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Heart of Darkness

What happened to Africa over the years can be analysed through the interlocking power struggles between various caste-like social formations in African societies



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BOTH,

those who view Africa from the outside and those who live in it, assume it as a whole. Africa is bonded together as a geography of the countries commonly held by a mass of massive land and a few island nations. The continent's commonality is held

by the forces of historical colonisation and the market of ideas empirically voyaging throughout the world.

Africa is a continent largely populated by darker-skinned people identified as Black, Africans, or related neologisms. Probably, the most influential picturisation of Africa is informed by David Attenborough's soothing commandments of flora and fauna, recorded mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa. The wildlife chases, panopticon shots of the animal kingdom, and vast, ever-expanding topography of the savannah—all have informed the younger generation about Africa.

The 1990s saw impending conflict in the Horn of Africa, the central African region, southern Africa and western Africa. These conflicts were the result of decades-long insurgencies led by the rebels. I often wondered what caused this. Would a simple explanation about corrupt political class, gerontology and ethnic conflicts give us the answers? Something intrinsic to the region existed, and we ought to explain that deliberately.

The Outsider African

The dominant view of Africa is invariably mediated by the outsider. Who is the outsider? It depends on how you read history. Is the white settler population an outsider? Are Indians who have lived there for generations outsiders? Are the neighbouring country citizens outsiders? Are different tribal and ethnic groups bonded together into nation-states outsiders? This proposition is now debated by a generation of youth who have not experienced colonial aggression.

The warfare that torpedoed Africa saw regular people as the harshest victims. In some cases, they were the marginalised groups who were left asunder by the dominant ruling class. The African story needs a clear and non-dogmatic reading of the conflict and anthropology of social classes.

The frightful image of a famished, skeletal, distraught mother looking at a dying baby shattered everyone. Even the Hollywood music industry stepped up and sang "We Are the World" to raise money. Africa, thus, was forever etched as a desperate land requiring our charity and pity. "People in Africa don't even have food to eat" was a curt reminder by parents to kids, who refused to eat what was served to them. The narrative of Africa is thus battling the tendency of survival as well as pride in the people, who live decrying such a

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picturisation of their past and present.

Africa is a space of multiple modernities that rely on exterior and interior influences. The colonisation of various countries on the continent by various European powers is a glue for African nationhood to establish its sovereignty. Post-colonial nations worldwide built up a nationalist appeal by focusing on the recent past, giving unnecessary weight to the colonial history of a couple of centuries.

By constructing this history, new heroes were manufactured, and the succeeding generations were forced to reckon with the greatness of these freedom fighters. The second half of the twentieth century saw such a rewriting of history the world over, especially in Asia and Africa. The Latin American experience of decolonisation was already a century old.

Making a National Sentiment

Any new idea needs an emotional appeal. This can be better informed by gratifying the mundane necessities of human life. Thus, desires are created in the minds of people by making their story of self-importance a grand story in history. People are made to believe in their specific glorified past. Religion, region, caste, tribe and economy are used as indicators of assessing one's position in the past. Myths are created to make the citizenry believe in something that they otherwise would not have agreed to. A nation, like an idea, needs such statements of fashion and glory. It also needs an enemy.

For every nation on earth, a common clannish belief acts as a base for believing in the nation. Thereby, the State that collects taxes from citizens and provides services in return. The political economy of the nation-state is predicated on diverse operational forces acting in the interests of certain classes. The judiciary, legislature, executive and local governments act as arbiters of conflicting interests. In this modern construction of a national identity, Africa is a profoundly invested player.

Neither is there a singular meaning of Africa nor is it a defined plural idea. Africa is a history of human memory that assesses itself by comparing it to the landed mass. Africa is, therefore, a citation of good, bad and ugly. The uglier parts are most visible through media narratives. Warfare and internecine conflicts mire the continent. People arrested in these mega-confrontations keep escaping morbidity and carnage. However, the ones who are trying to find a rationale for such violence fall back on the mythical ideas of uniting the nation.

Europe is brought back into the picture to find faults. The hegemonic capital of European assertion worked for a while. The nature of European dominance was protected by the welfare policies enacted on the continent, which made their citizens believe in their innate superiority. Social traits, such as whiteness, were constructed to demonstrate a superficial axiom of performance and quality. Anyone other than that was judged with unfair, prejudicial assessments.

However, what happened to Africa over the years can be analysed through the interlocking power struggles between various caste-like social formations in African societies.

The hierarchical power structure that monopolised the newly acquired independent nation reiterated the necessity of power and violence. Therefore, the new regime that took over power was often the one that drew power by being closer to colonial governance. Who were these people? Most often, they were the tribal chiefs, power brokers, and dominant castes of their societies.

The older divisions of power imbalance were carved out to maintain the rationality of the new law. Frederick Cooper's tour de force of the African political economy after the 1940s shows us the growing power struggle between the groups that have ascended to the democratic throne. While some maintained power, others exploited their own people and created a mess through continuing warfare. The rebel groups of conflicting caste groups took up arms, demanding representation of a new nation, different from the one the coloniser bequeathed.

The major conflicts meriting our attention tell a familiar story. Nothing is more apparent in the caste story than the tribal warfare gripping the Nigerian story of Igbo, Fulani, Hausa and Yoruba staking claim to power over a nation-state that draws its boundaries as a colonial heritage. The intra-and inter-tribal upmanship has given the new class of rulers democratic pretence. The outcastes of these societies, the Osu, Ohu, and Ume of the Igbo societies, remain unknown in the power struggle.

Similar examples can be given in East Africa, Southern Africa, Central, West, and North Africa. The Rwandan conflict was a fissiparous departure from the modern state, falling into tribal nationalism. Incidents like these send alarming signals to those who want to live peacefully. Independent African nations inherited the wars and conflicts that run through postcolonial coups, disagreements over boundaries with neighbours, tribal rebellions, group clashes, and civil wars.

Tribal Denomination

South African anthropologist Archie Mafege looked at the "tribal" epithets applied to Africans by non-African and African anthropologists. He was not comfortable with those appellations as they represented the views of others—"incrementalists" and "expatriate theorists" who fixed the African society into mental zones. Mafege was pushing for a diverse and complex view, one that is shaped by colonisation and capitalism. The tribes did exist, but the people shaped by modernities in urban areas would not recognise the power of the chieftain tribal as was the case in fixed tribal-caste formations. What perhaps best represented Mafege's anxiety was the modern role of caste-like power structures that could not be easily explained by the British-defined act of tribalism.

The continent was locally ruled by chieftainships, and tribal lords were brought into a modern constitutional republic that further endangered the vulnerability of the farmers, pastoralists, peasants, artisans and small merchants. The old boundary was surpassed to create a new nation. But the older monarchies and systems of governance clashed with the ruling dispensation at the centre.

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The land was cut into a neat national idea which remains debatable in many parts of the world. The premise for this is based on the unilateral dependency on the rich countries' foreign aid. For the aid industry to continue, such conflicts need to be sustained as a staple.

Another War

There is another warfare that goes on within the spheres of thought and philosophy. The native's wrestle with the colonial Other is the source of intellectual greatness. The episode of colony and the post-colony has been done with. The European other has its legitimacy for as long as the native—who sits across the table with the European—will write the stories. S/he will feel slighted by the arrogance, and, at times, reject the power held by the white person.

The newly minted class of educated elite, who took over the reins of their country—Fanon called them the “new caste”. They rallied to position their knowledge space as equal and, at times, superior to the oppressor Other. They sought justice that was epistemic in nature, i.e., correcting the colonial wrongs at the level of ideas. The other way to sort this out was to reclaim the past that was robbed by the oppressor. Rewriting history and complicating the archive of memory became a rallying call to action. This happened mostly in the Western countries and was led by diasporic scholars. The discipline of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and radical humanities helped explain the nature of the empirical present.

Often, the conversants are advised to think of history without the oppressor's hand. This is then followed by the advice of returning to the original—the Orient. Language, as a walking stick of culture, is invoked to foreground one's presence as an essential African. The Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who careered in English, rebelled against the language and wrote in his mother tongue. Those who profited from the oppressor's language became leaders and acquired the top seat, while the mother tongue-speaking generation was made to feel inferior and left out of the developmental promise.

Certainly, the standards of class and superiority came with the proximity to European cultures. It is hard to imagine parents contesting whether to send their children to schools run by American or British governments in Africa as opposed to the local language school. In my recent visit to Kenya, I observed the elites pursue higher dreams, interlocked with the standards of African syllogism, packaged in the wrappers of high dreams of the Northern world. In

Ethiopia, on the other hand, the Amharic canon prevails. The country boasts of not being ruled by the European colonial powers, and that is their reason for not partaking in the instances of postcolonial drivel.

Authors like Olufemi Taiwo refute the linguistic debate carried among the new class of African elites, who wonder about the past and the question of colonisation. If at all it is about an external power, Taiwo points to the Chinese empire in Africa that will be a paramount force on the continent. He suspects that in a few decades, one will have to challenge the imperialist resurgence of China. That is why China-Africa initiatives are among the attractive vestiges of contemporary critical thinking. India and the Middle East are the older players with a newer garment that attempts to reiterate their historical connections to establish a firm control.

Add to that, there is intra-African dominance of capital run by South Africa and Nigeria predominantly. However, regional players such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Senegal exert their influence on the expanding economic leverage of countries.

New Paradigms of New Castes

The African continent has a new paradigm. It is confident and reminiscent of the past. It is also privileged to have a space that is not riddled with the mistakes of the bygone era. The new generation of scholars, writers, and artists are imagining their space full of ideas and challenges that they take on with their political leaders. Their story is much like that of India.

Today, in India, one hardly talks of British rule as much as they did till the early 2000s. Indian President Pranab Mukherjee went to the UK and announced that the country no longer needs their aid, refuting the dependence on aid. Indian political reality has drained the youth into caste-communal factionalism.

The coloniser is a subject of fantasy and mimics the regular folks. The elites want to assert their dominance. The divides of class that make this debate are scrutinised by the new middle class, whose purchasing power is similar to their counterparts in other parts of the world. They travel, dine, and shop at the same avenues at a vacation cosmopolis. The twenty-first century offers us a more dynamic reality than the mythical sense of nationalism that worked for the past few decades. Now, the target of appropriation is held inwards—towards the caste-like wars that are old enough with a renewed life. ◉

(Views expressed are personal)