



Publication details, information for authors and referees and full contents available at: <http://global-discourse.com/>

ISSN: 2043-7897

Suggested citation:

Kabbah, F. (2010) 'Imperialism or Independence: The Donor's Choice', *Global Discourse* [Online], 1: 1, available from: <<http://global-discourse.com/contents>>.

All copyrights of this article are held by the author/s.

Imperialism or Independence: The Donor's Choice

Foday Kabbah¹

Abstract: Western liberals glean great satisfaction from their 'altruistic' donations of charity to Africa. In this article, I dismiss this self-ascribed 'altruism' and argue that western liberals exchange compensation for the amelioration of guilt and the eradication of 'repugnant' cultural practices. This exchange lies at the heart of neo-colonial relations between western liberals and their immiserated subjects. Although the goods at stake differ, with a shift from material exploitation to guilt amelioration, the consequences of the relationship of domination are as harmful for Africans, and as beneficial for their masters, as any 20th century colonial order. In effect, Western self-interest leaves Africa in a void of malaise between two rival worlds. The answer is for Africans to select one world and pursue its objectification. The neo-colonial dominance of Westerners ensures that Africans do not have the space or resources, psychological, political or material, to make and actualise such a decision. As with any dominated people, the destiny of Africa lies in the hands of its masters. If Western liberals do feel concern for their subjects, they will have to decide which path Africa will take: Western or African, imperial or independent. However, the masters are themselves ambivalent, wishing to ameliorate guilt through charity and aid dependency, yet claiming to oppose imperial subjugation. I argue that they must be confronted with the deleterious consequences of this conflict if Africans are ever to escape their stagnation. If Western liberals are unable, decisively, to amend their consciences and decide in which world their subjects should live, Africans should accept a single tenet to regulate exchanges with their masters: any benefit gleaned by western liberals from donations must not be to the disadvantage of African peoples.

Keywords: Africa, charity, independence, colonialism, benevolence, cultural tradition

Imperialism or independence

The culture of charity towards Africa (a homogenous space) and Africans (a homogenous group of impoverished black people) is pervasive in the western liberal world. Through the latest 'disaster' appeal or buzzword-riddled celebrity campaign, such as Live8 or 'Make Poverty History', western liberals appear superficially dedicated to alleviating the conditions of suffering which afflict millions of Africans. There are few notable critics of this apparent benevolence. Indeed, as an African, it feels as if I am expected to validate, support, and extol the benefits of, this culture of 'charity' and debt 'forgiveness'. Recently, however, I have come, heretically, to

¹ Foday Kabbah is an independent researcher with a background in political thought and the anti-imperialist movement. He is currently working on progressive critiques of racism and imperialism.

contradict this expectation. I am unable to support the culture of charity because its surreptitious motives harm the very people it is supposed to benefit.

From beneath the deceptive (often self-deceptive) outer-layer of altruism, lies an unchecked core of racist imperialism that is permeating and subverting every sphere of African life. Once we strip away all of the 'good' intentions, we see nothing but the repetition of past mistakes by the 'benevolent', liberal donors: the sad perpetuation of colonial relations of subservience through a very modern, and extremely 'politically correct', 'white man's burden'. In detailing the malign consequences of this order, I shall argue that it is the imperial perpetrators – the everyday, self-satisfied liberal donors – who will decide whether or not Africans are to be condemned, eternally, to suffer. I begin by placing this contemporary issue against the backdrop of the most hopeful era, and most promising political concept, in African history – 'independence'.

Reclaiming 'independence' in the 20th century was supposed to be a precursor to the realisation of everything that colonialism had prevented. Freed from the deleterious control or influence of outsiders, the likes of Jomo Kenyatta hoped that independence would allow us to operate according to our own principles and practices and flourish from the seeds of our own culture. Between continents, it was believed that independence would force outsiders to grant the same respect and recognition to the new, African governments that they granted to their white counterparts. However, despite relinquishing direct control over their colonies, our supposed 'equals' in the West continued to dash such meagre aspirations through a plethora of cunning profit-driven strategies.

Western entities made, and still make, a handsome profit from the sale of arms and the means of modern warfare, enabling, in the process, a more bloody, uncontrollable and destructive form of violence than has ever been seen between black man and black man. Traditional warfare, when it did occur, was much less indiscriminate and pervasive. The debt accrued by our leaders – the syntheses of tribal chiefs and bureaucratic, western officials– from such transactions has been used by the West to maintain a position of post-colonial dependency. The mutual greed for quick cash made this dependency ever more complete as the number of items bought on credit increased exponentially. This subservience has been strengthened further by the rape, especially in Nigeria, of natural resources, the profits of which have been funnelled out of the continent or into the pockets of rentier, post-colonial puppet-governments. This misappropriation has robbed the immiserated African populace of the means by which to live independently. It has also excluded us from whole regions of our continent, while our absentee landlords exchanged the concept of independence for graft.

Western governments have, understandably, been reluctant to challenge such a profitable arrangement. Only after years of pressure, millions of 'unpalatable' or 'damaging' pictures of the starving, and the prospect of anti-imperialist 'terrorism' engendered by the decrepit neo-colonial conditions, have leaders finally been forced to accept, at least rhetorically or symbolically (as at the G8 meeting at Gleneagles 2005), that this situation has created unprecedented poverty and suffering.

A proportion of the western populace have often been at odds with their leaders in recognising this sad truth. Certain liberals and 'radicals' have, for some time rejected, through various boycotts (of, for example, Nestlé and Barclays) and donations, the greed-ridden stubbornness of their leaders and welcomed a 'culture of charity'. However, liberals do not deserve the praise and gratitude they often allow

themselves for what they incorrectly hold to be an act of ‘altruism’. Western liberals can afford – in their words, ‘altruistically’ – to donate because their colonial and neo-colonial exploitation, abuse and oppression of non-white peoples has propelled them into the ‘First-World’, and relegated Africans, in particular, into the ‘Third-World’. When we expound the psychological imperatives of donation from the peoples of the ‘First-World’ to those of the ‘Third’, we see that the return of a portion of the wealth gleaned from exploitation approximates, more closely, to compensation than ‘charity’.

Compensation is an apt term to describe such donations, not simply because of what is given but, also, because of what is taken in return. To compensate someone is to make amends for an error. However, it is also to assuage the guilt of the perpetrator and to receive permission from the victim to continue, with some degree of confidence, to live. Everyday, middle-class, liberal donors are unable, psychologically in comfort, to live their affluent lives whilst burdened by the knowledge of past, imperial crimes and the contemporary consequences they visit on the impoverished. In order, peacefully, to continue their lives, they must *buy* permission from their victims. Their donations are, to a greater or lesser extent, determined by their guilt. Their lives, still funded collectively by the material exploitation of the ‘Third World’ are inhibited only by the cyclical repetition of this exchange as the accumulation of guilt reaches a critical threshold.

Favouring pragmatism, I would be reluctant, as a first step, to proscribe this relationship of trade between western liberals and Africans, were it limited to the exchange of – potentially beneficial – compensation for the amelioration of guilt. However, exposing their – perhaps unconscious – neo-colonial motives, liberals seem to expect more for their money.

Most donors, including the ‘anti-imperialist’ or ‘anti-globalisation’ activists, seem to believe that they are entitled to attach ethnocentric conditions to their so-called ‘charity’. The most prevalent examples include the demand that Africans abide by ‘universal’ human rights, govern through democracy and eradicate tribal customs such as female circumcision. They proclaim, righteously, ‘you can’t give my money to country X because it has a bad “human rights” record and is corrupt’, ‘you can’t give my money to tribe Y because they have committed war crimes’ and ‘you can’t give my money to people Z because they perpetuate “female genital mutilation” and keep women as “chattels”’. Despite incessantly affirming the ‘vibrancy’ and exoticism of African cultural practice, such liberals demand, not merely, the amelioration of guilt but, also, the decommissioning of culture, in return for their donations. They seek to buy for the purposes of ‘sanitisation’ or eradication those aspects of African culture which contravene their ethnocentric ‘ethical’ boundaries. This attitude dominates the entire discourse of charity for Africa. It is exemplified by the likes of Geldof and the ‘Commission for Africa’, who seldom recognise fully the destructive force of their efforts. However, they may have reason to reconsider this ignorance, as the deleterious consequences of their ‘charitable’, neo-colonial interventions are manifest and follow in the long line of colonial harms. For reasons of clarity, I shall describe briefly some of these sores.

We must begin by noting the appallingly ignorant imposition of alien territorial boundaries, governments and legal systems and the egocentric individualism which facilitate their operation. Combined with the machinery of industrial misery, these elements have proved the foundations for a decrepit continent filled with desperate, malnourished individuals. From this disastrous post-colonial beginning, the condition of ‘independent’ Africa has deteriorated gradually in relation

to the development of neo-imperialist tools of debt and resource extraction. Recently, the exchange of aid for culture has accelerated this process, with more wars, famines and human misery resulting from the introduction of 'universal', and loss of African, standards of governance. People bereft of meaningful governance, and with almost none of the continent's wealth, have been burdened by states which monopolise the vast majority of resources but which are bereft of substantial cultural foundation and the accompanying responsibilities to distribute fairly. Africa has been left in a degenerative void between two worlds – African and western – in which the benefits of either are subsumed by the rampant disadvantages of both. Whether or not we wish to utilise the terms of value pluralism invoked by the likes of John Gray, it seems that the values of the two civilisations are destructive, incompatible rivals engaged in a zero sum battle to an end of stagnation or even degeneration. The dominance of one value leads to the diminution of the other and the fusion of both leads to the diminution and loss of the best parts of both. In this profligate condition, the vast majority of Africans have suffered, whilst western liberals have gleaned profit and satisfaction from their 'ethical' life of exploitation accompanied by compensatory donation.

Western liberals will object to my cynical and pessimistic attitude. They will argue that they seek, sincerely, to remedy this situation, wish the best solution for the indigenous peoples of the continent and desire, inclusively, to account for the views of Africans. Africans, will respond that they would prefer to resolve independently their problems but are at present prevented by the dependency imposed upon them by westerners. Westerners are unable, because of the need to exchange charity for guilt and cultural amelioration, to afford Africans independence. Accordingly, it is the western master who must face, both, the genuine solutions available to end the current malaise and, because of their inclusive impulse, the will of the 'vibrant' 'natives'. I do not believe that they will enjoy this confrontation with reality, as it challenges their 'ethical' neo-imperialism of compensation. However, for the sake of lives they claim to cherish, they must make a choice between the present misery, and two 'repugnant' pathways which seek its resolution.

The pathways, and the rationale for them, are quite simple. As Africa is caught between two worlds, it follows that it must objectify completely one of them in order to emerge from its void and gain, genuinely, the benefits of one, rather than the disadvantages of both. Western liberals must choose whether to pursue the path of western, neo-imperialism to its logical conclusion or to allow Africa the freedom to overcome its malaise independently.

The first option proposes institutionalising explicitly an imperial system, in which westerners introduce the western systems of governance and capitalist forms of exploitation needed to replicate the West in Africa. The creation of a westernised Africa would depend upon the eradication of most, if not all, of the cultural assets which Africans hold dear. This would include the practices, dances and lifestyles which western liberals describe as 'vibrant' in addition, of course, to the unpalatable ones they denounce as 'repugnant'. This project would provide egocentrism and 'universal' human rights with the forum to which they are naturally suited, and allow Africans the 'goods' enjoyed by westerners – the freedoms and rights which are incessantly invoked as evidence of the superiority of western civilisation.

I do not doubt that some middle-class, 'cosmopolitan' Africans would appreciate the ends, if not the means, of such a project. However, the majority of Africans value their traditions too highly. These are the things which gave and still, to

a lesser extent, give, their life substance and meaning. They would oppose, militantly, any new direct imperial project, meaning that the imperialists would have to employ the fiercest forms of coercion to ensure their 'co-operation'. Whilst the examples of insurgency in Malaysia and, until recently, Afghanistan, demonstrate the West's technical capacity for absolutism, it is the psyche of western liberals which appears, at present, to preclude its most 'effective' employment. This psychological impediment amounts to a contemporary 'white man's burden'.

Western liberals like to proselytise their 'progressive', 'universal' culture amongst 'misguided' Africans. They like to guide 'natives' away from the 'repugnant' practices which mar the 'clean', western fantasy of Africa as a continent of innocent childlike tribesmen. As 'enlightened' peoples, western liberals have a 'burden' to eradicate these unfortunate sores and use charity as an imperial proxy to that end. However, they do not intend, by the eradication of 'repugnant' practices, to create a wealthy, westernised Africa. Subconsciously, the end they seek is the void of cultural amelioration that we witness today.

On the one hand, the void is good for westerners because it does not require the direct imperialism that is the historical source of their guilt. On the other, the perpetual misery provides them with an opportunity to engage in the exchange of charity for culture and guilt. For western liberals, this condition is a source of satisfaction for their entire way of life. Direct imperialism, the project which would truly eradicate 'repugnant' practices and afford Africans western goods, does not provide the 'burdened' mind with such pleasures. As the examples of Iraq and Afghanistan have shown, the guilt associated with colonialism and the open, coercive eradication of culture is too heavy for the western psyche to bear. For a 'burdened' people, such acts are unwanted reminders of their 'antiquated', 'intolerant' imperial past. As I have already noted, western liberals are often the first to condemn themselves for explicit imperial actions and will continue in this vein until they cease to live on the profits of exploitation or are, themselves, conquered. The first, imperial option for the revival of Africa seems, therefore, troublesome for both 'natives' and their masters.

The second option is to move away from imperial imposition towards independence and the rediscovery of traditional, African means of stability, temperance, and governance. If we are allowed, truly, to be free from the tools of neo-imperialism, we can rebuild the powerful, distinctive and pertinent traditions which guided us through our pre-colonial past. We can reignite communitarian identities through proudly perpetuating rituals and rites of passage. We can rediscover stability through the tribal hierarchies and punishments which once articulated the position and entitlement of each entity and which prevented the individualistic squabbling that now dominates our continent. To re-establish such things we will have, on occasion, to employ warfare, coercion and violence. This is not unique to Africa. Western liberals seem to forget that their own affluent political settlements are founded upon the wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, in which more people died than have ever perished in any African war – perhaps more than in the accumulation of every African war put together. War is an inevitability in the struggle for a new society, and if the western financiers and suppliers of the means of warfare are prevented from intervening and fuelling conflicts, such affairs can today, as in the past, be short, relatively bloodless and end in sustainable compacts to which all parties can subscribe. This, I believe, is the route with means and ends acceptable to indigenous peoples. However, it is not a path acceptable to the burdened consciences of liberals.

The new 'white man's burden' denies and denounces the 'repugnant' practices integral to an independent Africa. Abstracted from other concerns, the need to eradicate 'repugnance' implies a need perpetually to intervene to westernise, completely, indigenous culture. This is because, if a culture is to be live, and not merely a museum piece preserved on a tourist funded life-support system, it must exist in its evolved entirety. If the foundational elements of it are removed or 'ameliorated', the rest becomes superficial, surviving only for as long as tourists continue to visit. The people live as immiserated and corrupted circus acts, prostituting their culture. When the culture is no longer of any meaning or attraction to bored tourists, the people have to create their own means of existence. Without their western 'Johns' and their cultural imposition, they often rediscover the value and necessity of their 'repugnant' traditions. If western liberals wish permanently to eradicate such practices, they must remove, not merely the foundations, but the whole of indigenous culture, including the 'vibrant' parts to which they are drawn. But their desire for the retention of the exotic and fear of the guilt accrued from intervention render such direct imperialism undesirable, if not impossible. Within the western psyche, therefore, an imperialist 'white man's burden' and a guilt laden anti-imperialist aesthetic conflict. The western need, simultaneously, for both imperialism *and* independence leads liberals to engage in an eternal battle within their own consciences. They demonstrate, normatively, split personalities favouring, first, independence, then imperialism, repeating the cycle as circumstances dictate, without ever drawing their playthings closer to a stable good.

Unfortunately, this conflict located in the psyche of western liberals has a profound and negative effect on the actual lives of Africans. It affects, not merely the condition of our continent but, also, the everyday interaction between subject and 'ethical' neo-imperialist. It is often those who least recognise their own normative split personality and claim to defend my culture who demonstrate this most evidently. For example, I am often asked by those in 'anti-globalisation/imperialism', 'fair-trade' or 'debt-relief' groups, 'what distinct traditions do you have in your country? I'm intrigued!' Superficially, they ask me to cite the most 'exotic', substance giving tradition in my community. However, whenever I respond honestly and state that it is the circumcision rite in men *and* women, it is apparent that their question is 'ethically' bounded. The same people who moments earlier slanted their heads patronisingly in awe of my 'pure' ways, now declare that I am a 'chauvinist' or a 'brute'. Their new, 'politically correct' 'white man's burden' is ignited. It becomes apparent that my freedom of speech, and my continent's independence, is governed by their 'universal' criteria of palatability. The 'universal' nature of this position is undermined, however, by the ethnocentric hypocrisy of its proponents, especially on this issue of male and female circumcision.

Few liberals complain about Jews or Muslims amputating men's foreskins without anaesthetic, but if a woman, as part of an initiation rite that constitutes her African identity, has her genitals altered, it is believed that she is 'abused', 'exploited', 'tortured', 'mislead' or 'oppressed' by her 'chauvinistic' husband and family. That such a ritual is valued and perpetuated by many women, and is considered the female equivalent of the male circumcision rite, is beyond these 'anti-imperialist' donors. Circumcision establishes boys as provider, warrior fathers, and women as strong, empowered, child bearing mothers, both ready to perpetuate their culture and form of social organisation.

Those who claim to be ‘anti-imperialists’ or ‘anti-globalisationists’ should recognise this fact if they wish truly to eradicate imperialism and globalisation. That is, if they value social vibrancy and are truly ‘anti-imperialist’, they should respect the practices which form the foundations of a socially vibrant, independent society. This, of course, entails that western liberals suppress their contemporary ‘white man’s burden’ and abandon their life of neo-imperialist exploitation through compensation. If they are able to make this effort to sever their lives of exploitation, they must also, for the first time, develop tolerance for the vital elements of an independent people – the ‘repugnant’ practices, punishments, understandings and hierarchies which enable an existence of decisive substance.

If they are unwilling normatively to evolve in this direction, they must reconsider their self-applied title of ‘anti-imperialists’ and contemplate the ethics of the actions which provide them such satisfaction and relief from guilt. They must do so because they can not continue to glean smugness from contributing to Oxfam, Fair Trade, Live8 and the other manifestations of the culture of charity whilst labouring under the delusion that they are ‘anti-imperialists’. They are not. They are ‘burdened’ neo-imperialists. If their ‘white man’s burden’ is too strong to tolerate an independent Africa, they must relinquish their ‘anti-imperialist’ rhetoric and desire to preserve the bounded ‘exotic’. For the sake of the ‘primitive’ ‘natives’, they must engage in a totalising imperialism to replicate the West in Africa.

If western liberals dispute the tenets of this paper, there is a principle which, if employed, would demonstrate the reality of the neo-colonial relationship of compensation and guarantee that the good of Africa was prioritised. The principle is that, in giving, western liberals must accept in return only that which does not harm the wellbeing of Africans. In isolation, the amelioration of guilt costs Africa little; the cost of the imposition of western morals and the eradication of African cultural practices to the point of stagnation is incalculable. Given a free choice, Africans would reject all such charity as they would be better off without. The actions of guilt-ridden liberals in the event of such a rejection would be demonstrative. If they were to leave happily, never to return, it would be the first step towards the reconciliation of both conscience and continent. If, however, they were to decide that they are unable, psychologically, to leave, it would demonstrate, in an Hegelian manner, that the master had, all along, been dependent on the subject.