

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: INTERNAL BOTTLENECKS AS WELL AS THE RELEVANCE OF COMTE'S LAWS

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Abstract

Whatever adjective – poor, undeveloped, underdeveloped, developing, emerging, or transitional – which theorists delight to use to position Africa in the contemporary world, no one can deny the appalling socio-economic indices from Africa since political independence to date. The abundant natural and human resources in the continent have been misused or misapplied while some are dormant. This has placed majority of the citizens at the lower rung of the socio-economic ladder while the minority use few deceitful statistics to paint a false picture or fall back on colonialism as the cause of the problem. The situation is complicated by some unscientific positions which resurrect Auguste Comte's law of three stages which a review shows the law places Africa in the first stage of sociological development. African nations therefore remain in the group with the white-washed phrase, 'transition societies.' This paper uses desk research method to analyse the status quo. Application of Comte's three stages in national development process does not appear to have a parallel in literature to date. The paper recommends a research agenda to determine new concepts of development for policy purposes and indeed development aid; advocacy for new development thought and action in line with Comte's scientific stage; grafting of local practices seen to be development inducing; and emphasis on education for development.

Keywords: Development, Colonialism, Governance, Sociological Stage, Education

Introduction

Apata (2022) submits without equivocation that Africa was poorer in 2022 than in 1972 when Walter Rodney published his famous work, "How Europe underdeveloped Africa." Apata (2022) highlighted Rodney's discomfort with the activities of the internal bourgeoisie in Africa and accused them of complicity with the West made worse by unmitigated internal corruption. While Perelman (2011) describes the situation of Western-induced setbacks in Africa as 'stunting of potential' and Rodney called it 'underdevelopment,' Apata (2022) describes it as 'suffocation' of the continent. Given 2024 indices, African countries operated at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder compared with countries of the West and some countries in Asia. Walter Rodney had blamed Europe for the early activities designed to keep Africa down and more than fifty years after his publication, much of Africa has remained poor.

Modern economic thought can be traced to Adam Smith in his 1776 book, *The Wealth of Nations* but deep and sustained worries about growth and development of societies took new dimensions after the Second World War. Theories along with models were spun which gave birth to a body of knowledge known as development economics. The theories and models were without doubt primarily aimed at societies where development indices fell

below expected levels while some which looked promising were in fact, stagnant. Unfortunately, several countries in Africa and to some extent Asia and Latin America till date lag behind close neighbours. The reasons are many and include resistance to change noticeable in internal structures such as extant systems and cultures; application of one size fits all approaches to the problem of growth and development; deep and widespread corruption; capacity in terms of management; as well as the low level of techniques, technology, and productive resources. Aside from complex economic reasons such as aggregate demand, Spence (2015) mentions “quality of government” which in our opinion includes society-wide endemic and crippling corruption. This is captured by Dang and Pheng (2015) in a detailed review of the concept of economic development as well as development thought:

Development issues are complex and multifaceted. There is no one single pathway for economic development that all countries can pursue. In the long term, the economic development process requires changes in policies to account for new emerging factors and trends. Designing these economic development policies also need to take into consideration the social, cultural, political systems and institutions as well as their changing interaction over time in a country (p.22).

The poor economic indices in many underdeveloped countries should be a source of worry in an interdependent world. The worry deepens on the backdrop of availability of human and natural resources, substantial flow of development assistance and application of tested approaches cum models. The situation calls for new thinking to determine the status of each country or society along with new models to attempt remediation. It is pertinent to note that in some countries some parts grow fast, some are slow, while some remain in all intents and purposes stagnant. Another compelling reason for a new thinking relates to the penchant of post-colonial apologists to attack past colonial powers when independence has given developing countries the capacity to rise above poverty. Some African governments through their public relations personnel, print, and electronic media use colonialism to justify unsatisfactory performance in office. Walter Rodney in his work, “How Europe underdeveloped Africa” published in 1972 can be said to have led this trend. Rodney’s work was an early and central work on reasons for slow development of African countries. Apologists continue to use colonialism as excuse for the near-permanent underdevelopment of most African countries. But Ubong (2013) believes reliance on buck-passing initiated by Rodney (1972) should be discarded. We argue that the first move towards human growth from individual to corporate level lies in acceptance of existence of problems followed by direct, personal effort to solve them rather than a permanent look backward whereas the solutions lie in front.

Above issues informed this paper which reviews the economic situation in Africa from two perspectives. First, should the current backwardness of most African nations be blamed on colonialism and specifically on pre-independence colonialism? Second, can another issue such as the tight hold to non-scientific ways be an important contributor to Africa’s backwardness? An attempt at the first question makes use of economic data as well as the role post-independence managers of African countries have played. The second question uses Auguste Comte’s laws of three stages as basis for analysis. This paper does not conclude that operation at Comte’s first stage explains everything about slow growth of

African countries. It canvasses attention on the issue as one of the reasons for slow growth of African societies witnessed up to the second decade of the 21st century.

African Economic Outlook

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) over the years has provided economic data which allow for international comparisons of national economies. Table 1 presents a summary of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which is the most common index of development of countries and as in the table, continents. In 2024, Asia led the world with 36.8% of World GDP with China dominating on the continent. North America came second with 30.2% but the United States as a country approximated the continent. Europe, Africa's past colonial masters took 3rd position with 24.4%. Thereafter a dramatic fall follows with Africa accounting for 2.7% of World GDP. Oceania which includes the developed countries of Australia and New Zealand accounted for 1.9% of World GDP.

Table 1

Comparative Gross Domestic Product (Nominal) Data Estimates

Rank	Continent	GDP (\$b) 2022	Share (%) 2022
1.	Asia	38,435	36.8
2.	North America	31,603	30.2
3.	Europe	25,440	24.4
4.	South America	4,100	3.9
5.	Africa	2,858	2.7
6.	Oceania	1,979	1.9
7.	Unaccounted	62	0.1
	World	104,476	100

Source: International Monetary Fund, 2024.

Consolidated data are difficult to source on the situation in 1972 when Walter Rodney wrote his path-breaking book but another picture can be seen based on selected countries in the seven continents. Table 2 shows GDP (Nominal) by 2024 as released by International Monetary Fund for 1972, 2024, and projections to 2029 in millions of US dollars.

Table 2

	\$'000		
Country	1972	2024	2029
Algeria	7,193	266,780	3,058,227
United Arab Emirates	2,173	527,796	4,661,465
India	71,735	3,937,011	6,436,653
China	111,589	18,532,633	24,842,337
Australia	59,269	1,790,348	2,208,401
United Kingdom	162,369	3,495,261	4,661,463
United States	1,225,000	28,781,083	34,950,012
Nigeria	16,829	252,738	287,850
South Africa	20,753	373,233	442,857

Source: Compiled from IMF data, 2024

52 years after “How Europe underdeveloped Africa” and 64 years after Nigeria as the “giant of Africa” secured political independence, the country’s GDP trails behind that of United Arab Emirates which had just 12.9% of Nigeria’s GDP by 1972. A dramatic situation can be seen in 2024 data when Nigeria’s GDP trailed that of UAE and in fact became 47.88% of UAE’s. Meanwhile the ruling class in Nigeria without shame head for Dubai to buy property, host birthday parties, and enjoy rest after what they claim to be hard work in their offices. Both countries were colonized (if the term ‘protectorate’ can approximate colonial status) and both countries run on crude petroleum as the dominant source of foreign exchange. Maybe the rush by Nigerian power brokers to buy property in UAE should be blamed on colonialism after all, Europeans taught Nigerians to buy properties at Abu Dhabi and Dubai and host birthday parties at Dubai. UAE’s GDP was 10.5% of South Africa’s in 1972 but by 2024, South Africa trailed behind UAE with the former’s GDP at 70.7% of that of the latter. Nigeria and South Africa lead the continent in development statistics.

The situation generates more worry when projected figures from IMF show countries in Africa going at the speed of snails. While UAE is expected to grow by 966.3% between 2024 and 2029, IMF analysts hope Nigeria will grow by 13.9% and South Africa by 18.8%! Algeria has better prospects but worries are more about sub-Saharan Africa. India, a poor country, is expected to grow by 63.5% between 2024 and 2029. It is worthy to note that India’s GDP grew by 5,388% between 1972 and 2024 while that of Nigeria, at present Africa’s biggest economy, grew by 1,502%. Nigeria’s mass transit system is at present dominated by Bajaj and other tricycles known in the country as Keke. The dominant tricycles imported into and used in Nigeria are from India. As Laker (2024) reports, India has been projected to overtake Japan to become the world’s third largest economy by 2027 ahead of Germany in Europe at present in the fourth position.

In 2023 the Federal Government released ₦160 million (\$215,128.20 as at October 2023) to each federal legislator to buy SUVs for ‘monitoring’ and tour of constituencies. For each of the legislators the payment for purchase of a new car would have met the salaries of about 5,333 people for one month for those on the national minimum wage of ₦30,000 (\$64.57). The bicameral legislature has 109 Senators and 360 members in the House of Representatives. The allocation for the 469 legislators would have met the minimum wage of 1.9 million workers for one month or 159 thousand workers on the national minimum wage for one year. Of considerable importance, the money went to importers of SUVs when Innosin Motors assembles the same category of cars in Nigeria. The Federal Government kept factories in Europe, Asia, and the Americas active while the local equivalent lost out. As a matter of fact, Nwachukwu (2023) reported that a Senator said the legislators do not want locally assembled SUVs. ₦56.7 billion to import cars for people who operate from their homes and act as rubber stamps for the Executive arm in a country where several citizens slid into absolute poverty with the entry of a new Federal Government should be seen as unconscionable. The World Bank (2023) indicated a slide of about 10 million more Nigerians into extreme poverty in 2023.

Should Colonialism continue to bear the Blame?

A 32-year old musician Damini Ogulu known worldwide as “Burna Boy” released a video on part-history of Nigeria. The video blamed colonialism for the near-permanent state of underdevelopment of Nigeria. This kind of activity plays well into the rhetoric of politicians and western powers including China eager for voices from within to give justification for stagnation of Africa and to cover up for contemporary misdeeds. If the uneducated

traditional rulers of the pre-independence days signed off the future of Africa, should the highly literate class of today sustain such scandal? The 'leaders' continue to sign off the present and have gone further to sign off the future probably in the mistaken belief they have stashed up enough to cover their children and their grandchildren. One of the country's long term sources of development funds may witness a major change in approach to its management in the near future as indicated by Kennedy (2024). Crude oil, provider of about 95% of the country's foreign exchange earnings, will be traded in the futures market. New governments take office to find the dominant source of public revenue, a wasting asset, used up by previous administrations!

Another area of waste has been national pension funds. Pension provides long term, stable, predictable, and almost cost-free funds which should be employed in long term development projects. Unlike South America where pension funds play a significant role in development finance, Nigeria's billions in pension funds are managed in a secretive manner. Few African voices have spoken out against the use of colonialism as excuse for Africa's slow growth. Mapuva and Chari (2010) lamented on it while Olagunju (2024) in a piece titled, "Britain is Nigeria's 'bad' teacher" has bemoaned Nigeria's slow growth from the perspective of political system in use in the country at present. While established reasons for stagnation continue to dog the steps of African countries, a not-so obvious reason needs be reviewed for possible inclusion in future development models. One of such reasons is closeness of Africans to the supernatural which they employ to explain events and to operate their lives and systems at individual, corporate, and national levels. This issue is discussed hereunder starting from the conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework – Comte's Laws

Comte's law of three stages leans on the intellectual and regards thoughts and indeed visions and dreams as harbingers and catalysts of action. Auguste Comte, French sociologist and philosopher identified intellectual stages which societies pass through in their evolution. In societies at the theological or first stage, most things in individual and community life are read from the religious perspective. Concepts and issues are regarded as imbued by magic which implies the interplay of forces associated with the supernatural such as gods, spirits, and ancestors. In the birthplace of modern philosophy – Athens in Greece - this orientation existed given the famous quote by Thales, the earliest pre-Socratic philosopher to the effect that, "All things are full of gods," (Cohen, Curd, & Reeve, 2011). Thales took such transcendental position despite his inclination towards natural philosophy.

The second stage in the series was analysed by Comte in the metaphysical perspective. This stage does not appear to be too different from the first beyond uncoupling to make human thinking separate from ethereal principles as in the case of the occult. Conceptualizations on first causes, ultimate reality, and related issues dominate thinking even when, in Comte's opinion, they do not lead to acceptable explanations of nature and society. Plato's 'forms' which related to essences in the outer realm as original copies of what obtains in the physical plane can be associated with this second stage. In Nigeria this concept reverberates as far as pulpits as explanations for most things which take place in the society from the health of individuals to corporate failures and national malaise.

The third and final level Comte christened the positive stage which we can sum up in the word 'science.' Science has its basis on the scientific method with the characteristics of observation, experimentation, drawing of conclusions, and replication. The modern world with the dramatic developments is the child of the third stage with positivism as the major

operational tool. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (2021) has confirmed the role of science in development. It can be argued by deduction that the obverse holds – the low level of scientific knowledge and use of science in much of Africa has contributed to the slow socio-economic development in the continent.

Between the Theological and Positive Stages

Apart from ancient Greece where Comte's second stage appears to have been more relevant, most countries now regarded as developed skipped the second stage. Science, run on the principles of the scientific method has been the driving force behind the rapid socio-economic developments in countries regarded as developed. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (2021) quotes a statement by Professor Charles Weiss of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University on October 5, 2001 as follows:

It is science alone that can solve the problem of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and deadening customs and traditions, of vast resources running to waste, of a rich country inhabited by starving people. Who indeed can afford to ignore science today? At every turn we have to seek its aid. The future belongs to science and to those who make friends with science.

Developing countries have no need to reinvent the wheel at this point in human history. They need re-engineering of their thinking processes from the theological to the positive. Scientific and entrepreneurial orientation may as well be the big push conceived by Paul Rosenstein-Rodan in 1943. Empiricism in which ultimate reality lies in matter and energy may not be the last word in the societal development process but refusal to let go even the concept of forms which places thinking in the metaphysical level is anti-development. Pragmatism played a significant role in the United States of America (USA) during her transitional stage and provided the platform for landing men on the moon. This must be adopted in Africa to push forward the much-needed development effort.

The Specific African Experience

Admirers of Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher may feel uncomfortable at his view of Africa. Kant, quoted by Smidt (2004) believed the religious feelings of the average African during his time were closer to the profane than the sublime. Africans in the opinion of Kant were more inclined to fetishism and magic than science. But in the light of realism and the operations of many if not most Africans from the ancient to the contemporary, was Immanuel Kant wrong? The word fetish refers to the religious attachment and reverence accorded by persons to material things such as groves, trees, totems, bodies of water, and related things. Magic refers to application of means regarded as possessed of supernatural powers over natural realities. Given these two positions, Immanuel Kant was correct about the orientation of the average African. Which African country even in the 21st century can claim complete rejection of fetish practices among citizens? Who can claim with certainty that juju priests no longer have patrons who believe in the powers ascribed to the supernatural embedded in seen and unseen objects and processes? The practice of animism in every African society into the second decade of the 21st century is counterproductive and as Haynes (2007) notes, anti-development. But Haynes (2007) also

notes that religion can have a salutary effect on health, education, and environmental sustainability.

Influence of traditional religion however continues to affect people across social and intellectual strata and in all aspects of life (Ubong, 2013). The religious orientation sustains African communities in the first stage of intellectual development as conceived by Comte. Socio-economic development presumes structures and processes which improve well-being in the modern economic sense and those structures are available through the instrumentality of science. Traditions inhibit the use of the methods of science and by extension the development of requisite structures, processes, and systems which propel the society to achieve acceptable levels of growth and development. For instance, why should an entrepreneur whose path from home was crossed at the left side of the road by a stray snake think of a bad day ahead? A business day can end or a business idea can be rejected because imprints of the supernatural are suspected by the individual. Some work has been done on the place of religion in Africa such as the one by Kimmerle (2006). Kimmerle (2006) holds the opinion that African traditional religion is animistic and polytheistic. The average African (including the educated ones and 'strong' Christians) subject their thoughts and actions to the dictates of religion. Kimmerle (2006) accepts that the belief in transcendental realities exists in all societies but in the West the hold by religion has considerably reduced. The situation is different in sub-Saharan Africa of which he asserts:

In Sub-Saharan African thought this belief (in spirits) is broadly present and deeply rooted. It is the core of traditional African religions. Also intellectuals, although they may have taken over Christian and Islamic convictions mostly stick to this belief.

Traditional religion with spirits at the core influence thought and action in a disproportionate way as Kimmerle (2006) has noted. Attention to a multiplicity of deities generates a peculiar difficulty in the perspective of allocation and application of scarce resources with attendant impact on social and economic life. The Pew Center (2010) carried out a study of 19 African countries and submitted that among other things Africans have sustained their beliefs in traditional religions. Belief in juju ranged from a high 85% in Senegal to a low 5% in Rwanda. Belief in the 'secret eye,' supernatural healing, consultation of mediums, and related non-scientific attitudes continue to pervade and pervert.

The study though carried out more than two decades ago sustains its relevance even in economics if viewed from recent developments in the two countries mentioned above. By 2021 Rwanda was regarded as a shining growth pole with 10.9% annual growth while Senegal managed to record 6.1% growth in the same year (The World Bank, 2022). If the shackles of tradition are removed, Senegal with a larger population, more natural and human resources, and higher Gross Domestic Product should under normal circumstances grow faster than Rwanda.

Education

Patrinós (2016) summarizes the place of education in development thus: "Education is truly one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality and it sets the foundation for sustained economic growth." This remains true for all countries reason developed countries continue to emphasize education. Mallinson (1975) put the role of education on marble thus, "The reading nations are the leading nations." But education does more than to change formal standard of living indices. It expands the horizon of

individuals and in particular the scope of intellection and performance of those who have benefitted from education. Although many Africans continue to bow to traditions one cannot doubt the impact of education which gives clear explanations to mystical and mythical issues. Several diseases for instance are at present referred to hospitals rather than managed in the parish of tradition.

The refusal of African governments to allocate the recommended percentage of their annual budgets to education will continue to constrain individual and societal development. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recommended that 15%-20% of annual budgets be allocated to education at its 2015 World Education Forum. In Nigeria allocations to education for five years stood at 6.7% in 2016, 7.38% in 2017, 7.04% in 2018, 7.05% in 2019, 6.7% in 2020, and 5.6% in 2021. The 2023 budget provided for 4.30%, the lowest in a decade (Lawal, 2022). The 2024 Federal budget of N27.5 trillion (\$36.7 billion) provided a sad 5.6% or N1.54 trillion to education. However, in a framework of notorious lack of transparency at all levels what should be more worrisome is the amount released and the amount used out of whatever is released rather than amount budgeted. Ushie (2024) notes, "The castration of education is what has contributed to the emergence of all social and political problems of the society."

Way Forward/Research Agenda

Development economists have churned out several theories which appear not to work in the African set up. Many African and Asian nations have depended on aid which generates several unwanted outcomes from clash of goals, approaches, and interests among donors (Scanland, 2020) to outright misapplication as in the case of aid being used to prosecute local wars.

A new research agenda to focus attention on the non-science aspects of underdevelopment has become an imperative. The research questions should focus on the possibility of the African psyche being re-oriented away from the metaphysical to the positive. For instance, can a sick person and his/her family make a hospital and medical laboratory the first rather than the last ports of call? Can Africans develop the habit of checking their blood pressures rather than wait till stroke arrives and then go on to blame witches and wizards for an ailment which science has proven solutions for? Can business failure be analytically determined to stave off reoccurrence as against search for enemies and detractors? Would business training not be better than ad-hoc approaches to operations? In essence, can tradition be made to relax its stranglehold on the Africa's development throat? Eton, the protagonist in Bassey Ubong's play, "Zero Sum Game" (2006) lamented the pervasiveness of tradition in every aspect of life of everyone and as the play ends, loses his life to the unrelenting dictatorship of tradition. In a situation of this nature, Auguste Comte's first stage of societal development continues to be relevant.

Recommendations

John (2014) in his paper on colonialism in Africa makes a solemn and non-rhetorical declaration, "Failure has no excuses." To use colonialism as an excuse for poor management of the human and material resources of the continent must not be accepted any longer. One cannot point to a case in which Europe has told African rulers to exploit and direct the funnel of resources to their personal bank accounts in Europe and the Americas. Nor has any non-African placed a knife on the throat of any African in position of authority to use wrong practices and policies in the development process or continue to lean towards

transcendental approaches to management of life's processes. As African elders hold, no one tells even a child to direct food at the nostril rather than the mouth. Why would a head of government become richer than the country? Africa should adopt appropriate and acceptable processes and eliminate corrupt practices from the system. It should raise eyebrows that the Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership instituted in 2007 has gone to a shocking seven past leaders in its 18-year history! For nine years the Committee did not find any past African leader worth the prize!! With a mouth-watering \$5 million spread over ten years, the prize stands heads and shoulders above the highest prize of \$1.2 million awarded by the Nobel Committee for Peace. African leaders should be less excited about upfront material gains but look forward to long term gains such as offered by the Mo Ibrahim Prize.

In the specific case of stage of intellectual development, Africa should adopt the paradigm of grafting which exists in some developed countries. There is no country in the world where non-scientific practices are non-existent in absolute terms. Useful, pro-development traditions are retained by developed countries and made to run with modern science-based developments once conflict between the two can be avoided or minimized. The festival of Halloween for instance is based on mysteries and the other-worldly but a national (non-official) holiday on it is observed in the USA and Europe. The costumes, fireworks, and related paraphernalia cum processes are generators of business income. Education has a focal role to play which means governments have to provide more funds for education as should businesses and voluntary agencies both national and global. Ghana and South Africa are far ahead in budgetary allocations to education but what should be more important is how much is released and how much is used as approved. The system requires more controls for more transparency at every level from budgeting to auditing. The salary payment system used by Nigeria's Federal Government was expected to introduce simplicity and transparency but it has in fact, introduced greater complexity and less transparency reason the Academic Staff Union of Universities continues to demand a new salary payment system for its members.

Aside from formal education a dire need exists for structured advocacy by way of campaigns against the stranglehold of religion in societies. Knowledge of the ineffectiveness of non-scientific practices can be a turning point. The strangle hold of churches on the psyche of adherents has attracted little if any attention. If advocacy is sustained and people are convinced with scientific arguments to dare, much more will be achieved. With respect to the conceptual framework, can it be modified to reflect societies with two legs in two camps? Many Africans have and display the desire to migrate to the positive stage but they are limited by the environment. Maybe another transition stage can be developed to reflect and ease the complication.

Conclusion

Britain went through over six hundred years of colonial subservience in the hands of many colonial masters and Finland faced about the same thing. Why are they developed countries with high standards of living for the majority of citizens today? Why have underdeveloped countries in Asia such as Singapore and in Middle East been able to climb and join the big league today? The need for theorists to depart from extant paradigms and design new ones given the failure of the old paradigms has become the world's most urgent desideratum. The problems with Africa lie in lack of capacity in leadership as well as corruption but of utmost importance, sustained attachment to religious alignments and orientations by the

people. Positive thinking, positivism in practice, and rationalism should be the new thrusts for research, theory development, and administration of African countries.

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