

THE PLACE OF JARED DIAMOND'S THEORY OF DEVELOPMENT ON THE AFRICAN PREDICAMENT

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Abstract

With Africa the most-underdeveloped of the continents in the world, theoretical and practical discourses about development has become pertinent among scholars. The paper examines the place of Jared Diamond's Theory of Development on the African predicament. The paper agrees with Diamond that environment plays some important roles in development. However, in the case of Africa, the paper argues that Africa is currently the cause of its own misfortune because the worst forms of exploitation and dehumanization have been directly supervised by African leaders themselves. It pointed out the predicaments Africans faced after colonialism and how the Blackman have remained a woe onto himself. Using the expository and analytic methods, the paper concludes that environmental factors alone cannot explain development and underdevelopment. Moreover, the African continent is blessed with a favourable environment and abundant natural resources to be the world greatest but mismanagement of these resources have been a bane on development. Thus, African leaders must be responsive, inclusive and selfless if Africa must develop like other continents.

Keywords: Development, Underdevelopment, Theory, Africa, Predicaments

INTRODUCTION

The glaring underdevelopment, poverty, hunger, disease, corruption among African nations is a disturbing phenomenon. These ugly predicaments of Africa have raised various questions concerning why Africa is in such state. What is the cause of world inequality? Is it from nature or man's creation? Why do some people spend a lot of money to keep their weight down while others don't know where the next meal is coming from? How did rich countries get so rich and poor countries get so poor? Why did Europe take the lead in changing the world? The gap between the rich nations and poor nations keeps widening everyday and the need to answer the question of how and why we are where we are is necessary. Scholars have expressed their minds on the reasons why many countries in Africa is still underdeveloped when compared to

other countries in Europe. Some blamed African's underdevelopment on the slave trade and colonialism she suffered in the hands of the Europeans, others blamed it on leadership, corruption, ethnicity, wars etc. However, for Jared Diamond; the riches in Europe are not due to their ingenuity or intelligence. For him, the gaps in development, power and technology between human societies originate primarily from environmental differences. This stand has been known as environmental determinism of development. Diamond used historical facts to illustrate and prove that poverty or riches of a country are dependent on its natural environment or geography. This view was captured in his award winning book; *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

This paper is an attempt to unravel the African predicament and examine Diamond's view on development in an attempt to discover if Diamond's position can be attributed to the current state of Africa today. The work examines the views of other scholars and concludes that although nature has a significant role to play in the development and underdevelopment of nations, human activities play greater role in determining where the pendulum of development swings to. Drawing inspiration from Acemogul and Robinson's *Why Nations Fail* and Lee Kwan Yew's *From Third World to First* the work shows that mans actions and inactions moulds history and determines whether a nation succeeds or fails. The paper therefore concludes that the determinants of development cannot be mono factorially explicable. Rather, development and underdevelopment works with a retinue of factors which include cultural, religious, institutional, environmental and ethical factors etc.

The African Predicament

Predicament is a difficult situation, especially one where it is difficult to know what to do. The concept of African predicament therefore is the aggregate of plights that threaten the African people. Africa has been bedeviled with numerous plagues in the past, thus, Africans are in constant search for scapegoats to apportion blame in other to gain psychological relief. The concept of African predicament can be approached from different dimensions. This is because, no single scholar has exhausted in totality, this problematic theme. However, from their relative perspectives they always came at a consensus which depicts the African predicament.

Although, the predicament of the African people ranges from cultural, political, economic, religious, historical and psychological factors, they are all bonded together in the psychology of the African. Thus, until the African is able to psychologically liberate himself or herself, it will be a case of window dressing trying to address other factors that have helped in keeping Africa in its present condition.

Various Dimensions of the African Predicament

One of the greatest challenges of Africans is the affirmation of their true identity. Having been brainwashed to believe that white is synonymous with good while everything black is evil, Africans now suffers from inferiority complex and sees her economy, education, culture, religion and everything that is African as inferior. Hence, the richness of their identity as Africans is not dependent on what they make of it but is dependent on what the American or European says it is.

Emefiena Ezeani writes that Africans suffers from a disease of the mind which makes them unconsciously despise or look down on themselves (eg. their names, languages, culture, religion colour) and has instead an inordinate love or irrepressible desire to be like the white man or the colonizer¹. The disease is what he called *colonialysis*². Ali Mazuri also calls it cultural dependency which is exemplified by the African becoming 'black European in dress, language,

ideology and style'. All these militate against human and economic progress in the continent of Africa. The different themes which African predicaments can be divided into are: Economic enslavement and crisis of leadership; mis-education of Africans and falsification of history, culture, religion and identity crisis.

a) Economic Enslavement and the crisis of Leadership

One of the major problems Africa has is an imperial-centered economics. Africa had no freedom to take the destiny necessary for its economic prosperity in their hands. The colonial masters control every economic life of the Africans. During the era of colonization, colonial masters supervised peasant farmers on the peasant farmers own soil. The land which they labored to sustain themselves and their families, the colonial supervisors decided how much they earn, quantity of food that they will take home on daily basis and the price of the goods in the market³. Oguejiofor stress that this is the process of satellization of Africa, where every economic activity on African soil is directed towards the needs of Europe⁴. In the 21st century, neo-colonialism replaced raw and naked colonialism. The neo-colonialists used European financial oligarchies like the international monetary fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) Paris and London Clubs as agents to lend money to African countries. These loans come with stringent conditions which keeps Africans in perpetual underdevelopment. African countries are lured into adjustment programmes that lead to currency devaluation, high interest rates, privatization of state enterprise, liberalization of imports and so on⁵. The lack of vision and corruption among African leaders makes it impossible for Africa to develop. Chinua Achebe in his book; *The Trouble with Nigeria* had earlier argued that:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its

leaders to rise to the responsibility and to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership⁶.

The Nigerian problem is the same with all other African nations. The failure of leadership in Africa is due to the agency role that African leaders play for the imperialist.

(b. Mis-education of Africans and the Falsification of History

Education is the driving force of any nation. The type of education the people receives will either make or mar them. Colonial education alienated the people from their environment, culture and themselves. Ezeani defines colonial education as a totality of influence and experiences of the colonized in a colonized environment⁷. Fortunately, while the education received in other advanced countries prepares them to meet the needs of the society, the education that Africans received kept them in a static position. This is why Rodney called it “education for underdevelopment”⁸.

African history was also distorted and passed to Africans by the colonial masters. For Jochannan, “colonialism brings us to a kind of history written by the conqueror for the conquered to read and enjoy. When the conquered looks around and finds that even God speaks from the heart of the conqueror, the conquered then becomes suspicious of Gods”⁹ Therefore, Africa need a new historiography, not a history that is based on the adventure of Europe but that premised on life of the African and the things that constitute the essence of their being.

(c) Culture and Identity Crisis:

Africans suffers from identity crisis because they now carry the identity that is alien to them and an inbuilt inferiority complex. But this deliberate inferiority complex that is institutionalized has an aim, for it leads to dangerous brainwashing that further leads to self erosion, shame, and self-alienation. Its negative impact is very broad since it erodes the relational character which identity seeks to create.¹⁰ Africans was made to belief that their culture is barbaric and savage. The black

Africans who went to America was made to believe that Africa was a land of people with barbarian instinct and primitive ties, where the consumption of human flesh is the order of the day¹¹. This made Africans to now believe that modernization, civilization and exposure is defined in terms of a total disconnect from African culture.

Who is Jared Diamond?

Jared Diamond is an American ecologist, geographer, biologist, and anthropologist. He was popularly known for his books *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997, awarded a Pulitzer prize), *The Third Chimpanzee* (1991), *Collapse* (2005) and *The World Until Yesterday* (2012). He was born in Boston, Massachusetts, United States to a Jewish family who migrated to the United States from Eastern Europe. His father, Lous Diamond was a physician and his mother, Flora Kaplan, a teacher, Linguist and Lonart pianist. He attended the Roxbury Latin School and earned a Bachelor of Arts in anthropology and history from Harvard College in 1958 and a PHD on the physiology and biophysics of membranes in gall bladder from Trinity College, University of Cambridge in 1961.¹²

After graduating from Cambridge, Diamond returned to Harvard as a junior fellow until 1965, and, in 1968, he became a professor of physiology at UCLA medical school. While in his twenties he developed a second, parallel, career in ornithology and ecology specializing in New Guinea and nearby Islands. It was during his research in the New Guinea that a question from Yali was thrown to him. This question gave birth to the book; *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

Later in his fifties, Diamond developed a third career in environmental history and became a professor of geography at UCLA, his Current position.¹³ He also teaches at Luiss Guido Carli in Rome. He won the National Medical of Science Award in 1999 and Westfield State University granted him an honorary doctorate in 2009.

Jared Diamond's Theory of Development

Diamond's view on development was represented in his book *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies*. This book was an attempt to quench young Yali's curiosity about European dominance in world affairs. For Diamond, the current fate of human societies has a historical and pre-historical connections, he narrowed them down to conquest, epidemics and genocide. For him: "For example, much of Africa is still struggling with its legacies from recent colonialism. In other regions including much of Central America, Mexico, Peru, New Caledonia, the former Soviet Union, and parts of Indonesia, civil unrest or guerilla warfare pits still numerous".¹⁴ Development can only take place in a serene and peaceful environment, thus these areas are less developed than others that are peaceful. In the book, Diamond further gave reasons why germs played a role in nation's inequalities. He writes that:

First, Europeans have for thousands of years been living in densely populated societies with central government, police, and judiciaries. In these societies, infectious epidemic diseases of dense populations (such as smallpox) were historically the major cause of death, while murders were relatively uncommon and a state of war was the exception rather than the rule. Most Europeans who escaped fatal infections also escaped other potential causes of death and proceeded to pass on their genes. Today, most live-born Western infants survive fatal infections as well and reproduce themselves, regardless of their intelligence and gene they bear. In contrast, New Guineans have been living in societies where human numbers were too low for epidemic diseases of dense populations to evolve.¹⁵

Therefore, whenever there are epidemic diseases, because they are not resistant to the disease, they often die off. Meanwhile, the traditional New Guinea societies suffered high mortality from murder, chronic tribal warfare, accidents and problem of procuring food.

Diamond was working in Papua New Guinea, studying members of a culture. As he became acquainted with them, he recognized that as individuals they were as smart, hard-working, creative and talented as the members of western civilization. This made him to wonder about the origins of the differences between Papua New Guinea culture and Western cultures.

What crystallized the issue for Diamond was when his friend Yali asked him: “Why is it that you white people developed so much Cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little Cargo of our own?”¹⁶ The term Cargo in this context means variety of goods from packaged flour to metal tools to cell phones. In his book, *Guns, Germ, and Steel*, Diamond’s summed up the inequality in nation’s development as follows. Firstly, there were “continental differences in the wild plant and animal species available as starting materials for domestication”.¹⁷ This was because Eurasia was most well-endowed due to its size and diversity and it did not suffer a large mammal extinction phase when humans first came into contact with in the Late-Pleistocene era, as it happened in other continents. Secondly, Eurasia’s “east-west major axis and its relatively modest ecological and geographical barriers” which greatly enhanced the possibility of diffusion and migration”.¹⁸ Moreover, both crops and livestock depend heavily on climate and therefore are more easily transferred across latitude than longitude.

Furthermore, Eurasia is a home with much less drastic environmental obstacles which could bar political and linguistic unification or communication, and therefore, complicate diffusion. This is also connected to the third factor which is the possibility of inter-continental diffusion. This was difficult because the continents lacking animals and plants for domestication differed in their capacity for acquisition from elsewhere; this made them develop in isolation.

More so, the total population size and area is another influential factor. Larger endowments in both of these means “more potential inventors, more competing societies, more innovations available to adopt and more pressure to adopt and retain innovations, because societies failing to do so will tend to be eliminated by competing societies”¹⁹ Eurasia had most of these areas and population. This area according to Diamond has fertile lands and favourable climate in relation to the distribution of grains. He dismissed tropical region because tropical

domesticates are mainly non-grain crops. Furthermore, Diamond argues that these differences make the diffusion of crops difficult northward between mid latitude Eurasia and the African and Asian tropics because; this requires movement between regions that are ecologically very different. This means that mid latitude staple crops will tend not to grow well in tropical regions and vice versa because they are accustomed to different temperature and rainfall regimes.

Germs are also other factors that enhanced the development of Eurasia. Diamond argues that once societies began to evolve from hunters and gathers to food production and farmers, the societies will then start domesticating animals which they usually use to plough their fields. These animals carry bacteria and germs which were passed on to people. The people became ill from these germs and the weaker people died while the stronger people developed immunity to the germs. The Eurasians became the stronger race and colonized more land and gained more development because they gained immunity to these germs first.

Summarily, for Diamond, "Environment molds history".²⁰ He is of the view that everything important that has happened to humans from the Paleolithic era is due to environmental influences. The ultimate causes of the three primordial environmental facts; the shapes of the continents; the distribution of domesticable world plants and animals, and the geographical barriers inhibiting the diffusion of domesticate. The major problem with the shape of the continent is its axis. A continental landmass with an east-west axis supposedly is more favourable for the rise of agriculture than the continent with a north-south axis. Diamond divided the world into three continents: Eurasia, Africa and Americas. Eurasia has an east-west axis; the other two have north-south axis. He argues that the east-west axis was able to make progress in history because it has a climatic advantage. The world's largest continuous zone of temperature climates lies in a belt stretching across Eurasia from Europe in the west to China in the east.

Therefore, crops that survived in one part will also do well in another because they have the same climatic condition. But in continents like Africa that has a north-south axis, there is always a change in climate as you move upward or downward, this makes the survival of crops across the zone difficult.

Diamond is of the view that “History followed different course for different people because of differences among people’s environments, not because of biological differences between people themselves.”²¹ He claims that this view is largely eschewed by most academics. Historians in particular think it diminishes the importance of human action and argue, according to Diamond, that it is deterministic. In other words, some say that Diamond’s view seems to suggest that a people’s environment determines everything else about their development, from their culture to the technology they develop. Diamond wanted to write what he calls a “unified synthesis of a range of disciplines, including human genetics, history archeology, evolutionary biology and epidemiology”²². For the lay reader, one who is not familiar with modern scholarship on the development of human societies, one facet of Diamond’s argument is especially important. He wants to underscore the idea that it was not the cultural, moral or racial superiority of Europeans that enabled them to develop the technology that enabled them to conquer and influence peoples around the world. Rather, it was accidents of geography that facilitated the development of crops, and even pathogens that made it possible for them to do so. Diamond believes that historians have over-emphasized the importance of culture without considering the scientific foundations of its origin among different peoples.

The Place of Diamond’s Theory on African Predicament

When we place Diamond's theory, side by side with the views of some scholars who painted the real picture of African predicament, we will find out that it will not fall into place.

For instance,

In his book; *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Rodney makes us understand that;

Every people have shown a capacity for independently increasing their ability to live a more satisfactory life through exploiting the resources of nature. Every continent independently participated in the early epochs of the extension of man's control over his environment....Africa, being the original home of man, was obviously a major participant in the process in which human groups displayed an ever-increasing capacity to extract a living from the natural environment²³.

Rodney's major objective is to prove that Africans were capable of political administrative and military greatness even before the white men entered the African scene. But as soon as they entered, Africa's political acumen, her administrative genius and her military might vanished. To substantiate his claim, he reminds us of the description of Africa in the 15th century by some historian, the Egyptian civilization and so on. He concludes that "Any diagnosis of underdevelopment in Africa will reveal not just a per capita income and protein deficiencies, but also gentlemen who dance in Abidjan, Accra and Kinshasha when music is played in Paris, London and New York²⁴. This position implies that Africa was doing well until Europe came and destroyed Africa. This did not agree with Diamonds view that geography was the major cause of Europe development and African's underdevelopment.

Also, in his book; *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon blamed Europe for Africans predicament. For him without consultation European nations came together and shared African continents among themselves as people would share war booty. He argues that the worst thing colonialism does to its victims is that it never stops with imposing its rule on them and letting them live. It goes further to distort their psycho-affective equilibrium and to make them

speechless and servile robots who must be perpetually dominated by their colonial masters in his own words he states:

Perhaps we have not sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it²⁵.

For Fanon, this psychological effect of colonialism still haunts the continent years after political independence. Diamond's environmental theory is also ruled out here as the cause of unequal development.

However, Oyebola Areoye in his book: *The Black Man's Dilemma* tries to synthesize the views of Fanon and Rodney. He agrees that slave trade and colonialism is the cause of the black man's backwardness. He writes that:

the social effects of colonialism have dehumanized and subjugated black people. The great historical wrong done to blacks through the slave trade and colonialism constitutes an important explanation for our backwardness²⁶.

But, Oyebola refuses to agree that such suffering is enough to make him a perpetual backward human being. He contends:

But the strange thing about our race is that other races have, in the past, been similarly ensnared and colonized, but these other race broke the shackles of slavery and domination, reached great heights and in many case excelled above their oppressors in contributions to civilization. However, the black man has, for too long, looked for scapegoats for his many problems. He has, therefore, become his own worst enemy.²⁷

Oyebola's view did not also blame the weather, climate, disease or soil but Africans themselves.

How Africans Underdeveloped Africa

One may agree with Diamond to some extent that geographical and ecological factors to some extent contributed to the reason why Europeans dominated the rest of the world but we cannot sweep aside the roles played by African leaders after independence as the cause of Africa's underdevelopment. Looking through Africa, the continent has produced a lot of leaders that have destroyed it, the question we need to answer is; what foundation made it possible for these bad leaders to emerge? The likes of Idi Amin of Uganda, Francis Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, Emperor Jean Bedel Bokoras of Central African Republic, Mobutu Sesse Seko of Zaire, Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha of Nigeria, Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor of Liberia and many others of their kind. Most of them were military dictators and with little or no education. The truth is that as of the time most African countries are getting independent, there are no experienced educated leaders in Africa. So most of them were ignorant and didn't know what to do or what governance was all about, thus they resorted to looting their country dry. For example, Zaire became independent on June 30, 1960 under the leadership of Patrice Lumumba who emerged as their first prime minister. As the prime minister, Lumumba appointed Mobutu as chief of staff to the commander of the Congolese army. Mobutu plotted and assassinated Lumumba in January 1961, just eleven months after Zaire's independence. He consolidated power and ruled like a powerful emperor. He made people see him as the Messiah and gave orders that his portrait be displayed in churches beside the portraits of Jesus Christ. Also, in schools, there was a compulsory subject called *Mobutism* where children are taught that Mobutu was sent by God as a messiah. Zaire is rich in copper, cobalt, uranium, oil, and diamond. Earnings from there were diverted into his personal account overseas. As far back as 1984 the United States treasury revealed that Mobutu's personal money is up to \$4 billion. His landed properties are mind-boggling. He has nine luxurious estates in Belgium, and Switzerland, a villa

on French Rivera, a castle in Spain, a Coffee plantation in Brazil, a ranch in Portugal, fleet of aircraft and more than 50 Limousine cars. These are outrageous properties acquired through corrupt and ill gotten dealings. They have nothing to do with geography and ecology as Diamond postulate. The same goes with other present African leaders like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, who was recently forced to relinquish power after thirty seven years of impoverishing and under developing his country.

The role that institutions play in the development and failure of nations was also identified by Acemoglu and Robinson in their book; *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, prosperity and Poverty*. They jettisoned the ignorance, culture and geography hypothesis and called them *theories that don't work*²⁸. For them, the success and failure of any nation depends on how extractive or inclusive their institutions are. Inclusive institutions engender development and progress while extractive institutions breed underdevelopment and failure. In their own words:

Nations fail today because their extractive economic institutions do not create the incentives needed for people to save, invest, and innovate. Extractive political institutions support these economic institutions by cementing the power of those who benefit from the extraction.²⁹

Although they did not rule out growth under extractive institutions like the case of China, but they predicted that it will not last. Looking at African countries today, we will see that they run an extractive political and economic system. It is of recent that democratic elections are gradually taking over the military dictatorship as was obtainable after independence.

Furthermore, in his book: *From third World to First*, Lee Kuan Yew gave a firsthand information of how he transformed Singapore from third world after independent to a thriving Asian metropolis with the world's number one airline, best airport and busiest port of trade.

After their independence, Singapore was the smallest country in South East Asia. Many think they are destined to become a client state of their powerful neighbours, if indeed they could preserve their independence. However, Lee Kuan Yew substituted superior intelligence, discipline and ingenuity for resources to develop Singapore from third world to first. Today, Singapore's annual per capital income have grown from \$1,000 at independence to nearly \$30,000. Singapore now plays a major role in the politics of economics of South East Asia and beyond. Yew's massive stride in transforming Singapore is a clear indication that the action or inaction of leaders can make or mar any nation.

Odey writes in his book *Africa: The Agony of a Continent* that the black neo-colonialist has not proved himself to be better than the white imperialist. "The African political, social and economic scene considered in its entirety has become a violent microcosm of the black man's inestimable failure to manage his own affairs on his own"³⁰. A look at African countries will expose a catalogue of military dictatorship, corruption, naked lust for power, reprisal and murder, deprivation of fundamental human right, poverty, tribal chauvinism, nepotism, ethnic hegemony, embezzlement of public fund, unfulfilled promises and despair of the masses.

Evaluation

From the foregoing we can all agree that underdevelopment is not the original state of African. But we cannot continue to bask in the euphoria of African civilization of yester years. Did Africa go to sleep after they discovered that civilization started from Egypt? Or that archeological evidence shows that the first man came from Africa? Or that their Ancestors built pyramids, skyscrapers, good roads etc. Where were Africans when Europe was developing superior ships and canons? After Europe had developed all those and turned them against Africa,

what did Africa do toward them off? What prevent Africa from developing her own superior ships and cannons even up to the 21st century and use them to ward off European intrusion and destruction? If Africa is the cradle of civilization, why will it not contribute same to its own development? When we reflect on these questions we cannot but agree that Africa is the cause of its problem. When Rodney wrote his book, his thinking was mainly determined by the euphoria of joy which greeted the rapid succession with which African states were getting independence. Then, he was perfectly right because he was dealing with the realities on ground. To believe in them today will never help us as Africans. I am convinced that if Rodney were to write a follow-up today he will most likely title it: "How Africans underdeveloped Africa". This is because Africans has been his own enemy. This is in line with Oyebola's view that slave trade and colonialism is not enough excuse for the black man's underdevelopment today.

Conclusion

From the forgoing, underdevelopment and underdevelopment is not an original state of any country or continent. Moreover, the complex nature of development cannot be mono factorially explicable. There are different factors which combine to bring about development. From the origin of the world, everything was the same, but human activities and inactivity made or marred mans existence. Although, natural and environmental factors played great role in the development of some part of the world but that cannot be enough excused to be underdeveloped in this 21st century when man have almost conquered nature. Man is in a consistent search of a way to develop, build and make his environment a home. However, natural and human factors joined forces to mould the destinies of different continents. The dominance of Europe may not only be because of the continental slope, it may be because they had selfless leaders who knows what leadership is all about and channeled their energies into developing the continent.

This work concludes that the geographical and ecological factors alone cannot explain underdevelopment in Africa because every African country has enough natural resources that should develop the continent, but greed and corruption has made African leaders to impoverish Africans by diverting these resources into private aggrandizement.

Thus, development now depends on how inclusive the economic and political institutions are. This work concurs with the view of Acemoglu and Robinson in their book; *Why Nations Fail: The Origin of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, that Nations fail due to extractive institutions. A cursory look at African countries will reveal high extractive nature of both political and economic institutions. Until African leaders become inclusive and selfless, until leadership is seen as a service to the people and not an opportunity to cut your own part of the national cake; until African leaders crave for power is tamed, Africa will always take the back seat in the world development index.

END NOTES

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