Chapter One

THE TROUBLE WITH AFRICA

All too often, talk about Africa revolves around pessimistic undertones: “A continent for the taking”, “the lost continent”, “the Dark Continent”, “a continent at risk” and more. Why is this so? Has Africa reached a point of no return? Is the African continent really unredeemable? What could Africans at home and in the Diaspora do in order to salvage their continent? These are some of the burning issues that will be addressed in this article. The author argues that in order to rescue the continent of Africa from the likelihood of a socio-economic cataclysm, Africans at home and in the Diaspora are duty-bound to investigate the root causes of the morass in which Africa finds herself today.

Many factors, I believe, account for the chronic underdevelopment of Africa, some dating as far back as the colonial era. In his seminal work titled How Europe underdeveloped Africa (1982), Sir Walter Rodney shows clearly how Europe, over the last four hundred years, underdeveloped Africa. He illustrates beyond reasonable doubt that most of the ills that afflict Africa currently are actually colonial legacies. Apologists of the self-styled “civilizing mission” tend to argue that colonialism was not entirely a bane for the people of Africa. They contend that colonialism did some good to Africans. For example, they argue that Africans learned to read and write thanks to the introduction of literacy to Africa’s culture, good roads were built for Africans who hitherto, used bush paths to commute between villages, and so on.

This reasoning, persuasive as it may sound, is, in fact, spurious. The truth of the matter is that colonialism was a one-armed bandit just as the whole concept of the “civilizing mission” was a farce. As Obiechina (1975:7) puts it:

Colonialism […] is a practice not a theory. It is a historical process and not an abstract metaphysical notion. Above all, it is a relationship of power at the economic, political and cultural level.

It should be noted that colonialism was a practice shrouded in its own contradictions. As Césaire (1989:7) points out: “Une civilisation qui ruse avec ses principes est une civilisation moribonde.” [A civilization that plays foul with its own principles is moribund]. The colonizer attempts to obliterate everything from the memory of the colonized about his past and creates antipathy for the colonized person’s own
civilization and culture. Arguing along similar lines, Juneja (1995:4) observes:

The colonizer destroys the past of the colonized by changing the frame of reference of history from the colony to that of his mother country. He distorts and disfigures the historical past of the colonized to his advantage.

Memmi (1965:102) echoes him when he contends that the “historical catalepsy of the colonized” helps the colonizer in propagating and perpetuating the myth of his racial superiority. This type of cultural racism, he asserts, makes the colonized hate his language, dress, techniques, value systems, social institutions, historical past, religion and practically everything that is not connected with the colonizer. Thus the “social panorama” of the colonized “is destructed, values are flaunted, crushed, emptied” (Fanon, 1967, 16-17). The question that begs asking at this juncture is what colonizers had in mind when they scrambled for Africa? How did they intend to grapple with the multiple cultures that exist in Africa? Did they conceive the incorporation of indigenous cultures into Western cultures? These are probably lame questions given that the quintessence of colonialism is cultural glottophagia, the practice whereby the fostering of indigenous cultures is stifled by the imperial power. Clearly, the development of the culture of the colonized was perceived as antithetical to the colonizing mission.

It should be noted that although colonial administrators built a few roads, schools, hospitals and clinics, these infrastructures were not intended to serve Africans. The roads they built, for instance, were meant to enable them to siphon raw materials from Africa to feed Western industries. The schools they built were meant to train administrative auxiliaries, semi-literate Africans, who assisted the colonial masters in local administration. Arguing along the same lines, Amadou Koné (1993:28) observes:

On s’accorde généralement sur le fait que l’enseignement colonial a eu pour but essentiel de former des cadres subalternes nécessaires au bon fonctionnement du système colonial.

[There is a general consensus on the fact that the colonial education system was meant to train essentially subalterns needed to ensure the smooth functioning of the colonial administration.]
Thus, it would be less than candid to claim that colonialism, the highest stage of imperialism, was conceived with the well-being of Africans in mind.

The discourse of colonization is of such crucial importance that many African writers have taken to fictionalizing it. In his novel *Crépuscule des temps anciens* (1962), Burkinabe writer Nazi Boni attempts to subvert the Euro-centric notion that colonialism was for the good of the colonized. He does so by bringing under the spotlight the nefarious effects of colonization on Africans. Boni clearly ascribes the destruction of African cultural institutions to the advent of European colonizers to Africa. The era in which this devastation was taking place is portrayed as the “*crépuscule des temps anciens*” [the dusk of good old days] because it was the time when indigenous institutions were being destroyed by the white colonizers. As Kyoore (1996:64) contends, “against this backdrop, Boni’s interest in historicity enables him to depict accurately the consequences of [...] colonial rule and to reject the notion that colonialism was for the good of those who were subjected to it.” In a similar vein, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1989:2) has postulated that “Imperialism is not a slogan. It is real; it is palpable in content and form and in its methods and effects.”

As a matter of fact, what was touted around as the “development of Africa” by colonialists was a cynical expression for the callous exploitation of Africa’s material and human resources. During the many years of colonial rule in Africa, the continent was made to stagnate while the rest of the world made quantum leaps toward progress. There is no gainsaying the fact that people who lose power inevitably lose control over their own destiny. This is what happened to colonized Africans. Power determines the extent to which a people can survive as an entity. Being compelled to surrender one’s power entirely to someone else constitutes a form of underdevelopment in itself. Colonialism dispossessed Africans of their power base. Colonial education was conceived to serve this particular purpose.

**Education for the underdevelopment of Africa**

Education is critical for the socio-economic development of every society. The irony of the colonial educational system in Africa is that it was designed to hamper the intellectual advancement of Africans. The most obnoxious characteristic of colonial education in Africa was its irrelevance to Africans. Colonial education did not match the realities of African societies. The main purpose of colonial education was to dehumanize and brainwash Africans into believing that one day they would be like their colonial masters in thought and
It was a system designed to create an identity crisis. Racism and white supremacist complexes perpetuated by colonial authorities made it impossible for Africans to benefit from the colonial educational system.

It should be noted that Africa was not an educational *tabula rasa* (blank slate) when the whites came. Pre-colonial Africa boasted great universities such as the AL-AZHAR University in Egypt (we are aware that Egyptian hieroglyphics existed long before the development of written cultures in Europe), the University of Fez in Morocco, the University of Timbuktu in Mali and many more. Scholars of African history have documented the fact that African languages had long existed in the written form before some European languages. Diop (1981:215), for instance, notes that “Black African language has been the oldest written language in the history of humanity.” Sadly enough, Africa’s academic and cultural institutions were callously demolished in the wake of colonization. This is a reality that cannot be refuted because it exists in historical documents. The claim that Westerners “brought” education to Africa is not only a fallacy; it is an insult. Regardless of the colonial myth of the “civilizing mission”, the truth of the matter is that Europe did not bring light and civilization to the so-called Dark Continent. As Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has noted:

> African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain.” (Quoted in Olaniyan and Quayson, 2007: 25).

All in all, colonial education was a simulacrum intended to foster the reign of subordination, exploitation and inferiority complex in Africa. This explains why during the entire duration of colonial rule in Africa, the colonialists did not deem it necessary to train indigenous physicians, engineers and other technocrats.

The worst calamity that befell Africans during the colonial era, to my mind, was the loss of their cultural values, dignity and self-identity. Thinking along similar lines, Amilcar Cabral has argued that to “dominate a nation by force of arms, is, above all, to take up arms to destroy, or at least to neutralize and paralyze its culture.” (Quoted in Obiechina, 1975:8) Cabral notes that cultural imperialism was an
integral part of the system of economic exploitation and political oppression of Africans. Put differently, cultural subjugation was a prerequisite for the economic and political domination of Africans.

I have the firm conviction that the prime responsibility of Africa’s men and women of letters, and historians today remains that of helping Africans know who they are, enabling them to regain their lost dignity and identity by showing them through the medium of literary and historical books what they lost as a result of slave-trade and colonialism. It was not just slave-trade that sounded the death knell of Africa. Colonialism completed the havoc that European slave traders had started to wreak on the African continent. As Koné (op cit, 25) posits:

La Traite des esclaves qui en deux siècles a vidé l’Afrique d’au moins une centaine de millions de ses habitants porte le premier coup grave aux temps héroïques et aux sociétés heureuses du continent noir. Elle désorganise et affaiblit les États, détruit les foyers artistiques naguères florissants et sème le doute dans l’âme de l’africain […] La Traite semble avoir été pour les sociétés traditionnelles d’Afrique une grande catastrophe dont la signification pouvait être la même qu’une grande sécheresse ou une grande calamité naturelle.

[Slave-trade which in the course of two centuries deprived Africa of at least one hundred million persons was the first fatal blow dealt to the hitherto heroic and contented people of Africa. It disorganized and weakened States, destroyed artistic resources that were flourishing in the past; created doubt in the minds of Africans […] Slave-trade seems to have been for traditional African societies a huge catastrophe whose impact could be compared to that of a severe drought or big natural disaster.]

Interestingly, these legacies seem to linger in Africa long after political independence.

**Colonial legacies in post-colonial Africa**

Colonial shortcomings did not disappear with the advent of so-called independence in Africa. More than four decades after achieving political independence, many African leaders are still behaving like frightened kindergarten kids at the beck and call of their ex-colonial masters. Post-colonial Africa has virtually been hijacked by the G8 (Group of most Industrialized Nations). So widespread is the angst
provoked by the economic felonies committed against Africa by the G8 that this group has been re-christened the “Group of International Robbers” by some Africans. How does one explain the fact that the price of a bag of cocoa-beans produced by a poor African farmer in Abidjan or Accra is determined in Paris or London? There is no better way of putting a continent in a straitjacket!

This observation raises the belabored question: have things really changed in Africa after decolonization? The answer is everyone’s guess. Post-colonial African leaders have had the chance to speed up the development of their various countries by fighting for economic autonomy. Surprisingly, all but a few have thrown away the golden opportunity. Where their voices are supposed to be heard decrying the misdeeds of ex-colonial masters, they have remained surprisingly mute. Little wonder, Africa has remained the granary of France, Britain, and other meddlesome Western powers. To put this differently, African leaders have failed to meet the expectations of the people that elected them into public office. This is a pointer to the fact that internal factors have continued to contribute to the sorry state in which our continent finds itself at present. As I see it, Africa is beset by three major cankers: the sacralization of political power, corruption and misgovernment.

The Sacralization of Political Power

More often than not, abuse of power in Africa goes unpunished largely because Africans have the tendency to revere political leaders. In Cameroon, the common saying is: “Le chef a toujours raison” [The boss is never wrong.] This attitude has a cultural basis. In Africa, traditional rulers are viewed as untouchables. In fact, in many African communities, traditional leaders (fons, chiefs, kings, sultans, lamidos, etc) are seen as intermediaries between the living and the dead. In other words, these so-called natural leaders are perceived as immortals” sitting on the stool” of the ancestors and wielding unquestionable power over their subjects.

In many parts of Africa, the sacred role assigned to chieftains has been transferred to the political arena. The consequence of this is that abuse of power and dereliction of duty often go without consequences. This has resulted in the gross misappropriation of public funds, the proliferation of one-party governments or no-party “democracies” (the case of Uganda) and the emergence of “presidents for life” (e.g., late Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, Omar Bongo of Gabon, etc). The presidents of Cameroon, Zimbabwe, and Egypt are other cases in point. Late President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana is known to
have adopted the title of “Osagyefor” meaning “savior” or “redeemer” and actually approved of being treated as a demi-god during his tenure. Late President Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroon behaved in the same manner during his twenty-two-year presidency. He cherished the idea of being referred to as “Le Père de la Nation”, which could be translated as” Father of the Nation.” Africans need to come up with a new modus operandi of political leadership and power-sharing for the betterment of Africa. Otherwise, multiparty politics and democracy will remain games to be played on an ethnic chessboard. Our brand of democracy has been contaminated by the germs of tribalism, cronyism and nepotism. Our elections have remained window-dressings as we continue to turn a blind eye to wanton abuse of power and corrupt practices.

Corruption: A Stumbling Block to Africa’s Development

Corruption has been described by political science pundits as Africa’s deadliest cancer. The prevalence of corrupt practices poses serious developmental challenges on the continent. It is a canker that is eating deep into the marrow of Africa’s social fabric. Corruption from within has become more dangerous and destructive to nation-building than the forces of oppression from the outside. No longer is it possible to ignore corruption and the injustice it engenders in Africa. According to the findings of the Berlin-based, international watchdog, Transparency International (TI), post-colonial Africa is one of the worst victims of political corruption on the globe. This trend has to be reversed in order to give Africa the chance to develop. In spite of the abundance of natural resources in Africa: gold, crude oil, diamonds, bauxite, aluminum, copper, uranium, manganese, phosphates, iron ore, tin, limestone, coffee, cocoa, maize, cotton, wheat, rice, livestock, rubber, sorghum, timber, tea, fish to name but a few, Africa remains paradoxically the poorest continent on earth! This is an irony of sorts. Statistics indicate that a huge chunk of the gross national product of African countries is squandered through corrupt practices facilitated by tribalism, cronyism and nepotism.

Needless to say that corruption is not restricted to bribery. Corruption includes the illegal, unethical peddling of influence: big-time corruption. Extortion is another example of corruption existing in every African country. Other forms of corrupt practices are: graft, fraud, nepotism, kickbacks, favoritism and the misappropriation of state funds. I have to mention the petty corruption that prevails in Cameroon notoriously called “gombo” or “tchoko”. These are extortion practices where members of civil society or the armed forces, generally
referred to as “mange-mille”\(^1\) extort sums of money from people needing government services. This is practiced on a large scale nationwide. Corruption is a spoke in Africa’s wheel of development. It hinders developmental initiatives throughout the continent. This problem is compounded by inept leadership.

**Misgovernment in Africa**

The sad thing about the African continent is that it is saddled with inept megalomaniacs, most of whom are lackeys of Western powers. Many reasons account for this state of affairs: inferiority complex, dependency syndrome, technical and technological deficiencies, and chronic indebtedness.

In most African countries, bullets have replaced ballots as instruments of governance. In quite a few countries, inter-tribal conflicts have degenerated into civil wars. What transpired in Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and most recently Kenya, is still fresh in our minds. In other words, the post-colonial dream of Africa has been shattered and transformed into a mirage!

These factors have far-reaching ramifications for the development of the African continent:

- African countries are debt-ridden (debt servicing consumes a considerable percentage of the national budgets in Africa);
- The development of Africa is impeded by structural adjustment programs imposed on nation-states by the Bretton Woods institutions (i.e., the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank).
- Stifling of domestic industries;
- Foreign interference in the internal affairs of African nation-states; and
- Bad governance (absence of transparency and accountability).

The question that must be asked at this point is whether there is any hope for Africa. This writer believes that there is light at the end of the tunnel. To achieve meaningful political and economic advancement, Africans have to think and come up with effective paradigms that would guarantee genuine economic freedom and sustainable development. The time has come for Africa to go beyond blaming the West for all her ills. Africa has to learn to take Africans to task for failing to live up to expectations. In other words, the accusing finger must now turn inward.

**Conclusion**
In order to salvage the African continent from socio-economic stagnation, Africans at home and in the Diaspora must take the following bold steps:

• Africans must take their destiny into their own hands by combating endemic corruption through moral education and the inculcation of life skills (truth, integrity, loyalty, respect, honesty, trustworthiness, patriotism) into citizens. No amount of good will is sufficient to resolve Africa’s developmental problems. We have to learn to be our own nurses;

• Africans have to fight poverty by all means necessary, including redirecting educational expenditure toward the acquisition of skills needed in the workplace;

• Africans must foster South-South dialogue and encourage regional trade integration (build and sustain regional economic blocks amongst African countries) ECOWAS, SADC, NEPAD, are existing examples to emulate and improve upon. The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) has been adopted as the continent’s main developmental blueprint. According NEPAD officials, the attainment of Africa’s long-term development goals is anchored in the determination of African peoples to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment. This requires a new type of relationship between Africa and the international community, in which Africa’s economic partners will seek to complement Africa’s developmental efforts. For Africa to achieve significant development, NEPAD has adumbrated three conditions that must prevail:

• Peace, security, democracy and good governance;

• Improved economic and corporate integration, and

• Regional cooperation and integration.

NEPAD has further identified several priority sectors requiring special attention and action:

• Physical infrastructure, especially roads, railways and power systems linking neighboring countries;

• Information and communication technology;

• Human development, focusing on health, education and skills development, and

• Promoting the diversification of production and exports.
In sum, in this piece, I have argued that Africa is neither a continent at risk nor one for the taking. She may be home to the world’s most underprivileged people; she may be saddled with some of the deadliest endemic diseases on the globe, she may even be in the throes of underdevelopment. Regardless, she remains one of the most robust continents on the planet. No continent that I know of has ever been subjected to the same magnitude of exploitation, dehumanization, denigration, and brutality that have been the lot of Africa. Yet, in the face of all this, Africans have continued to hold their heads high, and to walk tall in the face of provocation. To forge ahead, Africans need to transform their hard-won political independence into genuine economic autonomy. We must learn to invest in the future because a saving continent is a prosperous continent. The journey toward de facto decolonization must begin with genuine economic liberation.