

Why prejudice against Africa persists

I once provocatively wrote that Africa has no African story to tell. It was meant as a challenge to the common refrain that **“Africans must tell their own story”** that has become a reflex to counter the overwhelming prejudice and misrepresentation of Africa by Africans and non-Africans alike. My view is not to be mistaken with the suggestion that Africa has no story to tell. It just doesn't have an African story. The difference is subtle but significant. But something has gone terribly wrong if Africa is telling a story – if at all – that's not its own. Which leads to the question, whose story is Africa telling and why? When the mouth of Africa moves, who is speaking?

Modern Africa and its image are a colonial outcome. This image that was projected to the outside world was that of a faraway place inhabited by things that are human-like. The savages. There was a political utility to this imagination: the savages needed to be rescued from themselves. This was the moral calling for Europeans. In other words, every contact between the European and the African placed a moral burden on the former to bring the latter from backwardness to the enlightenment. They carried this burden collectively through education, religion, language and culture; individually, they carried this burden through charity.

An African could not be considered civilized if he or she hadn't gone through this process. This was – and is – the measure of an African. The political imperative of processing the African through the conveyor-belt was for him or her to become the psychological edifice upon which the exploitation of Africa rested, the path of least resistance.

Consequently, the “ideal African” would be one whose metamorphosis has become complete, one who has imbibed within

himself the instinct to advance the political imperative on behalf of Europe. Similarly, the aim of education, religion, language and culture, was – and is – to produce as many of these type of Africans in the service of the extractive imperative, along with the mental psyche that reinforces within them the essentiality of Europe as a reference point for everything they do and aspire to do.

Africans who have been on the conveyor-belt are weaponized against themselves, as a result. This is why without the European reference point to any aspect of their reality, this “ideal African” immediately becomes morally and intellectually demobilized – like fish out of water.

The tragedy of Africa is that while Europe was able to define and craft the ideal African from its perspective, the Africans have not found import in defining what an ideal African who in turn is weaponized with Africa as the reference point of his or her reality.

European moral calling persists

Europe’s moral responsibility over Africans lives on. The tools of yesteryears may have gone refinement to suit the times. Fundamentally, however, the central thesis that Africans can only be enlightened by undergoing the European conveyor-belt and that only Europe can be the reference in the pursuit of progress remains intact.

This impetus to save Africans from themselves, as a matter of individual and collective moral duty, is unspoken about but visible. Similarly, now (as then) the political imperative of exploitation is concealed in increasingly subtle ways.

The conveyor-belt has undergone refurbishing. With education,

religion, language and culture representing conquered territory, another protective layer has been added to fortify the edifice. Significantly, with the mental estate surrendered along the conveyer-belt, the African has struggled to regain control of the physical estate in order to turn the tide on material exploitation.

The recently refurbished European moral calling over African lives resides in good governance, democracy, human rights, and freedom, etc. The efficacy of these tools is that they are worthy pursuit for Africans. However, now (as then), the allure promises substance but delivers form: Much as they are worthy ideals, Africans can never experience good governance, democracy, human rights, and freedom as long as their conception and application retains the European reference point.

The interest to understand Africans as they are – outside of the European moral calling – is not to be found at any level of African organisation. Yet, the integration of Africans into this moral calling is, by design, not compatible with efforts to understand Africans outside of their conception as a problem to be solved by Europe.

It follows that Africa's shortcomings are perennially defined as originating from its inability to format itself to the conveyer-belt of democracy, human rights, and freedom, as understood by its dominant reference point, Europe.

This fundamental defect invites corrective measures from Europe and the cycle where those giving lessons and those doing the learning is a one-way street – the rescue mission – continues into another century. There is no way out – not yet. The formatting of Africans – by Europeans and Africans alike – to become who they are not will always fall short and the shortcomings will be conceived as inherent deficiency that invites perpetual rescue.

Much as the unraveling of the ideals of democracy in Europe is raising questions about Europe as a reference point for human progress, perhaps no one is as devastated about the developments as the African elites to whom the imagination is circumscribed to the only reference point they know. Consequently, an emotionally devastated, depressive and anxiety-ridden African elite is likely to be the only one holding on to the European gaze long after the Europeans themselves have abandoned any pretence to being in possession of conviction about the very ideals they have tried to impose on others for centuries.

Africans can be excellent Africans. Indeed, even the exceptional mimicking of European culture and instinctive reference to Europe, will only confirm what Europeans think of Africans: Africans as a European moral obligation.

Prejudice will persist until Africa plucks itself from the European imagination and gaze.

Africa's upside-down reality

If Europe was deliberate in mounding the ideal African, it behoves Africans to similarly deliberately craft an ideal African in their own perspective.

This requires the ability of Africa to reach back in memory where the African story, Africa's reference point, lies buried under the debris of European memory.

However, as the ancestors pull Africans to this reference point so does the lure towards Europe. It's a road paved with assassinations, coup d'états, and sanctions. But those who have been stubborn enough have seen the results.

Even countries as clear-eyed as Rwanda, efforts to recover the African reference point have been termed the pursuit of home-

grown solutions.

However, the very idea of home-grown solutions made apparent the enormity of the challenge at hand: we have always relied on alien solutions (the opposite of home-grown) to solve the plethora of our socioeconomic challenges. If indeed we have relied on alien solutions, for whom was our development?

Similarly, our efforts to search for an organic approach to manage the plethora of challenges in the realm of politics produced “**unconventional methods**” of dialogue and consensus. This suggests that all along we were involved in alien political practices that we came to internalize as conventional methods. If African reality is not upside down, it’s difficult to argue differently.

Broadly, therefore, auto-reference in Africa is considered unconventional. In other words, Africans become unconventional (abnormal) the moment they try to be who they are. On the contrary, they are conventional (normal) with a European reference.

The lesson is that as long as Africans define themselves with an alien reference point, they can never be good enough. The inescapable conclusion is that enlightenment can only take a one-way direction because the subversion of self-reference is that it would create the possibility for enlightenment on the part of Europe. It would pull from under the rug Europe’s moral calling for Africa in the form of the White Man’s Burden and disturb the natural order of things. This why the stereotypical view of Africa – and prejudice against Africans – persists.

The African story cannot have a European point of departure. The African story are the “unconventional methods” that are buried under the rubble of centuries of destruction. Underneath the European interjection – interruption – are Africa’s real conventional methods waiting to be unearthed

along with the agency of the African.

It's the story of the mouth.