of Pan-Africanism, however, is used in a loose sense to refer, not to their ideological affinity with any of the Pan-African Congresses and movements (Duboisim, Nkrumahism or Garveyism), but to their emotional defence of Africa and its development agenda.)

Both scholars also believe the cause of the problems may be traced historically. Uneke begins by saying: “today, most African nation-states have been independent for forty years. Unfortunately, after forty years, many of these nation-
states have made either minimal progress or stagnated, in terms of socioeconomic growth and development” (2012, 1). Kah (2010, 37) concludes with reference to unaccountable regimes, unbalanced regional planning, identity, intra-and international conflicts, wrong educational policies, poor, unjust redistribution of resources and defective institutional policies as part of existing internal hurdles which for fifty years of independence have made it impossible to attain the state of unity necessary for preventing Africa against a global onslaught (2010, 37).

Kah agrees with Kwame Nkrumah’s unification thesis and further argues in defence of the view that Africa must unite under a single government in order to overcome her present socio-political challenges. Nkrumah (2007a: 176-177, 2007b, 1998), like Julius Nyerere (2007a:327-333, 2007b: 334-336) had earlier proposed the unification of Africa under a single government such as the United States of Africa as a *conditio sine qua non* for meaningful political independence. He had advocated having “a common flag, a common anthem, common motto, union citizenship, a common defence and economic policy, a union bank, and co-ordinated language teaching and cultural activities” in Africa (Kah, 2012, 26-41).

Kah’s position is effectively a defence of Nkrumah’s proposal. He believes that Nkrumah was right to see the unification of Africa as the only way to overcome ideological wars (motivated by the West) directed against the progress of the continent as a whole. Kah argues that the continent continues to suffer from exploitation by Europeans, with their ever-increasing presence in the continent through the activities of their international allies and players such as the European Union, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations (Kah, 2013:36). These institutional players, according to him, are more concerned about Euro-favoured ideologies and the economic needs of their Western sponsors than ever before. Kah argues, like Nkrumah, that unless African leaders promptly unite the continent and embark on projects that could avert the impending calamity, the continent is necessarily doomed.

With equal doggedness, Okori Uneke holds to the position that the economic decline in African countries and all the social malfunctioning of the systems of those countries have all been caused by corruption, which has permeated almost every strata of public life in most African countries. Uneke argues that whatever other numerous factors affecting the development of Africa, it is critical to tackle corruption first, if the continent is to make any meaningful progress.

Uneke expresses some pessimism about eliminating corruption in Africa, however. Nevertheless, even only minimising corruption is necessary if Africa is to make any progress. In the absence of democratic institutional arrangements that make the engagement in corrupt practices difficult, prevent systemic corruption-funded patronage, as well as limit state intervention in private exchange, the political leadership will still attempt to monopolise and over-regulate economic activity, as has been the case in many parts of Africa (Uneke, 2010, 124). This complicates the activities of businesspeople, discourages productive
investment, and creates bloated, expensive, corrupt and inefficient bureaucracies. He argues that the most effective approach to deal with corruption in Africa is for each state to make—and effectively enforce—constitutional provisions for the accountability of public officials. They should also guarantee participatory democracy to encourage the participation of civil society and thus ensure the accountability and transparency of governance.

Common to the two scholars is the belief that the problems have been caused by factors distinct from Africans themselves. While Kah believes the challenges of Africa are the result of the colonial actors and their post-colonial agents, Uneke believes that corruption is the cause of the problems. Yet Uneke also believes that corruption is a recent creation of post-colonial African leaders. According to him, corruption appears to be the only “industry” in post-independence Africa that has maintained steady growth in the past four decades (Uneke, 2010: 121). In his opinion, economic, political, and social development have either stagnated or degenerated into crises management, thus breeding disease, famine, illiteracy, poverty, ethnic rivalry, assassination of political opponents, political instability, and wars as a result of the unbridled pursuit of self-aggrandizement and a monopoly of state power by the ruling elite.¹

Despite their apparent opposition, therefore, the positions of these two scholars have more in common than might first appear. Kah observes that the corrupt, unjust and oppressive colonialism preceded the postcolonial challenges. He concludes that colonialism must be the cause of the postcolonial challenges of Africa. In similar fashion, Uneke argues that postcolonial African leaders have caused the postcolonial challenges of Africa.

Such universalist conclusions reflect the continuation of a colonial perspective on “Africa,” the continent whose character has been created and defined by European outsiders. These analyses are more or less accurate, depending on where and what is examined. If colonialism is actually the cause of corruption in Africa, how do we explain corruption and under-development in Ethiopia, which was never colonised? How also do we explain South Africa that experienced colonisation in its worst form, but which emerged as one of the most developed African states? And if the postcolonial leaders are the cause of the developmental challenges of Africa, how do we explain Botswana, South Africa, Libya and Egypt whose level of economic development compared (at least at one time) with nations in Europe and Asia? Even if some causal relationships exist between colonialism and/or corrupt leaders and the postcolonial woes of Africa, it still does not entirely justify either universalist conclusion.

Kah argues that colonialism caused the postcolonial challenges of Africa and it is being entrenched by its alleged new order called neo-colonialism. To undo the problems, he argues that Africa should unite under a single government. Although Kah does not explain how this will help undo the havoc wrought by the colonial past, he at least explains how neo-colonialism could be prevented by a
unified effort of Africans themselves who (according to him) have longed for unity, but have been ignored by their leaders (Kah, 30). Nkrumah had earlier exclaimed that “the masses of the people of Africa” wanted unity to become reality in all of Africa.’ Kah’s paper identifies with the call and therefore represents a reminder of its urgency. In his own words, “the paper ... examines the salience of Kwame Nkrumah’s clarion call for the United States of Africa and how this call remains relevant today” (Kah, 2013, 26).

In spite of the people’s supposed desire for unity and the expected magic associated with the need for a union government, however, it should be noted that between 1959 and 1960, Nkrumah experimented with a union between Ghana-Guinea-Mali. The union failed in spite of the promise he thought it held for Africa and Africans. The failure, according to Kah’s own testimony, was the result of internal opposition from within Africa. It poses some intellectual challenges explaining the overwhelming opposition amidst burning desire for unity. Whoever must argue that the people genuinely desire unity must provide the logic with which to explain the failure of an experimented unity. A way out of the problem is to argue that the colonial forces had earlier manipulated the minds of the people as to begin to harbour hatred for their own images; an attitude referred to as self-alienation by Frankfort scholars and by Frantz Fanon (1993) as well as by Memmi (2007, 264-277). Even this alternative route does not help bypass the logical question; it only alters its dimension. How would anyone explain that the people whose minds have been so manipulated to hate themselves have genuinely desired unity in order to save themselves?

In Uneke’s analysis, where there is corruption there is also poverty, and the people of Africa (who, according to him, are by nature not more averse to honesty than people from other parts of the world) also desire to have developments and improved living conditions (112-113). He argues that the poverty, underdevelopment and the poor living conditions that Africans now battle have been caused by corrupt post-colonial political leadership. He outlines the many ways in which African leaders have orchestrated and sustained these problems. Citing the documents of the Transparency International, Uneke identified how such leadership defects could further undermine people’s trust in the political system, their institutions and leadership and finally destroy the social fabric of society itself (113).

For Uneke, hope for the people of Africa depends on their ability to fight corruption, at all levels. According to him, “combating the pervasiveness of corruption may be difficult but achievable.” Citing examples of very low incidence of corruption by the governing elites in countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Singapore, and Finland, he argues that the condition for overcoming corruption and all the social challenges associated with it is “putting in place appropriate anti-corruption and legal machinery to prosecute without fear or favour any violations of public service codes of conduct.” He suggested a well-designed set of laws, determined through democratic processes based on popular participation,
accountability, transparency in governance, free economic exchange, entrepreneurship promotion, proper and equitable allocation of public resources, and alleviation of poverty (Uneke, 2010:122). He noted the need to promote enabling conditions of service to enhance professional and ethical standards, implement sound policies on recruitment, training and public personnel management and a litany of others including upholding the integrity of public institutions of accountability and enforcing ethical behaviour at various levels (Uneke, 2010:123).

Thus, Uneke claims the people desire peace but have been denied by some political opportunists. Sadly, however, he expects the same political opportunists to make an about-face and undertake such a project successfully in the interest of the masses for the future of the entire nation.

THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

History has it that the Europeans came to Africa in search of raw materials for their growing industries. Here in Africa they were said to have found abundant material resources and over time they began to extend beyond their initial interests to the extent that they eventually colonised the people in order to have unrestricted access to the resources, which eventually included labour. History also has it that the present day Ethiopia is the only African state that was never colonised and arguably Liberia, which significantly is peopled by former captives who also resisted being re-colonised.

In Boahen’s (2003) analysis of the history of Africa, both Liberia and Ethiopia successfully resisted colonisation because of the widespread indomitable feeling among the people that they were destined to survive resisting external domination and for the special skills of the people of Ethiopians to diplomatically play the colonisers against one another. Ethiopians were also credited with some unusual ability to cooperate against the alien forces by taking side with their own local army and refusing to render any useful information to the colonial soldiers. The alien Italian forces were therefore easily defeated by their inability to compete with local resistance forces that were more familiar with the topography of Ethiopia (Boahen, 2003, 120-131). Although history also notes that the coloniser did not use only military forces made up of European soldiers, it could be expected that some of the soldiers would be recruited mercenaries from neighbouring communities. Nevertheless, these would still not have the same mastery of the terrain of their neighbouring countries as the locals.

The social effects of the long-term slave trade on what has come to be called “Africa” are also significant. According to Obafemi Awolowo (Awolowo, 1985:19-20), millions of Blacks were dispersed abroad due to African nobles who sold their kinsmen into slavery through all sorts of manipulations (see also Atanda, 1979, 42-46 & 76, Perbi, 2001:7, Ogini, 1978:123-124). This aligns
with the view of Harry Johnston (1913:151-2) that the Negro slaves lacked race-fellowship or sympathy for other Negros. There could never have been race fellowship for a person who discovers that he or she never could have got into slavery without the conspiracy of his fellow natives and relatives. At the end of the tribal wars, the local communities also found themselves too indebted to the foreigners and interveners whom they came to see as their savours from the hands of local traitors and oppressors.

The strength of regional and national cooperation was said by Boahen to be most noticeable in the history of anti-colonial resistance in the central Africa between 1880 and 1918 (Boahen, 2003:83-84). According to him, the anti-colonial resistance efforts had significant success because of their broad-based and multi-ethnic resistance (Boahen, 2003:83-89). At once, the commonly-held belief that Africans are naturally docile was challenged by the fact the Portuguese were driven away from the Ovimbundu highlands in 1904 (Boahen, 2003:92-93).

What is evident in the discussion about the period of the colonial resistance is that many of the socio-political problems experienced in Africa today are not all together new because many of them already existed in pre-colonial era. The nobles who manipulated and sold their fellow Africans into slavery for money fame or for whatever gain were no less corrupt or cruel than the ones who embezzle money while in government in the 21st century. Many or most parts of the continent would not likely have fallen prey to colonial domination had there been unity (horizontal unity among communities, clans and kingdoms) and cooperation (vertical unity within the communities) among the inhabitants of the continent and its regions.

It is possible to make other observations, as well: The colonial powers who came as slave raiders were not the first of their kind. There have been some forms of slavery and slave raiding in Africa prior to colonial incursion (J. C. Anene, 1981:93). More importantly, however, we realize that Africa did not exist as a nation prior to colonial intrusion. Historically, pre-colonial Africa was made up of independent empires and kingdoms linked up only by economic needs and which, for reasons of lack of guided political ties often degenerated into violent conflicts and wars. Although Wiredu (2000: 374-382) talks about “under the tree” arrangements for conflict prevention, management and resolutions, it was only possible in intra-community and minor conflicts. That explains why, even from the pre-colonial era, the list of African wars is endless (Williams, 2013: 81-99, Elbadawi & Sawbanis, 2000: 244-269). Even the name 'Africa' itself was a colonial invention and what existed before then was an array of competing independent and warring communities, empires and kingdoms. All that the colonialists did (serving their own purposes) was to take advantage of the status quo to re-distribute the already disorganised people by joining together some that were earlier culturally and politically independent of one another and separate some that were previously united. Yet if Africa was horizontally and vertically disunited prior to colonisation, to what extent can anyone blame colonisation its subsequent
disunity? If Africa was not united before colonization, Europeans merely redistributed an already-balkanized continent.

Given the failure of Nkrumah’s experiment in Ghana-Guinea-Mali, it is hard to argue in that instance there was a universal popular desire for unity. If a handful of politicians were able to persuade the people against unification, the problem is not primarily a lack of unity. It would be easier to argue these were people who either did not know what they wanted, or who knew what they wanted but were too docile or too ignorant to press for it. In other instances, such as in Ethiopia and Liberia, people achieved whatever they strongly desired to achieve.

In comparison, Uneke’s thesis that the postcolonial challenges of Africa were caused by corrupt postcolonial leaders, elite and nobles of Africa has been more widely accepted among scholars, even by those within Africa. Jens Chr. Andvig (2008), Lawal,Gbenga (2007), Elliot P. Skinner (1998), Oluwole Owoye and Ibrahim Bendardaf (1996) are a few examples. Although they usually conclude by placing the reconstruction project in the hands of the same leaders who have both caused and perpetuated the problems in the first place, they adduce evidence to demonstrate that the people themselves could reverse the situation even against the wishes of their corrupt leaders.

Following the theory of Thomas Hobbes, one might argue (given human beings are naturally corrupt and are wont to exploiting every possible opportunity to satisfy his/her selfish interests) that Africans are no exception. The distinguishing factor in the case of Africa (according to Uneke), however, is that corrupt leaders have been heartened by docile or ignorant followers. But in every government on earth, as Thomas Jefferson (1944, 22, see also Padover, 1946, 168) observed, there are some traces of human weaknesses, germs of corruption and degeneracy; therefore, any government that becomes destructive to the interests of its formulators (the governed) risks being altered or abolished. In Africa, therefore, if the people strongly desire change, progress and improved quality of living amidst abundant resources but are being prevented by a few leaders, they would eventually get what they want. If they know what they want and how to get it, however, but fail to do so, should we still continue to blame a few opportunistic leaders?

Whether colonialism or corrupt postcolonial leaders should be blamed for the postcolonial challenges of Africa, both options imply that beneath the faces of colonial oppression and postcolonial corruption are docile people, whose docility is based on ignorance of what they could do. Both Kah and Uneke have thus effectively declared the people innocent of the crimes for which they suffer. They cannot reasonably prevent or stop a problem whose nature or origin they do not understand.
This paper is not committed to defending the position that Africans are either ignorant or naturally docile people, however. The author of this piece is himself an African. If he argues that Africans are ignorant or docile he should be the first to show how he has succeeded undoing for himself the ignorance or docility that has intractably enslaved the rest of Africa. Contrary to making any such argument, this paper simply follows Kah and Uneke to conclude that if it is true that the current challenges of Africa are as a result of her colonial past or her present corrupt leaders, it can only be true if the African victims are also ignorant or/and docile. Thus, if Africans are either ignorant or docile, then neither colonialism nor corrupt post-colonial leaders should be blamed for capitalising on existing opportunities. On the contrary, this author maintains that the problems instead should be blamed on the shortcomings of the African people, who both had the opportunity to avert the historical colonial invasion but could not or did not, and who still have the opportunity to stop corrupt leaders but do not. By implication, this problem will continue as long as the people, including their intellectuals, continue to blame mere opportunists for a situation they could not create without the direct or indirect cooperation of the people. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the postcolonial problems of the Africa and articulate an alternative understanding of their possible solution.

This author would argue that it is false that Africans are innocent victims, because beneath the lofty roofs of colonialism and among corrupt post-colonial leaders were capable people of Africa who had the power to change the situation. It is possible that Africans are ignorant of these facts, knowledge of which might have prevented them from being in the present situation. It is also possible that Africans are aware and have the full knowledge of these facts but either choose not to care or believe themselves incapable of doing anything to change the situation. Whichever the option one takes, and in spite of the popularity of theories (exemplified by Kah and Uneke) of explaining and remaking Africa, it is obvious that beneath the rots of Africa are Africans who fold their own arms and allow some transient historical events, individuals or/and institutions to determine their future and fate. That is, they allow others to dictate their story instead of telling it for themselves. Pan-Africanism, Afrocentricism, renaissancism and all those other nationalist “isms” instead need to be rethought to meet the needs of our time and to make them relevant to the needs and yearnings of Africa today. Otherwise, solutions based on uncritical assumptions and some vague general euphoria may end up worsening the situation of Africa instead of improving it. Whether or not the people of Africa have been victims before, they will continue to be victims unless they reject the limits such a perspective places on their control of what lies ahead.
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REFERENCES


Beneath the Rots | Olatunji


NOTES

i While the distinction between the colonial forces and the African victims is easily comprehensible, the distinction between the postcolonial African leaders and the rest of Africa could appear blurry, however. Perhaps one could draw some inspiration from Ayittey’s “Africa Unchained” where he draws a sharp distinction between African corrupt governments’ totalitarian socialist leaders and the real Africans made up of the informal sectors of the African society and economy, who in his view are the victims of the elite's misdeeds.