Colonial Legacy and Its Impact: Analysing Political Instability and Economic Underdevelopment in Post-colonial Africa

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Abstract. This study examines the enduring effects of colonial legacy on the nation-building and development path of post-colonial African countries. It investigates how various forms of colonial rule have shaped African institutional frameworks and led to a persistence of colonial institutional structures and normative governance theories across time. The remnants of colonialism are frequently implicated in Africa’s enduring political instability and economic underdevelopment. By tracing the impact of colonial legacy, this study illuminates the challenges faced by African states in their process of decolonization and modernization. It delves into the autocratic characteristics of African bureaucrat system bequeathed by colonial powers, the ethnic division exacerbated by the “divide-and-rule” tactic, and the excessive authority of local chiefs bolstered by the in-direct rule. This paper also confronts the Afro-pessimism perspective, which posits skepticism towards Africa’s self-driven recovery, by examining the less-discussed effects of colonialism on African institutional and economic frameworks. Employing a historical and analytical approach, the paper presents the political and economic hurdles faced by African countries and analyses the role of colonial legacy in these challenges. The findings highlight the necessity for African states to transcend these colonial constraints to pave its way for genuine political stability and economic prosperity.

1 Introduction

African post-colonial states in most cases attempted to create entirely novel governance systems during their nation-building process. Although commonly referred to as “new states”, these countries were essentially heirs to the colonial regime, adopting its structures, daily routines and customs, as well as its underlying normative governance theories. These kinds of colonial legacy are often held responsible for a multitude of issues in Africa, including persistent political instability and economic underdevelopment. Therefore, analysing the impact of colonial legacy on African political and economic construction can shed light on the durability and effectiveness of the power dynamics established and promoted by the colonial projects and their ongoing presence in Africa and help resolve the problems faced by Africa in its process of decolonization and modernization and reflect on the history of colonialism and its impact on post-colonial trajectories of peace and development. Young argued that the colonial state’s domination over the local population created a strong and centralized bureaucratic autocracy, which contributed to the subliminal code of African post-colonial states [1]. The autocratic spirit affected the inner ethos of the post-colonial states as they aspired to exercise a symbolic hegemony over indigenous societies demonstrated by its assertion of exclusive authority of legitimate vision of politics. Robinson proposed that the “divide-and-rule” colonial strategy fostered rivalries among ethnic groups, which undermined the construction of shared national identity [2]. Moreover, colonial powers delineated the territorial boundaries of African states without considering the pre-existing patterns of ethnic identity, so African states were in a context where national unity was hard to achieve. Mamdani found that the colonial state also aggravated the authority of chiefs and local custom [3]. This was often neglected by those African post-colonial states because they regarded tribalism and authoritarian chiefs as purely indigenous natures of Africa instead of forms of colonial legacy. A point of view arose after the end of the Cold War called Afro-pessimism, expressing significant doubt on Africa’s capacity to revitalize itself. Regardless of whether this was perceived as an issue of incomplete conquest or imprudent adherence to traditional authorities, both perspectives of Afro-pessimism ultimately arrived at the same conclusion: the reestablishment of colonial rule over Africa is of great importance. Proponents of this view argued that colonialism brought capital and investment to the continent, resulting in the construction of infrastructure that ultimately proved beneficial to African people’s well-being. Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to the distorting effect of colonialism on African institutional and economic construction. This paper aims to analyze the detrimental imprint left by colonialism on African nation-building, evaluate the novel logic that got intertwined with those ingrained in state practice as the heritage of colonialism, and discuss how African countries can get rid of the constraint of colonial legacy.
and achieve political stability and economic prosperity. This paper first presents the political and economic challenges that African post-colonial states were faced with in nation-building process and then analyses how colonial legacy gave rise to those challenges from three aspects, namely, a strong and centralized bureaucratic autocracy, ethnic division and local authoritarianism.

2 Methodology

This paper draws on selected studies on this topic, analyzing and integrating their findings, to synthesize key insights into the impact of colonial legacy, with a particular focus on how colonial legacy hindered African states from achieving political stability and sustainable economic development. This paper is intended as a systematic review on this topic, and relevant studies are included according to the following indicators: (1) colonial legacy and African nation-building related, (2) English language, (3) original research articles that have undergone peer review, and (4) full text available. During the article selection process, the initial steps involve screening the titles and abstracts, with the purpose of excluding articles that are not relevant. Then, the full texts of the remaining studies are evaluated for eligibility. This paper carries out both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The process of quantitative analysis consists of four steps: selecting the appropriate tool, categorizing keywords and acquiring data, doing quantitative bibliometric analysis and keyword clustering, and evaluating the materials. By employing this approach, the definition of keywords can accurately introduce the scope of the research, ensuring a comprehensive collection of pertinent studies. This approach also builds a flexible structure, allowing for revisions to the research scope by adjusting the selection of keywords. Based on the quantitative analysis, the qualitative analysis explains the causes behind African difficult national construction, evaluates the role of colonial legacy in it, and proves a statement that colonial legacy critically affected African political stability and economic development, by collecting literature and evidence. The research methods used were mainly qualitative combined with some quantitative methods, so this review paper didn’t include massive data sets. This paper recognizes the methodological limitations of many of the studies it will be discussing. It acknowledges that the quantitative associations that they may present can be taken as indicative rather than definitive evidence of cause-and-effect linkages. Taking into account these limitations, this paper proposes to integrate common sense and judgement with extensive understanding of the research framework to conduct a thorough examination of some of the existing literature on the imprint left by colonialism on African nation-building.

3 Result

3.1 The political and economic challenges

3.1.1 Political instability

Since the advent of the 21st century and the return to democracy in most African states, issues relating to political instability have been dominating African discourse system as regards to the construction of the continent. African states are confronted with diverse security challenges including politically instigated conflicts, election violence, separatist movements, insurgency, militancy, armed banditry, cross-border crimes and many other security challenges that are threatening the peace and security of African states [4]. Although those challenges are confined to one state internally, they tend to escalate and spread to other neighboring states, ultimately constituting a severe threat to the effective functioning of many African states and by extension the continent of Africa.

Africa’s leadership problem is a necessary condition for political instability. After the end of the colonial period, African post-colonial regimes aimed to achieve national cohesion by consolidating political and economic authority, utilizing remnants of colonial laws and institutions to inhibit pluralism. Therefore, the emerging African leadership transitioned into neocolonialists and the former liberators turned into oppressors of their own people [4]. Since the 21st century, participatory democracy has taken root and pluralism has emerged to replace single party dictatorship. However, the pace is slow and suffering setbacks. The leadership dilemma and other related governance issues kept shaping the internal dynamics in Africa.

3.1.2 Economic underdevelopment

Africa, despite its abundant and seemingly limitless resources, significantly lags the other continents at the economic development level [5]. Africa’s history of economy went through multiple phases, first with primitive hunter-gatherer societies in the Stone Age, advancing to the Iron Age and the establishment of agricultural practices, and culminating in settled communities with expanding and diverse economies, larger and more complex governmental entities, and flourishing trade activities. It was the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonial expansion that marked the beginning of Africa’s falling fortune.

Colonial legacy is often blamed for Africa’s chronic economic underdevelopment. Apologists of colonialism argue that colonialism laid the foundation for Africa’s economic advancement by introducing Africa into the global economic system. Their proposition suggests that Africa’s prospects for civilization and modernization were only realized through the imposition of colonialism without which Africa would remain a primitive and barbaric society. Nevertheless, in their arguments, the substance of exploitation behind colonialism is neglected.
Non-Africans imposed colonialism on Africa with the intention of maximizing their own gains from African resources. To achieve this purpose, a series of economic, social, and political measures were implemented, such as the construction of infrastructure, introduction of tax system, and integration of Africa into the global economic framework [6]. The abrupt exposure of people in an agricultural society who were growing at a rate that matched their surroundings to a network of competitive European machinery, was not what they needed, but what was needed by colonial powers. The amalgamation of different African groups, serving colonialism’s need of commodity markets and raw materials, is the source of contemporary underdevelopment of Africa. Therefore, the economic legacy of colonialism constituted an essential cog in the wheel of Africa’s backward economy.

3.2 The legacy of the colonial state and how it affected African national construction

3.2.1 A strong and centralized bureaucratic autocracy

Newly independent states in Africa kept colonial states’ practices due to security preoccupations. Since World War I, the cage of colonial subjugation had separated Africa from those predators in the global arena [1]. However, in the context of the Cold War, many small and medium-sized countries in Africa became the pawns of cold war superpowers on their global chessboard. Thus, the newly won independence of African states encountered a great risk of being undermined by both previous colonial powers and broader imperialist forces. Meanwhile, as ideological divisions over conceptions of Pan-Africanism emerged within the African community of states, development philosophies, bastions of colonial resistance and racial supremacy were diminishing [1], undermining African internal stability. Therefore, security needs were combined with the hegemonic instinct of the new ruling elite. The enduring governance tradition of a strong and centralized bureaucratic autocracy that characterized colonial empires remerged. The new ruling elite rejected possibility of a loyal political opposition, so anyone who opposed the current government would be repressed by violence, which was like colonial powers’ measures of dominating local people. Those newly independent states, dedicated to the task of modernizing the nation and civilizing the society, exaggerated the idea of rebellion and threats to national security and strengthened punishment of the dissident with the judicial formalism characteristic of authoritarian colonial regimes [1]. In addition to this, an approach to national development favouring central planning and control was adopted. The size of bureaucracies grew rapidly, and the cost of those major public was increasingly heavy [1]. The colonial legacy of a strong and centralized bureaucratic autocracy combined with the adoption of a new development path inspired by socialism, made it difficult for African post-colonial states to develop economically and politically.

3.2.2 Ethnic division

The “divide-and-rule” colonial strategy fostered ethnic rivalry, which undermined inter-ethnic integration within Africa. The main objective of this policy was to hinder collaboration between different ethnic groups, which may have resulted in a more cohesive and formidable opposition to the colonial government [7]. For instance, Britain used the Nubians to control Akoholi from the early 1870s in what present-day Uganda is, illustrating that the colonial state exploited rivalries among ethnic groups to undermine and control the local population. The colonial strategy also promoted segregation of African people along tribal lines, further aggravating the geographic separation between different ethnic groups. Ethnic division gave rise to weak nationalism which was the cause of a wide range of problems in Africa. The result of such ethnic rivalry and division was that the citizens of most African states lacked a common native language, shared historical recollections and similar cultural customs, which are all the cornerstones of a cohesive national identity. In contrast to the optimistic view held by post-colonial thinkers regarding the positive impact of modernization, second-generation modernization theorists pointed out that urbanization and the modern economy resulted in the convergence of individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. However, instead of fostering inter-ethnic cooperation and assimilation among these groups, the situation gave rise to intense competition for the achievements of political and economic modernization [2]. Hence, the impact of the colonial strategy didn’t disappear over time and could even be intensified by modernization. Existing research has shown that ex-British colonies have a higher susceptibility to inter-communal violence compared to former colonies of other European colonial powers, which shows that the “divide-and-rule” strategy was detrimental to the peace and stability of Africa [8]. Therefore, the ethnically diverse polities inherited from colonial predecessors lacked a common territorially defined national consciousness, generating many internal conflicts in Africa.

3.2.3 Local authorization

The purpose of colonial powers was not only direct domination through acts of violence, but also indirect rule by harnessing local custom to a larger colonial project. Indirect rule was designed to align compliant sections of Africa’s traditional leadership with the colonial administration in order to expand its social support [3]. This necessitated the presence of indigenous leaders who could serve as a layer of native administrators, shielding colonial rulers from the intricacies of local politics [9]. Therefore, chiefs delegated by the colonial state ruled the rural population. The authoritarian exercise in tribal politics was retained in new national politics. Post-colonial Africa witnessed a range of authoritarian regimes, including the totalitarian rule of Idi Amin Dada in Uganda and the one-party states in Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Malawi [10]. Colonialism emboldened Africa’s “Big Men”, who
were often chiefs or political leaders appointed by colonial officials and bestowed with prestigious titles like “Paramount Chief” or “King”, without any oversight or accountability and sometimes even lacking domestic legitimacy. By independence, those “Big Men” exerted influence over the newly established governments that emerged from colonialism by resorting to force and eroding democratic principles as a means to compensate for their lack of legitimacy. Furthermore, this colonial legacy encouraged the manipulation of elections and other forms of electoral misconduct, destroying the legitimacy of electoral competition. Therefore, local authorization created by colonialism contaminated African national politics, which also created adverse conditions for African economic development.

4 Discussion

4.1. Promoting democracy

Decentralization of power is essential to democratization. With a disposition to violence, the bureaucratic autocracy inherited from the colonial state is far from the only factor of political system and process during the period of independence. New dimensions manifested in the appearance of power; innovative techniques quickly became essential to ensure its continuation and the preservation of those in control [1].

The other crucial aspect of democratization is the detribalization of native authority in the local state, which serves as the initial step in restructuring the divided power structure that was established during the colonial era. The absence of citizen’s freedom to pick their representatives according to their own preferences, caused by the native authority, compromises the promised benefits of democracy in terms of fairness, human rights and gender equality. Therefore, without the detribalization of native authority there would be no thoroughgoing democratization and the absence of complete democracy would hinder the growth of a domestic market. The objective of democracy cannot be limited to a mere restructuring of civil society. It must also involve the demolition of the governance system that was structured around consolidated authority and bureaucratic justice, all of which are justified as the established norm [3]. This requires a clear awareness that tribalism and authoritarian chiefs are forms of colonial legacy intentionally imposed by the colonial state, instead of indigenous African natures.

4.2. Building ethnic identification

Due to its extensive size, ancient human civilization, diverse nature, and geographic orientation from North to South, the African continent was already one of the most culturally diverse regions in the world. However, colonial powers further intensified the already significant diversity by disregarding the existing patterns of political and social organization while dividing the continent [2]. Thus, a continent that was originally characterized by diversity was subsequently split into states that were similarly diverse. The colonial partition not only resulted in the creation of culturally distinct states, but also divided many cultural groups throughout multiple colonies and later multiple states, causing the fragmentation of various ethnic groups [2].

However, there is one effect of colonialism that is believed to have resulted in increased levels of national identification in the anti-colonial battles of African states. These anti-colonial campaigns facilitated the unity of people from diverse cultural groups by rallying them together against a shared enemy using a national discourse [2]. This was particularly evident in cases of the anti-colonial movements, as the act of engaging in battle is thought to enhance the sense of national identity tied to the state. Therefore, the spirit of resistance to colonial rule together can be propagated, serving as the spiritual bond between African people to foster ethnic unity.

4.3. Realizing self-sustained development

With the emergence of independence, the African colonial experience was re-evaluated in light of domestic conflicts [3]. Proponents of Afro-pessimism argued that the problem of Africa was not colonialism, but rather a lack of full penetration of traditional society by a failing colonial state, or acquiescence to it by cautious yet narrow-minded colonizers, so they had no confidence in African self-rejuvenation.

However, Afro-pessimism ignored the devastating mode of colonial penetration into Africa and was unable to see the hope for Africa to get rid of the colonial effects. African leaders can modify the existing colonial structures by implementing proactive developmental strategies that are based on the specific needs of their indigenous population and driven by the goal of achieving sustainable development in Africa [6]. By effectively exploiting the plentiful human and material resources in Africa, they can achieve regional development at first and gradually enhance Africa’s self-reliance ability, eventually lessening its dependence on the West. African leaders can also increase technological output to decrease the current disparity in the trade deficit [6]. Actions to pursue self-sustained development are of great importance to African post-colonial national construction.

5 Conclusion

This paper analyses the political and economic challenges that African post-colonial states faced in their national-building process and then discusses the role of colonial legacy in these problems. The findings show that colonialism deeply influenced African institutional and economic frameworks from three main aspects: inherited bureaucratic autocracy that characterized colonial hegemony, ethnic division caused by the “divide-and-rule” colonial strategy, and local authoritarianism produced by colonial in-direct rule. African states need to break away from these colonial
shackles to achieve political stability and economic prosperity. Firstly, promoting democracy through decentralization of power and detribalization of native authority is of great importance. Secondly, post-colonial Africa needs to reinforce ethnic identification through strengthening the common historical memory and spiritual bond between African people. Thirdly, self-sustained development pathways are called for, so as to realize Africa’s economic independence and sustainable development. This study investigates the impact of colonial legacy and argues that colonial legacy is not assets but hindrances to Africa’s national development. It provides some arguments against the view of Afro-pessimism and emphasizes the necessity of clearing the remaining colonial obstacles hindering African political and economic construction. Moving forward, the development road for African post-colonial states appears to be paved with both challenges and opportunities. It is imperative that these states confront the vestiges of colonialism by forging new political paradigms that embrace democratic principles, power decentralization, and the dismantling of tribalized governance systems. The endeavour to cultivate a unified ethnic identity through the rekindling of shared historical and cultural narratives holds the potential to bridge divisions and foster communal resilience. Moreover, economic strategies must pivot towards self-sustained models that prioritize Africa’s unique socioeconomic contexts, enabling a departure from dependency and a progression towards long-term sustainability and autonomy. In the quest to overcome the hindrances imposed by historical colonialism, African nations can redefine their future, eschewing Afro-pessimism and embracing a vision of self-growth and self-determination. By systematically dismantling the colonial legacies that impede progress, Africa can reshape its institutions and economy to fulfill the desires and ambitions of its people. Only through such transformative process can Africa actualize its potential and embark on a trajectory of all-round development and prosperity.

References

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