

The 3rd Session of the International Decade for Peoples of African Descent

Culture & Recognition

The most blatant example of the racist attitudes of Europeans manifested itself with the rise of imperialism in 19th century Europe – an attitude which lay not so much in the desire to discover the globe but in the supposed corresponding duty to civilize the inhabitants of that globe to bring them to the pinnacle of evolution achieved by Europeans.

Africans were the unfortunate victims of this paternalistic notion of ‘benevolence’ and have been suffering the consequences ever since. Europeans enthusiastically took the project and vision of imperialism because they believed that they were Darwin’s “fittest” and therefore had a moral obligation to bring their rationality, morality, modernity and industry to the “poor, dark, benighted Africans.”

This sentiment of imperial ideology was expressed so clearly by the poet Rudyard Kipling, an ardent empire-builder, in his 1899 work, “The White Man’s Burden” where he glorified imperialism.

*Take up the White Man’s burden-
Send forth the best ye breed-
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On Fluttered folk and wild-
Your new caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.*

The belief in a “White Man’s Burden” paints a devastating portrait of European arrogance particularly when one realizes that its self-appointed mission to bring light to the “dark” continent was not only misguided but ill-founded and ill-informed since, “it is fairly reasonable generalization to suggest that the development of some parts of African societies were roughly parallel to those of Europe two parallel and comparable cultures encountered each other.

For instance, consider this: Ethiopia already had philosophers, engineers, a musical genius and military strategists from the 6th century onwards. The philosopher Zera Yacob (1599-1692), in his 1667 treatise, *Hatata* (Inquiry) Zera Yacob introduced the supremacy of reason - that all human beings, male and female are equal. He was also against slavery. Earlier in the 6th century, St Yared, (505-571) invented the liturgical music of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as well as the Ethiopian musical notation system.

But most importantly, based on these traditions and beliefs in the sanctity of life, Ethiopia was the first in history to grant asylum to those who were persecuted. In 622 AD, Ethiopia, then called the Kingdom of Axum ruled by King Armah, (614-630), Ethiopia offered asylum to the followers of Prophet Mohammed. Prophet Mohammed was preaching that there was only one God, and that the other pagan deities were false. His teachings made his life and the life of his followers in great danger. Prophet Mohammed advised his followers to flee this persecution. His followers fled this persecution, sought refuge in the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia.

Similarly, during the Axumite civilization, 5BC – 8AD, Ethiopia was a well-established state and an important centre of commercial activities carrying out cultural relations with the Greeks, Romans, Persians and Indians. It had its own language, Geez, with its own alphabet; its own ancient civilisation and its own religion Christianity, which was introduced to the region, not in the 19th century, but in the 4th century. Despite all these advances, Europe's claim of self-righteousness and its self-appointed mission to 'civilize' Africa emanates from their false assumption that their civilization is innately superior – an assumption which drove them to attempt to impose it on the rest of the world. Ethiopia had a higher moral ground as it attached more value to morality, the respect of life and hospitality.

On the other hand, the invention of firearms and especially the Maxim gun and the well-organized armies and communications networks of European colonizers were important advantages they had during the scramble for Africa in 1884. The English poet, Hilaire Belloc summed it this way:

*“Whichever happens we have got
The Maxim gun and they have not.”*

In many parts of Africa, colonial intervention created and nourished a culture of self-definition based on “self” which is negative by its contrast with a “whole” i.e., the society itself which is the hallmark of African civilization.

The colonial administrators also nourished “tribal” identities for administrative purposes, and this eventually became the basis for inter-ethnic conflicts in the post-independence period. Certain tribes were selected and mobilized based on their ethnic identities for political purposes. This is one of the key factors behind the ethnic conflicts and tension ravaging the entire African continent.

Thus, we see that even after the heyday of colonialism, the artificially created and newly installed independent states in Africa inherited these imbalances and continued to govern using the social and economic structure left behind by the departing colonial powers. As we can observe today, these new states could hardly achieve unity based on a solid foundation because popular expectations for equal participation in power and an equal share in resources were never met.

My point in all this is to illustrate that today's forced migration in Africa is the result of a historical context, a context in which the legacy of colonialism has undoubtedly played a dominant role. For even after the colonial powers left (if they ever did) the African nations, now ruled by the former colonially favored tribe, were not only inherently unstable but also engage in fratricidal conflicts resulting in huge displacements. This constitutes as the main root cause of the refugee crisis in Africa.

The European imperialist ambition shaped the African refugee situation in three main ways: First, their excessive greed for resources fueled the colonization of Africa and the subsequent carving of African societies by arbitrarily drawing boundaries.

Second, the definition of a refugee as *(a person singled out for persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group and political opinion)*, was created in the European context and was therefore presumed to be universal in scope, even though it was clearly irrelevant to the African context.

Third, European xenophobia and racism are behind the refusal to expand the above-mentioned definition of refugees for fear that Africans will strike back through migration to the European metropole.

When it came to defining what constitutes to be a 'refugee', it was Europeans who created the international definition of refugee (to whom asylum would be granted) in response to the refugee crisis in the Post World War II era. The 1951 Convention relating to the status of Refugees, and the subsequent 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, created through the United Nations and purported to be universal in scope, were in reality, created in the European context, and therefore largely irrelevant to the situation in Africa.

The United Nations intended to create a situation of equality of nations, whereby there would be a "decline in European hegemony and increase in the multicultural character of international law." That is not the case, however, in the area of refugee law. While it is logical that the "experiences [of all states] with forced migrants should be considered and included in any international definition that claims to respond to an international, and not merely a regional, refugee crisis," in fact, the 1951 and 1967 definition did exactly the opposite, while still proclaiming themselves to be "international."

The definition of refugee set out in the 1951 Convention is any person who: *Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.*

This prototypical portrait of a refugee was created during the European refugee crisis existing at the time. Although it was expanded in 1967 to cover refugees outside

Europe, the lack of substantive changes meant that it still retained its links to the original ideological context under which it was formed – “the classic situation of political refugees who fear persecution because of their political or social views with the dominant ideology of their government...”

We see the Eurocentric character of this purportedly international definition reflected in the circumstances surrounding its creation: “It was debated at a time when the refugee problem is concentrated in Europe, and it was originally signed by twenty states, sixteen of whom were European...”

Perhaps the most compelling argument against the Eurocentric definition of refugee is seen most clearly in the fact that African nations were forced to create their own refugee agreement to supplement the “international” one. The regional African Union, in an attempt to “Africanize” the existing international definition by taking into account the specific aspects of the African refugee, added the following to the definition.

The term ‘refugee’ shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order... is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence...

Here we see the AU definition, in contrast to the “international” one, recognizes the effects of colonial legacy on the refugee situation in Africa, in particular, recognizing the fact that it may not be possible to identify an individualistic, subjective fear of persecution, and that a refugee flow, prompted by generalized civil strife, is just as deserving of recognition.

However, even though the African refugee definition is the most fitting to the contemporary pattern and nature of refugee movements, the West’s refusal to make the African convention a universal one is based on the premise that an expanded definition will result in a flood of refugees arriving in Europe from the African states.

Once again, European states demonstrate their arrogance by this assumption. Whenever it is suggested that the existing international definition of a refugee be expanded and improved by incorporating the characteristics of refugee flows recognized in the African definition, the United Nations, and in particular, the European nations who dominate the creation of international refugee policy refuse to allow it – purportedly because of the increased costs that European nations would face as well as their inability to integrate a large number of refugees. There is, it seems, a “desire to deter an influx of culturally, racially, and politically dissimilar people [from migrating] both for political reasons and general xenophobia.

Therefore, the history of the African refugee crisis must be seen inextricably as tied to the arrogance of European policymakers. That arrogance, however, must be set aside, if the global community hopes to achieve a solution to the problem. Specifically, the European nations must first recognize the roles they have played in the creation of the African crisis, particularly through colonialism, and second, recognize the moral obligation they owe to assist in the development of solutions. Any denial of that obligation simply perpetuates the injustices which began because of colonialist policies.

Finally, my recommendation at the 3rd Session of the International Decade for Peoples of African Descent is to recognize the African Convention on Refugees as the most relevant instrument for defining the contemporary nature and pattern of refugees. Therefore, during the Second Decade of IDPAD, for this convention to become a universal instrument instead of a regional one.