International Journal of Innovation and Research in Educational Sciences
Volume 1, Issue 4, ISSN (Online): 2349–5219

Comprehending Africa's Contemporary Problems: The Challenge of Kaleidoscopic Western Diagnosis for Contemporary History

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Abstract – **The changing Western conceptions of, and expert advice for solving post-independence Africa's myriad problems of nation-building, conflicts, economic development, and corruption as well as their implications for the ability of the contemporary historian of Africa to fully grasp and explicate them, and provide meaningful policies directed at their effective resolution were investigated against the background of the equally changing scholarly perspectives of the problems. Adopting the historical method of narrative and analysis, and interrogating available secondary sources on the subject, this study concluded that, given the constantly changing Western perspectives of, and remedies for post-colonial Africa's problems, which obviously compounded these problems and made their effective resolution even more problematic, the need for Africa, while not existing as an island unto herself, to seek African solutions to her contemporary problems cannot be over emphasized. Indeed, African History even in its contemporary form has a dynamic role to play in bringing this about.**

Keywords – **Contemporary History, Post-Colonial Africa, Nation Building, Western Conceptions.**

I. Introduction

Post-colonial Africa is afflicted by the myriad problems of national integration, and related issues of tribalism and ethnicity, economic development, and such security challenges as conflicts, including civil wars and contemporary terrorism. These problems would seem to have defied efforts at interrogating, comprehending and solving them, and taken new forms with each passing decade. Given that these problems had evolved over time to assume their contemporary forms, and, therefore, manifested elements of continuity and change, which are the main concerns of historical enquiry, borne out of the processional approach with its emphasis on time perspective; it is their historical study that can holistically interrogate and explicate Africa's contemporary problems for effective solutions. Yet, African leaders since independence have tended to take their clues from the West, thereby complicating Africa's contemporary problems.

Accordingly, by adopting the historical method of narrative and analysis, and interrogating available secondary sources on the subject, this paper attempts to examine the changing conceptions over time of contemporary Africa and her contemporary problems as well as the methodological problems they posed to contemporary history in its bid to study and understand them. It is hoped thereby to understand the sources of failures or pitfalls of efforts at solving the problems over the years. It is our contention that Africa's contemporary problems have remained unresolved and recurring largely because the past processes which gave rise to them were not properly taken into account, not properly comprehended, thereby giving rise to much superficiality in their explanations, wrong policies and failure of efforts at apprehending them. In fact, since "the past…is largely the creation of countless decisions by individuals, groups, organizations and governments,…" the processional or historical approach to the study of the phenomenon "would also offer… government officials, … and policy makers generally new insights into the processes and problems… and ways and means of making optimal decisions" towards their resolution (Abasiattai 1999: 10, 17).

II. Africa's Contemporary Problems of Nation-Building

On the attainment of independence, African political leaders opted to build European- style nation states without reference to pre-colonial African state-systems, or Africa's experience at nation building or sense of community, thereby giving the false impression that there were no nations in Africa's pre-colonial history. The implication of this decision was that what existed in all of colonial Africa seeking to achieve independence were 'tribes' or ethnic groups, none of which survived colonial rule intact as they were dismembered and arbitrarily lumped together with different names in new European-style colonial states administered by different colonial powers. During the struggle for independence, African political leaders were ridiculed as 'nationalists without nations' (Davidson 1978: 204), who did not aspire to build the nations of their dream on the pre-colonial African state model. As they accepted the European-type nation as the framework within which to lead their people to independence, some scholars wondered whether it would not amount to confusion to talk about African nationalism (Rotberg 1968). It was with such colonially created European-type units that independence was achieved by Africans who had merely established contact and coexisted for a few years before their attainment of independence. It was for this reason of their recent origins, contact and coexistence that they were characterized as nations in embryo. Nation-building at independence presupposed that only the foundations of the new nation-states had been laid by the departing colonial powers: African leaders were expected to build on the foundations.

The problem was how to transform these disparate units into new nations, how to cultivate new attitudes, new

loyalties and new solidarities, which would transcend the sub-national communities. African leaders remained at a loss about how to cultivate in their followers, and nationals of the post colonial states loyalties, which would rise above primordial sentiments, institutions and units, and be directed to the new national communities, thereby facilitating the building of national cultures, institutions, and consensus. The process, as Elaigwu (1985), points out is both vertical, by which the legitimacy and necessity for a central government is accepted as a symbol of the nation, and horizontal, whereby the constituent units of the emergent nation agree to live together as one and recognize the rights of all to a share of a common history, resources, values and other attributes which affirm a common sense of belonging to one political community. Identified as the national or nationality question, or problem of national integration, the issue which has loomed large since 1960 as the most critical, if not intractable political challenge confronting post-colonial African nation states has been how to achieve inter-ethnic accommodation and national integration, given their heterogeneous character, and deep divisions , which are sustained by elite manipulations. It became a major problem because colonial rule merely reduced the multiplicity of pre-colonial states into 50 odd or so colonial states to which independence was granted even as it was confused in terms of what political framework they were to be grouped under. Were tribal, ethnic, regional or national loyalties to be encouraged and developed as the building blocks of the post-colonial nation-state (Mordi, 2009 a)? Were there lessons that African history could provide with respect to the building and sustenance of loyalty beyond the sub-national community?

By emphasizing nation building on European models, the departing colonial overlords provided the answer to the latter question in the negative and the successor African regimes were too ready to work with the answer. The result has been much bloodshed and violent conflicts, which have been attributed to tribalism and ethnicity since independence, whereas at the heart of the issue is colonial hoodwinking, Africa's credulity and the failure of governance. Uzoigwe (1982) forcefully makes the point with respect to Uganda when he attributes the dilemma of Ugandan nationhood to British colonialism, which created Uganda without Ugandans and turned around to blame Uganda's post-colonial leaders for the concomitant post-colonial crisis of nation-building:

Had Britain created Uganda and Ugandans as well, there may not have been a Ugandan dilemma worth discussing… British colonial administrators found themselves deeply involved in the politics of the various ethnic groups whose separateness, one from the other, they helped to exaggerate…Divided, Uganda was ruled; and before Ugandans were made, Uganda was granted political sovereignty (vii).

The fact is that colonial authorities across Africa 'manufactured' African 'tribes' and 'ethnic groups', infused them with a sense of a common form, identity, oneness, and solidarity, and did much afterwards "to sustain and strengthen" their cohesiveness (Doornbos 1982: 3-4). In doing this, no objective criteria were universally applied, thereby making the definition of ethnicity "a nightmare for the scholar" (Ade Ajayi 1990: 5). Thus, it became problematic for the affected groups, and for others, including scholars to clearly demarcate and understand the meaning and applicability of the terms without recourse to some form of arbitrariness. Often the people so described never viewed themselves in such terms before the colonial imposition. Instead, the diverse, distinct socio-political units forged alliances in acts of deliberate statesmanship by which they gave meaning to observed similarities which were built upon to establish functional relationships. Thus, they did not talk of themselves as members of the same ethnic groups but as brothers, or at any rate descendants of common ancestors who were held together by common origins legends that they deliberately designed to reflect cordial relationships existing between them. With reference to Nigeria for instance, it was in the twentieth century that such groups in the competition for limited resources and opportunities offered by the colonial state began "to act politically in defence of their interests vis-à-vis the interests of other competing groups in what we now know as Nigeria" (Ikime 1985: 3).

Yet, in the post-colonial period, African politicians seeking power at all cost have deployed the weapon of ethnicity as if the ethnic identity has always been the medium of actualizing group goals. By so doing, they perpetuate the divide and rule stratagems employed by the colonial authorities and also perpetuate the crisis arising from the failure to relate with African cultural groups not in ethnic terms which they do not ascribe to themselves but as peoples willing to relate cordially with their neighbours. Dike and Ekejiuba (cited by Usman, 2008) with the Igbo of southeast Nigeria as their reference point thus caution, for instance, that until recently, the group were reluctant to identify themselves in ethnic terms, and were instead,

were variously referred to either as cultural groups (e.g. Olu or Oru i.e. the riverine people of Adagbe, people of the flood plain, Enugu, people who live on the hill, Aniocha, people who live on heavily leached and eroded soils, Ohozara, people of the Savannah) or as occupational groups such as Opi egbe, people who fashion guns; Ndiuzu or Umudioka, blacksmiths, artists and carvers… (11)

As with the Igbo so with other groups in Africa. Thus, it is misleading and counterproductive to interpret or seek solutions to the problem of nation building in Africa in ethnic terms. The methodological problem inherent in the application of ethnicity or tribalism to scientific analysis is compounded by "the obvious failure of analysis based on it to lead to the socio-economic and political transformation of the various African societies" (Nnoli 1980: 1). This point is worthy of emphasis in the light of the recent burgeoning ethnic conflicts and tendency towards ethnic politics, which undermine political stability, democracy and other aspects of life all over Africa. A proper understanding of the processes of the formation and transformation of Africa's polities and

ethnic groups is germane to the search for viable solutions to the violent conflicts spawned by their distortions and misconceptions. Ethnic cleansing and ethnic-based restructuring as solutions to the problem of nation building is thus misdirected as it demonstrates a woeful "failure to grasp the substance of the historical process which has produced our ethnic groups" (Usman 2008: 16-20). Rather, emphasis should be on the concept of citizenship in each of the nation states making up the African continent, instead of the current emphasis on indigene-ship, which furthers alienation and fuels bloodletting. A nation of indigenes and without citizens is a mirage because individuals and groups shut out of power, privilege and opportunity for parochial considerations but who contribute to the progress and development of their countries outside their ethnic bases, will seek alternative means and avenues of satisfying their needs. It opens the floodgate to disorder, and not only is it "destructive of civil society" (Davidson 1992: 11, 185-186), but also denies the new post-colonial states and their leaders the much needed legitimacy so necessary to build the European style nation states which they opted for at independence.

The tendency to attribute much of African conflicts to ethnicity, indeed calls for a critical reappraisal. Scholars have drawn attention to methodological issues with respect to ethnic conflicts raised by the changing scenarios of violent conflicts which previous researchers either ignored or took for granted. This relates to the "actual nature of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in terms of whether identities are constructed or 'natural' and whether conflicts that are termed ethnic are masks for more underlying (class, religious, and economic competition-based) conflicts". Equally important is the role of the state and the international community in instigating and managing such conflicts (Osaghae and Robinson 2005: 1-3; Mateos 2010: 25-35). Such wrong ethnic interpretations of Africa's conflicts characterized the approach to apprehending the Hutu/Tutsi crisis in Rwanda, for instance. Both groups speak the same language; *Kinyarwanda* and do not form two ethnic groups, but profess the same religion, and share the same culture. The Tutsi are taller on the average by 12cm, due probably to their different life style and eating habits: "Tutsi's noblemen, unlike Hutus do not till the land…" (Franche cited by Usman 2008: 15).

More worrisome is that even as traditional conflicts have not yet been properly understood, conflicts characterized by terrorism, namely by violence or threat of its use to instill fear and cause intimidation by wanton destruction of lives and property are being perpetrated by violent non state actors such as the al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa, and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. There is no gainsaying that perhaps, Africa's contemporary insecurity, vis-à-vis the surging terrorism on the continent deserves serious attention in the light of Islamic terrorism in North Africa and its escalating manifestation in Nigeria. No doubt, even if there could be political manipulations, the emerging trend is that the contemporary terrorism in Africa is ideologically driven, underpinned by warped applications of the tenets of Christianity as with the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, and of Islam exemplified by Boko Haram in Nigeria, and AQIM in North Africa. Their activities have been influenced and facilitated by advances in and ubiquitous nature of information technology and propaganda, as well as the ready access to both light and heavy weapons in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' which ravaged and overthrew autocratic regimes in North Africa and opened up their arsenals to sundry characters on the fringe (Forest and Giroux, 2011).

As a result of the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the African political scene, the conflicts which engulfed the continent after independence eluded systematic policy measures to arrest. For instance, the African political scene was so fractured that between 1960 and 1990, the continent was a theatre of civil strife, conflicts and wars. Such was the situation that 80 violent conflicts could be identified in Africa during the period. Indeed, as Africa entered the new millennium, 18 countries were rocked by armed rebellion, with 11 having to contend with severe political crisis, even as 19 were politically stable. It is instructive that Cote d'Ivoire, Benin, Cameroun, Ghana, Zambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Zimbabwe and Lesotho i.e. 11 of the countries listed to be relatively politically stable by 1999 have since experienced divergent degrees of political instability or turbulence. It was fashionable to categorize the conflicts on the basis of their causes, namely, boundary/territory, civil wars/internal with international operations, coup d'état, succession/ideological, transhumance and irredentism. Thus, conflicts could be internal in which the state is involved with different segments seeking to control power for a variety of reasons, including the arbitrary exercise of power, or self-perpetuation in office, or external manipulation in which marginalized groups in rural or urban settings fight over limited resources, including grazing ground. There are also inter-state conflicts involving border issues, resulting from the imprecise, arbitrary and artificial nature of colonial boundaries which, instead of acting as lines of contact, split ethnic groups and natural resources into different countries without frontier zones left for free interaction or joint exploitation of natural resources. The issue was not helped by the OAU/AU position of leaving the colonial boundaries intact in spite of the overwhelming evidence that affected groups were bent to push for self-determination. Thus, it is not possible to generalize their causes or common solutions to them (Bujra 2002: 1-45; Asiwaju 1984: 1-4).

III. Changing Perspectives and Problems of Africa's Development

Closely related to the crisis of nation building in contemporary Africa, and equally problematic is the issue of economic development. As in the former case so with the latter; African post-independence political leaders *ab initio*, abandoned the initiative to their erstwhile colonial overlords. Thus decisions as to Africa's road to economic

development years after independence have continued to be made in Western capitals for implementation in Africa. Indeed, while African nationalists were obsessed with Nkrumah's admonition "to seek ye first the political kingdom and everything else will be added unto it", they were left with little option but to apply for 'experts' and 'specialists' from the metropolitan countries, who arrived post-colonial Africa with ready-made antidotes to undiagnosed ailments. It could not be expected that the solutions would be in Africa's favour. On the contrary, it was an opportunity to perfect what was begun under colonial rule of turning Africa into dependent peripheral societies (Amin 1972: 520, 524), the dumping ground for goods which the 'mother countries' would have found no outlets for or been bought more cheaply elsewhere, or as cheap sources of supply of raw materials for the industrial needs of Europe. The objective "was a resolute determination to oppose and if possible prevent any development, whether political or economic, that could seem likely to undermine Africa's subordination to the 'world market': that is, to the continued post-colonial primacy of the relationships of the colonial era" (Davidson 1992: 10, 38-54, 187-194). Thus, by opting for western development models, African leaders necessarily had to look up to the West for requisite skills and guidance, and thereby further subject their nation states to further neo-colonial domination.

It has been suggested that Africans at independence were not even equipped to appreciate the basic necessities for the achievement of the development of their countries. At any rate they were overwhelmed by the absence of skilled manpower, technological know-how, requisite infrastructure, organizational skills, and even the level of literacy demanded by Western-style development. The situation was not helped by the narrow base of the African economy, underpinned by monoculture. In the circumstance, African post-independence leaders had tended to put their faith in "foreign aid to achieve some degree of economic growth and development", and thereby returned to the well-beaten path which preceded independence. But in embarking on this path of reliance on development aid to solve Africa's economic problems, African leaders only further subjugated the continent to foreign, neo-colonial, economic and political control by facilitating the achievement of the foreign policy objectives of the donor countries. This is because foreign aid was an instrument for extending and protecting the Cold War interests and influences of the donor countries designed to keep non-aligned countries from communist influences while securing access to their natural resources. In fact, foreign aid does not take the form of cash flows to the recipient countries but comes in as equipment, raw materials, expert services, and food. On the other hand, much of the aid funds are spent directly in the donor country to pay for the equipment and other components of the development aid (Oyewole 1975: 17-25, Unger 2010).

Indeed, Africa's development has been stalled by red herrings regularly thrown across the trail in anticipation of whatever initiative may be taken by African leaders, and the emergent elite. In this connection, Africans content themselves with whatever new slogan that is churned out by the West which they uncritically accept as the magic wand for Africa's attainment of sustainable development. As a result, "development has remained illusory in Africa, which continues to accept new magic wands designed to distract her attention" (Mordi 2009b: 124-25). In 1980, African nations under the aegis of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), realized this fact of Africa's dismal development performance, declared that Africa had stagnated under the weight of development strategies packaged in Western capitals, and resolved to restructure the economic base of the continent through collective self-reliance. In effect, African leaders acknowledged that Western development strategies merely facilitated the mal-integration of Africa into the world system and voted for home grown solutions to Africa's development crisis. The crisis was characterized by continued generalized misery, political instability, huge external debts, socio-economic tensions and the embarrassingly huge gulf between Africa and the Western world in relation to the index of general well being.

Part of the problem is inherent in the vague and changing meaning of the concept of development. So confusing, elastic and eternal in scope and meaning is the term that not only is it "no longer invoked as often as in the past", even though it has continued to assume new forms – including the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) which is expected to halve worldwide extreme poverty by 2015, and even culminate in "global public goods" unaffected by market laws - but as Rist (2008) shows, "The question is whether its particularly reductive world-view is not behind the impasse in which most contemporary societies find themselves trapped" (viii – ix). Indeed development has been studied from so many diverse perspectives by different scholars that it has come to acquire different meanings to different people in different places, and at different times. Thus, although development is generally viewed as connoting change, there is often a tendency to confuse or even treat it as synonymous with modernization, since both emphasize linear 'progress', and are understood in the context of the standards of industrialized nations (Unger 2010: 4-9).

Without a clear meaning, it beats the imagination how development can be implemented without confusion. However, since the change in question is about man, and seeks to improve an existing state of being, it means that it is cumulative, has purpose, direction, and can be evaluated within a cultural context (Ikpe 1999: 2-3). In effect the direction of the change cannot be universally fixed, and does not permit the imposition of the cultural assumptions of one society or group on another. But this tendency to project and impose the cultural traditions of one society on another which is said to be inferior, backward, stagnant and in need of some shock to reject its cherished traditions and move up the scale to be 'civilized', 'Europeanized', 'Westernized', or 'modernized' is the bane of development, and partly accounts for its failure in Africa as it takes the aspirations of the people for granted. Ade Ajayi (*1999)* thus aptly observes that it was fashionable for Africa's colonizers to variously equate development

with the desire to be civilized, Europeanized, or Westernized until Africans objected to the ethnocentric connotations and goals embodied in those terms. As a result,

... westernization was replaced by modernisation,... Eventually, it was agreed that modernisation, by implying a dichotomy between the traditional and the modern, was faulty in its analysis. It was therefore replaced by the concept of development which was regarded as more universal... (12).

This confusion has had catastrophic consequences as reflected in policy somersaults and decline in the quality of life of ordinary people. African leaders base their development plans and visions on technical advice, theories, and policies packaged in Western capitals by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. In the process, Africa has been used as a guinea pig, and her condition has deteriorated from bad to worse. The failure of the policies in each case is blamed on African leaders. As Ade Ajayi (1999) surmises, the World Bank, in spite of its numerous policy failures and subsequent somersaults in its attempt to diagnose and solve Africa's economic problems has often turned around to blame African leaders for such monumental failures for which the concept of development has lost credibility, only standing like a ruin in the landscape of history:

Consider the various changes and variations in policy, and yet the World Bank has never had to admit to being wrong. From the initial emphasis on economic growth based on import substitution industries,...income distribution, transfer of technology, appropriate technology, modernisation, population control, poverty alleviation, integrated rural development, structural adjustment, devaluation, withdrawing state support from higher education, etc. (13).

The negative and indeed deleterious impact on Africa of the confusion and changing perspectives which characterize the concept of development , processes and strategies for applying it to bring about change was palpable by 1980, two decades both after the declaration of the Development Decade by President John. F. Kennedy of America and of Africa's independence in 1960 (Unger 2010: 1). The focus of development and the strategy for its actualization were such as to hinge success on the erosion and utter disregard for age old, holistic African indigenous knowledge system which had sustained pre-colonial African institutions, life, resources, equipped them to meet their immediate and future development needs, and enabled Africans to predict, anticipate and cope with dangers to their environment, while facilitating the transfer of natural "human capital to future generations" (Eyong 2007: 130-132). Such was the level of Africa's economic decline that the 1980's became known as Africa's 'lost decade'. In fact midway into the decade of the 1980's, "most Africans were as poor as or poorer than they were at the time of independence" (Meredith 2006: 368).

It is against this background that the adoption of the OAU Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) in 1980 can be appreciated. It symbolized Africa's loss of confidence in and rejection of Western packaged development strategies for the attainment of Africa's development. Africa's development was dismal to the extent that the economy by the late 1970's was characterized by burgeoning current accounts deficits which increased from U.S $1.5 billion in 1970 to U.S $8 billion in 1980, and a rising external debt profile of U.S $32 billion in 1979 from U.S $6 billion in 1970 with accompanying increased debt service burden which gulped 12 percent of export earnings in 1979 as against 6% at the beginning of the decade of the 1970's (Olaniyan 1988: 210-214). Yet, the Plan of Action designed to address this life-threatening challenge to Africa's survival did not address the issue of external dependence and debt. While it focused on autonomous process of growth, diversification and achievement of self-sustained, democratized development process which could accelerate regional integration, through the instrument of self-sustaining industrialization and collective self-reliance, culminating in the creation of an African Common Market by the year 2000, it still emphasized foreign financial assistance, to finance projects. Thus, the plan was to a large extent a recipe for descent into peonage. But by emphasizing self-reliance and formation of the African Common Market, it sent shivers down the spine of Western nations, which rejected it promptly through the World Bank's Accelerated Development in sub-Saharan Africa, also known as the Berg report, 1981.While blaming African governments for Africa's economic crisis, the World Bank upheld the free reign of market forces as the only road to Africa's economic development. African leaders beat a retreat, and in 1985 adopted Africa's Priority Programme for Economic Recovery (APPER), which identified agriculture as the centre piece of Africa's recovery programme, and emphasized the central place of foreign financial assistance and debt relief. They subsequently agreed to undertake Structural Adjustment and reform of their economies under which the international community pledged to provide sufficient resources and an enabling exogenous environment to facilitate its realization (Mordi 2009b).

However, one after the other African countries which adopted the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) sank deeper into crisis of unprecedented proportions. African professionals voted with their feet and sought greener pastures outside the continent, thus inaugurating the brain drain (Mohammed 1988; Igiebor 1988). Commodity prices plummeted to their lowest levels since the early 1950's leading to the reduction of total export earnings from U.S $64 billion in 1985 to U.S $45 billion in 1986. Africa's total debt from all sources amounted to U.S $200 billion in 1986, or 44% of exports of goods, and 55% of exports in terms of ratio of scheduled debt service to exports. Besides, rather than receive more financial assistance from the Western countries Africa lost more resources to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), amounting in 1986 alone to over U.S $960 billion, or "three and half times as much money to the fund as they received". Conversely, only half of the annual external financial requirements of U.S $9.1 billion, and U.S $14.6 billion debt servicing

requirements projected between 1986 and 1990 to sustain the 1986 United Nation's Programme of Action for Africa's Economic Recovery and Development (UNPAARED) were received. Africa lost U.S $50 billion dollars through the drop in commodity prices during the same period, with external debt spiralling to U.S $270 billion at the turn of the decade (Mordi 2009b: 128-129) and US $333 billion in 2003, thrice its 1987 level in spite of the fact that Africa's total repayment amounted to two times its initial debt between 1980 and 1996, and the highest among all regions of the world (AFRODAD 2003: 6).

Thus, the first decade of the Lagos Plan of Action ended in disaster for Africa. This was because of Africa's lack of capacity to chart an autonomous course of development or at least implement its own Plan of Action. In the face of the disaster, Western economists blamed the state for Africa's lack of development, discredited government intervention which they had previously advocated, and called for market-driven development strategy. They similarly discredited state ownership in favour of the private sector which they projected as more effective and result oriented. In return for their expert advice, the IMF/World Bank prescribed for Africa, currency devaluation, subsidy removal, reduction of tariff barriers, upward review of agricultural commodity prices, downsizing of the workforce, closure or sale of state owned enterprises, price deregulation, lifting of restrictions on foreign investments, and reduction of budget deficits and public borrowing. The corresponding hardship which resulted from the implementation of these prescriptions erupted in riots across Africa, but that notwithstanding, "foreign aid became an increasingly crucial component in African economies" (Meredith 2006: 369-377). The foreign aid went into privatization of public enterprises, by which African leaders sold off government assets to their cronies at ridiculously low rates, funded with similarly, ridiculously low-interest loans, including lengthy pay off periods. Privatization thus bred corruption, or simply enhanced it, with international donors calling for the liberalization and opening up of the political space in Africa as the solution.

The evidence suggests that Western insistence on foreign aid as an instrument for addressing Africa's economic crisis was driven by self interest inimical to Africa's development. Foreign aid is indeed a form of bail out for Western private money lenders who, since the 1980's, had resorted to lending more money to African countries which Western governments and finance institutions had at the same time forced to deregulate their economies and privatize or sell off public industries as a way of guaranteeing the private money lenders the full recovery of their loans. As a result of this development, debts arising from these loans owed by African governments increased from US $9.9 billion in 2009 to US $23.4 billion in 2012. This translated to huge profits for the Western private money lenders who borrowed at low interests in Europe and the United States of America and lent at higher rates to African governments. The consequence was that in spite of debt cancellations in recent years for Africa by Western creditor nations, Africa's debt had mounted again by 2013, while Africa lost more resources to the West even as it received less in any given year. It is estimated that whereas, the total Western aid to Africa annually was US $30 billion, Africa's net loss to the donor countries amounted to US $58 billion. Taken together with the fact that US $69 billion, or more than half of government aid, was spent by Africa on the purchase of goods and services predominantly from firms in the donor countries on the insistence of the latter, it becomes clear that the concept of aid as a manifestation of Western generosity to Africa is a myth. It is a fabrication not only designed to win the hearts and minds of Africans but also geared towards sustaining the equally invented image of Africa as a poor and corrupt continent while diverting attention from Western complicity in its perpetuation (Sharples et al, 2014: 5-10, 27-31).

IV. Contemporary Africa: The Challenge of Contemporary History

The confusion which characterized the conceptualization and approaches to the study of Africa's nation-building and development strategies was also reflected in the historical study of contemporary Africa. For instance, not too long ago, the Historical Society of Nigeria published its Dike Memorial Lectures held between 1999 and 2007 with the title, *Interrogating Contemporary Africa*. It is instructive, however, that nowhere in the 136-page book did the editors, and texts contained in it seek to clarify the concept of contemporary Africa, other than the editors' assertion that "the choice of the title" of the work reflected the different foci of the various lectures delivered during the preceding decade in memory of the legendary Prof Onwuka Dike, and that the "piece demonstrates how historians in plying their craft engage and contribute to the search for solutions to problems that challenge their country and continent" (Ogbogbo and Okpeh 2008: vii).

In fact, the book reflects the historians' suspicion for contemporary history for which its writing is abandoned to political scientists (Ade Ajayi 2008), as was demonstrated when UNESCO had to invite Ali Mazrui a political scientist to edit volume viii of its General History of Africa. Those who engaged in its study were treated with contempt, and ridiculed as engaging in mere journalism and contemporary political writing as distinct from the study of history. The latter is characterized by a sense of detachment, by which the historian maintains some distance from the subject matter under investigation that lay in the distant past. In spite of the canons of the discipline which are designed to ensure objectivity, the historian labouring under the weight of his self-imposed 50 years rule doubts that he can write history with detachment, when "he is an observer if not also a participant". By the canons of the discipline, he is also expected to consult all available sources on the subject he investigates. This becomes a herculean task when such data are still treated as confidential, and filed away by

those who are charged with keeping custody of them. Even when the sources are available the historian faces the pitfalls of bias and a danger to his own life if he were to write "frankly as his sources and his analysis of events suggest" since he stands the risk of stepping on toes of "powerful individuals, groups or even governments". Since archival sources are not declassified until after 50-years, interest in contemporary history has come to be driven not by any historiography value attached to it but the expectation that "funding may be more readily forthcoming" (Ade Ajayi 1998: 368).

Even more fundamental is the issue of periodization of contemporary history. What is the scope of the discipline? While some insist that contemporary history begins with the end of World War II in 1945, other authorities assert that the period after 1945 belongs to a phase which cannot yet be regarded as history, even as others will argue that African historical experience between the late nineteenth century and 1960 is better understood as "the period of transition from traditional to contemporary Africa" (Davis 1973: 398-400). Barraclough, while recognizing the significance of the end of the Cold War, the emergence of newly independent African states and the Non-Aligned Movement formed in 1961, is emphatic however that "The sort of writing which attempts to wring the last ounce of meaning out of developments such as the ideological conflict between China and U.S.S.R. or the political instability of new emancipated Africa oversteps the limits of historical analysis"; given that "the range of possibilities is still so great that any attempt to discuss them is bound to be hypothetical and speculative" (Barraclough 1967: 12-13, 37-41).

Clearly, an acceptance of this Eurocentric periodization implies that there is neither contemporary history nor contemporary Africa to study in Africa. On paper, historians have since taken a giant leap forward in their perspective of events. There is now the possibility of 'Eye-witness History', (Esedebe 1980: 111 & 129) whose purview would be accounts written by first hand observers of the major developments under study. In realization of this fact, the International Scientific Committee adopted the position that for history to remain relevant to the study and understanding of Africa, it must "cover the immediate past up to the 'present day'". Thus, the issue of what constitutes contemporary Africa was resolved. The International Scientific Committee identified the immediate past as 1935, the year of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The scope of the study of contemporary Africa therefore covers the period 1935 to the present day. As a renowned historian has observed, "The Italian invasion is not seen as an attempt to complete the colonial conquest of Africa, but as part of the contemporary struggle to liberate the continent not only from nineteenth century colonialism but also from contemporary neo-colonial economic, military and even political domination and threats of domination". The focus of its study is the rapid and intense change which has left African leaders with political initiatives at a time of rapid technological change in transportation and mass communication, a changing world into which Africa has been inserted (Ade Ajayi 1984). In effect contemporary Africa is under pressure and being shaped and influenced by the wider world and, in a state of flux, as is reflected in the effort to understand her and apprehend her problems.

The reality, however, is that Africa entered her post-colonial era with the myth fabricated by Western historians that she had no history. The myth was part of the contemporary thought in Europe that Africa was a *tabula rasa*, without history, with no accomplishment of note, steeped in barbarism, and eminent scholars, notably Hugh Trevor-Roper, the Regius Professor of History at Oxford, propagated the myth. The UNESCO General History may have constituted a notable refutation of that myth, but, it is doubtful that the myth arose despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, due to "inadequate skills of analysis" and "lack of African historians" (Mazrui 1984: 15, 23). Rather, the myth was taught deliberately as an instrument of psychological subjugation and control hinged on a similar myth of the White Man's Burden of bringing the benefits of civilization to the African, while ignoring the more fundamental burden which the African had to bear, to facilitate European exploitation of Africa (Morel 1969). European objectives were to place obstacles in the way of Africa's development. In the words of Davidson (1992):

In retrospect, the whole great European project in Africa, stretching over more than a hundred years, can only seem a vast obstacle thrust across every reasonable avenue of African progress… It taught that nothing useful could develop without denying Africa's past, without a ruthless severing from Africa's roots and a slavish acceptance of models drawn from entirely different histories (42).

V. Conclusion

Comprehending and apprehending contemporary African problems constitute a herculean task for the historian, given the nature and methodology of his discipline and of policy somersaults as well as changing perspectives of the issues which are at the heart of Africa's contemporary problems of dependency, nation building, development, conflicts, and contemporary terrorism. The issues continue to unfold and to assume new definitions, new forms and dimensions, and to require changing strategies for understanding and solving them. By implication, the processes which gave rise to them and the documents containing official policies upon which they were formulated and implemented are not yet fully available to the historian who in order to remain relevant must still develop a studied interest in them. What is clear is that Africa's development and solutions to her contemporary problems lie not with foreign aid, expert advice, or other imported ideas or formulae which are not motivated by altruistic interest but by sinister objectives which can only be inimical to Africa's progress. It is imperative therefore that any attempt to apprehend Africa's numerous contemporary problems, which have so far defied externally imposed solutions, must take into account the motivations of Westerners in providing them

and of Africa's contemporary peculiarities which cannot be meaningful outside the context of African historical experience.

Note:

This is a revised version of a Paper, 'Towards Apprehending Africa's Contemporary Problems: Changing Perspectives and the Challenge of Contemporary History' Presented at the Faculty of Arts 2014 International Conference on the Humanities and Africa's Contemporary Challenges, 23rd – 26th September, 2014, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.

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