

# The political economy behind the gold rush of apologies in Africa

**A**FRICA, often labelled as the dark continent of the world, is now under intense pressure to choose a side. It is once again a centre of conflict between superpowers. This continent was initially invaded by the Arabs, who spread Islam and also settled in many parts of Africa. The naturalised Arabs, however, are not considered as colonial rulers as they are now part of the broad African communities.

However, the former colonial rulers of Africa - UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium and Portugal - along with USA are now rethinking about their strategies to contain Africa. The continent was invaded by the Imperial Europeans in the 14th century to 'capture' slaves. Since then it continued for 500 years. Slave trading made both the slave traders and the slave owners rich. This scribe had a chance to visit the infamous 'slave island' of Senegal. The island was a few kilometres off from the coast of Dakar - a place where Portuguese used to dock their ships and housed captured Africans before taking them to Europe and the Americas to trade. After the Portuguese, it was the Spanish, then the French and then the British went to Africa for the same reason. The slaves of Africa built the prosperity in Imperial Europe.

Once the Europeans understood the power of slaves, they used them to conquer the Americas and colonise the entire America. By the 18th Century the 'Gold Rush' for slaves was over. However, within this time, Europe gained economic and technological strength and became the production centre of the world. Industrialisation made them a 'super producer' of goods and so they needed new buyers. In their quest to find new markets they began exploring the world. The obvious markets were in India and China. With the blessings of the Kings and Queens, each of the imperial European nations established 'East India Companies' - and began their expeditions to the East. Around the same time, the Ottomans were expanding to the West. By the 16th and 17th centuries, the Ottomans were at their peak, while at the same time, the Mughals had settled in India and the Chinese Qing dynasty was ruling the territory which is now China - spreading from Manchuria in the East to Uyghur-Kashghor and Tibet in the West. India and China were the two most powerful economies of the world at that time and nearly 50 per cent of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was produced in these two countries.

With slaves in their hand, Europe emerged as a modern manufacturer of goods in the world. The production power led them to look for markets across the sea and their choice was written on the wall. Sell to the Ottomans, to the Indians and to the Chinese. Since the Ottomans continued their invasion of the Europe till the late 18th century, it was not the best choice for them. Most of the European kings had history of wars with them and so they were after the Chinese and the Indians. Every imperial nation in Europe - the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French, the British, the German - began to explore the sea to find a route to India and China bypassing the land-route to India and China which were in control of the Ottomans and the Persians. By the end of the 15th century they were successful and reached India through the Cape of Good Hope. This was the second beginning of prosperity and growth for Europeans and it was fuelled by two parallel events: (a) the slavery and trade of goods with India and China; and (b) the industrial revolution in Europe. Intense competition to capture the markets in India and China led European powers to legalise forceful occupation of countries to secure market access. The operations were both overt and covert. Meanwhile, the continent of Americas was also found by them. To their surprise, they also realised that the new continent was full of resources and gold was a major one. A new Gold Rush began and this time it was both in Africa and in America. There were many conflicts while conquering the Americas. The process was bloody and full of genocides. The European governments authorised their citizens to kill as many natives as then could (which was not a crime), so they wiped out a continent and many civilisations. In return, they acquired gold and knighthoods. One

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of my American friends once told me that in America, British rule allowed them to own 100 hectares of land for a pound while forcing the native Americans to stay within the 'Indian reserves'. The rule allowed them to kill any natives found outside these reserves. In the South America, the story was a little different as it was monitored by the Pope who drew an imaginary line to avoid conflicts between the Spanish and the Portuguese. The history was not pleasant in terms of the lives of the native Americans. They lost their cultures, their religions and their languages.

In Africa, a similar pattern existed. The continent was the supplier of slaves and so every European power grabbed a territory in Africa to capture slaves. Over time, the native African tribal lords cooperated with the European powers and traded slaves with them. The West Africa was mostly controlled by the French, and the East by the British. There were pockets of German, Belgium, Italian and Portuguese territories. Once colonised, these powers found another 'new' wealth in Africa. Gold, diamond and other precious stones

and minerals. Europe changed its priorities and began mining these resources. Local tribal leaders collaborated with the colonial powers and helped transfer these resources to Europe. Europe became rich and powerful. However, their markets are in India and China.

In the meantime, in-fighting in India among various religious and linguistic groups allowed them to occupy different parts of India. Colonisation of India began and it happened with the sole purpose to ensure exclusive markets access for their goods. They also found a 'new product' in India - the opium. They traded opium with the Chinese and began controlling China from inside. In short, their rule lasted for many years and by the beginning of the 20th century India and China became the poorest countries of the world. However, the so-called 'WWI' (I prefer to call it the Euro-Japanese War) changed the tide. Colonial rules ended and hundreds of independent states emerged on the world map. The legacy of colonisation, however, continued using a different mode - financial colonisation and money laundering.

Many of the European nations including United States of America (USA) became a refuge for corrupt leaders who were hated in these countries. Europe, the US, Canada, and also Australian banks became a safe haven to transfer their wealth. The strategy was unique - it was legal because money was flowing into these economies and these imperial nations controlled the global economic order; it was moral because it was done in the pretext of freedom of choice and justice. Many of the leaders in the newly independent nations were corrupt and often fled to Europe and USA and transferred huge wealth into their banks.

Till today, former colonial powers use their collaborators to control these economies. Like the native Americans, colonisation also caused Africans to lose their languages, their cultures and religions. African cultures were labelled as 'black magic', 'cults', 'demons', etc. Although, many of the African countries are independent, the process of demonising Africa pushed them into a state of chaos and mistrust.

Till the 1990s there were no challengers. It was China that effectively challenged the former colonial powers in Africa. Instead of transferring wealth into the Chinese banks, or granting residency to corrupt leaders, the Chinese strategy in Africa was quite different. Understanding the fact, that many of the leaders may transfer resources to Europe and USA, China offered an alternative which was win-win to the leaders of these countries and China. China needs raw materials for their huge economy. The payment they made against purchase of these materials was tied to build infrastructure like rail, roads, schools, and ports. What the Europeans did not do in the past 500 years, the Chinese did it in 30 years. They built road networks, ports, and rail connections to connect the markets. It changed the economy. In one of my visits to Kenya, I asked a taxi driver about their beautiful highways and he proudly replied that it is the Chinese who had built these highways.

Chinese intrusion in the African economy created both a threat to the West and a competition. The competition led to increase in prices of minerals. Mombasa, once was a thriving port that connected India and China, died during the colonial era. China revived Mombasa and connected it through road and rail networks with countries as far as in West Africa. A new horizon emerged in the east and it helped both India and China. In the beginning, the Western powers were uncomfortable with the Chinese presence into their hinterlands in Africa but they had a wishful thinking. They thought that a dose of 'freedom of expression', 'democracy', 'justice' etc., would be enough to push China out of Africa. However, it was not enough - African economies began to thrive with Chinese influence and many African nations could see the hypocrisy of the West. The imperial West, therefore, changed the game. Massive aid packages were declared and many Western media were paid to broadcast special hours targeting Africa to reverse the impression.

In a surprise move, in May 2021, the German Foreign Minister apologised to the African nations for their colonisation and agreed to pay US\$ 1.0 billion to their former colonies as reparation payment. The French also expressed their apologies to the former French colonies for their past deeds including their failure to prevent the genocide in Rwanda. The British are now worried. Their baggage is the biggest. They ruled Africa for more years than others. Can they apologise? With agreement for reparation payment by the Germans, the water is muddy. Previously, many African tribe leaders apologised for the role that their ancestors had played to promote slavery in Africa. Africans expected their colonial rulers to come forward and also express similar apologies. Reparations were not on their card at that time. The apologies by the French and the German are not because of their realisation that colonisation and desecration of religions, cultures and languages in Africa were a heinous crime, rather they are doing so to stop China who are re-writing the economic highways of Africa.

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