# First as Masters, Always as Friends: The Colonial Legacy, Neocolonialism, and the Impact on African Development

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Nearly forty years after the majority of the continent's countries gained independence from their former colonial masters, and over one hundred years after the Congress of Berlin finalized the 'Scramble for Africa' by "carv[ing] up [Africa] into various European zones of influence" (Martin, 1982: 224), the continent still suffers the ill effects of its comparatively short-lived colonial era. The region's most recent development indicators are dismal: a 2006 gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of $598, with much regional variation within the continent and within individual countries (International Monetary Fund, 2007); a 6.1% HIV prevalence in 2005, amounting to nearly twenty eight million people (UNAIDS, 2006); an under-five mortality rate of 163 per 1000 in 2005 (World Bank, 2007) and a life expectancy of 47 years (World Bank, 2007). While some argue, perhaps rightly when one considers the corruption and lack of transparency common in African politics, that "Africa is partly responsible for its own misfortune," (Sarkozy, 2007) it cannot be denied that the past and current actions of the former colonial powers, particularly Britain and France, have had a powerful and long-lasting impact on the political, economic and social development of the continent. According to Iuean Griffiths (1995) "[t]he colonial experience is critical for Modern Africa because of its strong impact on the present … [as] the imprint of the colonial inheritance is still very clear" (1995: 2) in the former African colonies. The intricate bond between the colonisers and the colonised has transitioned in recent decades from the colonial to the postcolonial; however, the relationship has continued to be characterized by imperial dominance even post-independence. The 'special relationship' between former African colonies and their colonisers in the years after independence has allowed for the continuance of colonial rule – both direct and indirect – over the political, economic and social spheres of African life, resulting in an enduring neo-colonial bond. European neo-colonialism, coupled with the effects of the colonial legacy, is at the very least, partially accountable for the long-term development issues that the majority of former African colonies have encountered post-independence.

This paper will attempt to define and address the themes of neo-colonialism, dependency and interdependency, and the colonial legacy in relation to the African continent and will discuss key political, economic, and social aspects of the colonial inheritance using specific examples from the decades following independence. The paper will conclude with a brief analysis of the links between British and French neo-colonialism, the inherited African legacy, and current African development.

## I. Thoughts on Neo-colonialism, Dependency Theory and the *Eurafrique*

Colonialism in and of itself requires little explanation; however, neo-colonialism is a much more enigmatic and complex phenomenon, which necessitates defining in order to understand its implications and consequences. Simply put, the neo-colonial system is "a more subtle, indirect version of the old" (Young, 2001: 44) system of colonisation in place in Africa and elsewhere throughout the colonial period. The term was first introduced in 1961 at the All-African People's Conference (Young, 2001; Martin, 1985) and was further defined through the writings of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president after independence, on the continued involvement of Britain in the affairs of independent Ghana. Nkrumah, a leading proponent of Pan-African unity and socialism, insisted that decolonisation and independence were primarily symbolic on the part of colonial powers and that "political independence would mean little if it were unaccompanied by economic independence from the former colonial masters" (Calvocoressi, 1986: 9). The process of granting independence allowed former colonists to claim a distance and separation from the affairs of their ex-colonies while still maintaining strong political and economic ties that provided distinct benefits to the European nations; in this way, "neo-colonialism [was and] is a continuation of traditional colonial rule by another means" (Young, 2001: 47). Neo-colonialism allows for the involvement of former colonial powers – in particular, the roles of Britain and France must be noted – in the economic and political decisions of former colonies through both direct and indirect means. This has, in part, led to continuing economic inequality and dependency, uneven and potentially exploitative trade relations, obvious social and political disparity, and systematic underdevelopment. Some argue the relationships and bonds between the European ex-colonists – now nearly all dominant world powers – and the former African colonies continues to border on exploitation similar to what was experienced during the colonial era (Chinweizu, 1987). It appears that "the crux of the [African] crisis [is] the unequal nature of the relationship between the West and Africa, an inequality which was created and is maintained by the West" (Chinweizu, 1987: 72). The consequences of neo-colonial practices and the remnants of colonisation together provide a long-term dependency of the so-called periphery of African ex-colonies on the core of dominant Northern former colonial powers, as well as a resilient colonial legacy that is "a product of historical forces and a direct result of the contact between the hitherto underdeveloped social formations [of African nations] and the forces of Western imperialism" (Udombana, 2000: 759). According to Young (2001) this dependent legacy is due almost entirely to the past and present actions of the former colonies, and he notes,

> … the word "neo-colonialism" was a fitting term to describe the immediate set-up of the postcolonial epoch [as] although the formerly colonized territories gradually had their political sovereignty returned to them, they nevertheless remained subject to the effective control of the major world powers, which constituted the same group as the former imperial powers. Neocolonialism denotes a continuing economic hegemony that means the postcolonial state remains in a situation of dependence on its former masters and that the former masters continue to act in a colonialist manner towards formerly colonized states. (2001: 45)

Dependency theory, commonly espoused within discussions of "Third World" economic and politic matters, postulates on the existence of a developed core or metropole and a developing periphery or satellite, which is dependent economically on the core. Throughout the colonial period, the imperial powers cemented an uneven economic relationship built entirely on dependence of the colonies on the metropole European states for trading purposes; in the postcolonial period, "independent economic development in Africa remains a dream" (Griffiths, 1995: 179) due to the dominancy of European powers in the world economic system and due to "the constraints of international politics and economics" (Zartman, 1976: 326). While dependency theory cannot explain every aspect of poor African development in the post-independence era, it is important to note the theory's usefulness in explaining the reliance of African ex-colonies on their former colonial masters, as the extensive historical economic ties provide a strong, and seemingly innate, basis for ongoing economic interdependence. The idea of 'complementarity' (Martin, 1985) alleges that the two continents are dependent upon one another in that "Europe requires Africa's raw materials and markets, while Africa needs the capital, technology, and know-how of Europe;" however, this interdependence primarily "serv[es] the interests of the metropole rather than those of the colony" (Martin, 1985: 222) and is thus another aspect of the neocolonialist system and "an ideological justification for the perpetuation of dependency in a changing international environment" (Martin, 1985: 233).

Out of these theories of interdependence and complementarity arose the French concept of the *Eurafrique*, which developed during the colonial era to describe a desired "kind of unity of continents with complementary economies, which under the leadership of "the older of the two" was to develop as an independent factor in world politics" (Sicking, 2004: 212). Despite its conception in the late 1950s, the ideology continues to be advocated in the current era, promoted and referred to by French President

Nicolas Sarkozy recently as "this great common destiny that awaits Europe and Africa" (Sarkozy, 2007). The idea of a *Eurafrique* is based on long-term cooperation and collaboration between African and European states whereby "the fate of Europe and Africa is seen as being naturally and inextricably linked at the political, economic, social, and cultural levels;" (Martin, 1982: 222) under the philosophy of the *Eurafrique*, links between Africa and their colonial counterparts were seen as "indissoluble" (Martin, 1995: 2) and permanent. Thus, long-term interconnections and contractual commitments between the two continents, and in particular between France and both Francophone and non-Francophone African countries, are seen as natural continuations of historical economic and political partnerships, which first appeared in the colonial era as paternalistic leadership on the part of Europe and now as neo-colonialist policies "conveniently renamed *coopération*" (Martin, 1995: 4). Post-independence, policy makers in both Britain and France realised quickly that decolonisation did not necessarily need to mean a loss of overall power and of their long-term investment in a continent that had gained certain strategic importance in the bipolar world climate of the period. Particularly, in the case of France, the post-colonial period continues to be defined by the concept of a 'special relationship' (Golan, 1981) which "came into being during the last period of colonial rule and was aimed at allowing a certain continuity rather than a complete break with the colonial past" (Golan, 1981: 3). This 'special relationship' is still largely accepted by the French and promoted as being the best and most effective way to continue a relationship between the former colonies and France (Golan, 1981), although the "French approach has been condemned [by many Africans and Northerners alike] as essentially neo-colonial" (Griffiths, 1995: 74). The enduring strength and influence of the European powers in the political, economic and social spheres of Africa is considered largely to stem from the subtle and indirect means the former colonists use to engage the continent in the international system. Such influence ranges from the provision of development assistance, often in the form of tied aid, to the creation of Euro-African trade agreements, many of which provide few benefits to the average African. These neo-colonial forms of control and influence "represent imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous stage" (Nkrumah, 1965).

## II. The Colonial Legacy: What has Africa Inherited?

Much work has been published on the impact of colonialism on Africa (Boahen, 1987; Chinweizu, 1987; Griffiths, 1995; Nkrumah, 1965; Rodney, 1973), although the nature of the impact is often in question. While some argue that there were indeed exploitative and oppressive practices in place within the colonial system, others argue there were positive "credits" of development to the "balance sheet of colonialism" (Boahen, 1987: 95). Others strongly maintain that there were no positive impacts resulting from the colonial era. In the words of Walter Rodney, author of *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, "[c]olonialism had only one hand — it was a one-armed bandit," and a system under which "the only thing[s] that developed were dependency and underdevelopment" (Rodney, 1973). Regardless of its positive or negative nature, the importance of the colonial experience on African development cannot realistically be denied, and the endurance of the colonial legacy and inheritance are key to understanding the current situation in the majority of African former colonies. At this juncture, it is useful to define what, precisely, is meant by the term "colonial legacy." Similar to the phenomenon of neo-colonialism, the colonial legacy embodies the remnants of the colonial system: institutions (both political and economic); infrastructure; boundaries and borders resulting from partition, and social and cultural practices, including but not limited to language and religion. Such aspects of colonialism were often carried over into the workings of the post-colonial, independent states of Africa for domestic convenience at time of decolonisation and continued to be used due to international pressure and influence under the neo-colonial system (Griffiths, 1995). The effects of the colonial legacy – and the legacy itself – varies greatly, dependent on both geography (as some regions fared better than others in the colonial period due to natural resources and strategic locations) and on the form of colonialism in place from 1884 until decolonisation. Differences in the colonial approach may be important when considering the impact of colonialism as it is often argued "the British espoused a philosophy of indirect rule, working through indigenous rulers and preserving traditional institutions. Conversely, the French adhered to a philosophy of direct rule, abolishing indigenous institutions and imposing French beliefs and practices outright" (Firmin-Sellers, 2000: 254).

**A. The Implications of Partition: "Unnatural" Borders**

One of the most important, yet also one of the most basic, aspects of the colonial legacy is certainly the partition of the continent during the "Scramble for Africa," which culminated in the Congress of Berlin in 1884-1885. It is "perhaps the most basically problematical part of the colonial inheritance" (Griffiths, 1995: 98). Prior to the dissection of the continent into European-controlled zones, a number of distinct areas based on ethnicity, language and shared ancestral history existed; many such areas were divided and separated during partition with little thought on the part of the European powers. This process of "balkanization" (Griffiths, 1995; Martin,1995), under which "small component political units" (Griffiths, 1995: 167) emerged first as colonies and later as independent states, provided long-term disruption to development, and made both colonial and neo-colonial systems of dependence far easier to impose. Colonial borders were drawn with little regard to traditional boundaries, often dividing and separating ethno-linguistic groupings and favouring those groups most amenable to European interests, which often furthered interethnic conflict and caused a number of issues in regards to traditional land and resource use. The arbitrary nature of the partition has been duly noted by a number of scholars on Africa: H. L. Wesseling (1996) notes that Europeans organized partition looking at maps, with little knowledge of the regions discussed, and that "[t]hese maps did not … reflect reality but helped to create it … draw[ing] much criticism. Thus it is often said that it has rendered the borders of Africa 'unnatural'" (Wesseling, 1996: 364); Griffiths, too, notes that "the partition of Africa was by Europeans for Europeans" (Griffiths, 1995: 45). Essentially, "Africa became Europe's geo-political chess-board" (Griffiths, 1995: 38). Few other aspects of the colonial era have held over so firmly in the post-colonial period; not only have the vast majority of independent African states adopted the colonially-determined borders despite long-term criticism of their ineffectuality as appropriate and logical boundaries, but the implications of such borders are numerous and delve into the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres. "The colonially-imposed partition is a political straight-jacket for modern Africa. It divides, constrains development, encourages neo-colonialism and helps perpetuate Africa's economic and political weakness in global affairs" (Griffiths, 1995: 3). Furthermore, it "created fundamental problems in Africa that are still present and are likely to be there for many years to come," (Griffiths, 1995: 44) and the international recognition of the existing borders is such that "opportunities for change in the post-independence era have largely been ignored" (Griffiths, 1995: 84). The European-drawn borders of the colonies have created long-term problems for governance in a number of African countries, as states lack cohesion and unity and face issues involving "disputed borders and incorporated religious and ethnic conflicts" (Calvocoressi, 1986: 15). Griffiths summarizes the various reasons behind the extreme impact of partition, noting,

> The partition of Africa by the European powers to create colonies which subsequently became independent sovereign states caused all manner of problems for those successor states. Some are land-locked, others are of an off shape, many have ambiguous boundaries, most have badly located capital cities. Some are too small to be economically or politically viable, others are too large, particularly in the sense that they encompass disparate groups of people. As states they lack cohesion and unity." (1995: 123)

Independent Africa appears on the modern map much as the boundaries were drawn in 1884, despite a number of factors that interfere with cohesive statehood in the present. Many states suffer a variety of conditions rendering them politically and economically unviable on their own as distinct political units; thus, neo-colonial practices are suggested as a means of integrating these small countries into the international system.

**B. The Political and Economic Inheritance: Systems of *Coopération***

Politically speaking, former African colonies inherited the political systems and institutions of their colonists, often with few changes made. The French administered a direct, centralized system of rule within their colonies, while the British ruled more indirectly, often seeking out traditional or customary leaders to rule through (Golan, 1981; Firmin-Sellers, 2000). The adoption of the former colonial systems of rule has led to complex political ties to the ex-colonist countries, and particularly in the case of the French, it is noted that "regardless of their political regimes - military or civilian, 'progressive' or 'moderate' - the Francophone states of Africa all maintain a particularly close association with their former metropolis: Paris" (Golan, 1981: 3). Many African colonies inherited the bureaucratic institutions of the former colonists, including a two-tiered system of civil servants and customary rulers, under which power was passed on to a small African elite promoting a patronage system that would remain in use long after decolonisation. According to David Potter (2002),

> The post-colonial state was thus two-tiered (like its predecessor) bureaucratic and political institutions in the top-tier, 'customary' patrimonial authorities in the lower tier. The anti-democratic character of post-independence politics in many African countries can be traced at least in part to the colonial legacy of authoritarianism. (2002: 286)

The long-term use of authoritarian political systems in African colonies encouraged the development of neopatrimonialist systems after independence, which combined traditional patrimonial rule and "rational-legal political institutions" such as "bureaucracies, courts and executives accountable to legislatures" (Potter, 2002: 286). Neopatrimonialism – a system whereby one person holds supreme power and "dominates the state apparatus" (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997: 62 quoted by Potter, 2002: 286) – has become a standard feature in African politics and figures heavily in the political relations between African states and their former colonial masters. The prominence of neopatrimonial leaders has done little to encourage development and political and economic stability in present-day Africa; in fact, the extensive employment of patronage and clientelism has done little but to facilitate the neo-colonial practices of the former colonial powers.

The economic legacy of colonialism, too, has heavily influenced the economic and commercial decisions made by African leaders in the decades following independence, largely due to the continued involvement of former colonial powers in the economic affairs of the ex-colonies. The main economic agreement signed prior to independence granted preferential status to France's colonies under the Treaty of Rome, which created the European Economic Community. Following decolonisation, the tenets of the Treaty were adopted under the first Yaoundé Convention (1964-1969) with few changes, and were later transferred into the second Yaoundé Convention (1969-1975), which thirteen of the former French colonies and the three former Belgian colonies were party to (Martin, 1982). The first and second Lomé Conventions (1975-1980 and 1980-85, respectively) were touted as being less neo-colonial and more conducive to African unity; however, the Conventions meant "the transition from the colonial to the neo-colonial pact is realised smoothly while the essence of the unequal exchange remains unaffected" (Martin, 1982: 230). The agreements promoted exploitative trading practices and allowed for continued underdevelopment of African economies, which appeared as mere "appendages of the Western economy" (Chinweizu, 1987: 286). Trade agreements between European and African countries emphasised the subservient role of African economies in the world economic system and encouraged continuing production of cash monocrops whose commodity prices were, and still are, often kept artificially low (Martin, 1995). Colonisation put an end to the majority of inter-African trade (Boahen, 1987) and little changed in this regard post-independence; the former metropolises remained the primary trading partner of nearly all African states (Griffiths, 1995). Along with close trading relationships and "[an] overdependence on aid" (Nyukuli, 1999: 624), the former colonists continued to tie the colony currency to that of the mother country, and much of the colonies' earnings were held in European banks, rarely withdrawn – even post-independence – for development of investment purposes (Boahen, 1987). A prime example of postcolonial monetary policy is the *Zone Franc*, under which the French pegged colonial currency against the worth of the *franc*, which "meant that these territories followed France's inflationary and deflationary movements" (Sicking, 2004: 210). The neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs

(SAPs) promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank throughout the 1980s, while too complex to discuss in-depth in this paper, also added immense economic and political pressure on the developing world as a whole and Africa in particular and caused a host of problems in and of themselves, adding to the effects of neo-colonial economic practices (Nyukuli, 1999).

III. Colonialism and Neo-colonialism: Impacts on and Possibilities for African Development

The legacies of the colonial period are deeply engrained in the present political, economic and social spheres of African life; they have erased and recreated aspects of African history (Chinweizu, 1987). It is argued "the immediate causes of African misery must be put in the context of basic structural defects, both economic and political, deriving from the comparatively recent and short-lived colonial period when almost the whole of Africa was divided between European powers. This context is by no means the sole cause of Africa's present plight, but the colonial inheritance is crucially important and not easily disowned" (Griffiths, 1995: 1-2). While it would be an exaggeration to lay blame on the events of the colonial period for all of the current issues facing modern Africa, the remnants of colonialism, as well as the neo-colonial practices of European powers, are responsible, directly or indirectly, for the underdevelopment of the continent. In order to continue to move forward with development efforts, the history of colonialism must be addressed, as "contemporary Africa is beset with problems which cannot be solved without adequate attention first being paid to the surviving legacies of [the] past" (Chinweizu, 1987: 227). The continent is faced with numerous internal conflicts (frequently over ethnicity, ownership of resources and the issues surrounding national boundaries) such as those experienced in much of sub-Saharan Africa; famines and droughts; the unethical exploitation of natural resources including diamonds and gold, which are mined primarily by and for the North; immense loads of debt, and high prevalence of poverty and disease. Underlying these conditions is the economic and political subservience and instability assumed to be an inheritance of both the colonial and neo-colonial periods (Griffiths, 1995; Martin, 1995). While a number of factors have improved over the past decade – GDP per capita has increased (IMF, 2007); more democratic and fair elections have been held in several countries such as Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Liberia, and public spending on education and health has increased – the continent "remains marginalized in the economic development process and global political scene" (Nyikuli, 1999: 623) and development efforts continue to stagnate.

Faced with what often appear to be insurmountable obstacles to political, economic and social development, African scholars and others have continued to note the importance of "African countries… bear[ing] the responsibility of shaping their own destiny" (Nyikuli, 1999: 636). The endorsement of African unity in the forms of a common market organizing both inter-African and international trade policy, integrated infrastructure including roadways and communications, and integrated financial resources such as a common African currency are often promoted as the most logical means of shaking off the effects of the colonial legacy and the more recent influence of neo-colonialism. After more than one hundred years of colonialism and neo-colonialism, suggestions for African development are following in the lead of the pan-Africanists of the 1950s, who believed "that the immediate and complete political and economic integration of the whole of Africa is the only road out of the neo-colonial predicament in which the continent at present finds itself" (Martin, 1982: 236).

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