

Africa – A Clash of Civilisations:

Traditionalism versus Modernity
in the 21st Century



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The world of the 21st Century is a very different place from that of the 20th Century. For example, for the first half of the 20th Century, Africa and much of Asia was under European colonial rule. Depending on the European power in question, economic and social development of their colonial possessions depended on European strengths and economic limitations, as well as European attitudes to race, which in turn drove what European powers were willing to do to educate and enrich the African and Asian people under their tutelage.

In the second part of the 20th Century, the world saw a fundamental shift in geopolitical power from the European continent to the North American continent. World War II broke the financial and military power of many European states, exhausting their ability to maintain direct rule over their colonies. Corollary to this was the proliferation of nationalist movements in Africa and Asia that had their genesis in the multitude of local armed uprisings against European rule. However, much of the narrative of modern nationalism in Africa and Asia was an American contrivance, borne of the rhetoric of President Woodrow Wilson (President from 1913-21) who championed the idea of national self-determination. While many nationalists in Africa and Asia used Wilsonian logic to argue their case for decolonisation, self-determination as described by Wilson was not a gift to the oppressed people of Africa and Asia; it was an instrument with which to break up the Central Power empires of Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey and justify the creation of a multitude of smaller ethnocentric states out of the wreckage of post-World War I central and southeast Europe. And while it took many African and Asian nationalists another generation to find their voice, when they did, the appeal to Wilsonian idealism was as strong, as it was inevitable.

But the dreams of post-colonial utopia failed to materialise. Often, African and Asian nationalists came from dominant cultural groups. They sought to fortify their interests at the expense of other tribal, clan, ethnic and sectarian minorities that lived within the same national boundaries. It was a sort of internal, post-colonial colonialism. National leaders spoke the language of ‘the people’ but in many cases acted as former European colonial officials, using the tried and proven method of divide and rule to keep control over restive provinces, and, when things got out of hand and threatened the central authorities – brute force was exercised. This situation did not improve during the period of the Cold War. In fact, ideology was a tool with which national elites experimented with command economies, overt repression of national minorities, and proxy warfare. They exacerbated existing internal national tensions and socio-economic weaknesses. In Asia, national elites rapidly developed strong post-colonial polities, hybridising Confucian, Islamist and military autocratic structures and traditions with European corporatism which, by the 1960s, generated a noticeably new economic dynamism in this region.

In Africa, things proved far more difficult. The 19th Century ‘Scramble for Africa’ saw the continent divided in ways beneficial to Europe, but not beneficial to the African people. The two largest colonial powers, Great Britain and France, essentially split the continent into two culturally dissimilar blocs – Anglophone and Francophone. Standing above the fray was independent Ethiopia, a country that, apart from a brief Italian military occupation in the 1930s, did not suffer as others from

direct European rule. German Africa was subsumed within the British sphere of influence after World War I; Belgian rule of the Congo ended in 1960, while Portuguese rule over its African holdings ended during the 1970s. Post-colonial Africa was a patchwork of different European influences, 'official' languages, economies, polities, and societies. The one thing all African states had in common was that central authorities, as brutal as some of them were, could not control their borders. Internal national infrastructure such as road and rail networks were poor, if they existed at all. Moving military units along pockmarked single lane roadways, most unsealed and vulnerable to the vagaries of weather and often neglected by national governments, meant that military units moved very slowly and inefficiently into crisis-prone areas, giving insurgents sufficient time to prepare a robust defence.

As post-colonial nationalism was an artifice, generally serving the interests of a dominant cultural group, the composition of African militaries reflected this truth. Ethnic and sectarian minorities were extremely under-represented in their ranks. A military or police force moving into an area inhabited by a significant national minority group was viewed not as an arm of a legitimate government, but as a tool of oppression. Poor governance in the capital and little commitment to civil society guaranteed that there was never a shortage of pretenders to the throne, ready to challenge incumbent presidents, prime ministers and dictators alike, many of whom came from the military. Units loyal to various African political challengers were usually the best equipped and the best trained and were in many instances required to stay close to the capital to protect or act on behalf of the political incumbent or political challenger.

This Cold War dynamic in Africa did not simply end with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it persisted well into the 1990s. But what started to have a positive impact was the rapid economic growth of China, India and the Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN) states. Collectively, the expansion of Asian heavy industries drove a boom in commodities necessary to fuel this expansion. Africa was not a big market for finished goods because of the high level of poverty throughout the continent, but it had commodities in abundance. Asian foreign investment altered the way the African elite saw its position in the world. No longer simply a place of bitter intra-state and inter-state conflict, repression and poverty, Africa became a destination for Asian extractive resource industries. This brought money into the continent which in turn precipitated a commitment by the African people to the preservation of political stability without which foreign investment would 'dry-up'. By the early 2000s, many protracted civil and inter-state wars ended. African polities opened themselves to the idea of liberalisation, though this was tempered by a conscious, or unconscious desire to preserve elements of the old order of tribal and clan affiliations. To this day the African old order does not see modernity as an advantage to nation, province or village. Certain selected technologies however do co-exist within the traditional African framework. The proliferation of mobile phones is an example of this. Other technologies such as the Internet, and road and rail networks are seen as threats to local tribal/clan authority. The fear that a better-educated, ambitious, outward looking people will displace older political customs and social norms by imposing 'national modernity' (also seen as foreign culture) on to their people, is real. Internal kinetic struggles – i.e., shooting wars between the

dominant cultural groups and cohabiting minority ethnic and cultural groups are gradually being replaced by civil ‘culture wars’ that are just as intractable. In many African states, this dynamic is reminiscent of the continuing culture wars in the West between the upwardly mobile and technologically savvy urban population and the less developed and more traditionally minded rural dwellers. But in the West, the urban and rural constituencies form part of a national whole, minor divergence notwithstanding. In Africa, this societal gap is more pronounced, with the concept of ‘nation’ residing largely in the national capital. Large country towns are not simply concomitant urban entities loyal to the national capital, but symbols of local resistance to the national governing elite. This is especially true in towns which are local agglomerations of minority ethnic and cultural power. Many modern African states possess within them a number of parallel communities, that is, people living side-by-side, often in a state of perpetual tension or open conflict with neighbouring minorities as well as the national political elite, drawn as it is from a hostile dominant cultural group.

The problem exacerbating this situation is, that the borders between the African states are poorly patrolled by national militaries or gendarmeries. Deploying military, police or gendarme units to boost the surveillance and monitoring of contentious border areas can be tantamount to taking hostile action against the local communities who live there. In order not to inflame internal ethnic and cultural unrest, national governments often take the line of least resistance and live with the poor security profile of border areas, rather than take proactive measures to improve border security. Notable exception to this rule is when the cash flow of the mostly foreign owned extractive industries is threatened by neighbouring governments, organised crime syndicates or terrorist cells – all seeking to exploit a government’s incapacity to enforce border protection. Then there is the wilful exploitation by the foreign owned multinational extractive industries themselves. The looser the connection between the national capital and the border areas, the easier these multinationals can manipulate local conflicts to drive a better bargain with national governments for the extraction of their resources. While not branded white collar or corporate crime, the fact that ‘corporate social responsibility’ has become a new buzzword on the African continent shows that this kind of manipulation was rife for decades and continues in spite of some laudable efforts at stamping it out.

A major issue within Africa, whether Anglophone, Francophone or anything in between, is the problem of borders and infrastructure. This problem has internal and external dynamics and therefore, attempts at solving these issues become exceedingly complex as ‘the answer’ requires domestic and international approaches. Another critical issue is the willingness, or lack thereof, by national governments to take the hard political and policy actions necessary to turn what basically amounts to a collection of artificially created post-imperial nation-states, into nation-states of substance. The first and arguably most difficult decision is how to quantify the legitimacy of existing borders. Considering the myriad of national boundaries, the question is, which country is the rightful home to a certain group of people thus divided? Could there even be a case that special ethnic homelands be created out of the existing state system within Africa, leading to the birth of ethnically/culturally homogeneous national identities? Surely such identities would be easier to administer.

Still, there remain the sectarian rifts between members of the same ethnic group that often lead to fratricidal killings – Christians versus Muslims, Shiite versus Sunni, Orthodox versus Protestant. Politics without a culture of civil society is open to dictatorship, oppression and civil war.

If we discount the ability to radically alter the contemporary international setting within Africa because too many domestic and international interests have invested in the political landscape, then we need to make the most out of this political landscape, as flawed as it may be. A historic example of creating something new out of an existing political order, was Prussian dominance over the German states during the 1860s. Yes, this dominance did come at the price of war, ruthless diplomatic manoeuvrings and some might even say injustice, but the fact remains that the unified Germany that we take for granted today, is a relatively recent political contrivance formed in 1871. Much of Prussian power came about from the realisation that creating a German homeland would be impossible without dealing a fatal blow to the traditional, agrarian aristocracy of Austria, then the most powerful state within the German Confederation. The Prussian Hohenzollern monarchy saw their success in exploiting modern civilian and military technologies – especially the dual-use technology of rail transportation. As a relatively small German state, the building of a rail network throughout the Hohenzollern kingdom effectively tied this kingdom together. So, from an administrative and commercial perspective, it allowed Berlin to exercise absolute control over its holdings and internal trade. Expanding this rail network into other northern German states brought these states under Berlin's political and economic influence, effectively dividing the German Confederation between a slower moving traditionalist Catholic bloc ruled by Vienna in the south, and Berlin effectively controlling a faster moving, largely Protestant northern German league. Focussing on equipping its army with the best weaponry a German state could manufacture, and coupled to its commitment to rail, Prussia could mobilise its military instrument faster and deploy it quicker than Austria. The Austrian military was much slower to adopt new military technologies and its commitment to rail transport was hampered by the fact that the Hapsburg monarchy was not just German, it was a multicultural empire. Rail was seen as a threat since it meant that people from the countryside could move into the cities and non-German people could move into German areas, upsetting the fragile social/ethnic/sectarian and cultural balances that existed within the Austrian Empire. When conflict between Hohenzollern and Hapsburg 'Germanies' finally took place in 1866 (during the Austro-Prussian War), the largely horse-drawn Hapsburg military was no match against the speed and power of Prussia. Prussia's victory guaranteed that German states such as Bavaria, wavering on the sidelines of Prussian ascendancy, joined Berlin, leaving Austria outside of the German economic miracle, and Vienna's fate sealed as an anachronistic European capital, doomed to social decay and strategic irrelevance. For Prussia, the coup de grâce came from its short war against the 'ancient enemy', France. The Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) was a demonstration of Prussian power and a further illustration that 'Prussian might' could not only displace a traditional aristocratic European power as personified by the Austrian Empire, but could also dispatch a more modern and powerful Western European global empire. It was the demonstration necessary to wield the North German Confederation (Norddeutscher Bund) into a Prussian dominated unified German state (January 18, 1871).

Many modern African states share characteristics that were fatal to Austrian success in a rapidly modernising world. They are agrarian, they are traditionalist in outlook, they favour a slower, more controlled up-take of modern technology. Much of this technology they see not as an opportunity for national competitiveness and strength, but as threats to vested political interests – these interests being tribal and clan-based. Yes, there are some generational issues that have and are impacting on this outlook. Younger, more technologically savvy ‘urbanistas’ are driving traditionalist Africa toward a more ‘tech-friendly’ way of conducting business. However, without road and rail networks necessary to ship goods and services from one part of a country to another, Africa’s development will continue to be hampered.

It can be argued that a role exists for multinational corporations to encourage African states’ uptake of modern technology and robust infrastructure. But there is no guarantee that the end result will favour the African people. Corporations run on profit maximisation, not on social welfare. All too often, multinational corporations exploit the inherent political, social and economic weaknesses of African states to get the best deal they can for their shareholders. A marriage between international capital and local politics in the African context, will tend to favour established tribal and clan elites who will do what they are told by multinational corporations. Innovative young people, struggling to find new meaning in public or private sector work, are therefore not an easy fit and more likely viewed as threats to the status quo.

Non-government Organisations (NGOs), while playing an important role in relieving the worst depredations of extreme poverty at the lower end of the African political and social orders, simply reinforce the fact that contemporary African political entities – autocratic, plutocratic, or keltocratic, are incapable of addressing the social ills that confront them within their own borders. The fact that a relationship between African states and NGOs exist, is not necessarily a social good when considering that the very real strands of dependency that are created between countries and aid agencies, basically means that established political elites who should be actively involved in relieving their own people’s poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy, can walk away from these domestic responsibilities for all manner of reasons. For example, the worst malnutrition exists in tribal, ethnic and sectarian areas of the country – away from the political leadership. In a developed country, this reasoning would be impossible to justify on moral or ethical grounds. In a developing country, excuses are made largely on the ground of these countries being poor. Ironically, the West argues passionately that the political upper class in developing countries cannot and should not be held to higher standards. One of the perennial excuses is that the independent countries that were forged out of the post-colonial era (1950s-70s) are not true reflections of African tribal, ethnic, clan or sectarian cartography. If these countries are largely illegitimate European artifices, then why should a particular tribal, clan or sectarian leadership group even pretend to care for the welfare of ‘other people’ with whom they cohabit the same borders? Or why should they care about sanctifying their own borders or treating the borders of neighbouring states with respect? Contemporary Rwandan and Ugandan interference in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is typical of this state of play, where the powerful tribal elite in control of Rwanda and Uganda seeks to profit from giving

succour to fellow tribesmen in the eastern DRC. Illegal commercial interests in mining and forestry allow Rwanda and Uganda to reap massive profits from enabling and supporting what are war crimes against ‘enemy tribes’ in the DRC, including the forces of the DRC.

Weak states, problems in the perceived legitimacy of borders, traditional rather than modern political constructs, all add up to an accumulated mess, whether in North, South, West or East Africa. Sitting on top of this mess is the African Union (AU). This organisation has been fighting an uphill battle to stabilise regions that threaten to tear themselves apart in a cascade of wars large and small, tribal and ethnic genocides, transnational crime and political/social injustice. Unfortunately, the AU does not have the critical mass of finance or personnel to put out all existing and potential brush fire inter and intra-state conflicts. In the current environment of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the European Union (EU), the AU’s chief backer, is justifiably more worried about issues closer to home, with key European states at the edge of economic default or social fragmentation. China, the other critical supporter of the AU, is concerned about its own domestic economy following the decline of its biggest market – the EU. Further complicating matters is that both the EU and China are supporting African stability for their own pragmatic reasons – resource security. This makes them highly competitive, rather than complementary centres of power on the African continent. Should Brussels and Beijing pool their stretched resources and find formal ways of co-operating on issues of mutual concern, more could be done to shore up the AU and the existing international balance of power in Africa. The fact that Brussels and Beijing are not natural strategic or economic partners but natural competitors, may see greater degrees of divergence between European and Chinese interests as time goes on. The Americans have their own issues. Africa with its multiplicity of weak national governance and poorly patrolled borders, is a haven for transnational criminals, pirates and terrorist cells. The current scramble for Africa is a scramble for influence. While primarily between the EU and China securing readily accessible minerals, agricultural products and other commodities, for the US, it is about stamping out terrorists and transnational criminal groups. Then there are the Gulf Arab states. Their interests lie in securing arable land from which they can produce the food they need for their growing populations on the Arabian Peninsula.

Perhaps a re-imaging of a handful of existing African states is what is needed. Hegemonic regional powers in their own right, driving modernisation in their respective regions. Francophone Africa could use Algeria as its engine for modernity. While a troubled country with a troubled past, Algeria as a country, has a relatively modern infrastructure by African standards – a base upon which it can build and expand. From a cultural standpoint Algeria is the largest and best developed Francophone African state. It has good relations with the rest of Francophone Africa – the problems with contemporary Mali notwithstanding. Similarly, Anglophone Egypt should be seen as the hegemon of Northeast Africa – its region encompassing Sudan and Libya. Ethiopia, the hegemon of the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, South Sudan), Nigeria, the hegemon of Anglophone West Africa, and South Africa, the hegemon for Southern Africa. If each of these hegemons were able to exercise a series of ambitious programmes for nation-wide literacy, education, poverty relief, and infrastructure modernisation and expansion, the obvious immediate benefits

would be for the hegemonic states. Their rising power would over time translate into overt influence in the development of the regions for which they are responsible. This may not arise out of purely altruistic reasons and perhaps neither should it. Pursuing politics through the lens of internationalist altruism has seen scarce resources being spread far too thinly across too many complex areas to make a *real difference*. Concentrating the direction of international aid and investment to empower a few African states with the drive to succeed, may be a better way to expend resources and gain a better return for investment. The problem associated with unchecked movement of people from Africa to Europe could be better contained by giving a handful of larger states the responsibility for their own internal and external affairs. If, as a consequence of this, life becomes easier for African people, their desire to leave their homelands might not be as strong as it is now. Historically, successful national development in Europe was not driven by altruism, but over time, altruistic motives and frames of reference were superimposed on national self-interest. Even if national self-interest is the primer for these potential hegemonies to start reshaping their parts of Africa, the long-term results may see a series of Prussian-style evolutionary leaps, which, if supported by targeted foreign investment, could net Africa a number of highly efficient centres of political power and commerce. The merit of this may see a group of empowered African states driving African development on their own terms rather than on the terms of foreign interests, whether state or non-state entities. Moreover, these new centres of political and economic power may form a Pan-African core from which a more robust and African-derived AU would emerge, emulating the sophistication and functionality of other multilateral institutions such as ASEAN.
