

SECOND DRAFT:
JUNE 2011

**USING 50 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE
TO JUDGE 100 YEARS OF COLONIAL RULE**

**By
Ali A. Mazrui**

**Director, Institute of Global Cultural Studies
and
Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities
Binghamton University
State University of New York at Binghamton, New York, USA**

**Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large Emeritus
and Senior Scholar In Africana Studies
Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA**

An earlier version of this paper was published in *THE GUARDIAN* (London, U.K.), December 2010.

Last year seventeen African countries celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their independence. These Golden celebrants included such large countries as Nigeria and the former Belgian Congo and such vulnerable countries as Niger and Somalia. These seventeen countries were followed into independence by others soon after.

This fiftieth anniversary provides a suitable occasion not only to evaluate what has happened to postcolonial Africa as a whole but also to estimate the impact of the colonial experience on the African peoples.

Two schools of thought are emerging among African scholars and historians. The *episodic* school of African historiography argues that these last fifty years illustrate how shallow was the impact of European colonialism. The imperial period in individual countries was often little more than an *episode* in relation to the millennia of African history. That is one reason why European institutions transplanted to Africa have not taken root.

But there is another school of African historians who constitute the *epic* school of African historiography. This latter paradigm argues that the impact of colonialism upon Africa has been of *epic* proportions. This effect of European imperialism has been both deep and wide-ranging, though not necessarily constituting a change for the better.

But what is the nature of the colonial impact? How deep has that impact been? Was European colonialism exceptional in the depth of its repercussions? Or was the Eurocolonial century no more than a short chapter in millennia of African history?

The Epic School of colonial historiography leans towards maximizing and exceptionalizing the repercussions of European colonialism in Africa. Those one hundred years were truly exceptional.

On the other hand, *the Episodic School* has examined half a century of independence as a measure of a century of imperial rule. The argument starts from the premise that our generation is so close to the era of colonialism that European influence looms extra large. Our proximity to the colonial age results in unjustified exaggeration of the colonial impact upon Africa.

There is a third method of judging European colonialism. This is *an ethical approach* – trying to determine whether European colonialism was a positive or negative *moral* force in Africa. On balance, was the European century ethically justified or ethically evil?

Let us begin with a comparison of the Epic and Episodic schools of colonial impact.

The shallowness of transplanted European institutions is best illustrated in what was once the Belgian Congo. The so-called national army mutinied within little more than a month of independence. The richest province at the time (Katanga) declared its secession soon after. President Josef Kasavubu and Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba declared each other illegitimate, and before long the Prime Minister was assassinated. The Congo has remained the ultimate paradigm case of Africa's chronic instability.

Millions of people have died since then, and hundreds of thousands of women have been raped.

The artificial boundaries of the African colonies have made it hard to integrate the populations into real nations. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be haunted by perennial ethnic rivalries, while Arab Africa has suffered from periodic conflicts between Islam and secularism.

Postcolonial African economies have suffered from shortage of skills and abundance of corruption. A clash of cultures has created confusion in ethical standards. Three codes of conduct (indigenous, Islamic and Western) have created moral incoherence at least for the time being. Indeed, the Somali militants seem to have traversed a whole span from pastoralism to piracy, while Nigerians have celebrated the last ten years as their first postcolonial decade without a single military coup.

On the other hand, the *epic* school of imperial historiography would argue that European colonialism prepared Africa for participation in global affairs. The continent has produced two Secretaries-General of the United Nations (Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan), one Director General of UNESCO (Mohtar M'Bow) and one President of the United States (Barack Obama). Over a dozen Africans have won Nobel Prizes for peace, literature and chemistry — while a quarter of the membership of the United Nations now consists of African states.

The *epic* school also celebrates Africa's initiation into modern science and technology, the partial eradication of deadly diseases, the functional value of the

European languages which Africa has inherited from colonialism, and the enhanced infrastructure in communications, electrification and modern cities. Many of these changes are not only of epic proportions, but are also irreversible.

But what are the signs of what the next fifty years of postcolonial Africa are likely to be?

While the Western world may be drifting towards a *post-democracy era*, most of Africa is still in a *pre-democracy* stage. The Arab awakening in North Africa in 2011 is trying to take Egypt, Tunisia and Libya closer to democracy.

Many African elections are notoriously rigged. African losers in national elections are seldom gracious.

However, the majority of African countries — though still pre-democratic — stand a good chance of getting democratized. Ghana led sub-Saharan Africa in the attainment of independence from colonial rule in 1957. More recently Ghana has led Africa in successful democratization. The real test is when an incumbent president, or an incumbent political party, allows itself to be peacefully voted out of office — not once, but at least twice. Ghana has satisfied that condition.

But there are African countries which are unlikely to be democratized before the second half of this 21st century at the earliest and more likely in the 22nd century.

Particularly vulnerable are dual societies — countries where two rival ethnic groups account for the majority of the population. Such vulnerable countries include

Burundi (with its Hutu/Tutsi rivalry) and Rwanda (with a similar dual configuration, in spite of the current optimism).

Another vulnerable category which may find democracy elusive is a country which has a long history of nomadic lifestyle, and one which in pre-colonial times was a case of ordered anarchy. Ordered anarchy is a form of governance which relies more on consensus than on state coercion, and relies on rules rather than rulers.

Another undemocratic category of countries is almost the opposite of *ordered anarchy*. These are countries which were already states in pre-colonial times, and were often cases of *ordered tyranny* for hundreds of years.

African countries of today which are mentioned by the same name in the Christian Bible are Ethiopia, Egypt and Libya — countries with a history of indigenous dictatorship before European colonial rule. In the post-colonial era it is almost certain that the pharaohnic legacy of Egypt of thousands of years, and the dynastic legacy of Ethiopia of hundreds of years, will slow down the democratization of these Old Testament states. But the Tahrir Square uprising of 2011 has raised democratic expectations.

As for the relations between Christianity and Islam in the Africa of today, both religions are expanding in numbers, and growing in influence. But can they co-exist democratically and peacefully? Nigeria is the largest concentration of Muslims in Africa — Nigeria has more Muslims than Egypt. Is this a threat to Nigeria's democratization?

In reality Christianity and Islam are divisive in Africa if they reinforce prior linguistic and ethnic divisions.

In Nigeria almost all Hausa are Muslims, almost all Igbo are Christians, and the Yoruba are split in the middle. Thus Islam reinforces Hausa identity; Christianity reinforces Igbo identity and Yoruba nationalism unites the Yoruba regardless of religion.

Islam and Christianity divided Northern and Southern Sudan mainly because the two regions were already divided by even deeper pre-colonial cultural differences.

Southern Sudan has now voted to be a separate republic from July 2011.

On the other hand, *Muslims in Senegal* soon after independence repeatedly voted for a Christian president. For twenty years Leopold Sedar Senghor, a Roman Catholic, was President of a country which was over ninety percent Muslim. Leopold Senghor was succeeded for another twenty years by a Muslim president of Senegal, Abdou Diouf. The Muslim president had a Roman Catholic First Lady. This degree of ecumenical democracy has not been achieved in the Western world.

It is also worth remembering that Africa has produced an elected female Head of State before the United States or France or Russia has produced a female President. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia has set a new standard of female political power in Africa's experience.

But the struggle continues as Africa seeks a middle ground between episodic change and epic transformation in the years ahead.