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## **The Scars of European Imperialism in Africa**

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*Research Article*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The contact between Europe and Africa dates back to the fifteenth century. The relationship then was centred on trade. The objective of this article is to determine the extent and depth of the impact of European imperialism in Africa. This article contests that the main reason for European imperialism on Africa was economic exploitation of the resources of Africa. It further states that the Atlantic slave trade was abolished after the industrial revolution when it was no longer profitable to own slaves. The abolition of slave trade led to the introduction of legitimate trade which in turn paved way for imperialism. European imperialism in Africa, which lasted from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, was a period of intense colonization and exploitation of African territories and resources by European powers. Driven by economic interests, political rivalries, and a sense of cultural superiority, European nations such as Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, and Portugal partitioned and occupied most of Africa, imposing their own systems of governance, economy, and culture on the indigenous populations. In addition to the tremendous bloodshed, displacement, and cultural loss that characterized this era, European industry and expansion were fueled by the exploitation of African labour and natural resources. African societies and economies were disrupted; and local institutions and traditions were undermined. Finally, it is argued that imperialism retarded the development of industrialization in Africa; destroyed African traditional religion; and the imposition of arbitrary boundaries on modern nation states without considering the historical and ethnic background of the people is the major cause of conflicts in Africa. The article submits that though some infrastructural facilities were provided during that period, it was done to facilitate the process of economic exploitation.

**Keywords:** Economic exploitation, colonialism, development, industrialization, imperialism

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Europe and Africa which started about the fifteenth century was centred on trade. At the first contact the main articles of trade was gold. Portugal was the first European country to establish close contact with West Africa with the annexation of Ceuta in 1415. By 1485 the Portuguese had made contact with the Benin Empire and its ruler. Before the end of the fifteenth century, they had reached Cape Verde, Port Elmina Fernando-Po, Sao Tome Island and the Cape of Good Hope. After this period came the Dutch, Danes, Bills, French and other European countries came and established trading posts along the coast of Africa from where they traded with the people of the hinterland. At first there was mutual respect for each other and Africans were the middle men. After the exploration of the interior at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the relationship between Europe and Africa was drastically changed. The report found that slaves, gold, ivory, and wax could always be found here for the smallest items, and that a trade with a profit of up to 800 percent could be conducted at Fattatenda with the least amount of difficulty.

After the abolition of the slave trade, the European found a substitute in legitimate commerce. With the conclusion of exploration of the rivers Niger and the Congo, Newman (2007) noted that territorial acquisition became competitive and strategic as Europe's major powers decided that their future economic prosperity depended on their seizing as much of the continent for themselves as possible. This was the beginning of the scramble for Africa during which process African leaders lost their destinies. African leaders were made to sign complicated treaties which they did not understand and any violation of the treaties was severely punished by way of deportation or facing the risk of punitive expedition by

the colonial power. In this article we shall examine the meaning, theories, motives and effects of European imperialism on Africa.

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

### What is Imperialism?

Hornby (1989) defined imperialism as the belief in the value of colonies or policy of extending a country's empire and influence. It is the practice whereby powerful nations or peoples seek to extend and maintain control or influence over weaker nations or peoples. Though this is often confused with colonialism and sometimes used interchangeably the two are not the same. Mastandunor (2007) argues that while colonialism implies formal political control, involving territorial annexation and loss of sovereignty, imperialism refers more broadly to control or influence that is exercised either formally or informally, directly or indirectly, politically or economically. In the words of Beard(1946)Imperialism is employment of the engines of government and diplomacy to acquire territories, protectorates, and/or spheres of influence occupied usually by other races or peoples, and to promote industrial, trade, and investment opportunities. Morgenthau (1993) on his part defined imperialism as a policy that aims at the overthrow of the status quo, at a reversal of the power relations between two or more nations. Imperialism in international politics deals with the dynamic process of acquiring an empire or territory.

A variety of phenomena are covered under imperialism. Monopolistic advantages and preferences, raw material looting, territorial seizure, slavery of the native population, nationalism, racism, and militarism are all examples of the phenomena that Offiong (1980) links to imperialism. Imperialism, as defined by Sill (1972), is an endeavor primarily intended to establish or maintain nominal sovereignty over

subordinate political communities, however it is also sometimes confused with the exercise of any kind of political influence or control over another political society. It is important to point out that imperialism existed within and outside Europe. The empires that existed in Europe such as the Hapsburg empire of Austria, the Hohenzollern Empire of Prussia, the Romanov Empire of Russia and the Ottoman empire of Turkey Romanov Empire of Russia and the Ottoman empire of Turkey imposed alien rule on the local peoples and so they were all imperialists. So were the policies in the ancient time that led to the foundation of the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Persian empires. Even the conquests of Alexander the Great of Rome and the expansion of the Arabians in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries showed signs of imperialism.

The definition of imperialism put forward by O'Connor clearly explains European imperialist activities in Africa. According to O'Connor (1971), Economic imperialism is the economic subordination or domination of one country or a group of countries by another for the main purpose of formal or informal control of domestic economic resources for the benefit of the subordinating or dominating power and at the expense of the local people and their economy. The imperialist power control foreign exchange and public and private savings and agriculture, mineral, transportation, communication, manufacturing and commercial facilities and other assets. In other words, imperialist powers control both the liquid and real economic resources of the underdeveloped countries. We shall now discuss the various theories of imperialism put forward by some scholars.

## THEORIES OF IMPERIALISM

### Marxist Theory

The Marxist theory of imperialism sees imperialism as the product of the capitalist economic system. It contends that when capitalist societies are unable to find sufficient markets for their products they could enslave larger capitalist or non-capitalist areas and transform them into markets for their surplus products and this will in turn give them the opportunity to invest their surplus capital. The Marxist theory clearly explains the economic reasons for European imperialism in Africa. O'Connor (1971) asserts that, Lacking in domestic investment outlets British capitalists turned their attention to the economically under-exploited regions of the world. Britain then established colonies as archives for their surplus capital. Imperialism and its conquest would end only when the British working classes gained more economic and political power through unionism and parliamentary representation which would forge a redistribution of income and hence the development of a domestic economy in which the volume of consumption would correspond more closely to the volume of production.

In fact, it is the Marxist theory of imperialism that elaborated on the natural desire of the capitalist states to engage in imperialistic expansion. Lenin (1933) sums it up when he said that imperialism is capitalism in the face of its development in which the domination of monopolies and finance capital has established itself, in which the export of capital has acquired very great importance, in which the division of the world among the big international trusts has begun, and in which the division of the earth amongst the great capitalist power has been completed.

### Hobson's theory of under consumption

John A. Hobson sees the cause of imperialism in certain maladjustments within the capitalist system. He argued that in Britain, there was surplus goods and capital which seek outlets in foreign markets. According to him, opportunities for profitable investment in Britain were slim by the late nineteenth century and if investment continued, it would lead to low profit and a drastic reduction in the income accruing to the investors. Another result of continued investment in Britain would have been full employment, which will result in unduly strengthening the bargaining power of the trade unions. Hobson and his men therefore concluded that the best way out was to export British capital to the less developed countries of the world, like Africa. It was their view that this would keep capital relatively scarce in Britain and thereby increase the rate of interest. O'Connor (1971) argued that, the precondition for a truly favourable investment climate is indirect or direct control of internal politics in backward regions. Economic penetration therefore leads to the establishment of spheres of influence, protectorates and annexation. Hobson however said imperialism can be avoided through economic reforms.

### The Devil's Theory

The Devil's Theory of Imperialism is a concept that suggests that imperialism is driven by a desire for power, control, and exploitation, rather than purely economic or political motivations. It is driven by a desire for dominance and control over other nations and peoples. The devil's theory of imperialism identified certain groups that obviously profited from war as the cause of war. Such groups which profit from war included manufacturers of war materials international bankers and distributors of war

materials. They reasoned that since these profited from war, they must be interested in wars in order to enrich themselves. Morgenthau (1993) is of the view that the devil's theory of imperialism operates on a much lower intellectual level than its two companion theories (Marxist and Hobson) It may be said to have been the official philosophy of Nye committee, which in 1934-38 investigated the involvement of the US, in the First World War. This theory was given wide publicity as the explanation of the US foreign policy. The Devil's theory of imperialism challenges traditional views of imperialism as a benevolent or purely economic phenomenon and highlights the significant power imbalances between imperial powers and colonized nations.

### DISCOURSE

#### Motives for European Imperialism

- i. **Economic Motive:** The motive for the coming of the European to Africa was undoubtedly economic exploitation. Trade relationship was established out of their desire to get the luxuries in Africa. When the Americas were discovered they turned their attention again to Africa where they procured slaves to work in their established plantations in North America, the Caribbean and Brazil. After the industrial revolution in Europe, the obnoxious trade in human cargoes was abolished because it was no longer profitable and this gave way free-trade imperialism.

After the middle of the nineteenth century the monopoly enjoyed by Britain in industrial production was broken. North America, Germany, France and Japan joined the industrial powers of the world and started competing with

Britain. Boahen (1977) adds that, the first economic reason was the need for new markets for surplus manufactured goods caused by the spread of industrial revolution from England to France, Russia, Germany and Italy, during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As each country became industrialized, they began to produce far more goods than could be absorbed locally, and therefore began to look for a solution to this over production of goods. This was found in the imposition of high tariff duties and in the acquisition of colonies whose markets they could dominate. This search for lucrative markets led Europe to impose her alien rule on Africa.

Closely related to that is the demand for cheap raw materials which also became competitive. It therefore became imperative for the industrialized countries to control the sources of such valuable raw materials as gold, cotton, ivory, cocoa, rubber, palm products etc which they exchanged with shoddy manufactured products such as textiles, salt, and alcohol. Lord Lugard (1893) expressed British motive for coming to Africa "it is in order to foster the growth of trade of this country (Britain) that our far-seeing statesmen and our commercial men advocate colonial expansion". The European by flooding the continent with those manufactured goods discouraged domestic production and this was the foundation of Africa's underdevelopment.

Another economic reason for this mad rush for the acquisition of colonies and imposition of foreign rule was to look for avenues to invest their surplus capital. Much capital

was accumulated in Europe as a result of the profit made during the age of industrial revolution. As the accumulated capital grew there was the need to look for new areas outside Europe where this surplus capital could be invested. Jules Ferry the Prime Minister of France from 1880 to 1883 once noted that, colonies are for rich countries one of the most lucrative methods of investing capital-- I say that France which is glutted with capital and much has exported considerable quantities has an interest in looking at this side of the question --- it is the same question as that of outlets for their manufacturers. Offiong (1980) supported this view by stating that the rate of return earned by capital is relatively high in economically underdeveloped areas, the composition of capital is lower, labor is plentiful and therefore inexpensive and colonial imperialists created the conditions for monopolistic privileges. The goal of exporting large amounts of capital to underdeveloped regions is to enable the exploitation of their mineral wealth, which is desperately needed by metropolitan countries. This will help the imperialist countries to make more profits from their investment.

- ii. **Political Motives:** Another reason for European imperialism of Africa was the political pressure in Europe especially after 1870. Before that period the balance of power in Europe was maintained by Britain and France who owned the best navy and army respectively. The unification of Italy and Germany in 1860s and 1870s tilted the balance of power in Europe. Germany rivaled Britain on the sea by

building fleets and war ships as well as manufacturing war weapons. She also rivaled France on land (Fadeiye, 2004). This balance of power was disrupted in 1870 when Bismarck the Chancellor of Germany incorporated many territories including Alsace Lorraine which was a French territory. This territory was highly valued by France it had deposits of iron and coal. The defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the loss of Alsace Lorraine altered the balance of power in Europe. After her humiliation, France turned her attention overseas to demonstrate that she was still a great power. As one of her scholars, Paul Leory Beaulieu proclaimed in 1882, colonization is for France a question of life and death, either France will become a great African power or in a century or two she will be no more than a secondary European power (Boahen, 1977).

It is important to point out that France came to Africa not only to look for colonies but to look for people she could use to build up her military strength. As colonies became associated with the balance of power, many European powers rushed to Africa to possess colonies. Italy and Belgium on their own part came for prestige. They had neither surplus capital nor manufacturers to export. They joined the scramble because other European nations were involved in the scramble. Germany also came because Germans needed a place in the sun in Africa.

- iii. **Social Motives:** The social conditions in Europe after the industrial revolution also contributed to European imperialism in Africa. This

development did not only produce surplus capital that needed markets elsewhere but as more machines came into use more people were thrown out of jobs. As a result in the 1870s over a million people were jobless in Europe. The European nations therefore came to Africa to acquire colonies where their unemployed citizens could be settled and employed.

There was also the evolution theory of Charles Darwin which gave the European the notion that higher forms of life developed from lower forms of life. This claim was popularized by Herbert Spencer who drew a hierarchy putting whites at the top while non-whites were at the base and hence inferior. Crowder (1976) observed that additions of national glory and humanitarianism to commercial reasons for colonial acquisitions, along with theories of white supremacy and the explorers' and missionaries' accounts of the pre-existing conditions in Africa, bolstered support for the occupation of Africa and its submission to European rule. According to Jules Ferry, the French Chamber was informed that it is necessary to publicly state that the superior races actually possess a right in relation to the lower races. This assertion by Crowder clearly summarizes the motive behind European imperialism in Africa.

A further justification for imperialism was Augustus's *The White Man's Burden* (2022). At least in the past, many individuals in developed Western cultures felt that it was the moral duty of their state to provide "backward" peoples with the advantages of their own religion and

civilization. They believed that it was the responsibility of the white man to help his less fortunate brethren, who were often in the black man's Africa or the yellow man's Asia. The innumerable missionaries, soldiers, and administrators who faced the dangers of the unfamiliar and unknown environment attest to the fact that many of these individuals were completely honest.

### Effects of European Imperialism in Africa

**i. Economic Effects:** The main goal of European imperialism on Africa was to tap the economic resources of Africa for the benefit of Europe. For maximum exploitation to be effected, the European exercised minimal control over the conquered people. Unfortunately, European writers like Lugard are of the view that the main goal of European imperialism was humanitarian to civilize Africa. While it is true that the imperialists built roads, rail lines and harbours, this was done not because they actually wanted to develop Africa; but because the existing transport systems in Africa such as human portorage, canoe, and beasts could not meet the challenges of transporting the raw materials from the hinterland to the coast, for onward transmission to Europe. The colonial economy was characterized by disarticulation or incoherence, according to Augustus (2022). In the field of transportation, it seems that the collection of export commodities dictated the construction of railways: the Chemin de Fer de Bas-Congo au Katanga in what is now Zaire was built to connect the mineral-rich Katanga to the sea; the Congo-Ocean Railway was built

specifically to facilitate the transportation of manganese ore from Gabon as well as forest products; the Kano-Apapa railway line was built in Nigeria to facilitate the collection of cotton, groundnuts, and cocoa for export; and the Enugu-Port Harcourt line was constructed to serve the oil-palm trade.

Even the schools they built were to facilitate the training of clerks to work in their business firms. Alade (2004) stated that the strategy of creating these physical infrastructure facilities served one important function. Their principal aim was to increase imperialist commerce and the transfer of economic surplus from the colonies to the metropole. It actually constituted the physical and social arteries for pumping the life-blood of these colonies to Europe and North America. European imperialism did not encourage industrialization in Africa since they reasoned that it would endanger the interest of the industries in their home land. They encouraged agriculture and mining because it provided raw materials for their home industries. The introduction of Christianity by the imperialist to some extent destroyed the African Traditional Religion and Art. The worst part of it all was that some of Africa's art works which constituted her cultural heritage were looted from Benin and Ife-and taken to museums in Europe.

**ii. Political Effects:** Imperialism made African traditional rulers to lose the sovereignty they enjoyed for centuries and some of them were either dethroned or sent on exile. This was the case during the Benin massacre of 1897. The Oba Ovonranwen of Benin

was not only dethroned, but was also sent on exile to Calabar. Imperialism equally disintegrated and destroyed empires in West Africa. The African people's socioeconomic and political life also saw the rise and institutionalization of classes and class conflict as a result.

Again Imperialism led to the emergence of the present nation states of Africa. The imposition of arbitrary boundaries without consideration for the history and language of the people is a major cause of conflicts in Africa. It led to the imposition of foreign systems: European political systems, laws, and institutions were imposed, replacing traditional African systems.

- iii. **Social Effects:** Imperialism led to the displacement and migration of many Africans who were forced to migrate or were displaced from their lands. It also led to the suppression, destruction and in some cases the erasure of African identity which included histories, traditional African cultures, languages, customs, and traditional African knowledge systems such as medicine and agriculture, and introduction of new social hierarchies. Europeans introduced new social hierarchies, with themselves at the top and Africans at the bottom. European values, such as Christianity and Western education, were imposed on African societies. It is true that the European introduced Western education to Africa, but when critically examined however, it will be discovered that colonial education according to (Atakpa et al., 2012) was not rooted in African culture and therefore could not foster any meaningful development within the

African environment because it had no organic linkage. Again, the colonial education as introduced was essentially literary; it had no technological base and therefore sharply contrasted industrial development. Rodney (Rodney & Reipurth, 2008) helped with this after noticing that colonialists benefited from schooling in the colonial society. They formed slaves under their colonial slave system by using the education they brought in. Thus, the purported advantages of colonialism are known as the colonization's unexpected benefits.

It is however not totally correct to say that imperialism did not leave any good legacy for the African people. Imperialism facilitated the growth of urbanization in Africa. Many cities grew up along the coast of Africa some of the cities included Lagos, Ibadan, Dakar, Kaduna, Lome and many others. It led to the growth of formal education which later enabled Africans to fight for their independence. It brought a new system of administration in place of the monarchical system of administration. It also led to the introduction of modern health centres: hospital and health centres were built for the treatment of various diseases such as malaria fever, cholera, small-pox and many others. Imperialism also brought about improved transport and communication.

## CONCLUSION

We have attempted in this paper to examine the meaning, theories, motives and effect of imperialism on Africa. Our discussion revealed that imperialism is a reversal of the status quo. Various theories of imperialism have been propounded by



scholars. The study identified economic exploitation as the major reason behind European imperialism in Africa and noted that the industrial revolution in Europe triggered the mad rush by the European powers to acquire land in Africa. The paper submits that imperialism did a lot of havoc to the social, economic and political life of the African peoples. It is also responsible for the slow pace of industrialization in Africa. It's essential to acknowledge the historical injustices and ongoing impacts of imperialism on Africa. This study has revealed that the ongoing economic underdevelopment, Political instability and conflicts, cultural identity crises and continued dependence on foreign powers are traceable to European imperialism in Africa. The paper concludes that though infrastructural facilities were provided during the period, they were provided to facilitate the economic exploitation of the resources of Africa.

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