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## From economic to development and back to economic: the changing explanations for the study of Africa

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### Introduction: the origins of African Studies

An understanding of the historical foundations of any discipline is an important variable in the enhancement of its utility value. Gaining this however is not always easy. This is especially so when the knowledge output from the discipline has diverse economic and social

implications for the different groups associated with the discipline. Under such circumstances, there is an incentive for the true origins of a discipline to be befuddled and contested. African Studies is a clear example of a discipline whose true origins have been confused and contested. Given the influence of European interests in shaping African Studies, it is not surprising that such contestations have their origins in the long and sometimes difficult relationship between Europe and Africa.

The reality is that Europe has arguably had the greatest influence on African Studies and African (under-)development. On one side of the contestations around the true essence of African Studies are those who believe that the economic exploitation of Africa is the main reason for European interests in

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on Prof. Uche's speech delivered during the ASCL's anniversary on 8 September 2022, from which his line of thinking has evolved.

Africa and African Studies. Advocates of this view include Sinclair (1901), Keltie (1890), and Rodney (1972). On the opposite side of the aisle are those who argue that it is the humanist interest of the West to develop Africa that has been the main driver of the development of African Studies. As John Lonsdale (2005) put it, this group sees Africans as feckless victims and the West as a rescue service. Unless the contested dynamics of European interests in Africa and African Studies are properly explored and understood, the continent may continue to make the mistakes of the past. In other words, unless Africa's past international economic relations are objectively studied and contextualised, it will be difficult for the knowledge produced in African Studies to have any meaningful developmental value for the continent.

It is in light of the above that Ton Dietz, who was the director of the African Studies Centre Leiden from 2011 to 2017, stressed the importance of understanding Africa in the context of its historical dynamics. According to him, 'we cannot understand what is currently going on in Africa and what will happen during the rest of this century if we do not study Africa's past and the history of Africa's relationships with the World' (Dietz, 2017).

In this short paper, I will demonstrate how the diverse contestations that have been driven by various interests have at different times in history conspired to shape our meaning and understanding of the essence of African Studies. In summary, I will show that African Studies has come full circle. I will specifically argue that the recent public acknowledgments by a growing number of western countries that their aid and trade policies in Africa are correlated, is at the very least a concession that their rescue service in Africa is incentivised by their national economic interests. This reconciliation of the theory and reality of African Studies has set the stage for the utility value of the discipline to be enhanced.

### **The changing explanations for foreign interests in Africa**

Although Africa and Europe are sometimes referred to as twin continents, the reality is that the European exploration and exploitation of Africa was a by-product of the search by Europe for an alternative trade route to Asia in search of spices. In this direction, the Portuguese led the way and were later joined by other European powers like the Dutch, British, and French. At the time the main drivers of European exploration of Africa were gold, ivory, and slaves (O'Rourke and Williamson, 2009). The journals kept by such explorers laid the foundation for our understanding of the continent.

One such explorer was Vasco Da Gama, who became the first person to navigate around the Cape and find a way to India (Ravenstein, 2010). On the side of the Dutch, traders, especially those allied with the Dutch West India Company and with respect to South Africa, the Dutch East India Company, were also encouraged to keep journals of their exploits and explorations of Africa. The Journal of Jan van Riebeeck was arguably the most influential in the above direction (The Van Riebeeck Society, 1958). Such journals showed that the interests of the Europeans in Africa at the time were driven mainly by economic profits. Associations of Europeans interested in Africa were also formed in some European countries. One example was the African Association (UK), which was formed in 1788. Again, its focus was on economic exploitation. At the time there were no inhibitions against making such goals public. Similar associations were formed in France and Spain in 1802 (Boahen, 1961).

The exploitation of Africa and Africans at the time was made easier by the fact that they were seen as savages who were nearer animals than humans. It was arguably because of this perception that the Europeans had no moral boundaries in dealing with the Africans (Brantlinger, 1985).

From the above, it is clear that historically, the motivation for the interest of the West in African Studies was economic. Since at the time there were no opposing voices either from Africa or Europe, there was no need to change the real narrative behind the collection of information about Africa and the dealings of Europe with Africa.

Things are, however, different now. The economic narrative of African Studies has since been successfully replaced by a developmental narrative (Cohen, 1971). This change process commenced after the Industrial Revolution, which was one of the reasons for the abolition of the slave trade and which propelled the scramble for the hinterland of Africa by different European powers.

The morality debate in Europe about the slave trade, which led to its eventual abolition, helped to ensure that the exploitative economic practices of Europeans in Africa could no longer be openly discussed. This arguably led to a change of narrative where Africa's developmental interests began to be touted as the main reason for European involvement in Africa. This was so for all the unilateral ventures of European nation-states and international agreements that were employed to continue the economic exploitation of the African continent, like the advent of European missionaries, the Berlin

Conference of 1884-5, and the League of Nations Agreement of 1919 (Covenant of the League of Nations, 1919; Craven, 2015).

Unlike in the past, European explorers now had to devise more sophisticated developmental and social arguments to support their revised position. The fight among diverse European interests in Africa also did not help matters. By the last decade of the 19th century, for instance, the missionaries who had previously worked closely with the British traders in West Africa began to increasingly question the British exploitative commercial practices in Africa (Flint, 1963). Such traders were therefore forced to find robust ways of defending their practices. This sometimes entailed challenging the role of missionaries in Africa. The arrowhead of this intellectual defence was Mary Kingsley, who was the philosophic spokesperson of the British traders in West Africa. Her central argument was that Africa and Africans were different species and that it was wrong for the missionaries to tamper with the spirituality and institutions of the Africans, which had developed in the context of the specificities of their society. She also argued that alcohol, which was heavily criticised by the missionaries as an exploitative tool, should actually be seen as an important medium of exchange (Flint, 1963, 1965). So successful were her arguments that the Royal African Society was established in her honour shortly after her death in 1900 (The African Society Inaugural Meeting, 1901).

The relationship between Europe and Africa however changed fundamentally during WWII. This was because the Atlantic Charter of 1941, contrary to the provision in the 1919 League of Nations Agreement, acknowledged the right of all people to govern themselves. This pronouncement made the end of colonialism imminent. Despite this, the developmental focus of African Studies continued to reign largely unchallenged. This was because European countries proactively moved to establish African Studies Centres in their home jurisdictions and consolidate existing ones at the time.<sup>3</sup>

### **The establishment of the ASC**

It was under such dynamics that the present ASCL was established in 1947 as the Study Centre of the Africa Institute. Although the Dutch were the most influential commercial players in Africa for the most part of the 17th century,

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from the Curators of the Africa Institute to the Minister of Foreign Affairs dated May 30, 1947, National Archives of the Netherlands, Catalogue Reference Number 2.05.117, Inventory Number, 12998.

they subsequently lost their influence in the continent and concentrated on Indonesia. The Atlantic Charter made the loss of this colony by the Dutch imminent.

It was at this stage that Africa again came into focus for the Dutch. Despite the economic origins of the Study Centre, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs was determined to disguise it as an independent scientific institute. This was why it advised that the Study Centre should be separated from the Africa Institute. This happened in 1958. Prior to that time, there was a push in 1955 to make the Study Centre part of Leiden University. The University was reluctant, however, partly because of the non-scientific aspects of the duties of the Study Centre.<sup>4</sup>

Arguably because of colonial influences, the European Centres for African Studies played important roles in establishing similar centres in many African countries. Such close relationships have at least in part led to the dominance of Eurocentric ideas across Africa several years after many African countries gained independence.

One consequence of the dominance of the developmental focus of African Studies is that issues targeted at aiding the development of the continent, such as development aid, dominate the policy space. It is because such development aid consistently lags behind what multinational businesses get out of Africa (Curtis and Jones, 2017), which is rarely mentioned in international policy debates, that I argue that the developmental perspective of African Studies has failed a cardinal empirical test for theory validation. Despite this and calls for the decolonisation of African Studies, the developmental focus continues to reign unhindered. The poor funding of education in Africa and the migration of several prominent Africanist scholars to the West have not helped matters. Those still resident in Africa remain dependent on western research and development, which are also sometimes entwined with Eurocentric interests (Olukoshi, 2006; Hyden, 2007). As a consequence of the above dynamics the calls for the decolonisation of African Studies have thus far not gained much traction.

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4 Letter from the curators of Leiden University to the curators of the Africa Institute, dated 7 April 1955, National Archives of the Netherlands, Catalogue Reference: 2.11.57, Inventory Number 936.

## Chinese influence in the continent

However, this is about to change because of the rise of China as a major force in Africa. This is so given the fact that Chinese influence in the continent has essentially been driven by their economic interests. Unlike the Europeans who previously pretended that their aid is simply aimed at helping wean Africa off poverty, the Chinese have historically linked their aid with the promotion of their economic interests in the continent. This strategy has at least partly helped China, a country that historically had very limited contact with Africa, to emerge as the largest exporter to the African continent. China has also become a major player in the funding and building of Africa's infrastructure.

Because of the emergent contestations for African resources and business opportunities with China, an increasing number of European countries have arguably started to use their aid as bait to enhance their trade and economic engagement with Africa. In other words, such countries have removed their developmental masks and brought out their economic claws. Examples of such countries include the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Finland, and Denmark (van Ewijk et al, 2017).

Economic interests, which for a long time had been disguised as being an unimportant variable in the shaping of European interests in Africa and African Studies, are now gradually returning to the centre stage. The result is that Eurocentric Africanist scholars who have invested their careers propagating and defending the developmental focus of African Studies are gradually losing the support of their benefactor European states. It is at this time safe to predict that such scholars will also soon lose their audience.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to explain how the traditional European economic interests, which were openly admitted in the African Studies literature up until the slave trade became a heavily contested moral topic in Europe, were transformed into a developmental issue - up until recently, more than half a century after most African countries got their independence. The emergence of China as Africa's largest exporter through its aid and trade policies has now caused an increasing number of European countries to adopt a similar strategy. This official admission and recognition that European economic interests are the main drivers of European interests in Africa and African Studies will help reconcile the theory of African Studies with the reality of

African Studies. The removal of the disguise of European incentives sets the stage for the real economic and political dynamics in Africa's international relations to influence the creation of knowledge in Africa. This will be in the interest of Africa and African Studies. At the very least, it will set the stage for the enhancement of the utility value of the discipline.

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