

Why clarity around colonialism is a prerequisite to Africa's rising

I have been part of a never-ending debate amongst Africans on whether it is important to bring clarity around what colonialism was and its contribution to Africa's past and current predicaments. I am of the view that this clarity is central to any meaningful progress that Africa can make. However, critics that oppose this view have advanced the idea that one should not dwell on a historical fact that is not peculiar to African countries. They are wrong. Here's why.

The critics have four main arguments, all of which are flawed. First, they argue that colonialism should not be an excuse for the persistent governance issues, the violence that Africans inflict on their fellow compatriots, and the rampant corruption which they identify as one of the main factors of the endemic poverty on the continent. In their view, the debate on colonialism prevents Africans from taking responsibility for their own failures. However, this binary, Manichean, view of the world has no logical basis. For one thing, Africans can bring the necessary clarity around colonialism while, at once, taking responsibility for their own failures; the two are not mutually exclusive and consideration of one does not preclude that of the other.

One is reminded of the 1950s when colonialists were reluctant to expose Africans to university education because the underdeveloped African mind, they argued, didn't have the capacity to command complex issues such as those taught at university.

Unless one subscribes to that logic, then he or she ought to know that a healthy mind is not unidimensional. Its training

is intended to grasp the interaction of a multiplicity of factors at once. In fact, some of the most pressing challenges facing Africa today can only be grasped in their complexity; that is, if the intention is to provide lasting solutions rather than cosmetic copy paste solutions that have dominated post-colonial Africa.

I now turn to their second argument. In an attempt to diminish the significance and consequences of colonialism, the critics compare the process of state formation in Africa with colonisation as if the two are one and the same. For instance, they confuse Africa's –i.e. Rwabugiri's (Rwanda), Ntare Rugamba's (Burundi), Shaka Zulu's (Zulu Kingdom) or Kabalega's (Bunyoro) – expansionist conquests to European colonisation. Again, this is a failure of nuance that often accompanies binary reasoning. Otherwise, it is advisable to differentiate the processes of intra-African conquests and the colonial project because Africans who expose themselves to commentary on colonisation should be in a position to know this much: Colonialism, unlike intra-African conquests, did not aim to create state expansion in which the conquered peoples would be integrated with the same rights and privileges as those enjoyed by the citizens of the conquering powers. A Ugandan or Nigerian who was colonised by Britain did not become a British citizen. However, a Mushi who found himself under the authority of Umwami enjoyed all rights that came with being a Rwandan. In other words, colonization aimed to plunder local resources in order to enrich European nations or to create European islands from which indigenous peoples would be displaced or exterminated. This difference is adequate to rationally distinguish the process of state formation from colonialism.

Clarity is the weapon of self defence

The third argument that critics make is about preventing the recurrence of colonisation. They argue that clarity around colonialism does not remove the reasons that attracted the

colonialists to Africa to unleash the violence against Africans. For them, Africans should rather build the capacity to prevent the recurrence of colonialism. Once again, the critics aim for the trees and miss the forest. The key difference is that while the critics think about colonialism as something that ended, we are of the view that it has only reformed and made itself more acceptable. While the times have changed and the form (direct occupation) has outlived its acceptability in the community of nations the objective of exploitation remains alive and well. If the critics understood this, they would know that the objective that is pursued by those who want to bring clarity around colonialism and its pervasive effects on African societies is not to suggest that clarity is an end in and of itself, as the critics imagine. On the contrary, clarity is a means to an end. One of the objectives is to create a consciousness among Africans on the factors that entrench Africa's fragmentation into small and weak entities incapable of putting up any meaningful defence in the face of exploitation as well as other forms of soft colonialism. Indeed, without clarity around colonialism, there's no collective consciousness and there's no uniting idea of what Africa is and aims to be.

In other words, consciousness-raising from the clarity around colonialism is not aimed at creating helpless and hapless victims dwelling on their misfortunes. Ironically, it is the critics who refuse to engage on colonialism and its effects that rob the Africans of the memory that they need in order to nurture the consciousness required to confront an ever-exploitative global order. Without the muscle of memory being developed, the Africans have conditioned themselves to botched solutions that only provide temporary reprieve while remaining at the bottom of the global order as a dominated people.

The fourth misplaced argument of the critics points out that other former colonies have moved on from colonialism and Africans should similarly move on. They ask themselves: "What

is preventing African countries from thriving?" What's preventing Africa is the inability to reclaim its memory. If this view weren't myopic it would recognise that the battle to reclaim the minds of our people has a unique purpose: to redefine who we aspire to be; neither replicas of Europeans, nor that of Asians. No society has mimicked its way to greatness. Those we mimic didn't get where they are by mimicking others. Even the formerly colonised societies reached within themselves to reclaim who they were by reconnecting themselves to the memory of their glorious past and where this memory had faded, they reinvented themselves around a value system that complemented that memory. It is certainly not amnesia that allowed them to put an end to exploitation and reclaim control of their economies while building social cohesion for nation building.

Consequently, memory that reinforces commonalities amongst Africans is a prerequisite to the success of nation building. It is necessary for the emergence of a peaceful, prosperous, and liberated Africa that is able to define and deal accordingly with friends, partners, and foes – an Africa that sees exploitation and knows how to respond to it.

Since colonial apologists are still Africans for whom history has intertwined our destinies, I wish to invite them to ask themselves these questions. If Africans still define themselves in the imagination of the colonisers and persist in disintegrating into smaller and smaller units where predators smuggle ammunition to both sides; if important decisions affecting the lives of Africans still require the approval of colonisers; if their financial institutions still dictate how African economies should be managed; if we still depend on the "generosity" of our abusers; then how can we claim to be independent? And if we agree that we are yet to be independent, then how can apologists say that we should shift the debate towards preventing the recurrence of colonisation when we, in fact, live it?

Since colonial apologists don't like history, let me stay close to current news. A fortnight ago Zimbabwe had to compensate its looters; a move which will certainly undermine the demands in South Africa for "expropriation without compensation." How do the racial inequalities in South Africa today inform our view of what Zimbabwe's past prosperity as "bread basket" of Africa looked like? Similarly, if the memory of looters allows them to get compensation, what does that say about the memory of black Zimbabweans from whom the loot was gotten?

These are questions to do with a people's memory and its utility in present circumstances. If the coloniser doesn't wish to unveil the ruins of his past misdeeds while underscoring his role in the "enlightenment" of the savages, and if the African doesn't want to unveil the misdeeds of the coloniser, then it is logical to conclude that the African has conflated his interests with those of the coloniser. In other words, in whose interest is it to diminish or obscure the ruins of colonialism? This is evidence of an occupied mind that is under programmatic command – remote controlled – to act as an echo chamber for the wishes of the occupier in order to render costly physical occupation redundant. Freedom and consciousness, rather than their illusion under telecommand – are there for the taking only if colonial apologists can muster the courage not to sell themselves short for crumbs at the master's table.