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**Political Systems and Underdevelopment in Africa (1957-2010)**

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**Abstract**

Africa is a creation of European powers following the scramble and partition of the continent by major European powers. The Berlin conference of 1884-1885 made it mandatory for these powers to provide effective administrative machinery in their areas of influence. At inception, each of them adopted separate system of administration ranging, from Indirect rule, Assimilation and Association policies. The emergence of Educated African Elites and its attendant Nationalistic feelings and agitation for independence led to various constitutional conferences both in Europe and in Africa. These led to the adoption of various Administrative system ranging from federalism, Regionalism, parliamentary and unitary systems of Government. From 1957, Independent African countries retained these system of Government institutionalized by their colonial masters. Some of these system of Government was strange to Africa since it was not based on their custom and tradition. These adopted system of Government has led to ethnicity, election violence, sit tight syndrome, military dictatorship, corruption and civil unrest. This paper examined in details the different system of Government across Africa since 1957. The paper critically assessed the level of underdevelopment across Africa as a result of these adopted system of Government. The paper also proffered solutions to Africa current underdeveloped state.

**Key Words:** Exploitation, kingdom, political system, underdevelopment

**Introduction**

African societies had a unique political system of Governance long before European colonialist penetrated the area. This is evidence in the formation and organization of these societies into various kingdoms and Empires. These kingdoms and Empires were either centralized, centralized medium size or the Acephalous communities (Vansina, 2005). These Empires and kingdoms were governed by monarchical Heads and appointed rulers. The existence of these institutions of governance entrenched peace and stability in the larger African societies.

Sadly, these structured indigenous institutions of governance were short lived. Through outright conquest, deposition and treaties, these Empires and kingdoms disintegrated (Sesay, 2014). The European colonial administrators retained some of these indigenous African institutions of governance and used it in administering their conquered territories. This is a clear indication that African political systems were unique in theory and in practice. Through the European policy of Indirect rule, African political institutions and culture were retained.

The Europeans introduced other political systems during the period of colonialism. Such systems included Assimilation by the French, Regionalism, federalism, Republicanism, parliamentary and the presidential system. Also, economic systems such as capitalism and communism were also introduced.

The Africans on realization of the exploitative nature of European imperialism agitated for independence. The independence struggle culminated into political independence of African countries beginning from the mid 1950's (Eluwa et al 1996, p. 204). Before handing over to the Africans the Europeans structured the political system in such a way that, African countries and leaders depended on them politically and economically. Some scholars refer to African independence as flag independence (Ekpe 2007, p.192). Therefore, African Leaders retained the European political and economic system and depended on them for capital and direction in running the affairs of Government. The implication of all these is the fact that the Europeans were indirectly controlling the economy and resources of African countries (Okereke & Ekpe, 2002, p.109).

The continuous dependence on Europeans for capital, manufactured goods, advice and aids is the cause of underdevelopment in Africa. The aim of this article is to highlight the fact that European political and economic system is the cause of African underdevelopment, this article is divided into the following sections. Section one is the introduction, section two focuses on the African political system while section three examines the European political system. Selection four examine the impact of political systems on the development of Africa while section five summarizes and conclude the study.

### **Indigenous Political Systems in Africa**

Before the European conquest, African societies had a well organized system and institution of governance. This enhanced stability and cohesion of the larger African communities. These indigenous systems and institutions were developed by the Africans for the governance of the society for many years. There are basically three broad governance systems during the pre-colonial era. These are the centralized kingdom and Empires, centralized medium size kingdom and the widely dispersed empires and chiefdoms (Vansina, 2005).

The centralized kingdoms were large Empires governed by a king who had absolute powers. The kings operated vast court systems with grandeur. Court officials, bureaucrats and vassal Heads held their position in trust for the king and security of tenure and life depended on loyalty to the king who was a supreme leader. Example of such kingdom, included those in ancient Egypt in North Africa, the Nubia and Axum in East Africa, Mali and Shongai in West Africa, Shona and the Zulu in Southern Africa. There was outright fusion of powers where the king and his court performed executive, legislative, and judicial functions. They also had a very unique bureaucratic and tax system which brought invaluable economic and financial resources to the kingdom. There were significant similarities between the African kingdoms and the European and Asian Kingdom. It is noted that all these kingdom operated absolute monarchy e.g. Mansa Musa of Mali, Sundiyata Keita and Sonni Ali of the Shonghai Empire. They all claimed divine right to kingship just like their counter part in Europe (Vansina, 2005). It is quite unfortunate that these well structured indigenous

centralized kingdoms did not stand the test of time. These kings and large Empires were later conquered through treaties and deposition by the European colonialists.

Centralize medium kingdoms is another governance system in the pre-colonial African society the medium size kingdom were urbanized and their kings exerted great powers. Law making implementation and adjudication powers were vested in the hands of the kings in council. The royal elites controlled access to very important economic resources e.g. land and revenue from tax. They also controlled the military and security apparatus of the kingdom. Example of the centralized medium size governance system include Oyo and Ife Kingdom in Western Nigeria, the Ashanti Empire in Ghana, the Buganda and Bunyoro kingdom in Uganda and Zulu Kingdom in Southern Africa (Vansina, 2005).

The Third and the last governance system in pre-colonial Africa was the one operated in stateless or acephalous societies which also had a measure of centralized administrative structures. Since these areas did not have a king, Chief or clearly centralized ruling authority, they were regarded as acephalous or stateless societies. This system operated more at the village level where leadership was rotational instead of hereditary. There was collective decision making and implementation of decisions. A leader was appointed based on age. Usually the oldest person in a community was appointed the leader. This mode of enthronement gave room for wider consultation before decisions were made. There was separation of powers since power was not concentrated in the hand of a single individual. Therefore, there were checks and balances in the system. Power was defused among the various units of the community which included the council of Elders, age grades and secret societies. Executive, legislative and judicial functions were defused among these units in the community. This system was common among the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria, Baoule, Dida and Bete in South Eastern Cote d'Ivoire, the Noer and Dinka Gnoc in South Sudan, the Massai in Kenya, the Nyjakwa in Tanzania and Tunga in Zambia (Sesay, 2004).

Because of the efficiency of some of this indigenous governance system in Africa, the colonial authorities retained them and utilized their authority in their sphere of influence. For example areas with a centralized system of governance and sophisticated bureaucratic tax system were used by the colonial authorities in the Governance of their territory. Example of such areas included the Hausa in Northern Nigeria etc. Indirect rule as the system was called by the colonialists retained the status of the royal kings for their own interest. However, the system actually weakened opposition to colonial rule.

### **Colonial Political Systems in Africa**

The efficacy of African indigenous political systems of governance prompted European colonialist to adopt or retained the system and used it in administering their territories. Various names were given by the Europeans to describe these indigenous political systems. The British termed it Indirect Rule while the French structured it and referred to it as Assimilation, the Belgian and the Portuguese called it paternalism (Eluwa et al 1996, p. 187).

Indirect rule means ruling through an African ruler. The system was adopted by the colonialists to exploit Africans especially in the area of taxation. Northern Nigeria and Uganda which had a well structured centralized authority and tax system recorded huge success for the colonialist on the operation of indirect rule. However, the system turned out to be a doom for the British in areas where there was no centralized authority and means of tax collection. This was noticed in Eastern Nigeria among the Igbo whose system of governance is usually referred to as stateless or acephalous.

The French adopted the Assimilation policy to exercise authority over its areas of influence. The French policy unlike the British indirect rule system was meant to exterminate completely African culture and indigenous political institutions. The aim of the French policy of Assimilation was to

completely entrenched French culture on the indigenous African communities. The policy encouraged Africans to produce raw materials to feed the French industries. Natural resources of French colonies were exploited greatly to enhance French competition with other European industrial powers. The policy of Assimilation which was a 'pact' made French colonies to rely on France for all its economic needs. Thus they were unable to engage in any foreign trade with any other country except France. France became the God of trade for their African colonies which even till today works like a generational curse(Tsiwah, 2017). The French equally regarded African culture and political system as barbaric, fetish, uncivilized, and ungodly. That was why they sowed and entrenched French culture on the Africans. The French culture was regarded as saint, godly and divine. The effect of all these was subjugation and subjection of Africans to forced labour without wages. Example include those that were conscripted into the Army as assistant(Tsiwah, 2017).

The Belgian and the German paternalism also degraded Africans and their cultures. Therefore, they regarded Africans and their culture as barbaric and uncivilized and should be change. Their so called aim was to civilized the people of Africa. Their economic aim resulted in subjecting Africans into forced labour and forcefully took over their land. The African economy was controlled by the European colonialist in such a way that even after independence these countries still depended on them for capital, diplomatic relations and security.

### **Post Independence Political System**

The obnoxious system of administration adopted by the Europeans colonialists ignited anger, resistance and opposition from the people of Africa mostly by the educated elites who returned from Europe after their studies. The educated elite criticized administrative policies of the colonialists. This included the exclusion of educated elites from the Native Authority System under the excuse of preserving traditional institution. They were also excluded from the Governor's Executive Council and legislative council. The educated elites resented these states of affairs. In the economic sphere, the colonial administrators were exploitative. They imposed forced labor and forced the people to pay tax heavily. They forcefully took over land from the people and distributed to the Europeans who did not have any farming experience. They also give loans to the white farmers through tax derived from the indigenous people. The educated elite kicked against all these anomalies (Eluwa et al 1996, p. 194).

The Nationalists struggle and agitation led to decolonization and independence of African countries right from 1950's. The colonialist prepared and structured African countries for independence. The structures laid down by them resulted in what is termed 'flag independence' since the newly independent countries still depended on them for economic support and capital for investment even till today.

At inception African countries relied on existing political structure laid down by the colonial authorities instead of devising a political system and ideology that suit them based on their history and economy. Initially, they operated the parliamentary system of Government model after the British and the French. Parliamentary system is a democratic governance of a state where the executive derives its legitimacy from its ability to command the confidence of the legislative branch, typically the parliament ([http://www.britannica.com/topic/parliamentary democracy](http://www.britannica.com/topic/parliamentary%20democracy)). The Executive is also accountable to the parliament. In parliamentary system, the office of the Head of state is different from that of the Head of Government. The monarch e.g.the king or queen is the Head of State in countries that operates the monarchical system while the Head of Government is the Prime Minister. Parliamentary system is the dominant form of government in Europe with thirty six of its fifty sovereign state operating it.

The parliamentary system is purely British in origin exported to other countries especially members of the commonwealth of Nations including African countries. One of the greatest de-merit of parliamentary system is the possible danger of personality clash or conflict of interest between the Head of state and the Head of Government. The division of power between the Head of state and Head of Government is strange to African societies where community or political leaders are used to wielding enormous political powers. This type of conflict of interest manifested between Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (President and Head of State) and Alhaji Tafewa Balewa, the prime Minister and Head of Government in the first republic. The two personality disagreed over the conduct and outcome of the December 30, 1964 federal election. Also, in September, 2010, Prime Minister of Somalia Omar Abdurashid Ali Sharmarke resigned from office due to personal disagreement between him and president Sheik Ahmed. Defending his reasons for resignation, Sharmarke explained “after seeing that the political turmoil has caused security threat I decided to resign to save the country”(http://spot.com.ng/2015/merits and demerits of parliamentary system.html).

African leaders in the quest to adopt western democratic system also experimented the presidential system of Government. Presidential system is a democratic system in which the President is both the Head of State and Head of Government. The executive is different from the legislative arm of Government. It has disadvantages which make its usage very cumbersome. The personnel involved in the running of the affairs of Government with duplication of offices in the federal, state and local government areas coupled with a bicameral legislature make the system very expensive to operate. So much money is spent in the running of the affairs of Government to the detriment of infrastructures and amenities. There is also ethnic agitation and protest which usually culminate in insurgency and violence in the country. Similarly, some ethnic groups usually agitate for secession e.g. Biafra in Nigeria and Eritrea in Ethiopia.

During the period of Cold war (1947-1991), African countries were embroiled in military coup d'état sponsored by either of the then super powers, united state and the defunct Soviet Union. This resulted in the military taking over power and controlling the machinery of government. The period between 1960 and 1970 and slightly beyond is usually regarded as the decade of coups in Africa. Once it started in one country, it became like a wild African bushfire<sup>17</sup> spreading through the entire continent at an alarming high speed. It started in Congo-Kinshasa in 1960 when General Mobutu seized power temporarily. Later, it took place in Togo in 1963 when President Olympio was killed in the process. Nigeria experienced the first military coup in 1966 when Gen. Johnson Aguiji Ironsi took over power from the civilians of the first republic (Madiebo:1980:15). Since then, there have been coup and counter coup in nearly all parts of Africa including Nigeria until 1999 when the military finally handed over power to the civilians. The military regimes usually record scores of corruption and misappropriation of public funds.

The military Government transition to democracy is usually full of intrigues and deception. Some African countries operate a one party system during their transition to civil rule while some dictators transform themselves to civil rule and sit tight in power for many years (Sesay, 2014). Example of such African leaders include Late Col. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Late Sgts. Samuel Doe of Liberia, Late Mobutu Sese Seko of Democratic Republic of Congo, Late Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo and presently President Paul Biya of Cameroon and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (Sesay, 2014). Most of these sit tight African leaders are corrupt and thus lead their countries to a state of underdevelopment (Rodney 2002, p. 21, Ogbeyi, 2012).

### **The Impact of Political System on Africa's Underdevelopment**

Underdevelopment is a term usually used to describe countries rated as third world countries. African countries are classified under the third world. Underdevelopment is a term used to describe

the level of backwardness or poverty in Africa, Latin America and some part of Asia (Okereke, Ekpe 2002:13).

This article is of the view that the system of governance inherited from the colonialist is the cause of underdevelopment or poverty in Africa. During the period of colonialism, the political system operated by the colonialist was meant to exploit and degrade their colonies for their own benefit. Imperialism and colonialism are the two major deterrent to Africa's development. The colonialist divided Africa into regions or states for administrative convenience. In the course of creating these states natural boundaries and ethnic groups were not considered. Therefore, people with the same cultural background were split and merged with other ethnic groups to form a state or country (Nwabueze:2010:169). The effect of this was post independent conflict and crisis in the continent. Therefore African countries instead of focusing on development strategies engaged in conflict management, conflict resolution and peace building strategies in countries ravaged by civil wars eg Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia etc. The effects of these civil wars are destruction of lives and properties, poverty, out-break of diseases and epidemic, refugee problem, underdevelopment and the total collapse of the economy of such countries. Nearly all sections of Africa has experienced civil wars. There had been civil wars in the following African countries- Congo, Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, Chad, Mali, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda Burundi etc.

Also, the policy of Indirect rule adopted by the British was a calculated strategy to use constituted warrant of Authority to forced the people to pay tax. The tax payers money was rather given to white farmers as loan. While the European farmers operated mechanized farming, the indigenous farmers practiced subsistence farming. The system forcefully evicted the indigenous African people of their land. The white farmers had large hectares of land for mechanize farming while the indigenous farmers had fragmented portion of land and operated subsistence farming using local and traditional tools or implement for cultivation. This has led to underdevelopment of African countries who are still depending on European industrial powers for food e.g. rice, chicken and manufactured goods.

The parliamentary and presidential system of Government laid down by the British for African countries is another cause of underdevelopment in Africa. The system especially the presidential system is too expensive to operate. The system of Government operate three levels of Government which include the Federal, State and Local Government (Appadorai: 1968:326). The system also operates a bicameral legislature in the federal and unicameral legislature in the states. There is also federal and state civil service, commissions and parastatals. There is also the Army, police, Navy, Air force, civil defense and other paramilitary agencies. All these require much money to run an administration. Therefore much money is spent on the running of the affairs of Government to the detriment of infrastructures and amenities in the country. Also in an attempt to meet up with the demands of running the affairs of Government, provision of infrastructures and industrialization, the Government of most African countries obtained loan from foreign banks, International monetary fund (IMF) and other international financial donors. Due to corruption and embarking on white elephant project from the said loan became trapped in debt crisis. They were unable to repay the debt and the interest on the loan was accumulating into billions of Dollars (Demson:2013:353). Also, the white elephant industrial complex were not completed e.g. the Ajakuta steel project in Nigeria. As a result of indebtedness, the economy of most African countries under the debt crisis had collapse completely to a stage where government was unable to pay salaries and therefore had to retrench workers.

The presidential system has also led to emergence of majority and minority ethnic groups as a result of creation of regions and state (Agbaje:2003:30). The minority ethnic groups faced marginalization from the federal Government. In an Attempt to protest on the marginalization has led to tension, violence and insurgent activities e.g. in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

### Conclusion

This article has critically analyze underdevelopment and crisis in Africa through the various political systems operated in Africa right from the period of kingdom, empires, colonial and post colonial era. The political systems devised by the colonialist were meant to exploit Africans for their own benefit. The system was exploitative and oppressive. The British adopted the policy of indirect rule while the French operated Assimilation and the Belgian and Portuguese operated paternalism during the period of colonialism. During these periods, Africans were dispossessed of their land, forced to work for the Europeans and similarly paid tax to the European over lords. They regarded indigenus African productions as barbaric and illicit while encouraging the indigenus people through advert and other grandeur to patronize anything manufactured by the Europeans.

Parliamentary and presidential systems of government were handed over to African countries by the European colonialist. The systems especially the presidential system is very expensive to operate as a result of duplication of offices and the existence of more than one level of Government. So much money is spent in running the affairs of government to the detriment of infrastructures and industrialization. In order to meet up the demands of running the affairs of government, provision of amenities, health care and job creation, some African Heads of Government borrowed money from foreign banks and other donor agencies. Increase in the interest rates, white elephant project and corruption plunged African countries into a web of debt crisis. This resulted in inflation, lack of provision of amenities, HIV/AIDs pandemic, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, infectious diseases, and moribund industries.

This article is of the view that after independence, African countries would have devised a system of governance that suit her history, culture and level of resources instead of towing the line of the west. Parliamentary and presidential systems are western political system. These political systems suit the West in terms of her history, culture and resources. It is high time African countries organized a conference to discuss, deliberate and devised an African political system that will reduce spending on governance, reduced number of personnel and placed more emphasis on industrialization, manufacturing, job creation, technology and promotion of the welfare of the citizens.

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