

## Colonialism in Africa: Theories and Practices

**Dr. Francis Paschal Nwosu**

Department of History and International Studies  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

### Abstract

Direct political domination of people by other people is what is known as colonialism. These dominations also extend to socio-cultural cum religious domination. These dominations are achieved by direct application of military force in order to impose political control which ultimately leads to the establishment of colonies on foreign lands other than the lands of the colonizers. It is the domination of the minority over the majority of people not minding their ethnic, cultural, political, religious and economic affiliations of the colonized. The colonizers claim cultural, racial and religious superiorities over the colonized and refer to them as barbarians, savages and primitive. As a result, the colonized are brutalized, dehumanized and psychologically enslaved. A lot of theories had been advanced by scholars as to the reason for advent of colonialism in the continent of Africa and these theories and its follies is what this article is set to look into. The paper tries to explain what theory is and various theories that was advanced to justify colonialism such as balance of power theory, economic theory, humanitarian theory, religious theory to mention but a few. The study adopted the thematic approach, combined with descriptive, historical and analytical method in arriving at its findings and conclusions

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Africa, Theories, Practices

### Introductions

Direct political domination and oppression of a people against other people is what is known as colonialism. Military operations are involved in such dominations in order to impose political control on the people leading to the establishment of formal colonies. These foreign minorities impose themselves on the numerically majority thereby controlling them racially, ethnically, politically, socially, culturally and economically on the numerically majority. To the colonizers, this is done in the name of racial and cultural superiority and refers the colonized as being primitive, savages and barbarians and as a result, the colonized are brutalized, dehumanized and psychologically enslaved. The history of the colonization of Africa by the European in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was an episode which began with the scramble and partition of African territories among the European countries in 1884-85 at the Berlin conference that resulted in the division of African states into sphere of influence to different European nations like Germany, Spain, Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium and Italy among others without ethnic, cultural, religions and geographical considerations. These European nations set out to administer their colonies exploitatively and balkanized Africa by creating boundaries to map out the different countries of Africa without due considerations to ethnic and cultural affinities.<sup>1</sup> The European policy change of the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the industrial development in Europe necessitated this. The European nations changed their policy toward Africa from that of informal imperialism that is, the creation and continuation of a structure of economic control through the establishment of trading posts along African coastal communities, to a more formal imperialism, that aimed at direct political control of the colonies established by the European in the colonial era in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Many theories have been propounded by various historians, political scientists and philosophers in their explanations as regarding colonialism in Africa. This new phase of imperialism to a formal control of colonies, through direct political subjugation of African states no doubt has been explained by scholars in theories. These theories have helped us to understand the phenomenon of colonialism in its simple word. It means colony of occupation in which foreign nation exercise measure of political control over an occupied or subjugated people. This subjugated people are forced to obey the rulings of the imperialist nation, politically, economically and socio-culturally to the detriment of their own way of lives.

### Theory explained

According to Stanley Hoffman,

*-----a theory is a systematic study of observable phenomena that tries to discover the principle variables, to explain behaviours and to reveal the characteristic type of relations among national units.<sup>3</sup>*

This definition lacks some ingredients that helps scientific understanding of the true meaning of the term “theory” because it could not account for the predictive, descriptive and explanatory, analytic and data collection and interpretative aspect of the term. To this end, the definition given by David Singer will be more appropriate. He defined theory as

*.....a body of internally consistent empirical generations of descriptive, predictive and explanatory power.<sup>4</sup>*

### Theories of Colonialism

There are several theories by scholars that explained the reasons for the colonization of African continent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Hobson,

*the economic need of the time which is as a result of the surplus capital in Europe necessitated by the Industrial Revolution that produced the surplus capital in Europe.<sup>5</sup>*

By this Hobson asserted that Europe needed a place of investing their surplus capitals.

### Political Balance of Power theory and explanations

The political theory of colonialism tries to explain colonialism from the dynamic of international power distribution, this is the balance of power theory, which was developed by historians such as Hensley and Taylor. In their view, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century European imperialism can be considered as a safety-valve for the struggle for European hegemony between the great powers. In this line of thinking, a central role is assigned to Germany under Bismarck. Bismarck foreign policy was directed towards maintaining the balance of power politics in Europe on African soil. This he got at the Berlin Conference in 1884-85, where effective occupation of Africa was used as a right of ownership and sphere of influence reached.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the political balance of power theory or explanations of colonialism in Africa also involves theory of social imperialism which was developed by Wehler to explain German imperialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This explanation is different from the point above. That the territorial expansion is seen as a political means to face internal social unrest, which manifest itself through increasing class conflicts in periods of rapid industrial development. The ensuing social unrest formed a direct threat to the existing ruling class. A new foreign policy, directed at formal imperialism, was used as a crisis ideology and served two ends; **"as a therapy for the economic recession and as a diversion from the social troubles"**.<sup>7</sup> By this theory the zeal for the Europeans to solve their internal economic and political problem, annexation of colonies in Africa became the solution.

D.K Field threw more light on the political explanation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century formal imperialism of the European in Africa. To him; formal imperialism-colonialism in Africa was motivated by political and strategic factor rather than economic impulses comprised the primary motives of European imperial expansion. That,

*-----to be a world power one needed bases in all continent...Another aspect of great power status in an age of international rivalry was the need for secure strategic raw material...That there was a diplomatic use for colonies... More colonies might provide more prestige, more protection for their nationals, more diplomatic bargaining<sup>8</sup>*

National Prestige is one clear motivating force for European imperialism in Africa. National standing of a state began to be measured by number of colonies a state control. Possession of colonies came to be regarded as a symbol of so-called first class power. Nation states were motivated by the desire to win imperial glory, for instance, the French invasion of Western Sudan. The disastrous and humiliating defeat it suffered in the Franco – Prussian War also serves as a motivation.

### **Economic Theory Explanation**

The political explanation above has been challenged by scholars like Hobson and Lenin whom feels that no other explanation can be given that will be sufficient in explaining the reason for colonialism in Africa rather than economic factors. For Hobson, imperialism was the direct result of expanding forces of modern capitalism...capitalistic forces within Europe over-saved by keeping the wages of the laborers' as small as possible.<sup>9</sup> This resulted in under consumption among the majority of the population. These savings, furthermore, needed to be invested. Capitalists found that they would get the highest returns if they invested in the under developed areas of the world like Africa and Asia. The only way for them to protect their investments from the local populations was to get their governments help. They therefore, used their influence in the government and caused the annexation of those areas where they have heavily invested.<sup>10</sup> The under lining message here, is imperialism. According to Hobson, colonialism is an economic domination of a capitalist nation over the undeveloped nations of the world. This theory was propounded by Hobson when in his book “Imperialism a study” he tried to explain that colonialism was as a result of the need of the time when imperial powers of Europe or great European powers due to their surplus capital saw it necessary to find places of investment outside Europe. The financiers and bankers was able to convince their home governments to take responsibility of their market expansion outside Europe. They are not ready to anything to their host communities hence, according to Hobson, their home government became a device to exploit the masses with the bankers and the financiers as the main beneficiaries. It should be noted that capitalism is an aggressive accumulation of wealth, capital and profit which in most cases leads to monopoly. In other words, imperialism creates monopolistic tendencies. He concluded by saying that capitalism creates a system for exploitation of the masses by the bourgeois

Lenin being inspired by Hobson wrote in his book "imperialism the highest stage of capitalism' that imperialism is a particular stage in the evolution of capitalism, implicitly its final stage is when monopoly finance capitalism gives rise to surplus capital that cannot profitably be invested at home and must be invested in other countries. In Lenin's word;

*Imperialism is capitalism in that development in which the dominance of monopolies and finance has established itself; in which the export of capital has reached pronounced importance; in which division of the world among the international trusts have begun; in which the division of ail territories of the globe among the highest capitalist powers has been completed.*<sup>11</sup>

### **Socio-psychological theory**

In propounding this theory in the book “The sociology of imperialism” forwarded by Schumpeter, it was argued that the valiant is not the imperialists but the old feudal military class in Europe who kept pushing for colonies where they could satisfy their dying class. <sup>12</sup>

But for Fanon in his book “Wretch of Earth” explained that colonialism was established by violence and maintained by force. Because the colonialists knew that they are in the minority, they felt totally insecure hence the need to apply strong force to maintain it.<sup>13</sup> To achieve greater success, they psychological deflated the ego of Africans. Fanon maintained that the greatest enslavement is mental enslavement.

Some colonial apologist, thinks that before the advent of colonialism in Africa, Africans depended on their elders for effective and efficient leadership and on their ancestor worship for checking the excesses

of the old and the exuberances of the young. But with the advent of the white, the Africans replaced their ancestors with the white since they were by nature dependents.

### **The Humanitarian Theory of Colonialism in Africa**

This theory has Rudyard Kipling as one of its leading proponents in his famous poem "The White Man's Burden." He stressed that;

*it is the obligation of the Europeans to take the blessings of Christianity and western civilization to non-Europeans. That; those who are civilized must be ready to sacrifice their comfort and property to bring the blessings of civilization, law and order to those who have no civilization; and they must not expect thanks for doing it. In Kipling own words; take up the white man's burden...send forth the best ye breed...go bind your captives need; to wait in heavy harness, on fluttered folk and wild...Half devil and half child...<sup>14</sup>*

This civilizing mission of the European nations as primary reason for the colonization of Africa left much to be desired in practice given the way and manner in which Britain, France, Germany, Portugal and Italy colonial masters ruled their colonies in Africa. This study will discuss the British and French colonial policies in Africa to demonstrate how the above theories of colonialism were practiced in Africa.

### **The British Colonial Theory and Practiced in Africa**

Britain had over 35 percent of the colonial territories in Africa during their colonial period in Africa. These colonies cut across; west Africa, East Africa and North Africa. This large empire required effective policy that would bring great measure of control on the various colonies. To do this, she adopted an indirect method of administration as her colonial policy in Africa. The chief proponent of this colonial policy was Lord Lugard in his Dual mandate, he states thus;

*...if continuity and decentralization are as I have said, the first and most important condition in maintaining an effective administration, cooperation is the key...cooperation between every link in the chain, from the head of the administration to its most junior member-cooperation between the Government and the commercial community, and, above all, between the provincial staff and the natives' rulers. Every individual adds his share not only to the accomplishment of the ideal, but to the ideal itself. The task of the administrative officer is to clothe his principles in the garb of evolution, to make it apparent alike to the educated native, the conservative Moslem, and the primitive pagan, in his own degree, that the policy of the Government is not antagonistic but progressive-sympathetic to his aspiration and the guardian of his natural rights...Government in African dependency is the supervision and guidance exercised by the Lieut. Governor, Residents, and the District officer over the natives... the idea is to rule subject races through their own chiefs...<sup>15</sup>*

The idea behind the British colonial policy in Africa from the above quotes from Lord Lugard is to allow Africans to exercise some measure of control in their respective colonies. This simply means indirect rule; identifying and cultivating local chiefs and other hereditary ruler, using them as intermediaries in colonial policy. The principle stands on the premise; that Britain possessed

*... a dual mandate to, on the one hand, colonize territories and extract wealth from them and, on the other, to help backward peoples to progress.<sup>16</sup>*

In practice, indirect rule greatly depended on District Officers, who under indirect rule theory were to be primary advisers to the traditional authorities. The District Officers were supposed to promote change and progress, in doing this have to go through the native chiefs. However, chiefs might not have the ability to either lead or adopt to change due to pressure from people who might strongly oppose the change. This often resulted into conflict; the District Officer had ultimate authority to replace a chief in such a situation. The power given to the District Officers by the colonial policy of the British in Africa became a major focus of politics in the colonies. Individual or group might build up a campaign of complaints against the chiefs in order to remove them for their own interests.

In colonies where there were no recognized or strong traditional government or chiefs, in the bid to create them was counterproductive; there were great resentment against this chiefs and wide spread unwillingness to cooperate; the chiefs set up in such colonies were often regarded as a stooge of the District Officer. The South Eastern people of Nigeria in the West African colonies of Britain are an example in this case. The introduction of indirect rule in the region in 1928 was not an easy task. The near absence of any indigenous and traditional political organization, the appointment of "warrant chiefs" resulted into crisis. The chiefs were seen to be misfit in the province where they were appointed, the attempt by the warrant chiefs to collect tax directly from the native people met serious opposition in Aba in 1929. It took the colonial army days to bring the region to a stable state. The crisis in the eastern region made mockery of the British colonial policy in Africa. The greed to exploit African resources blind the Briton from a proper study of the people of the region before a decision was reached to appoint chiefs.<sup>17</sup>

The British colonial policy of indirect rule in Africa was a segregated or what is known as a divide and rule system of governance in practice. Colonies where the people were perceived to have developed a unique or centralized system of administration before their conquest, or a highly religious people like the Northern people of Nigeria, given their Islamic believes, administered separately from others in the same colony with them. There were different laws for people considered to be too sensitive to policy that would affect their religion or way of life. In some cases, the British colonial administrators did not allow others in the colony to relate with them politically and otherwise. This pitched ethnic groups against each other in the colonies and this divided native Africans to come together and resist colonization for a very longtime, Eghosa and Suberu stressed that the British colonial administration in Nigeria prevented the socio-cultural and political contacts between the nationalities in the North and South for a long time. 1947 marked the beginning of political contact between the politicians from the two regions. They were allowed to sit together for the first time in the central legislative council.<sup>18</sup>

The British colonial policy in Africa also discriminated against the educated elites in the colonies. The Native Authority chiefs were preferred by the British administrator to be involved in the governance of the colonies than the educated African elites whom were almost equal or even equal in learning like the British officials in the colonies. The Native Authority system was the basis of representation of Africans in the colonial government for a long period of colonial rule in Africa, even when qualified Africans educationally had emerged in the political scene. This situation pitched the educated African elites against their traditional institutions and chiefs. In Nigeria colony of British West Africa, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, one of Nigeria's well known political actors and leaders of that time, called for a modification of the system of selecting the representatives of the people into legislative houses, He said thus; "**there should be abandonment of indirect representation based on the Native Authority system**".<sup>19</sup> The Native Authority as medium of African representation in colonial government of British was a source of crisis between the educated elites and the chiefs, until a constitutional reform were made in British African colonies, that allowed the educated African elites to participate in the colonial administration. Economically and socio-politically, the British colonial policy in Africa did not convinced scholars of her civilizing mission whom Lord Lugard stated in his Dual Mandate, as roads and other infrastructures that would have led to the development of African were selectively established. For instance, in most of the British colonies, Africans and Britons were segregated against. Social institutions like schools, recreational facilities, and hospitals were maintained for different racial groups. In most places in East Africa colony, like Kenya, where different racial groups settled, Asia, Arabs and European

communities, there were separate facilities for each of those groups. The best were reserved for the Europeans. There were Asian schools, European schools, and African schools at the coast where British economic interests were. The transport systems and other infrastructures established by the British colonial government was mainly areas where their economic interest was. Also, Africans could acquire British culture but never the ancestry to go with it. The British notion of what constituted Britishness, therefore, was based both on ancestry and on culture. Politically, the Native Authority system on which Africans were represented in the colonial government could only exercise powers over Africans not Europeans. In addition, not a thought was given to the Africans ever being represented in the British parliament just to suggest being trained for future leadership in post-colonial Africa.<sup>20</sup> In conclusion, the British colonial theories, resulted in an uneven development in the colonies in Africa in practice; in every aspects of human endeavor, whether politically, economically or socio-culturally, as the colonies were seen to be backward at the end of British colonial rule in Africa.

### **The French Colonial Theory and Practice in Africa**

France was also a major colonial power in Africa that had about 34 percent of the colonial territories in Africa, among the European countries that scrambled and partitioned African states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. France had the second largest colonial empire in the world; she had the greatest responsibility in Africa during the colonial era. France Empire could be divided into two separate and distinct parts: That is, the "White Africa," and "Black Africa," The "White Africa" parts were composed of three colonies that bordered the Mediterranean Sea. They were; Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The "Black Africa" colonies were much larger, more extensive and thickly populated and composed of French Equatorial Africa, French west Africa, Camerouns, Somaliland, Madagascar and dependencies reunion island.<sup>21</sup>

These large colonies under French colonial control were administered differently with colonial theories or policies that suit their dependencies. These colonial theories were the policy of Assimilation and that of Association. This means a direct and an indirect method of administration. For instance, among the "White African" region of French colonial territories, Morocco and Tunisia were protectorate colonies entrusted to France. Morocco became a protectorate of France in 1907, while Tunisia was a protectorate of France in 1881. These protectorate regions were administered indirectly like the British colonial policy in Africa. The idea here was to promote the evolution of native population towards moral, political and economic progress.<sup>22</sup>

The policy of Assimilation was a reaffirmation of the French mission civilization in Africa that was born out of the zeal to civilize the backward people of Africa from their primitive ways of living. The policy was thus; ... the making of the native Africans in the civilized image of the Frenchman...administratively, a highly centralized direct rule in the colonies without taking into account of differences in size, distance from France, social organization, religious patterns, economic development... the propagation of the French language among the native Africans...colonies were seen to be an extension of the soil of France. That is colonies were considered to be department more distant than the rest in France...so representation of the colony in the legislature of the mother (France) country was encouraged.<sup>23</sup> The French policy of Assimilation in Africa was geared towards making African natives a fully-fledged European in black skin which was totally impossible in practiced given long impact of African culture that pre-date the arrival of the Europeans on African soils in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This made the Assimilation policy of the French towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to meet serious resistance culturally from African peoples as the policy tend to replace the African culture with that of French. More so, the emergence of educated African elites heightened the resistance of Africans against French colonial policy of Assimilation. French colonial administrators whom given the tempo of African resistance had to modify France colonial policy in Africa, to that of "Association," especially in those protected regions of her colonial possession in Africa. To demonstrate the damages the French colonial policy of Assimilation did on the African soil; Ferhat Abbas in Algeria, stressed that the policy of Assimilation on Algerian territory was simply

*...a military and economic venture defended thereafter by the appropriate administrative regime. But for the Algerians, it was a veritable revolution, over throwing a whole ancient world of beliefs and ideas and an immemorial way*

*of life. It confronts a whole people with sudden change. An entire nation, without preparation, finds itself forced to adapt or perished.*<sup>23</sup>

In West African territories of French, Senegal precisely the policy of Assimilation was a total failure. The family and property rights introduced by the French between 1904- 1945 met serious opposition from the Senegalese. The policy alienated the African natives from their lands as the ownership of land belong to France, polygamy was also discouraged by the policy and French education established was in the hand of the missionaries- the catholic mission, who were more interested in winning souls for God than in conquering mind for France. More so, French citizenship was given to those considered to have been frenchified. To be frenchified it means you have to totally transformed from the African way of life to that of French ways and civilizations. More so, not until after world war 11, following reforms that conferred citizenship on Africans in French colonies, Africans were sent to separate schools, sat on different seats in the church, ride on separate train compartments with the Europeans and other racial discriminating measures done on Africans. This made the Senegalese to resist the policy of Assimilation until a reform was made by the French that accommodate their culture and other ways of life that are crucial to their existence in the colony.

These feelings against the policy of Assimilation by African, whom had already developed a unique civilization, whether culturally, religiously, politically or otherwise but forced to drop their culture before they are properly embraced by the French in her colonial policy in Africa, of no doubt resulted in massive resistance by the African against the French. The French had to change her colonial policy to that of Association which simply means an indirect administration, which preserved but improved governance of the institutions of the conquered or colonized peoples, and respect for their past.<sup>25</sup> The reaction from Algeria and Senegal was a pointer to show how African rejected the obnoxious policy of Assimilation by the French. However, this change of policy by the French was just in theory in practiced the Native Authorities or chiefs who were supposed to be given much responsibilities by the new policy of Association in French colonies, had no power of their own, as the system

*....do not allow two authorities' in the circle, there was only one; only the commandant du circle command; only he is responsible. The native chiefs are but an instrument, an auxiliary.*<sup>24</sup>

The French held strong to direct control of their colonies even when the new policy of Associations stressed on an indirect rule like that of the British in colonial Africa.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Africans Nation should through her leaders' rise above Western and American socio-cultural cum economic dominations that has turned African nations to appendage of these Western and American super powers. African leaders should look inwards to effectively and efficiently harness the abundant human and material resources available in the continent to turn the continent to a great economic hub for the benefit of her citizens.

There is urgent need for Afrocentric perception of African history. Africans should tell their own stories themselves. African continent has the potentials to grow technologically, socio-culturally and economically. For African nations to achieve its full potentials and greatness its leaders must be proactive, visionary, committed and dedicated to African course and unity, eschew corruption, nepotism, ethnicity and other negative vices.

### **Endnotes**

1. R.D. Cornweil, *World History in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Longman Green and Co Ltd, 1969)p.226
2. D. Foeken, " *On The Causes of the Partition of Central Africa.*" (London: Geography Journal vol. no.1,.1995 )p.5
3. Stanley Hoffman, *Primary Importance of World Order: American Foreign Since the Cold War*(New York: Megraw- Hill Press) p.112
4. Singer, Marshall R, *Weak States in a World of Power*, (London: peoples Press) p.121

5. Thomas Hobson, cit. in Grigori Tunki, *Law and Force in the International System* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983) p.163
6. D. Foeken. " *On The Causes of the Partition of Central Africa.*" -----p.7
7. D. Foeken. D. " *On The Causes of the Partition of Central Africa.*"-----P.8
8. D. K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire 1830-1914*, (New York: Cornell University, 1973) p.63-72
9. J. A. Hobson, (1965). *Imperialism: A Study*, (London, University of Michigan Press) p.50,
10. J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, ----- p.50,
11. Lenin in Raymond Aron, *Politics and History*, (London: MacMillian Publications,1978) p.131
12. Schumpeter, *The Sociology of Imperialism*, (London: Peoples Press, 1976) p.250
13. Fanon, *The Wretch of the Earth*, (Onitsher: Nony Publishers, 2004) p. 50
14. Rudyard Kipling, *The White Man's Burden*, (Lagos: Peoples Press, 1978) p.203
15. F, Lugard, *The Free Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, (London: The Mills Publications, 1922) p. 51
16. M. R. Stenson. "The Economic Interpretation of Imperialism: A Comment On Some Recent Writings", (New Zealand: New Zealand Journal of History, 1976) p.150
17. Kalu E., *Constitutional Development of Nigeria*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964) p.120
18. E. G. Ighosa and T. R. Suberu, *A History of Identities, Violence and Stability in Nigeria*, (London: Queen Elizabeth House. University of Oxford, Crises Working Paper No.6. ) p. 20
19. E. G. Ighosa and T. R. Subaru, *A History of Identities, Violence and Stability in Nigeria*, ----- p. 15
20. Khapoya, V.B. *The African Experience*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. ( London: Peach pit Press. 2012) p.105
21. Khapoya, V.B. *The African Experience*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. -----p.99
22. R. Aglion, "French Colonial Policy" World Affairs Institute, Vol. 107, No. 5, 1944, p.78-9
23. R. Aglion, "French Colonial Policy"-----p.91
24. R. Aglion, "French Colonial Policy"-----p.92