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The Future of Africa – Not What it Used to Be

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Abstract

Usually the present-day understanding of Africa doesn't look back beyond its colonial past. But the difficulties of African nation states with the Western system of a strong and accountable state and an open civil society have to be understood from the perspective of the precolonial system of in-group solidarity and vertical networks under paternalistic authority. The Western political order doesn't stand a chance of being adopted if the traditions of social solidarity and personalized relationships cannot be integrated into it. This need comes in a different light by the recent developments of the impersonal and functionalized political and economic system of neoliberalism in the West itself, which increasingly evokes neo-tribal reactions in search for new in-group solidarity and identity. While Africa is grappling to adopt the Western system, Western societies return to the tribal heritage, it seems. This essay makes a plea to locate the need and desire for belongingness in the economic sphere of small and medium-sized enterprises. They cultivate strong bonds of solidarity and cooperative networks. Their temporary existence and fast rhythms of change prevent them from slipping off into the old exclusion mechanism of the tribal existence, which is so dangerous in politics. Both Western and African societies may find a new future by learning from each other's past.

Keywords: African history, Lifelong solidarity, Vertical networks, Rule of law, Civil society, Social entrepreneurship.

Introduction

We have as much future as we have a history. The future cannot be derived by extending the curves of growth or decline from past statistics. It announces itself in the challenges society faces, in crises, in problems not solved. In order to meet the challenges of the future cultures and societies need to delve deeper into their histories. This also counts for Africa. This essay is in search of a new balance between past and future of sub-Saharan Africa.

The postcolonial expectation of industrialization, of catching up with the west, of self-rule and democracy, failed to deliver on its promise. The reason is that the binary opposition between colonial and postcolonial proved to provide too short a historical perspective. Often we need to delve deeper into history to find paths into the future (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1993). Much of the older layers of African history survived both colonialism and post-colonialism: the system of lifelong solidarity (Tshikuku, 2001), of personalized relationships and vertical networks (Hyden, 2006). It has not effectively been replaced by a Western style civil society and

universalist state. As an informal system it makes its impact the more felt inasmuch as it is less explicitly mentioned (Kelsall, 2012). The old layers of African history should be taken into account to find paths into modernity. But then again, which modernity? Modern nation states seem to be dissolving either in bigger units like the European Union or in smaller units characterized by neo-tribalized nationalism, language groups, or even, like in Italy, old city states. While Africa is trying to depart from its tribal past, the West is re-tribalizing (Bauman, 1993, 2011).

A new balance needs to be found between the heritage of Africa and the heritage of the West. In a sense the one's heritage may be the other one's future. This essay attempts to explore how such a balance might look like. It will focus especially on governance, society, and the role of entrepreneurship.

The development debate

Every era produces its own myth: the belief of this one generation turned into a universal recipe. Its own solution or fashion also becomes its export product (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1993). Such solutions are mostly partial and one-sided. This is what turns them into a myth. If myths are left to their inner dynamics they make a mess of society. After the second world war the first development myth consisted in the belief in money and technology (Gasper, 2004). The developing countries would catch up like Europe did thanks to the Marshall plan. In the 60s when the Western world industrialized rapidly, the emphasis shifted towards industrialization and infrastructure. Next the emphasis was on rural development, services, education, health, often bypassing the government. The Western donors began to discover that the African nations had a different social system. But the Cold War stood in the way of a deeper understanding. The elites of the decolonized "nations" consolidated their power by installing large bureaucracies (Hyden, 2006; Moyo, 2009). Since these elites consisted of minorities or (coalitions of) tribes they used these bureaucracies to keep competitors at bay and in check. But in an era of general confidence in state interference in the economy (socialism), this was hardly noticed. What was noticed, however, was increasing corruption. Many NGOs and donor institutions moved away from working with the state institutions. Grassroots development and community management became popular (Schouten & Moriarty, 2003). It was associated with the then socialist preference for the poor. During the 80s the nonfunctioning state bureaucracies became untenable and "structural adjustment" programs were enforced upon the African countries by the World Bank and IMF: the West entered upon another myth, the era of neoliberalism. The criticism from Africa, but also within the Western world was severe, because African countries were forced to cut their budgets on education, health and welfare and stop protecting their markets. After 1989 the World Bank responded to the criticism by starting the debate on governance (World Bank, 1998), which was later followed by the debate on civil society (Eberly, 2008). The term "governance issues" was introduced as a diplomatic term for nepotism, particularism and outright corruption. Since 2000 the debate is dominated by the millennium goals, the grand challenges, either in the form of the comprehensive approach of Sachs (Sachs, 2005) or of the searching approach of Easterly (Easterly, 2006).

Entrepreneurship is the latest offshoot in this cascade of development discourses (Prahalad, 2010; Valerio, Parton, & Robb, 2014). It has become fashionable not only in the West (where it is the dream of students to start their own business) but also in Asia and Africa (where the reality of lack of jobs urges people in this direction). The good thing is that it enhances bottom-up initiatives and self-organization (Samli, 2009). But it may be as promising and disappointing as all the other myths, if it still shares the same blind spots. Blinded by our own export products and good intentions often we do not see what is really going on at the other side. Specifically two of those blind spots need to be mentioned: these are (1) the lack of capacities (skills, entrepreneurial mindset, cultural characteristics and values) and (2) the lack of an enabling environment (vertical

networks, nonfunctional state bureaucracies) (Kroesen, Darson, & Ndegwah, 2014). It would be a bad service to Africa to remain silent on these issues for reasons of political correctness and shame for the crimes of colonialism (Calderesi, 2006). But we need a deeper understanding of Africa's past to comprehend where it might (or should) be heading.

What about tribes and empires in Africa?

We need to understand Africa's oscillation between tribes and empires. Tribes have been roaming around all over the world. On top of those tribes empires have been built (Fukuyama, 2011; Rosenstock-Huessy, 1958). But the system of hunters and gatherers was longer dominant in Africa than in the rest of the world; tribes that exercised agriculture (especially introduced by groups of Bantu origin) entered at a later stage (Vansina, 1990). Only from the 14th or 15th century onwards small empires turned into larger imperial conglomerations (deGraft-Johnson, 1954). It is a strange paradox. One of the most successful empires, pharaonic Egypt, originated in Africa and precisely this heritage could not successfully be copied in Africa. Due to its vast area which has long been impenetrable due to the lack of roads and the impossibility of the use of horses (the tsetse fly), in sub-Saharan African empires there was always the exit option (Oliver & Atmore, 2001; Vansina, 1990). Time and again new territories have been entered and cultivated by people seeking refuge from the central authority of kingdoms and empires. Such centralized governments could provide safety and security, but tax pressures and exploitation always pushed families and clans out of their orbit. The raids for slaves either from Arab raiders or from their Western counterparts, or from intermediary groups from African origin, reinforced this ambivalent attitude to central rule. Many times African kingdoms reorganized themselves into larger centralized empires under the pressure of those raids. Often these empires in their turn raided other farther away groups to satisfy the demand for slaves and become rich (Oliver & Atmore, 2001). In Africa as elsewhere the slave trade was an important source of revenues and wealth and always the groups raided at reacted by attempting to stay out and move farther away. This ambivalent attitude to central power might have left a lasting imprint on the African soul: one of adapting to the central power or big men, and at the same time ridiculing them in a healthy attitude of irony and laughter. Nowhere a strong hierarchy marked by labor division and strong imperial authority could for a very long time be established (Reader, 1997), like in China or in India. The main feature of governance remained paternalistic rule by means of clientelistic vertical networks of separate small clannish groups and families, living as pastoral nomads or from agriculture, with limited labor division. It has been argued that it was actually the Western administrative system that organized the population in tribes more strictly than ever before (Bayart & Bertrand, 2006). And indeed tribes merged or separated, so that membership changed according to opportunity. But the system of houses and clans, the mindset and values of "family is all" or even better "family-line is all" has prevailed everywhere and always (Ayittey, 2006). Beyond the family-line and the continuity of the "house" all and everything was or needed – for reasons of survival – to be approached in an instrumental way, with the ambivalence of respect for authority and having the exit option in the back of one's mind.

System I → System II

This history created a specific value set which still survives (Kelsall, 2003). Everybody up in the political hierarchy, MPs, ministers, presidents inherited this patriarchal role of distributing favors in return for services. Economic profits are used to buy votes for political offices and these in turn are used to compensate for the "investment" by privileged tendering, monopolies of parastatal companies etc. MPs are chosen to act as strong men who can achieve something for their constituency, the region or the tribe. If one needs a license, or taxes arranged, or a clearance for imports, one needs a "friend" in the government bureaucracy who can help in return for a favor. One may have to "buy" this favor, in case the person is not part of one's solidarity network. Such services may take a "little something" or an "allowance". The solidarity system and personalized

rule make it difficult for the state to create an equal level playing field (Ayittey, 2006; Hyden, 2006). That in turn makes it difficult to enhance voluntary cooperation apart from clientelistic networks. The two biggest obstacles for economic development therefore are (1) the lack of a universalist state (rule of law, transparency, equal playing field, contract enforcement) and (2) lack of voluntary cooperation on the level of civil society apart from family loyalties or state authorities (Fukuyama, 2011). These two issues make doing business in Africa 20% to 30% more expensive (Cooksey & Kelsall, 2011; Eifert 2008). That may explain why a home grown industry and entrepreneurship in general do not really come off the ground. The formal institutions are present, state agencies, laws, bureaucracies. But informally different rules prevail (Ekeh, 1975) – often not even perceived by Westerners, who make indiscriminate use of the word "corruption" for everything they do not understand (Sardan, 1999). As a consequence of these informal rules investments and property rights are insecure (Besley, 1995; Bromley, 2008). Patrimonialism from the top and distrust between different groups at the bottom of society stand in strong opposition to the "modern" system of a universalist state and an open civil society (Stackhouse, 1984).

Should I now make use of the distinction between tradition and modernity? Or old and new? Or African and Western? None of these terms is completely correct. In traditional Africa there were countervailing powers against the power of the chiefs and kings (Ayittey, 2006). There was a council of elders keeping the rulers within the royal house in check. And the institutions of state and civil society have to such an extent become indigenous to Africa that they cannot be treated as exclusively Western anymore. On the other hand, in the modern West as well such vertical networks exist, old boys networks, professional groups, lobby groups, who distribute privileges and create "less equal" access (Fukuyama, 2011). Therefore I prefer to make use of the more neutral terms System I and System II (table 1). System I: patrimonialism from the top, lifelong solidarity among closed in-groups at the bottom. System II: rule of law and universalism at the state level and open cooperation (competition and cooperation, realignment of loyalties etc.) at the bottom. These two systems imply two different value sets. System I: obedience and loyalty, participation in the group, traditionalism, uncertainty avoidance, go with the flow. System II: individual judgment, initiative, status by achievement, importance of planning and innovation.

Table 1. Overview System I and System II

System I		System II	
Institutions	Values	Institutions	Values
Patrimonialism at the top, granting favors in return for services	Obedience and loyalty, hierarchy, status	Rule of law and universalism at the top	Equal access, transparency,
Closed in-groups at the bottom	Lifelong solidarity, participation in the group, traditionalism, uncertainty avoidance	Civil society, open cooperation at the bottom, changing coalitions (apart from family loyalty and state authority)	Individual judgment, initiative, status by achievement, planning and innovation

These two systems can be considered as a continuum along which different sectors of business and activity score differently, cities and villages, rural areas etc. Three comments may put table 1 and the transition between the two systems in the right perspective:

1. The distinctions are of an ideal-typical nature. Historically speaking System II features have also been present in Africa: checks and balances on government, egalitarianism, open cooperation

often functioned well on the small-scale of nomadic or/and agricultural societies.
2. The postwar socialist ideology that was also strong in Africa was not only attractive to legitimize the liberation struggles in Africa against the exploitative colonial powers, but also to unify the different tribes and regions under the umbrella of a strong state. The socialist principle of putting all power exclusively in the hands of the state suited the African need for unity well.
3. The ethnic coalitions that conquered state power during the liberation struggles consolidated their political rule (deemed indispensable for the higher purpose of national unity) often by keeping the other ethnic groups out or at a distance. That the different ethnic coalitions struggle with each other for political power within the framework of a modern state in itself is indicative of the transition between System I and System II that is taking place.

Generally speaking Africa is on the move, from tradition to modernity, whatever one understands by it, from System I to System II. Should sub-Saharan Africa eventually copy the Western world? The real challenge may consist in a revival of the precolonial heritage within a postmodern framework that does inherit modernity, but also goes beyond it. Only if Africa can translate – which literally means "taking along" – the older system of lifelong solidarity, of slow rhythms of change, of personalized relations, into a new and creative future, the continuity of history will be restored. Only if the heritage of Africa can merge with the Western heritage of an open civil society and a universalist state, a new future opens up that may be sufficiently mature to solve the pressing problems of the continent.

System II – Heritage of the West?

What is the origin of System II? Is the West the exception? Yes, and no. No: in many parts of the world the struggle to supersede the tribal organization by an imperial system ran its course. The difficult question always was how to get an effective and accountable hierarchical authority above and beyond tribal and clannish loyalties and prevent clientelism (Fukuyama, 2011; Rosenstock-Huessy, 1958)? Sooner or later always one clan or tribal group conquered the state apparatus and used it keep the others in check. Such a system of rule is not sustainable. China tried to solve this problem by means of a system of state examinations creating at least limited equal access. India tried to solve it by means of an intricate equilibrium between the different castes. The Empire of Turkey tried to solve it by establishing a layer of privileged slaves, imported from its European territories, which functioned as a civil service between the Emperor and the clientelistic systems of clan and region. In Western society the church was the solution (Fukuyama, 2011; Rosenstock-Huessy 1993, 1958). Before the fall of the Roman Empire the church was already present in all the tribes. Tribal rulers and kings used the authority of the church to legitimate their rule over the other tribes and in return the church urged them to codify their laws in order to put an end to arbitrary rule (Berman, 1983). In this competition between two great powers the law became the instrument to compromise and compete in peace. In a long process and by many revolutionary upheavals – the Struggle of Investiture, the city movement, the German Reformation, British parliamentarism, the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution and finally the world wars increasingly an open civil society was created with equal rights for all citizens (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1993; Berman, 1983). In this way Western society pushed back the bonds of tribe and family. Individuals and non-family based corporations could now compete and cooperate on a larger scale under the umbrella of a universalist state.

The benefits are enormous, but they did not come without a price. The price of citizens rights, mass production and mass consumption, consists in the gradual instrumentalization of our lives in large-scale social systems and in the anonymity of becoming cogs in the production machine, while as consumers we are becoming spiritual dwarfs that live by the day. The West itself is attempting to counterbalance this mechanized existence by seeking refuge in an older past. Although some time ago the Western system of a strong, universalist and accountable state, was considered to be the

end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), history itself went further and nowadays in politics and in society we are witnessing a revival of ethnic and national identities and of personalized relationships that rely on the authority of big men. Didn't the African rhythms already invade much earlier the musical styles of the West, the dances and other forms of art? Wasn't that an announcement of what lies ahead of us and what is now gradually happening? The youth is seeking the unconsciousness of participation in the group instead of the independent, waking, objectifying mind of Western scientific analysis and individual independence (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1993).

In sum, where Africa is struggling to inherit the Western system of universalist rule, open civil society and independent individualism, both Africa and the West attempt at the same time to restore lifelong solidarity, reverence for authority, belongingness (Junger, 2016). Could it be that Africa and other parts of the world kept this old heritage of belongingness in store precisely in order to make it available at the right time? In any case, if we consider the last 1000 years of Western history as a great leap forward, the challenge now, both for the West and the Rest is how to connect this leap forward to the heritage of the past. Not only Africa is challenged by the West. The Western institutions are also challenged by the heritage of Africa. The future is open.

Will Africa's tribal past thus experience a revival? Will the West as well seek to revive the older layers of its own past? But isn't violence lurking around the corner if this course is taken (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1958)? It is the violence that Western society attempted to eliminate – the violence of exclusion and persecution, of victimizing the others, of tribal wars. Should the universal speech of numbers really be replaced by the tribal tongues of closed we-groups?

How can we revive the heritage of the tribes without at the same time also reviving the violence and persecution of the old tribes, the exclusion of the others? Can a balance be found between the Western heritage of state universalism and open civil society on the one hand, and lifelong solidarity, belongingness, authority and identity on the other hand? If by reflection on our past we are able to delineate the contours of such a future, how much violence both of the Western system and the African tradition might be averted?

The entrepreneurial tribe

I already mentioned entrepreneurship. It should not be considered just a contingency that everywhere people speak of living-labs, consisting of technical whiz kids, starting an enterprise or consisting of volunteer groups doing projects in developing countries. They are exemplifications of the introduction of tribal bands and strong group loyalties right in the heart of modern society (Drnovsek, Cardon & Murnieks, 2009). They counterbalance the functionalization of our existence by the state apparatus and the technological machinery that has taken hold of disciplined and functionalized, and spiritually suffocated people. Such groups may strike a creative balance between group belongingness and initiative, past and future, and insiders and outsiders. They may function as strong we-groups, but also as a team, coordinating different contributions. They don't reduce their members to a common denominator. And they are also open to outsiders, open to the market forces and the customers, open to partners from which they can learn in order to take the next step. Such entrepreneurial networks or groups, or connected individuals are a mixture of self-affirmation – show what you can do! – and of social service, because they feel their work should also be meaningful and welcomed by other people. Entrepreneurial teams with a passionate spirit might be more successful than individual entrepreneurial heroes (Reich, 1987; Ruef, 2010), since they foster a set of values that provides their members with strength, conviction, but also commitment and compassion. As member of such groups people can grow above and beyond themselves (Rosenstock-Huessy, 1973).

There already is an example: the guilds and commons of the Middle Ages (Moor, 2008). They were part of the city movement and although they were denounced by the French Revolution as

conservative they, together with the monasteries, set the oldest entrepreneurial examples. They watched over the professional standards of their members and gave them training. They supported competition, but not completely free competition, but responsible and regulated in order to include and not exploit weaker parties. They could think in terms of long-term continuity and not only of quick gains. Together with the monasteries they invented the word that is still in use for an organized body of people: corporations (or universities). This kind of attitude, spirit, and responsibility may be a viable way of re-tribalization for the West and de-tribalization for Africa.

Conclusion

In response to the development failures of Africa I have proposed an attempt to understand the present predicament not only from the perspective of the colonial but also the precolonial history of Africa. Africa has known a system of lifelong solidarity especially on the family level, and patrimonial/clientelistic governance from its rulers. This system of rule, to be summarized as System I, has been suitable to agricultural and nomadic societies. I have opposed it somewhat ideal-typically to System II, the system of universalist rule, equal access and of cooperation and changing alignments within an open civil society. Although this system can be considered as a leap forward within human history, this very fact implies that it has to be reconnected to the older layers of history represented by Asia and Africa. This need is articulated as a longing to reinstall strong we-groups and vertical networks, and reinforce belongingness. It raises the question how the older systems and the new system can be integrated into each other. Tribal politics is a dangerous affair. It lacks the inclusiveness of a universalist state and as such the self-confirmation of such we-groups is prone to violence. However, if this spirit of belongingness, identity and self-affirmation is located in the economic sphere (and not in the sphere of politics!) by cooperative networks and entrepreneurial "tribes" an equilibrium may be found between the heritage of the past and the challenges of the future. Such groups can intensely cultivate their own identity and still exchange with their environment since their profits depend on it. They can combine the intense belongingness of a tribe with the temporary existence of an enterprise. This spirit of collective action can take the shape of social service and create the socially and environmentally sustainable society of the future. For sub-Saharan Africa this entails the adoption of universalistic rule and an open civil society from System II, but in the form of cooperative entrepreneurship networks with a strong team spirit among its members. In such groups, understood as egalitarian and cohesive teams with strong leadership, old-time African traditions are combined with initiative, inclusiveness and innovation. Such a revival of the heritage of Africa may also open a door into the future for established System I societies that need to compensate for the functionalization and atomization of their members.

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