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An Historical Assessment and Analysis of Economic Imperialism in West Africa

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Abstract

The West African political economy has been shaped by the policies, decisions and actions of dominant European imperialist countries since about over 500 years. Starting with imperial merchant capitalism along the West African coast in the 16th Century and French gradual acquisition of Senegal as a colony as from 1677, West Africa has remained under the imperialist hold. West Africa remains economically dependent on its former colonial masters despite more than 60 years since the countries started gaining independence. The consequences of economic imperialism on West Africa have included exploitative resource extraction, proxy and resource influenced civil wars, illegal trade in natural resources, mass poverty, and external migration of skilled workers necessary for national development. The world sees and broadcasts poverty, starvation, conflict and Saharan migration in the West African sub-continent, but hardly reports the exploitative imperialistic processes that have produced poverty and misery in West Africa in particular and across sub-Saharan Africa in general.

Keywords

Colonialism – neo-colonialism – economic imperialism – anglophone – francophone – lusophone West Africa

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1 Introduction

The transnationalization of the modes of production goes hand in hand with the reconfiguration of the values of goods to the benefit of core capitalist social formations (Amin, 2009, 2013a, b). The market economy already reflects an advanced stage of international capitalism. Under the regime of the natural economy from which capitalism evolved, patriarchal peasant families, ancient rural communities, and feudal domains formed the mass of societal homogenous economic unities of production. From these earlier stages of economic development, capitalism evolved. As the production process became heterogenous, the means of production was privatized by European and North American capitalists, and production was transformed by machines, allowing mass production beyond manual labor. The onward sophistication of international capitalism is a function of the contemporary imperialistic system. The history of contemporary capitalism is traceable to the 14th Century. Prior to full blown capitalism, European explorers and merchants sought out raw materials and spices in other continents. They discovered new territories hitherto unknown, and far away from Europe. They secured economic interests, signaling the early stage of imperialism (Kearns, 2010).

Europe launched its quest to explore the so-called hitherto unknown parts of the world particularly in Asia, the Americas and Africa between the late 14th and early 15th Century. West Africa got into the European imperialism chain as from the early 15th Century when European merchants sailed in to discover hitherto unexplored land and people along the coast of West Africa. The quest to explore and see other lands and settlements was not just to advance a knowledge-quest to contact other human settlements around the world. European explorers sailed out under royal charters to explore opportunities for European trade and imperialism round the world. European crusades in the Middle East had come to an end by late 13th Century with major losses to the European army (Chevedden, 2008). Europe's attempt at imperialism in the Middle East through the Crusade had failed. Thus European kingdoms subsequently launched out to explore other parts of the world for mercantile and imperialistic interests. European exploration and consequent colonization and neo-colonization have strengthened the West's dominance of the world capitalist system in the last 700 years of Western economic globalization process. This article examines European economic imperialism in West Africa from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial periods.

Amin (2013a) rightly notes that societies were by no means isolated from another prior to the 16th Century. Societies competed within regional systems and as such kingdoms and empires were formed in the diverse geographies across the world. Amin further posited that in terms of accumulation, the previous forms of imperialism were different from modern capitalist imperialism, to the extent that the former was politically driven, while the latter was economically driven. On the one hand, political imperialist empires extended territories over vast geographies until they could no longer sustain their hold over vassal states politically and militarily. On the other hand, international capitalism uses global economic imperialistic systems to gain control over and keep nations under its imperialistic grip. For West Africa, the gradual incorporation into the World Capitalist System started with the coming of Portuguese explorers by the 15th Century.

Portuguese explorers were the first Europeans to reach West Africa in a quest to find a route to India, visiting coastal lands and settlements in present day Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Cape Verde Island, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria (Ebert, 2008). The discovery of human settlements and land with rich resources attracted Portuguese traders, and later, other European merchants to trade along the West African coast. They extracted resources such as palm oil, palm kernel, gold, spices, cotton, cocoa and other needed raw materials from natives in exchange for finished products such as spirits, umbrellas, and clothing which the local population considered fanciful (Omobowale, 2013). Initially, European merchants traded at the coast with limited access into the hinterland. However, European slave merchants started shipping captured slaves from Africa as from the 16th Century, marking the second stage of European imperialism in Africa. Walter Rodney estimated that more than four million Africans were shipped as slaves to Europe and the USA between the 17th and 19th Century according to Walter Rodney (1972). Furthermore, Aline Helg (2019:17) on the other hand citing figures from *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, puts the figure of captured Africans transported to Americas at about 12 million. The exact figure of Africans captured as slaves and transported may not be known, but slave trade marked a phenomenal dimension of Western economic imperialism in Africa. Great Britain abolished slave trade in 1807 and subsequently, created the West Africa Squadron to enforce the ban on slave trade. Britain's West Africa Squadron intercepted many slave ships and freed captured slaves intended for the Caribbean Islands, Europe and the Americas from 1808 to about 1870. In 1833, following the passage of the Slavery Abolishment Act, the British government paid slave owners the sum of £20 million pounds as compensation to British Slave owners for loss due to the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire (Walvin, 2009).[1] Slavery abolishment marked

1 Kenan Malik (11 February 2018) in a report published by *The Guardian* noted that the sum of £20 million paid to compensate the slave owners represented 40% of the budget, was burrowed by the British government and only fully repaid in 2015.

the end of the second stage on European imperialist domination of Africa and it signaled the beginning of the third stage of colonialism.

Great Britain, France, and Germany emerged as the major colonial powers in West Africa after the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference hosted by the first German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck on the protocols for imperialistic acquisition of Africa. Great Britain acquired the coastal territories reconstituted as Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia. France also acquired eight territories namely the coastal areas of Benin (formerly Dahomey), Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea (formerly French Guinea), Mauritania, and Senegal and landlocked territories of Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), Mali (formerly French Sudan) and Niger. Germany also claimed Togo, the Volta region of Ghana and Cameroon as its West African territories. Germany lost these territories to Great Britain and France during World War 1 (Nasson, 2014). Portugal had only Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. These three European nations produced imperialistic colonial and post-colonial realities that are delineated as Anglophone (British), Francophone (French) and Lusophone (Portuguese) spheres of imperialistic influence.

Great Britain administered its territories through a process it termed indirect rule, France used the assimilation system and Portugal used the *Indigenato* Code for civilizing and assimilation processes (Mendy, 2003; Okon and Ojakorotu, 2018). Indirect rule ensured the retention of local rulers at the grassroots as native authorities. Native authorities were the closest to the people exacting political, economic and coercive powers for the exaction of British rule. The natives saw their local rulers as the ones giving exercising political authority, charging taxes and fines, determining economic paths and controlling the police, courts and prisons. In reality, however, native authorities were supervised and controlled by European colonial officers. And until about the 1950, educated natives were barred from senior positions in the civil service. The French Assimilation and and Portuguese *Indigenato* policies differentiated between the native and non-native, and between the non-civilized and the civilized. French and Portuguese policies sought to make the native internalize European culture in order to 'become' a civilized being. Only those deemed 'assimilated' and 'civilized' could serve in the colonial service. However, being assimilated and civilized meant being like the colonizer to protect the colonizer's imperialistic interests. Political independence has not weaned West African countries from Western economic imperialism with African nationals receiving the least value from the global imperialistic system.

Generally speaking, the law of value presupposes an integrated market capital and labor for the production of commodities, markets and profits.

The integrated market supposedly advances standardization in the space in which it operates, identical prices of goods and remuneration of capital and labor. This approximation corresponds well to the empirical reality in the central capitalist formations. But on the scale of the world capitalist system, the law of globalized value integrates trade in products and capital movements well, but, alienates local labor power, thus producing poverty and misery in neo-colonized countries (Amin, 2013a, b). Once again, this article examines economic imperialism in West Africa. This section introduces the chapter. The next section historically discusses mercantile and colonial imperialism while the third section examines economic imperialism in the post-independence period. The fourth section imperial rivalry and cooperation in West Africa. The fifth section takes further discusses the consequences of economic imperialism in West Africa and possible mitigation strategies. The last section presents the conclusion.

2 Tracing Mercantile and Colonial Imperialism in West Africa

Understanding the imperial institutional design of colonial powers provides the structural and normative framework for understanding the genesis French, British and Portuguese mercantile and colonial imperialism in West Africa. The 14th–15th Century mercantile imperialism marked West Africa's initial encounter with Europe's imperial explorers. The explorers' supposed quest to find a route to India, took them to the coast of West Africa and they were exposed to the beauty of the landscape and the economic benefits that could be sourced from the sub-continent. The primary emphasis was on the raw materials that could be sourced from Africa. Africa's soil was rich for the cash crops that were needed in Europe. Kriger (2005) relayed an account of Cadamoso, an early European explorer who scouted the coasts of West Africa between 1455 and 1456 to acknowledge places where cotton was available in commercial quantity. The aim was to note the communities where cotton cloths were sold and worn. Cadamoso acknowledged that there was an established market of raw cotton, threads and handwoven textiles along the Senegal-Gambia axis. Kriger notes: "On the Gambia River, Cadamosto was especially impressed by the amount of cotton that was grown and processed there, and he described the locally-woven cotton textiles as having been very well made" (Kriger, 2005: 99). Furthermore, Kriger reports the account of Pacheco Pereira's voyages to West Africa in the 1490s. Pereira described cotton plantations and evidence of textile industries in Rio Grande, Sierra Leone, Forcados and Benin Kingdom. Pereira also noted in his journal that palm oil, animal skin and uniquely coloured shells were available for sale along the coast of the territories he visited.

Cocoa was introduced to West Africa by the Portuguese in 1822, they planted the first seed in the Island of Fenando Po. (Howes, 1946). Cocoa cultivation spread to Ghana, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast from Fernando Po and the three countries account for 70% of the contemporary global production of cocoa (Voora et al., 2019). Oil palm is indigenous to West Africa and archaeological findings confirm that the oil palm contributed to pre-colonial civilization and subsistence in the sub-continent (D'Andrea Logan and Watson, 2006). The oil palm was another raw material that attracted the imperial merchants to West Africa. It is difficult to quantify the export of raw materials from West Africa between 1400 and the commencement of hinterland colonization as from the mid-1800s due to lack of data. It is, however, important to note that the availability of the raw materials needed for production in Europe tied West Africa into the European global imperial network.

Slave trade was a dimension of the imperial labor integration of West Africa into the World capitalist system. Slaves provided the critical labor needed on plantations in Europe and European new world in North and South America and the Caribbean Islands. As property, they lacked protection under the European laws. Hence, European slave merchants had the impetus to capture Africans from vulnerable communities and ship same across the Atlantic Ocean as slaves. The evidence of the trauma West Africans endured after capture remain encrypted in the walls and structures of the numerous slave fortresses dotted around the West African coast (Asante, 2000). The 'point of no return' was the narrow excruciating passage captured slaves had to pass shackled and neck chained to one-another on a single file from the fortress to the waiting ships that subsequently sailed to a new world of slave labor on plantations. Slavery thrived as long as African labor was required for production by imperial masters. The industrial revolution signaled a departure from the continual conveyance of slaves from Africa. Great Britain banned slave trade in 1807, while its naval squadrons intercepted slave ships on the Atlantic Ocean and rescued slaves were resettled in Sierra Leone.

The end of the slave trade was not the end of the imperial exploitation of West Africa. A new stage that was called 'colonialism' was introduced. The colonial power justified colonialism as a necessity to civilize Africa and throw light into the 'Dark Continent' (Omobowale, 2015, 2019). In reality, colonialism was a means of taking control of the whole gamut of African political, economic and coercive structures to advance the exploitation of Africa in the World Capitalist System. Great Britain, France and Portugal were the major players in the colonization of West Africa. Great Britain adopted the Indirect

Rule system while France and Portugal adopted Assimilation and *Indigenato* Systems respectively as earlier mentioned British colonialists chose not to dispense with the traditional authorities that were already well established in the colonies. In essence, British colonial officers administered the natives through the instrumentality of the traditional political authorities that the natives were well acquainted with. In places without such established traditional political structures with executive powers, such as among the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria, Warrant Chiefs were appointed to serve the purpose of the indirect rule (Afigbo, 1967). The new structures were termed Native Authorities. Native authorities had administrative, economic, policing and adjudicative powers. The powers of the native authorities were subject to the supervisory overview of colonial officials designated as District Officers and Provincial Officers. In reality, indirect rule was a rule of colonial officers through the instrumentality of native leaders. Native authorities had no power to decline or resist the decisions of colonial officers who had powers to dethrone and exile traditional rulers. The loyalty of traditional rulers shifted from the natives to the colonial authorities. The British colonial authorities dictated the structure of the economy and production processes. Hence, production shifted from subsistence farming to planting and production of cash crops needed by companies in the metropolis at the expense of food crops needed by natives. The performance of native authorities was measured and judged by the quantity and quality of cocoa, cotton, and oil palm among others produced. The prices of these goods were not subject to the economic notions of 'demand and supply', but the judgment of colonial merchants who fixed low prices, extracted surplus value, and ensured capital flight to the metropolis while the producers were exploited into poverty.

In Francophone West Africa, the French Minister of the Colonies exercised both legislative and executive powers. In the colonies, apart from the orders and directives of the Minister upward, the Governor-General had no limit to his power downward. For example, there was no deadline for him to implement the orders of the Minister of the Colonies. The various councils which were set up had not only a consultative role, but were also controlled by the French interests groups (merchants, colonists and administrators among others) and African population of the colonies were underrepresented. Besides, the sovereign rights of the African chiefs were taken away by the decree of 23 October 1904. They did not have any status before 1934–1936, and colonial administrators used them as intermediaries especially for the implementation of the risky and humiliating orders. Traditional chiefs were denied their judiciary powers; the decree of 18 November 1903 recognized their power on matters of simple policing, and the decree of 16 August 1912 denied them any competence on penal matters, by only allowing them conciliation. With a few exceptions, all African populations were 'subjects', with no right to vote. What is more, the decree of 15 November 1924, gave colonial administrators the right to inflict disciplinary penalties to the "subjects"; similar rights were also given to all whites. As subjects, African populations were subject to forced labor, and paid capitation taxes. Furthermore, they did not have any means of appeal in case of denial of justice by the administrators, and were deprived of freedom of expression and association (Atger, 1962; Suret-Canale, 1982; Bayart, 2007). As subject, they served in the prosecution of French wars for the conquest of the hinterland and during World Wars 1 and 2. They also served as veritable sources of raw materials and markets for finished products for French companies.

The Portuguese *Indigenato* system followed a path similar to that of the French to civilize a native into an *assimilado* (assimilated) status. In Guinea, the 1917 Organic Charter divided its West African subjects to 'Natives' and non-natives, civilized and uncivilized. The Charter classified the natives as indigenous Africans born in Guinea without the privileges of civil and political rights because they have not attained the status of citizens. The charter further states that: "For the 'natives' to be 'elevated'… [to *assimilado* there must be] 'proof of dedication to the interests Nation,' literacy and fluency in Portuguese, a salaried occupation, and good behavior as attested by the administrative authority of their area of residence" (Mendy, 2003: 42–43). Since they were mere subjects, the Portuguese exploited them through forced labor. Forced labor continued in Guinea until the 1970s (Mendy, 2003).

3 Post-Independence Imperialism

"Seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things shall be added unto it…" is a statement attributed to Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's frontline nationalist and pioneering president (Lentz, 2017: 560). This assertion was a guiding philosophy for many nationalists in Africa. Following the end of the World War II in 1945, nationalists prioritized political independence as a primary need to advance African countries. Ghana was the first to gain independence in 1957, and joined Ethiopia and Liberia to form the three Great African independent countries clamoring the political independence of the rest of Africa. Nigeria got independence in 1960 and by 1965 all of Anglophone West Africa was politically independent. In 1958, Guinea emerged as the first Francophone West African country to be independent after unexpectedly opting for independence in a referendum. By 1960, all of Francophone West Africa was independent.

Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde gained independence from Portugal in 1974 and 1975 respectively (O'Sullivan 2006; Omobowale; 2009).

West African countries got political independence they so much sought, but it was freedom devoid of economic independence. Political independence was therefore, a movement into neocolonialism. The overbearing influence of Colonial officials was replaced by that of capitalist managers of multinational corporations in a new reality of neo-colonization. Politically, African nations have remained somewhat tied to their former political masters and economically, multinational corporations with headquarters in the metropolis remain the giants exploring natural resources in former colonies. British, French, Dutch and American companies play dominant roles in the oil sector in West Africa, while the prices of cocoa, cotton and other natural resources are determined in the international market leading to massive capital flight. Africa remains a major producer of raw materials needed by the Western power. About 70 percent of world cocoa production happens in Africa. Africa exports raw cotton, timber, tobacco, iron ore, rubber, palm produce and cash crops. Also, Africa has large deposits of crude oil, natural gas, bauxite, uranium, diamond, gold, silver and platinum among other resources that are exploited by former colonial overlords that remain imperial powers.

The natural and agricultural resources are of principal importance to imperialistic powers. The global structuring of the imperialistic supply chain in colonial and post-colonial periods have effectively structured Africa, and West Africa in particular to the low or no value-addition to the raw materials produced locally. With no value addition, the prices of raw materials are determined low in international markets while the excess value that could be of benefit to West African nations are appropriated to the metropolis. Surplus appropriation to the metropolis results in mass poverty and misery. Natural resources have not, thus, benefitted West African nations. They have rather caused poverty, misery and wars in what Alao (2007) has aptly described as the tragedy of endowment. West African countries are predominantly of the low socio-economic index. The natural resources and wealth multinational corporations produce for the metropolis does not positively impact the local population. Official corruption is often described as the cause of poverty and misery in Africa. There is no doubt that endemic corruption hurt the West African continent. However, corruption in West Africa is also connected to multinational corporations who network the lumpen bourgeoisies and other local middlemen into deals and corrupt schemes that siphon wealth from Africa while multinational banking groups also provide safe havens from stolen funds.

Africa continues to bear the burden and misplaced blame of its deplorable socio-economic situation. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and powerful Western nations recommended Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) to mitigate poverty and underdevelopment in Africa in the early 1980s. Virtually all West African countries were persuaded and eventually forced to adopt SAP at the pain of economic sanctions. They were made to devalue their currencies, embargo public service employment, freeze salary increases and liberalize their economies. Initially, SAP was touted a success because it afforded local cash-crop producers more funds. More funds seemingly accrued to farmers only because local currencies exchanged at lower rates. Hence, the little amount paid in US Dollars exchanged for more currencies. The currencies, however, possessed lower purchasing powers. Hence, there were more currencies available, but the currencies had lost value considerably, hence, more money did not improve lives. Still, trade liberalization led to the dumping of cheap imported goods that led to the collapse of local industries. Between the mid-1980s and the year 2000, the SAP had caused poverty in West Africa to increase from less than 30% of the population to over 70%. Hence, the SAP did not achieve any miracle in Africa. The Structural Adjustment Program only served as another imperialist instrument to siphon wealth from Africa and impoverish the local population with grave socio-economic consequences.

4 Imperial Rivalry and Cooperation in West Africa

The whole process of imperial colonization of Africa started from European rivalry in the quest for raw materials, trade routes and markets in Africa and beyond. The French, British, Portuguese, Belgians and Germans had particular interests in the abundant resources that the vast continent of Africa held. Europe was not a continent void of inter-nation wars. France, Great Britain and Spain in particular had engaged in diverse wars over territories in and outside of Europe to establish imperial interests and/or displace another European nation already established as an imperial lord over a territory (Whelan, 2020). The German Chancellor's Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 was directed at limiting the extent of open rivalry and military confrontation in the process of territory acquisition in Africa. With treaties signed with local leaders and by forceful acquisition, West Africa was effectively balkanized among Great Britain, France, Germany and Portugal by the first decade of the 20th Century.

Great Britain acquired fewer territories than its imperial rival France. All British territories were however connected to the coast and resource-filled. France acquired territories along the coast-lines and deep into the Sahara. Germany also acquired a smaller portion of coastal and hinterland territories while Portugal had the Guinea-Bissau and the island nation of Cape Verde (see the Introduction). The treaty documents 'seemed to have provided the initial succors to imperial rivalries. By 1914, however, the European rivalries that resulted in World War I, exited German colonialists from their possessions in West Africa and other African territories through coordinated French and Anglophone military expeditions. The former German possessions were subsequently allocated to France and Great Britain as trust territories. The treaties signed by the respective imperial powers in contest for West African territories and the resolve for mutual recognition of territorial claims ensured no open armed conflict between Great Britain and France. For example, The Anglo-French Convention signed in Paris in 1889 (alongside other ones subsequently signed by the duo) outlined the colonial demarcations of British and French powers in West Africa (Anene, 1963). Hence, both Great Britain and France, rather, subsumed their rivalries in treaties, diplomatic exchanges and mutual cooperation to subdue West African territories and mutually respected each-others preferred colonial policies in the administration of colonies for the global advancement of capital. Again, during the Second World War, French West African territories were divided between the Dakar, Senegal group which supported the Vichy regime in France (Axis powers in alliance with Hitler's German forces) and the rest that supported the Free French forces under the control of General Charles De Gaul that was with the Allied Forces. Britain's attempt to unite French forces along the Allied lines was frustrated by the French colonial state of Senegal in alliance with the Vichy regime (Baer, 1977). Hence, Britain refrained from directly dislodging Vichy forces from Senegal as an affirmation of its diplomatic policy not to annex French colonial territories.

The imperial interests of the colonial powers were similar, even though they pursued their agenda using diverse colonial policies, particularly indirect rule (Britain), assimilation (France) and the *Indigenato* Code (Portugal). The diverse imperial powers had a common interest to ensure local labour appropriation, the flow of raw materials from colonies, uncontested local markets for colonial companies and a firm integration of the territories to the World Capitalist Systems as peripheral partners. Yet, the imperial powers in conflict, conscripted soldiers into European battle fields especially during World Wars 1 and 2. Political independence only introduced West African countries to the vicissitude of the Cold War. European powers ensured that their former colonial powers remained within the threshold of their capitalist ideological frames 'protected' from the socialist 'incursions' led by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, with Russia as the leading state). Whereas, Nigeria and other Anglophone West African nations firmly ousted the continued presence of British Military regiments in the newly independent states, France has retained military units in its former colonies and also directly controls the economies of the countries who were all compelled to utilize the CFA Francs as common currency and maintain national accounts at the French Central Bank. The effect of this is that Francophone West Africa remains innately tied to the economic stranglehold of France who also routinely determines its political happenings using the French military and economic might, while Great Britain and other Western powers, seemingly look the other way, but remain in tacit support of France.

The case of Cote' D'Ivoire is an important reference point here. According to Bush et al. (2011), in 2000 Cote' D' Ivoire elected Laurent Gbagbo as president. Gbagbo attempted an anti-imperialism governance framework. The country subsequently fractionalized into pro-Gbagbo group in the South and the opposition in the North. Insurgents comprising mercenaries from Mali, Burkina Faso and Liberia armed by the French emerged as Forces Nouvelles in Northern Cote D' Ivoire. The *Forces Nouvelles* became a formidable group and Gbagbo's government was compelled to enter into a peace treaty that incorporated members of the rebel forces in government. Following a contested general election in 2010, supposedly won by the pro-France opposition candidate Alassane Ouattara, Gbagbo refused to step down claiming widespread irregularities. France supported the Forces Nouvelles to oust and arrest Gbagbo and his wife from the Presidential palace. Laurent Gbagbo was subsequently arraigned in the International Criminal Court. Gbagbo was acquitted in 2019, but he was restricted to Belgium. Meanwhile, Ouattara amended the constitution to allow for a third term in 2020 while the country's electoral commission puts a ban on Gbagbo. Ouattara won a third term in office in the 31 October 2020 presidential election. It important to note that neither is post-colonial Anglophone Africa free. Britain still exacts its influence through 'cat and carrot' deployment of economic sanctions and aids to keep much of Anglophone West Africa in line to solidify economic imperialism.

5 Consequences and Mitigation Strategies

Economic imperialism has had deleterious social consequences for the West African region. Indeed, in relative terms, the region is still under the burden of poverty. In 2000 the under-five mortality rate per thousand remained high, as an average of 150 per thousand died before the age of five. Furthermore, the poverty stricken and unstable informal economy is omnipresent with more than 70% in Sub-Saharan African. In most cases households in the informal sector are not able to meet their basic needs. They are vulnerable to economic shocks while both top-notch professions and skilled artisans are continually brain-drained from West Africa through intended and unintended economic migration. Since the 1980s, particularly with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program, stagnant economies and overwhelming poverty across West Africa has resulted in social and economic crises. Workers demonstrations demanding employers, generally the state, to improve their working and living conditions have been regular since. In some cases this has led to political crises leading to government overthrow, such as in Burkina Faso, in Mali, in Niger. In the worse cases, terrorism and war are used as responses to what their initiators interpret as discrimination and exclusion. When these crises happen, imperialism deploys strategies meant to serve humanitarian ends. The militances and insurgencies in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Chad, are examples of the consequences poverty and impoverishment in West Africa. Yet, the crises and wars are primarily the consequences of colonial and post-colonial economic imperialism.

In order for the deleterious social consequences of economic imperialism in West Africa to be progressively halted, some of the aspects of classical approaches to development in the South are still relevant. Indeed, most of West African countries entered the independence decade with a radical approach to their development, as a response to economic imperialism (Sawadogo and Sawadogo, 2018). They sought to address the consequences of colonial and neocolonial economic imperialism by developing new policies according to the competing model of development based on dependency theory between the 1950s to the 1970s. Dependency theory interprets 'development' and 'underdevelopment' as socially embedded and interrelated processes. It supports the idea that the economies of the countries of the South are better understood within the international economic system. For example, according to this theory, colonization destroyed the social and economic features of countries under domination and blocked their natural evolution. Models based on dependency theory consider that market competition led to the formation of monopolies and 'free' trade arrangements enabled monopolies to continue their expansion through the internationalization of domestic markets. Proponents of dependency theory-based models 'concluded from their own observation that the international system, far from guaranteeing the South's prosperity, brought the effects of domination to bear upon it and locked it in dependence' (Omobowale, 2013; Kabonga, 2016).

In terms of policy, these models advised that countries of the South should opt out of the system by developing their industry, including appealing for foreign capital, form regional groups and encourage state intervention to control inequalities through land reform and the redistribution of investment. In most cases, this would require radical social change in the form of socialist revolution and construction of egalitarian societies. Several plans were designed by most

West African countries within this framework. In Burkina Faso, for example, the revolutionary government of Thomas Sankara of the 1980s, set out to achieve independence and economic autonomy[2] for social progress. The policy option suggested that all development plans for the country would involve the engagement of each individual. The efficiency of mass labor relies on a clear framework of a planned economy. It applied to all national and regional sectors. The aim was to deal with the urgent and pressing needs of the population: food, water, housing, education, health, culture, transportation, and sport. In relative terms, this strategy is considered by many analysts to have resulted in significant improvement in the living conditions of the majority of the population. For instance, in 1988 the proportion of the labor force in agriculture has reduced to 56% from 87% in 1975. The structure of exports shifted to 98% in 1988 for manufactured merchandise, and just 1% in 1988 for primary commodities, meaning that there was some improvement in the development of secondary sectors to transform local primary goods. Such policy options are still relevant today, in order to reduce poverty with its spiral of wars, political violence of all kinds and mass uprising that prevail and are growing in the region today. West Africa requires an urgent delink from debilitating imperialistic constraints to achieve economic recovery, and uplift its peoples from crushing poverty, and rescue it from conflicts, insurgencies and militances that are ravaging nations across the region.

6 Conclusion

West Africa's contact with European powers in the 15th Century signaled the entrapment of the region into the World Capitalist System and exploitative imperialistic relations with grave consequences. West Africa has subsequently been subjected to colonial exploitation by Great Britain, France and Portugal and the present neo-colonial imperial relations further disadvantages the region socio-economically. In addition, it remains to be seen how new economic powers from the global South in need of natural resources, for example, China and India, trade with West African states. Thus far, it appears that global South countries are not as rapacious in their extractive projects, and provide far better terms of trade. Unbridled imperialism has resulted into mass

2 'Quatrieme Plan Quinquenal de Development 1982–1986' [4thFive Year Development Plan 1982–1986]; 'Plan de Base ou Programme Populaire de Development 1984–1985' [Basic Plan or Popular Plan for Development 1984–1985]; Rapport Sectoriel du Plan Quiquenal de Development Populaire 1986–1990' [Sectoral Report on the 4th Five-year Development Plan 1986–1990].

poverty, civil war, economic migration and loss of skilled workers among other challenges. Reversing imperialism and mitigating the consequences of exploitative imperialistic relations that West Africa has experienced in the last 600 years can be assured as long as the exploitative exchange relations subsist.

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