

# **The Centrality of a Historical Perspective to the Analysis of Modern Social Problems in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Tale From Two Case Studies**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper advances the view that the analyses of the origins and persistent growth of the social problems affecting most sub-Saharan African countries today must proceed from a historical perspective. It is argued that for sociologists, social workers, political scientists, policy makers, administrators and social scientists in general to provide well-rounded accounts of the birth and spread of social problems and develop well-informed policies for the alleviation of the same, they must not overlook the role played by history. The authors utilise the cases of ethnicity and corruption to demonstrate that historical forces, particularly those associated with the process of colonisation, are pertinent to the understanding of social problems in the African continent. The outcomes of the social, economic and political restructuring accompanying colonisation such as the policy of divide and rule, the creation of a new economic order, the discriminatory allocation of resources and the emergence of a new political culture are considered to be central to the comprehensive explanation of ethnic tensions and conflicts and/or corruption. Because such outcomes have a legacy that has been extended to the neo-colonial period, it is concluded that these and/or other related factors are essential components in the explanation of today's social problems.

## **Introduction**

The analyses of major social problems afflicting sub-Saharan African countries today, by social workers, sociologists, political scientists and other social scientists, more often than not, proceed without any meaningful integration of the historical forces that gave rise to and continue to shape their existence. A closer

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look at the existing literature reveals this to be particularly true after the decline of the dependency/underdevelopment school of thought (see eg, Wallerstein, 1979; Frank, 1975; Rodney, 1972) with its emphasis on the historical events of colonisation and, subsequently, neo-colonialism as the major factors responsible for the poverty and underdevelopment found in Third World countries. Since then, emphasis appears to have shifted mainly toward the policies and practices of African communities and government (state) bureaucrats as the major propagators of social ills such as crime, poverty, unemployment, ethnic tensions and conflict, human rights abuse and family-related problems like spouse and child abuse, among others. Such ahistorical emphases, it may be argued, not only render myopic the explanations of the origins and entrenchment of social problems in sub-Saharan Africa, but also contribute to the further entrenchment of particular social problems by misinforming policy measures tailored toward their alleviation, thereby leading to what may be considered inadequate, unrealistic and often inappropriate programmes of action.

This paper seeks to demonstrate the centrality of a historical approach to the understanding of modern social problems in sub-Saharan Africa. Its core argument rests on the premises that any comprehensive explanation of virtually all social problems must bring directly to bear the contributions made by historical factors. The essence of such a historical dimension becomes paramount when viewed in light of the fact that the study of social problems, generally speaking, is in itself a historical process (Henshel, 1990). According to Henshel:

- (1) The notion of social problems itself is rooted in history since the nascence of the study of the same is the historical event of the nineteenth century industrial revolution. This period was characterised by suffering that proceeded the urbanisation and industrialisation taking place then.
- (2) The attempts to remedy social problems are rooted in history. In particular, it is the historical epoch termed the "enlightenment" that is said to have produced the idea of a social science that could rectify the social problems afflicting the world.
- (3) There is a historical dimension to the emergence of social problems into public consciousness. That is, different social problems have emerged into public awareness at different times. To illustrate, the push for decolonisation, women's rights/gender equality, democratisation, protection of children and women from abuse and exploitation, and alleviation of poverty, among others, have occurred during specific periods in human history.
- (4) Lastly, the evolution of ideas about specific social problems is rooted in history. This explains the tendency of human societies to constantly define and redefine what conditions constitute social problems.

Consistent with Henshel (1990) and in line with the dependency/underdevelopment theories, we argue for the necessity of the incorporation of a historical dimension to the study of modern social problems in sub-Saharan Africa. The basis for this position rests with the continent's experience of colonisation and the subsequent extension of ties with the former colonisers through the process of neo-colonialism. These two processes constitute a lasting historical legacy that may be associated with the various social ills that plague the continent today. As such, for a more comprehensive explanation and subsequent understanding of the social problems that have persistently rocked sub-Saharan African countries, one must look to the new social, economic and political structures that accompanied colonisation and continue to buoy up neo-colonialism.

To illustrate, two case studies, namely, ethnicity and corruption are examined. We explore the historical backgrounds to these problems to demonstrate the impossibility of offering a complete account of the genesis and entrenchment of these and, by implication, other modern social problems, without integrating the role played by historical events. Nonetheless, it should be noted well in advance that the decision to emphasise particularly the historical events of colonisation and neo-colonialism does not suggest a relegation of other causal factors such as the actions and policies of post-colonial African communities and governments to oblivion. Indeed, such factors have their rightful place in the scheme of things, particularly in the perpetuation of most social problems in the sub-Saharan African region. Be that as it may, there is the added difficulty of de-linking these actions and policies from the two historical events since, by and large, they are a by-product of the legacy of the same.

### **Case Study 1: Ethnic Consciousness and Conflict**

As used here, the term *ethnic group* (or tribe) refers to a people characterised by shared kinship, religion, language and culture and who regard themselves and are regarded by others as distinct (Cockerham, 1995; Kalinga, 1985). *Ethnicity*, on the other hand, represents a consciousness of belonging to a distinctive ethnic category or a feeling of "we-ness" among members of a single ethnic group that enables them to consider themselves as having a distinct identity (Mare, 1993), as a result of which the members of a group tend to see one another as "insiders" and members of other groups as "outsiders." The terms ethnicity and tribalism – or the consciousness of belonging to a particular tribe (Leys, 1975) – are used interchangeably. However, we depart from conventional practices to distinguish between what, for the lack of more suitable terms, we refer to as *positive (or integrative) ethnicity* and *negative (or disintegrative) ethnicity*. The former is taken to represent ethnic

consciousness that exists with the objective to preserve the identity of the group and pride in its culture without generating or sustaining hostilities/hatred, unhealthy competitiveness, resentment and unequal treatment of others, whereas the latter, its converse, is seen as often accompanied by conflict and its attendant ills such as annihilation of other group members or genocide. The distinction between integrative and disintegrative ethnicity is important because the consciousness that people develop of their own ethnic groups need not inevitably create hostile attitudes toward, and conflict with, "outsiders."

The diversity of the African continent, both ethnically and culturally, is a recognisable fact. With the exception of Lesotho, Somalia and Swaziland, all African nation states constitute what amounts to a mosaic of ethnically distinctive groups (United Nations, 1994). Although ethnicity may constitute a major basis for social identity and cohesion (Johnson, 1995) across most of Africa, it remains a persistent social problem, whose resolution has continued to elude the continent's post-colonial leaders and policy makers. More often than not, where ethnicity rears its head, a host of attendant ills become manifest. For instance, social tension, conflict and violence due to ethnic rivalry often act as a barrier to the development of national identity and pride in the modern African state (Ungar, 1989). Ethnic rivalry hampers economic and social development by siphoning off resources (United Nations, 1994) from the provision of urgently needed basic needs. Ethnicity is also associated with other problems such as nepotism; corruption; economic mismanagement; human rights violations; denial of individual rights and freedoms; political instabilities and constitutional manipulations. As a source of political support, ethnicity is a stumbling block to emerging multi-party democracies as political parties in multi-ethnic states have tended to coalesce along ethnic lines. In addition, it wields significant influences on many policy decisions and actions (including admissions to institutions of higher learning, recruitment for employment, appointments to important public and political offices, parliamentary representation and patterns of development) in many African nations. By so doing it denies certain segments of the population their rightful share of national resources.

To fully comprehend the origins and persistence of especially hatred- and discrimination-prone (or negative) ethnicity on the African continent, one must delve into the historical event of colonisation and its lasting legacy during the post-colonial period. Of particular interest to this paper are two distinctive phases of the historical event of colonisation, viz, conquest (domination) and what is commonly referred to as neo-colonialism. Within the first phase we differentiate between the role played by the partitioning of Africa into European spheres of influence and by

the process of the administering of colonies. The discussion surrounding the second phase (or neo-colonialism) zeroes-in on the political and socioeconomic practices of African political regimes to depict them as major factors responsible for persistent ethnic hatred, tensions and conflict that are partially grounded in the legacy of Africa's colonial history.

We construe colonisation to have played the major role in laying the foundation for the kind of ethnic/tribal consciousness characterised by hatred and discrimination that has often been associated with group conflict and annihilation. We acknowledge that ethnic consciousness, broadly defined, has been a persistent fact of life in Africa that predates colonisation. During the period prior to colonisation, what is referred to today as sub-Saharan Africa was populated by people who were conscious of their diverse cultures and ethnic identities. However, it may be argued that the kind of ethnicity (ie, positive or integrative) existent then mainly served to preserve the identity of the group and pride in its culture. The group differences that occurred during that period rarely escalated into prolonged hatred, tensions and conflicts resulting in the kind of genocide that has characterised some nations during the post-colonial period. Also, pre-colonial inter-ethnic conflicts tended to be confined to local, small-scale disputes (Krymkowski & Hall, 1990). Where major conflicts occurred, such as those occasioned by competition between pre-colonial African kingdoms for the control of trade routes in areas where valued articles of trade were found (Mair, 1977), these, unlike those proceeding colonialism, were mainly wars of conquest and chiefdom-building that were not driven by hatred emanating from the discriminatory allocation of socioeconomic and political resources based on ethnic lines. They were not wars of destruction and annihilation but of annexation or incorporation that in some instances led to total assimilation.

The onset of colonisation appears to have transformed the nature and magnitude of ethnic consciousness in sub-Saharan Africa. Colonial rule, it may be argued, ushered in a new dawn in ethnic relations in which the negative (or disintegrative) element of ethnicity seemingly assumed prominence over positive ethnicity. Over time, the former would eclipse the latter to become more visible and rampant and set the stage for persistent ethnic tensions and conflicts even among groups that at one time co-existed peacefully. This view finds support in the works of Nkrumah (1980) and Leys (1975) who considered modern ethnicity/tribalism (or negative ethnic consciousness) to be mainly a creation of colonialism rather than a by-product of the relations existing between ethnic groups in the pre-colonial period. Nkrumah, who believed that tribes but not "tribalism" in the modern sense existed in Africa before imperialist penetration, argued that,

*"tribalism arose from colonialism, which exploited feudal and tribal survivals to combat the growth of national movements"* (Nkrumah, 1980:59).

Leys, on the other hand, considered the displacement of the various tribal modes and relations of production by capitalist ones to have laid the foundations for modern 'tribalism.' This, he contends, gave rise to new forms of insecurity and obliged,

*"people to compete with each other on a national plane for work, land, and ultimately for education and other services seen necessary for security"* (1975:199).

As pointed out earlier, two major factors – of newly-acquired colonies – are central to explanations of the origins and entrenchment of ethnic tensions and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa premised on the historical event of colonisation. The partitioning of Africa among European powers and their subsequent administration has resulted in what is commonly referred to as the dismemberment of tribes because of arbitrarily drawn colonial boundaries. To illustrate, the partitioning of Africa into European spheres of influence that occurred during the Berlin Conference of 1884 stretched the homeland of the Ewe from Ghana to Togo and from Togo to Benin; placed the Hausa and the Fulani in many West African states stretching from Nigeria to Senegal and the Gambia and left the OvaHerero occupying both Botswana and Namibia, the Masai and the Meru scattered across both Kenya and Tanzania and the Somali occupying Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia, (Birch, 1989; Smith, 1981; Hunt & Walker, 1974). The dismemberment of tribes accompanying the redrawing of boundaries is one of the most commonly preferred historical explanation of the birth of ethnicity and ethnic tensions and conflicts. Those who subscribe to the dismemberment view argue that the new boundaries created by Europeans lumped together people with diverse cultures and traditions while totally disregarding the historical developments of the African peoples' social reality. Diverse ethnic groups were forced into new social and political relationships that contravened traditional patterns and eliminated the ethnic autonomy existent in the pre-colonial days (Krymkowski & Hall, 1990; Horowitz, 1985). This greatly transformed the ecological stage on which the ethnic game was played (Duran, 1974) and sowed the seeds of ethnic animosities and strife among the various ethnic groups occupying various nation states as new forms of inter-ethnic competition arose.

That the partitioning of Africa into European spheres of influence is an important historical factor that cannot be overlooked by any comprehensive account of the genesis of disintegrative ethnicity is indisputable. However, the role

played by this factor must be treated cautiously to avoid creating the impression, as has happened in some instances in the past, that the act of redrawing of boundaries *per se* was directly responsible for the genesis and subsequent spread of unhealthy ethnic competition, hatred and resentment that have, in certain instances, been accompanied by violent conflicts. That is, as a causal factor of modern ethnicity, the redrawing of boundaries must be understood within the context of the subsequent process of administering the newly acquired colonies. Indeed, it is the specific political, and socioeconomic practices of the colonial administrators, rather than the mere redrawing of boundaries, that offer a more direct historical explanation of the nascence of ethnic competition, tensions and conflict.

At the political realm, one prevalent practice by most colonial governments, and especially those of British descent, was the adoption of a policy of "divide and rule" as a mechanism for controlling the diverse native populations of Africa (Cockerham, 1995; Brass, 1985). This involved the favouring of one tribe over others with the objectives to secure the loyalty of that group to the colonial administration and to encourage rivalry between different tribes and prevent a sense of unity from evolving and threatening colonial rule (Prunner, 1995; Kalinga, 1985). It culminated in the creation of a paramount group (the 'superior' tribe) enjoying considerable privileges from the colonial rulers and the relegation of other ethnic groups to a minority status. According to Kalinga (1985), the situation of being a paramount ethnic group created an urge for such groups to demonstrate that they were special. This, in turn, elevated negative ethnicity to new heights and also served as a catalyst for ethnic-based tensions and conflicts. This, in our view, constituted the actual genesis of negative ethnicity as we know it today.

Colonial sub-Saharan Africa was replete with cases fitting the situation described above. In Rwanda and Burundi, for instance, colonialism exaggerated an already existing ethos of ethnic superiority characterised by a pervasive system of social, economic and political inequality in which the numerical minority Tutsi dominated the numerical majority Hutu (Prunner, 1995; Vassal-Adams, 1994; Mazrui & Tidy, 1984). In the North Nyasa District of British Nyasaland (today's Malawi), on the other hand, a natural alliance appears to have developed particularly between the British colonisers and the Ngonde peoples, with the Ngonde becoming the avenue through which the British could extend their dominance among the peoples of this region. To maintain this situation the British colonisers "*extolled the virtues of the Ngonde and created the image of a superior African people*" (Kalinga, 1985:68). The elevation of Ngonde to paramouncy was followed by the souring of Ngonde relations with other ethnic groups in the region and the resurgence of ethnicity among the Sukwa and other non-Ngonde peoples (Kalinga, 1985). Elsewhere in colonial Africa similar paramouncy was enjoyed by

the Baganda in British Uganda (Roberts, 1962); the Ibo in British Nigeria (Hunt & Walker, 1974) and the Shona in present-day Zimbabwe (Day, 1980), among others. In all these cases the paramount group and the colonial rulers reinforced each other's interests.

Turning to socioeconomic practices of colonial regimes, it is evident that most regimes were guided by discriminatory socioeconomic policies that favoured some tribes over others. This led to immense regional variations in the patterns of economic development and in the spread of missionary-sponsored Western education within the same nation state. Kenya and North Nyasa District of British Nyasaland (Malawi) provide good illustrative examples. In Kenya colonial-engineered economic development was concentrated in the so termed "White Highlands" which were predominantly occupied by white settler farmers. Here too, missionary education appears to have been targeted at the Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya and Akamba ethnic groups. Similar regional (and polity) variations in economic development trends and the spread of missionary education were evident elsewhere. The existence of immense regional/tribal variations in economic development and the permeation of Western education played an important role in fostering the development and expression of ethnic/tribal awareness (Krymkowski & Hall, 1990; Rothchild, 1986; Kalinga, 1985; Nkrumah, 1980).

Uneven economic development culminated in the differentiation of economic functions along ethnic lines (Nkrumah, 1980), drew ethnic groups into competition for scarce status and material resources controlled by the state (Krymkowski & Hall, 1990) and brought about,

*"a shift in emphasis from culturally-based conflict ... to conflict that involves collective struggles in the marketplace for an increased group share of scarce political, economic and social resources"* (Rothchild, 1986:66).

The discriminatory practices in the spread of education, on the other hand, could be said to have set the stage for ethnic competition between groups that had acquired missionary education and between educated and uneducated groups.

Colonisation is further associated with the birth of a new economic order in sub-Saharan Africa which, it may be argued, also played a major role in engineering the birth and entrenchment of ethnic hatred and conflict in the region. We are referring to the introduction of a capitalist oriented mode of production. According to radical scholars (see eg, Kalinga, 1985; Diamond, 1983; Nkrumah, 1980; Leys, 1975; Sklar, 1967), introduction of capitalist materialism, coupled with the spread of Western education (that bequeathed the individual with both economic and social status), led to class formation that gave rise to ethnicity. They argue that the



emerging African elite (or petty bourgeoisie) during the colonial period deliberately nurtured the birth of modern ethnicity/tribalism with the objective to further the interests of their own socioeconomic class. The new elite considered ethnicity to be a suitable avenue through which the battle for meagre material resources could be fought and won. Consistent with the radical scholars, we construe the birth of a colonial elite to have boosted the levels of negative ethnic consciousness among groups, thereby intensifying ethnic tensions and conflict. Of particular importance is the role played by the socioeconomic and political practices of the post-colonial African ruling elite. These present an imitation of those characteristic of colonial regimes and manifest a lasting colonial legacy. Consequently, they comprise important elements of historically rooted explanations of ethnicity.

At the socioeconomic level, post-colonial African states appear to have borrowed a leaf from history by perfecting, sustaining and aggravating the uneven regional socioeconomic development whose precedence was set by colonialism. They appear to have extended the use of tribalism/ethnicity as the basis for the allocation of important, and often scarce socioeconomic (and political) resources (Cockerham, 1995; Leys, 1975). The tribe occupying the presidency generally enjoys tremendous advantages over other tribes in terms of access to socioeconomic resources and political power. It enhances its economic prosperity and social status by having access to better jobs in the government sector, more powerful cabinet posts for its politicians, more public resources invested in its geographical region, better educational facilities, better access to government-controlled resources such as scholarships and credit facilities, and generally high status and privilege for its members. The regional and/or tribal differential distribution of and uneven access to resources sets in motion a general feeling among disadvantaged groups that the advantaged group has taken over the country (Duran, 1974) and paves the way for inter-ethnic struggles and conflicts. The groups that perceive their lot not to be experiencing economic and social disadvantages are likely to develop resentment and hatred for the advantaged group(s) (United Nations, 1994) that could lead to ethnic friction and conflicts. The situation is likely to worsen as resources become more scarce.

As with the socioeconomic practices the political actions of the African post-colonial ruling elite have contributed immensely to the entrenchment of ethnic tensions and conflicts on the continent. These span a wide spectrum to encompass the practice of divide and rule and the reliance on what may be considered half-baked measures to combat negative ethnicity, including the search for a common lingua franca (Birch, 1989; Hunt & Walker, 1974), controlling the mass media (Birch, 1989), the proscription of multiple party democracies (Mazrui & Tidy, 1984), and the outlawing of tribal associations. However, it is the practice of divide and rule that is clearly a manifestation of the legacy of the historical event of

colonisation. Those leaders who ascended to power moved to perfect and use this same counter-productive tactic that had been utilised by the imperialists in an attempt to muscle their peoples. They continued to exploit tribalism as *"an instrument of power politics and as a useful outlet for the discontent of the masses"* (Nkrumah, 1980: 59). By so doing, most governments have been unable to sustain the little gains brought by the nationalist movements associated with the struggle for independence. Although such movements temporarily detribalised Africa and solidified a feeling of togetherness among people of diverse backgrounds (see, eg, Mazrui & Tidy, 1984; Anderson, 1983; Smith, 1981), within a brief period ethnicity had regained paramouncy and after over three decades of independence, ethnic rivalries remain a prominent feature in most countries.

A final factor that has been viewed especially by politicians to be responsible for the intensification of ethnicity in sub-Saharan Africa is the introduction of mass (multi-party) democracies. This view holds that multi-party democracies in multi-ethnic states foster the emergence of political parties that are essentially ethnic coalitions that do not reflect a national outlook. While we do not consider the emergence of multiple political parties *per se* to be directly responsible for the intensification of ethnicity, we consider this phenomenon to have a historical angle to it that must be explicated in any attempt to incorporate it as a factor in the persistence of ethnicity. A closer look at the socioeconomic and political history of most sub-Saharan African nation states reveals that the formation of ethnically-based political parties can best be understood in terms of the fear of political, economic and social domination of a group or several groups by another group or a coalition of other groups. The precedence for such fear was set by colonial regimes through their discriminatory practices that led to the elevation of certain tribes to paramouncy and the differential allocation of important resources regionally. Rather than stamp out this fear, the post-colonial state escalated it by continuing to allocate political, economic and social resources along ethnic lines. The formation of ethnically-based parties could be viewed as an attempt by the various ethnic groups to ascend the political, economic and social platform and enjoy the dominance and other related privileges that come with it. Through such parties, the subordinated group(s) hope to wrestle power from dominant groups and open the resource gates to their members.

## Case Study II: Corruption

As utilised in this paper, the term corruption refers to,

*"a form of antisocial behaviour by an individual or social group which confers unjust or fraudulent benefits on its perpetrators, is inconsistent with the established legal norms and prevailing moral ethos of the land and is likely to subvert or diminish the capacity of the legitimate authorities to*

*provide fully for the material and spiritual well-being of all members of society in a just and equitable manner"* (Osoba 1996: 372).

It incorporates acts such as the use of public authority, office, or official position with the deliberate intent of extracting personal or private monetary rewards or other privileges at the expense of public good and in violation of established rules and ethical considerations (United Nations, 1990; Dey, 1989), theft, embezzlement of public funds or other appropriation of state property and nepotism and/or granting of favours to personal acquaintances. The corrupt include both petty and major offenders. Petty offenders are those individuals such as government file or record clerks who demand bribes before they render services to clients, police officers who are offered "something small" by suspects in exchange for their freedom and account clerks who embezzle funds from accounts they are entrusted with by their employers. On the other hand, major offenders include individuals such as senior corporate officials and government officers who cut secret deals involving huge sums of money with local and international organisations, companies and individual businesses or who practice massive embezzlement of public or corporate funds.

Corruption is another notoriously persistent and progressively worsening social problem afflicting most sub-Saharan African countries today. The practice has permeated virtually all institutions, both public and private, governmental and non-governmental to become a way of life and a principal method for the accumulation of private property. Corruption has, indeed, become a major impediment to political, economic and social development (Hope, 1997; Osoba 1996; Makumbe, 1994; Ayittey, 1992). It hinders administrative development and performance (Hope, 1997), impairs economic efficiency (Gould & Amaro-Reyes, 1983), stifles local initiative and enterprise (Hope, 1997; Ouma, 1991) and intensifies other social problems such as crime rates and ethnicity and ethnic conflicts. The problem is usually accompanied by growing poverty, misery, and degradation among the mass of society amidst the accumulation of immense wealth among the ruling and corporate elite.

Although corruption is one of the most written-about topics (Hope, 1997) by academics and others, the documentation of its genesis and persistence in sub-Saharan Africa seemingly appears to have failed to incorporate a historical dimension. Rather, the emphasis has been on the role played by African bureaucracies and private businesses and individuals. This paper examines the often overlooked historical causes of this social ill to provide a second illustrative case study in support of its core argument that any comprehensive delineation of factors responsible for the emergence and entrenchment of the social problems afflicting sub-Saharan African countries must integrate a historical dimension.

Corruption can be viewed as a by-product of traits of fraudulent antisocial behaviour deriving from British, French and other colonial rulers (Osoba, 1996). This behaviour infiltrated indigenous African peoples during the colonial period and was nurtured into the post-colonial era. There are three major ways through which the historical event of colonisation impacted on the emergence of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa that must be acknowledged by any explanatory accounts of this social pandemic.

First, is the restructuring of indigenous economies by the colonial governments. A closer look at pre-colonial African economies reveals that emerging colonial powers did not find sizable monetary economies in their newly acquired territories. To make the colonies economically viable they substituted a capitalist mode of production for the traditional ones. Because corruption requires a well-developed monetary economy characterised by a clear differentiation of interests to thrive, an ingredient that traditional African economies lacked, it may be concluded that it is the fronting of new economic structures by the colonial governments that provided the framework within which corrupt practices could be nurtured and sustained.

A second necessary ingredient in the study the genesis of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa is the introduction of compulsory in-cash-only taxation in the forms of hut and later poll tax. Having found no meaningful monetary economies in their newly acquired territories, most colonial governments, and particularly those of British origin, introduced compulsory taxation payable in cash only (see, eg, Collier & Lal, 1986; Tlou & Campbell, 1984; Stichter, 1982; Van Zwaneberg, 1975), with either of two objectives: to meet the cost of administration or to acquire cheap African labour necessary for the establishment of productive economic activities. It was not the introduction of taxation *per se*, but the manner in which the tax itself was collected, that constituted the genesis of corrupt practices. To collect taxation, the colonial governments mostly relied on local African leaders and especially chiefs whom they motivated by allowing them to pocket a part of the money collected as inducement (Colclough & McCarthy, 1980; Tlou & Campbell, 1984). In our view, this practice amounted to the taking of kickbacks by African chiefs. It gave a new meaning to the practices of gift-giving which had existed in different parts of Africa long before the onset of colonisation. Unlike pre-colonial gift-giving practices which were not carried out at the expense of public good and did not violate any established rules and ethical considerations, the practice of rewarding tax collectors became a principal method for the accumulation of private property (just like corruption today appears to have become), a way of life that was hard to give up and precipitated the abuse of office. As Leonard (1991:29) would have it, colonial chiefs *"were implicitly encouraged to use their positions to amass wealth and demonstrate thereby that it paid to cooperate with*

*Europeans.*" The financial gains accruing from the amount pocketed from taxes blinded the chiefs to the plight suffered by their people as a consequence of taxation.

The final factor rooted in the historical event of colonisation that must be featured in the study of the birth of corrupt practices is the technique of divide and rule (Cockerham, 1995; Brass, 1985) adopted particularly by colonies of British descent to subdue and control native peoples. As discussed earlier, such divisions culminated in the creation of paramount (superordinate) and subordinate groups with the former enjoying considerable privileges from the colonial rulers. The corruption associated with this practice was inherent in some of the methods utilised to sustain it. Those groups enjoying a favourable status from the colonial administration were rewarded through access to Western (missionary) education (Kalinga, 1985) and government-sponsored economic opportunities. Such discriminatory practices, it could be argued, sowed the seeds for the emergence of corrupt practices such as tribalism and nepotism that have become deeply entrenched in many sub-Saharan African nations today.

As earlier observed with ethnicity, the socioeconomic and political structures inherited from the colonial era have helped entrench corruption in sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, of significance are the lasting legacy of the administrative technique of divide and rule, the colonial administrative culture and the constitutional structures that ushered African nations to independence. On the one hand, the embracing of the policy of divide and rule by African elites who ascended to positions of leadership after the demise of colonialism, is a factor that accounts for the existence of corrupt practices such as nepotism and other related practices, namely embezzlement and economic mismanagement resulting from the appointment of underqualified, but politically well-connected, tribesmen to fill important positions.

The administrative culture inherited from colonialism presents another avenue through which the legacy of colonialism has continued to perpetuate corrupt practices particularly among the higher echelons of political and administrative bureaucracies. The coming of independence in some countries was identified with the continuation of the "African chief model" of administration from the colonial period. Colonial chiefs, and especially those found in British colonies, were expected to be authoritarian figures who could make quick, final decisions and keep order by commanding respect and even fear (Leonard, 1991; Nkrumah, 1980). Unlike pre-colonial chiefs who had limited and controlled powers, the colonial chief enjoyed unsurpassed powers. According to Leonard (1991:28) chiefs, "*were not notable for their respect for the niceties of law or due process, they were known instead for their decisiveness, courage, presence, and ability to hold a crowd.*" Although their role was not popular, it became well established due

to the support given it by the colonial government, from which it drew legitimacy. A closer look at African political leaders after independence reveals a strong semblance to this model. As Leonard (1991:29) puts it, contemporary African politicians and administrators appear to have embraced the power structure associated with the colonial chief, despite its unpopularity during the colonial era, and adhere to "*an only slightly softened version*" of the colonial chief's role. Like the colonial chief, these leaders are associated with authoritarianism and a near total lack of respect for the law and due process. A major consequence of such authoritarianism has been the lack of accountability that has been said to be partially responsible for the rampant corruption in Africa. Like the colonial chief, authoritarian leaders use their positions of power to amass illegal wealth.

A final historical factor that must be considered in the analysis of the genesis and entrenchment of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa is the shaping of the constitutions that were to govern the newly emerging states. The attainment of self-rule was preceded by the drafting of new constitutions, under the guidance of the colonial governments, to provide the legal frameworks that would guide the operations of the new governments. While the colonialists may not be blamed for the way these laws have been interpreted and applied, it would be rather myopic to overlook their role in the drafting of such laws as a historical factor in the entrenchment of corruption. The constitutions authored under their guidance, for example, vested enormous (absolute) powers in the hands of a single office, institution or individual, usually the presidency. It appears that the outgoing strongmen oversaw the emergence of laws that provided a continuity to the kind of repressive practices they had subjected the colonised to, only this time using "a son of the soil" as their proxy. This resulted in the emergence of overly powerful states that were imbued with boundless economic and political power and reigned supreme over civil society. In such a scheme of things, (bureaucratic) corruption was imminent.

Concentrated power created autocratic presidents who were above the law and not accountable to any institution. The failure by the new constitutions to cap the length of time one individual could be president compounded this situation further by allowing for the existence of "for life" presidents who engaged in corrupt practices with immunity from possible prosecution and often resorted to unconstitutional measures to shield their practices. These have tended to surround themselves with indispensable power brokers who are also not accountable to anyone. The president's men become trusted aides, wheeler-dealers, political schemers and hatchetmen for high-level corrupt deals that cost organisations, individuals and would be investors huge sums of money. They have been extended the same immunity enjoyed by the president himself. In addition, the existence of overly-powerful presidents is associated with the politicisation of bureaucracies making them autocratic, devoid of accountability, transparency and rule of law and

irresponsible (Hope, 1997; Adedeji, 1991). Such conditions are conducive to the entrenchment of a corrupt culture (Prah, 1993), accompanied by practices such as the abuse of public office for private and personal gains, favouritism and nepotism. Overly powerful presidencies also lead to state capture of bureaucratic organisations (such as the civil service) and instruments of law and order, such as parliament and the judiciary (Hope, 1997; McCarthy, 1994). This translates the civil service into an extension of ruling parties; makes parliaments rubber stamp lame ducks that cannot act even in cases where humble evidence points to increased corruption and graft; interferes with the independence of the judiciary and its ability to prosecute and give deserving sentences (to those involved in corrupt practices) and provides appointments, promotions and the tenure for appointees at the pleasure of the head of state. A major consequence of the above situation is the lack of the rule of law and administrative predictability that renders it impossible to challenge illegal or irrational decisions, even in courts (Hope, 1997).

The constitutions ushering most sub-Saharan nations into independence have also boosted corruption in the continent by creating political environments that cannot nurture the birth of a popular participatory democracy. Unfortunately, this type of democracy is a necessary requirement in combating corruption because it facilitates the monitoring and holding to account those in charge of the state and the treasury (Osoba, 1996). The same constitutions have also failed to empower the press and civil society, yet these constitute important avenues through which corrupt governments can be exposed and eventually be held accountable for their practices. A final way through which constitutions negotiated with the patronage of out-going colonial governments aided the perpetration of corruption was by allowing for an expanded state role in economic activities (Hope, 1997). In most African states, the government participated extensively in economic decision-making and in economic activities through public enterprises often referred to as parastatals, especially during the period immediately after independence up to the early 1990s when most countries embraced the privatisation agenda. These dual roles of the state set the stage for (bureaucratic) corruption to thrive. The centralisation of economic decision-making, for example, culminated in an expanded bureaucracy vested with discretionary powers and hence corrupt practices such as demanding kickbacks before awarding government contracts, embezzlement and unlawful accumulation of wealth (Makumbe, 1994; Ayittey, 1992; Ouma, 1991).

As alluded to earlier, colonisation is a process beginning with conquest followed by a period of domination that culminates in self-determination and the birth of a new phase of the same process referred to as neo-colonialism. The historical process of neo-colonialism represents an extension of the economic and/or strategic interests of the former colonial powers. Because most colonial powers

were determined to extend these interests at any cost, this created an environment that favoured the emergence of policies and actions that were conducive to the entrenchment of corruption. In the name of protecting economic and strategic interests, for example, international governments and donor organisations have acted to disburse aid to corrupt regimes that waste a considerable fraction of that money on bribes and kickbacks or divert it to private use. This practice, which is tantamount to subsidising corruption, has made most African political leaders to view aid as a reward for their cooperation in the fulfilment of the economic interests of their former masters. The financial support extended to the overly corrupt regime of Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire for over 30 years by the United States government and other Western governments is instructive of this. In the same vein, the British government has continued to support corrupt regimes, including those in their former colonies such as Kenya.

Economic and other interests of foreign governments and organisations have also aided the entrenchment of corruption in sub-Saharan Africa through the adoption of half-hearted and often unclear and inconsistent stances toward corruption itself and corrupt regimes. The linking of aid to the control of corruption and good governance is a case in mind. There has been no consistency in enforcing this policy. This appears to convey mixed signals to corrupt bureaucracies and to give them the courage to engage these governments and organisations in what amounts to hide-and-seek games. Inconsistent policies and practices, it may be argued, are responsible for the lack of commitment on the part of most African bureaucracies to stamp out corruption. This is evident through the failure or reluctance to prosecute those involved in corrupt practices, the formation of lame duck directorates of corruption, victimisation such as sacking, unnecessary transfers from strategic positions and/or organisations and the political harassment and intimidation of officers who refuse to succumb to corrupt practices and display a no-nonsense attitude toward corrupt practices and officials.

The desire to protect own interests has also pushed former colonial powers to silently consent to the emergence of repressive laws and the systematic dismembering of constitutions that have occurred over the years in an attempt by African leaders to tighten their grip on their peoples. This has always occurred under the pretext that such laws did not threaten the interests of these powers. For long these governments and organisations, by either opting to ignore the existence of repressive laws or at times by supplying the armament utilised to enforce such laws, stood firmly on guard as their African proxies intensified their political repression by crushing the voices of dissent that could have constituted a foundation for the eradication of corrupt practices.



## **Summary and Conclusion**

This paper aims to demonstrate the necessity of a historical dimension to the analyses of the modern social problems that afflict sub-Saharan African countries today. Its basic argument is that any broad comprehension of the origins of virtually all social problems must encompass a historical dimension to their causation. The paper analyses the (social) problems of ethnicity and corruption to support this position. While acknowledging that the actions of African communities and governments (states) may be responsible for the persistent spread of social problems in the continent as depicted by most of the existing literature, the paper stresses the need to appreciate in totality the role played by historically-rooted factors if well-rounded explanations of the genesis and subsequent entrenchment of social problems are to be provided.

To demonstrate the central place of history in the study of modern social problems, the paper utilises ethnicity and corruption as illustrative case studies. The two problems are cast within a historical context to underline the specific historical factors that are pertinent to their genesis and subsequent entrenchment and cannot be overlooked by any quest for a comprehensive explanation of the two social ills. In both cases, emphasis is placed on the historical events of colonisation and neo-colonialism. The two are considered to have contributed variously to both the nascence and continued entrenchment of the two problems. Thus, treating their role casually or ignoring them totally amounts to presenting half-baked and often misleading explanations of the social problems at issue.

Concerning ethnicity, the paper, while agreeing that ethnicity in general predates colonialism, locates the genesis and permeation of negative ethnicity on the processes of the restructuring of boundaries (to facilitate European rule) and the discriminatory socioeconomic and political practices of colonial regimes and later to the post-colonial African ruling elite. These, it is concluded, constitute major historical factors that must be featured by any attempts at a comprehensive delineation of the causes of its beginnings and subsequent intensification (or spread). The analysis of corruption, on the other hand, premises the origins and spread of the pandemic on the colonial restructuring of indigenous African economies through the introduction of a capitalist mode of production, the introduction of compulsory in cash-only taxation, and the technique of divide and rule that was utilised to subdue and control African populations. The birth of the latter is associated with the birth of a corrupt administrative culture (especially the 'African chief model'), the constitutional structures drafted with the help of outgoing colonial governments and the desire by the outgoing colonial powers to protect their economic and/or strategic interests in the former colonies.

To conclude, all the historical factors explicated by the two case studies, are considered to be central to the understanding of the two problems. Consequently, they must form a part of any attempts at accounting for the nascence and persistence of the two social ills. In light of the significant role played by historical factors in explaining the two problems discussed in this paper, it is proposed that the analyses of other modern social problems pertinent to sub-Saharan Africa must incorporate a historical dimension to their causation. This is particularly important considering the lasting legacy bequeathed on the continent by the social, economic, and political restructuring accompanying colonisation and by the effects of neo-colonialism. The emphasis for a historical perspective, however, should not constitute a substitute for non-historical explanations of the (genesis and) entrenchment of modern social problems. Rather, it should supplement them.

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