

# In defense of the internalists' conception of Africa's under-development

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## ABSTRACT

Many people have contributed to the debate on the causes of, and solutions to, Africa's underdevelopment. The various contributors to the debate have been so divided into intellectual camps of the externalists and the internalists. The externalists' camp comprises of those that argue for Africa's underdevelopment by tracing the causes and solutions to external factors; on the other hand, the internalists camp is the umbrella body of those that link Africa's problem to internal factors. In this paper, we argue that the problem of Africa's underdevelopment is traceable more to the internal factors, than the external factors. Consequently, this work seeks to exhume evidences from the pre-colonial and contemporary Africa to support and illustrate our claim.

**Keywords:** Africa; underdevelopment; internalists; externalists and causes

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The dictum "No man is an Island" conveniently establishes the foundation, both in theory and practice, for any discourse relating to the issue of development, and its' underdevelopment counterpart. Hence, it is on comparative basis that one can talk of either development or underdevelopment of societies, this is why it is posited that "underdevelopment is not absence of development... , rather, it makes sense only as a means of comparing levels of development" (Rodney, 2009: 15). Thus, the attempt at comparing Africa as a continent with other continents of the world always justifies the posture of Africa as an underdeveloped continent. In this way, the logic and sense in that posture becomes unquestionable. The question of Africa's underdevelopment is not a mirage but a reality. In fact, it is an existential reality confronting resident humanity in the continent. It is real and not a myth that "the countries of Africa... are underdeveloped today (and) their rate of economic growth has been far lower than that in the Western world" (Seligson, 1993: 52).

This problem (Africa's underdevelopment), whose effects continue to reflect in the day to day quality of life of Africans, has generated responses or reactions intellectually and pragmatically in terms of government policies and practices among Africans and non-Africans within and outside the continent. In fact, these reactions and responses have become so controversial that they have degenerated into a debate. This debate takes the centre-stage of scholarship on Africa.

Today, in an attempt to investigate the causes, as well as solutions, to this problem, the debate has polarized contributors and their contributions to this issue into separate and opposing camps or schools of thought. These schools employ arguments to find a workable theoretical foundation in order to grasp the causes of the problem for the purpose of finding a lasting and genuine solution to it.

For clarity, the camp of the externalists accommodates those contributors and contributions to the debate that Africa's problem of underdevelopment "are generally caused by external factors, particularly the European slave trade and colonization of Africa" (Falaiye, 2005: 42-45). On the other hand, the internalists school of thought to the debate argues that the problem of underdevelopment in Africa is not due to external factors as argued by the externalists, rather "the causes of Africa's numerous problems are internal" (Falaiye, 2005: 42), particularly "misguided leadership, mis-governance, systemic corruption, military vandalism" (Ayittey, 2005) and so on. Concisely, therefore, while the externalists' camp traces Africa's underdevelopment problem to external factors, the internalists' school of thought rejects the external factors as the causes of Africa's problem, and therefore traces the causes to internal factors.

Following from the above, the prime task of this paper is to critique the externalists' point of view to the subject-matter of the debate. This paper turns a searchlight on the externalists' suppositions and arguments on how the problem of Africa's underdevelopment was caused by external factors. Subsequently, this paper shall do a critique of the externalists' conception of the problem by contesting the externalists' thesis. Clearly by this, we hope to defend, with modification, the internalists' thesis that Africa's problem of underdevelopment is as a result of internal factors, and therefore its resolution lies within.

Therefore, the nature of the task of this paper as well as the title is very suggestive and instructive in organizing and ordering the paper; hence, this paper is structured into two sections (excluding the introduction and conclusion). This is done for two reasons. First, it is an attempt to appropriate and expose the claims as well as the conjectures of the externalists concerning Africa's underdevelopment in order to have a clear understanding of their arguments for the causes of, and possible solutions to, Africa's problem. Secondly, it is done to bring to light the flaws, shortcomings, and insufficiencies to be encountered in the arguments of the externalists in the light of historical and contemporary evidences in Africa.

On this note, Section II is entitled "Externalists' Conception of Africa's Underdevelopment", and is devoted to considering suppositions, views, and arguments of the contributors and contributions of scholars that can properly be labeled externalists; Section III is simply entitled "Critique of Externalists' Conception", and is dedicated to the articulation of the insufficiencies in the claims of the externalists on the issue of Africa's problem of underdevelopment.

## **2. EXTERNALISTS' CONCEPTION OF AFRICA'S UNDERDEVELOPMENT**

Externalists, by consensus, adduced external factors as the causes of Africa's underdevelopment problem; the external causes of Africa's past and contemporary problem, according to them, include the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and imperialism, policies and practices of international socio-economic and socio-political institutions and so on. In other words, "the externalist believe that Africa's woes are due to external factors such as the lingering effects of...slave trade, racist conspiracy plots, exploitation by avaricious multinational corporations, an unjust international economic system, inadequate flows of

foreign aid, the neo-liberal policies of the World Bank, IMF, and deteriorating terms of trade” (Ayittey, 2005: 1).

Therefore, the externalists argue that the solution(s) to this problem of Africa can only be externally sought through external wealth in the form of direct foreign investment, reparation, foreign technology and so on, that is, the externalists seek the solutions to Africa’s underdevelopment problem through Western aid, debt cancellation, infusion of Western technology, reparation, and foreign investment. From the foregoing, it becomes very obvious that the problem of Africa’s underdevelopment, for the externalists, “is generally caused by external factor” (Falaiye, 2005: 42).

On this note, the externalists consider the internal factors (such as corruption, mismanagement, treasury looting, incompetent leadership and so on) as no causes of the problem. From this stand point, it is suggestive that the externalists conceived of Africa’s problem as having little or nothing to do with internal factors, but more to do with external factors, most importantly, the phenomena of slave trade, colonialism, imperialism, unjust international system among others are mostly postulated as the real foundation of Africa’s problem by the externalists.

Slave trade and colonialism (and by extension imperialism and capitalism), the externalists argue, constitute the greatest rape to Africa’s development trend such that stagnancy and derailment set into Africa’s development pace leading to adverse underdevelopment of the continent. Disciples of this view include the prominent and celebrated scholar of Africa descent Walter Rodney. Rodney notes that Africa’s underdevelopment project is due to European intrusion into the continent. In his celebrated work, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, Rodney posits that the slave traders who came to Africa started the process of underdevelopment because they stagnated the economic growth by taking away the productive class from African society, thereby laying the foundation for imperialist domination of the continent (Rodney, 2009: 108-117).

In short, Rodney’s conception can be summarized thus: Africa was developed prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, albeit in a different direction from Europe’s conception of development and that the European slave trade is at the root of black underdevelopment and technical stagnation (Rodney, 2009: 116). From this standpoint, Rodney’s supposition suggests that as a result of trade in persons carried out in Africa by Europeans, Africa was denied of both skilled and unskilled human resources required to sustain its pace of development as well as its very development; thus, development in Africa became dilapidated, retrogressive, retarded, and stagnated.

Furthermore, Rodney links Africa’s underdevelopment to the phenomenon of colonialism. In his hypothesis, he posited that Africans contributed significantly to European capitalism during the colonial period, and that the Black underdevelopment is as a result of Western Colonialism (Rodney, 2009: 279-284). Explicitly, he argues that Europe underdeveloped Africa in two major ways: the first is the operation of the imperialist system which drained Africa’s wealth and made it impossible for Africa to rapidly develop resources; the second deals with those who manipulate the system (Falaiye, 2005: 45).

Sharing this view in line with Rodney, that slave trade and colonialism are responsible for Africa’s underdevelopment, is Femi Mimiko. He supports the view that slave trade and colonialism, imperialism and capitalism are at the roots of Africa’s underdevelopment. He posited that

...specifically identified as having the most profound negative impact on the African socio-political landscape... are the phenomena of slave trade and colonialism since they served to truncate the developmental process of the African peoples, and by so doing constructed a solid foundation for their

present state of underdevelopment characterized by disease, ignorance, poverty, industrial stagnation, and acute political instability (Mimiko, 1999: 266).

He further states that Africa's

...state of underdevelopment is neither traditional nor natural, that growth and development being endemic to all human societies were not totally unknown in Africa before its contact with Europe. However, slave trade and colonialism combined to re-order and change this prevailing situation and distorted Africa's steady march to progress. Slavery marked the first act of penetration of the African sub-system which subsequently ensured the incorporation of the continent into the expanding world capitalist economy as a satellite, while colonialism marked the most important phase in the incorporation of all colonial people into the global economic system as dominated and controlled by the industrial capitalist states of the West (Mimiko, 1999: 269).

Hence, the externalists' conception of Africa's underdevelopment, as articulated above, show the phenomena of slave trade, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism as the causes of Africa's underdevelopment. In this regard, most Africans and some non-Africans (leaders and scholars) invoke and employ this argument as an excuse for the failure of governance in most African states.

In fact, contemporary scholarship of the externalists' coloration has helped many African leaders to add to the list of the causes of Africa's backwardness which include "exploitation by avaricious multinational corporations, an unjust international economic system..., the neo-liberal policies and practices of the World Bank, IMF, WTO" (Ayittey, 2005: 1) and so on. All these occurred not without their consents and supports for the managers and administrators of these institutions and organizations. For instance according to Mimiko, because colonialism marked the most important phase in incorporating colonized territories into the world system, the colonies were such that they took up positions in the emerging international division of labor as producers of primary product and consumers of foreign industrial manufacturer's product. By so doing, they made the colonies and their economies to become externally-oriented and lacking as it were, independent internal dynamics of their own (Mimiko, 1999: 269). For Mimiko, this explains the unjust global system responsible for Africa's contemporary problem.

From the above conceptions of the causes of underdevelopment in Africa by the externalists, it is very obvious that externalists attribute "the causes of every African problem...external factors" (Ayittey, 2005: 1) as explicated above.

According to the externalists, the solutions to Africa's problem of underdevelopment must be sought through external means, vis-à-vis foreign aid, reparation, foreign investment, and debt cancellation. Specifically, Mimiko argue that "the demands encapsulated in the reparations call are the things that can begin to place Africa on the path of stability and economic revival" (Mimiko, 1999: 279), since funds that will be realize from reparation will "be useful in setting up a black world bank for reconstruction and development" (Mimiko, 1999: 277) in Africa. This reparation, Mimiko further argues, will include "cancellation of Africa's debts" (Mimiko, 1999: 277) and a "wholesale re-appraisal or over-hauling of the structures of the prevailing international economic development in the continent" (Mimiko, 1999: 278) of Africa. Sharing this externalists' conception is Navari. According to this scholar, "a relationship entitling the underdeveloped to special consideration such as a post-imperial relationship may be one worth fostering" (Navari, 1982: 29), because "the encouragement of development in a society where the minimal economic activity that exists is tied into the

economic structure of ex-colonial power may lead to a widening of traditional economic ties” (Navari, 1982: 29).

### 3. A CRITIQUE OF EXTERNALISTS’ CONCEPTION

As discussed above, it is clear that the externalists’ conception of Africa’s underdevelopment which is anchored on external factors of slave trade, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and unjust global political-economy system control by the Western world, as demonstrated above. In this section, we revive and present the stewardship of some pre-colonial African leaders, because it is of relevance to the present subject-matter of discourse, particularly in this section of the paper.

In a piece written by Walter Ofonagoro, we come across precedent cases of the attitudes and styles of leadership of present-day African leaders. In that piece, Ofonagoro recounts how in pre-colonial Ghana “all nuggets found in the kingdom were reserved for the king, whilst only the gold dust was left for the people. Even the king’s dogs wore collar of gold and silver, while his pages carried swords and shields inlaid with gold... the king of Ghana owned a large nugget of gold as large as a stone with the weight of 30lbs, and the king had no better use for it than drilling a hole through it for the purpose of tethering his horse to it” (Ofonagoro, 1984: 20). Obviously, we can note in this submission the leadership incompetence of the king by way of lacking foresight of what to do with the gold (wealth) of the kingdom. Should we then conclude that this attitude of leadership incompetence is externally induced as the externalists will want us to believe? We shall return to this argument later, but let us consider another story of other pre-colonial African leaders.

Also in the same piece, Ofonagoro recapitulates “the story of the splendor of Malinke (present day Mali) wealth, exemplified by Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca between 1320 and 1325, during which he took with him 500 slaves carrying 2,000lbs of gold among them, and a further 80 to 100 camels loaded with gold,... this wealth was given away, and not always to charity, in a fortunate Arab Princely. Finally, the spendthrift monarch had to borrow, and at high interest, the wherewithal to finance his own return and that of his entourage” (Ofonagoro, 1984: 23). Clearly, what this African leader displayed is what the internalists will characterize variously as “capital flight, misguided leadership, misgovernance, economic mismanagement and systemic corruption” (Ayittey, 2005: 3) as it shall subsequently be shown.

Another stewardship account of another leader in another kingdom in pre-colonial Africa in the same piece, Ofonagoro relates to us the story of Askia Muhammed Toure of the great Songhai Empire. According to Ofonagoro, “this ruler received no criticism for his *coup d’état* which ousted Sanni Ali’s legitimate successor. In addition to that he repeated the extravagance of Mansa Musa in Mecca and Cairo, which depleted the treasury of Songhai to the tune of 300,000 gold pieces” (Ofonagoro, 1984: 24). On this last account of Askia Muhammed Toure, we crown the premises we need to rebuff the claim of the externalists as regard the issue of Africa’s underdevelopment. In this last account, we note that the leader displayed two attitudes which are condemnable: the first is what we have described about Mansa Musa above and the second is what the internalists will term flagrant violation of right, not just against the rightful ownership of leadership, but equally against the people.

From the three accounts as presented by Ofonagoro, we can discern that “slave trade, colonialism, imperialism and other kinds of external factors have nothing to do with the naked plunder and wrong choices”(Ayittey, 2005: 24) made by these pre-colonial African leaders. In fact, to make matter clearer, Ofonagoro did not forget to point out how “Ghanaian wealth was

dilapidated in maintaining royal pomp and opulence, and financing wars of expansion and consolidation. Thus, the material conditions of the people of Ghana do not appear to have been significantly improved after seven hundred years of Soninke rule” (Ofonagoro, 1984: 21). Also, the level of material development of the peasant population of Mali was not such that would justify their king’s extravagant international escapade and largesse” (Ofonagoro, 1984: 23).

These are pre-colonial African leaders and societies, that is, these leaders and societies were yet to be colonized, and yet the attitudes of the leaders – particularly towards societal development and people’s welfare – are not different from what are obtainable in the attitudes of contemporary African leaders. Yet, the externalists want us to believe that Africa’s problem of underdevelopment has its causal root in external factors of colonialism, imperialism, unjust global order and other allied external factors.

The question that arises is to ask how the externalists would explain the attitudes of these pre-colonial African leaders which were not different from the attitudes of post-colonial African leaders. This is one question that will continue to beg for answer in the minds of the externalists. However, if these attitudes of the pre-colonial African leaders cannot be explain in any way that reflects inducement by any external causal-factors, then that justifies our claim that “all” Africa’s problem of underdevelopment are internally rooted rather than been externally induced.

Talking about colonialism and reparation as the cause and solution respectively of Africa’s problem, as the externalists want us to believe, Falaiye (1999: 251-261) has shown through a hypothetical court case, between Africa and the West, that slave trade and colonialism seem to be a blessing to Africa because the attitudes of these present African leaders towards the states and development in the continent justified that. In clear terms, the people whom the rulers rule, continue to troop out of the continent (even when they are aware they will be use as cheap labors wherever they are going) as a result of the leaders’ attitudes towards state administration and development, which do not fall short of “Misguided leadership, mis-governance, systemic corruption, capital flight, economic mismanagement, declining investment, collapse infrastructure, decayed institutions, senseless civil wars, political tyranny, flagrant violations of human rights, and military vandalism”( Ayittey, 2005: 3), all of which are internally rooted in the continent. After all Africa was not the only continent that experienced the historical evil invasion of the Europeans that started with the operation of slave trading through colonialism to imperialism. Convincingly, as Ayittey will argue, African leaders would deny any responsibility and blame everybody else except themselves for the mess in Africa (Ayittey, 2005: 2). From our exposition so far, it must be noted that “the colonialism-imperialism card (as held by the externalists and many of the present day African leaders) has been so overplayed that it has lost its relevance and credence” (Ayittey, 2005: 2).

In contemporary time, for instance, western imperialism cannot be blamed for the endemic corruption in many African countries like Nigeria and South Africa; nor can white colonialism be blamed for the pathetic state of affairs in countries like Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Zimbabwe, and so on. A brief focus on one or two of these countries will drive home our argument. In Zimbabwe, how is it logically reasonable to attribute the cause of the political and economic crises of the country on any one or combination of any two (or more or all) of the external factors as argued by the externalists? When in actual fact the crises that enveloped Zimbabwe can only be blamed on the despotic totalitarian leader Robert Mugabe. It is to the knowledge of many that Mugabe had continued to perpetrate himself in power garbed in democratic language since the country’s independence from colonial rule, which is over three decades. Hence, neither colonialism nor imperialism is to be

blamed for the crises in Zimbabwe. Therefore, no one but the Zimbabwean leader Mugabe (and his cohorts who are also Africans) can only be held responsible for the problems in that country.

Another sorry case is that of Senegal, where it is practically impossible to depose the Senegalese leader Wade from power since year twenty hundred, even by winning in a free and fair election. Should we blame this on any of the external factors as enunciated by the externalists as the cause of the political problem in that country? Not forgetting to mention other problems in other countries like the political upheaval in Ivory Coast, the internal wars in Sudan and Somalia orchestrated by leaders in those countries, the long stay in offices (which became home in the long run) of Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and the recently executed Mahmud Gaddafi of Libya.

These problems, as explicated above, are respectively identified as “black neo-colonialism” and “the unwillingness of (African) leaders to relinquish power” (Falaiye, 2012: 22-23). Without any difficulty in categorizing them as identified by the scholar, they are neither external or externally related factors but internal ones, this means that black neo-colonialism and unwillingness to relinquish power in Africa are the internally generated maladies that are responsible for Africa’s backwardness.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

There is the need to recap our argument and stress our position very briefly again. It is shown explicitly that negative attitudes toward governance by leaders in Africa cannot be explained in terms of any external factors; hence, it is practically untenable today to argue that external factors of colonialism, imperialism, and the rest of them can be employed to explain African leaders’ negative attitudes to state affairs. A possible paradigm of explaining Africa’s predicaments is to point to leadership failure on the part of African leaders, particularly their lackadaisical attitudes to the business of governance. However, it is important to note that we are not denying the negative consequences of the external factors, as noted by the externalists, on the continent of Africa. Rather our contention is that with positive attitudes of leaders in Africa, the continent can attend to the multiplier effects of the external factors enunciated by the externalists. This point is well articulated when Falaiye notes that no one will “argued that contact with the West has not had negative consequences on Africa, as it also did in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and the rest of the world. *However*, while the other parts of the world were busy weaning themselves off the negative legacies of the contact with the West, Africa in the fashion of the externalists, continued to glorify and romanticize the role of the West in the continuing saga of Africa’s backwardness” (Falaiye, 2012: 21-23).

In practical terms, leaders attitudes of corruption, public looting, injustice, intimidation, embezzlement among others add to, and multiply the, already existing negative consequences of the factors identified by the externalists. Therefore, rather than solve or resolve the problems created by colonialism, imperialism, imbalance or unfavourable trades and so on, African leaders have constituted themselves into another greater problem for the continent.

By fiat, African leaders have become another group of colonizers and imperialists; and their victims are their own people whom they purport to save from white colonialism and imperialism.

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