

Africa and International Relations Theory: Acquiescence and Responses

Olukayode A. Faleye

The Westphalian narrative has been the compass of International Relations (IR). It sustains a Eurocentric hegemony in IR theory – ascribing to itself the nucleus of the international system. Indeed, international theory acts as a tool that legitimizes Anglo-American imperialism in international studies. For instance, colonization in Africa entails the force-feeding of African materials into the Western-centric structures. This phenomenon produced a distinct (hybrid) system with exotic challenges in Africa. The manifestation of these challenges in the decolonization process is often ignored in the neo-liberal, neo-realist and structural theories. This suggests a gap in the existing literature, especially in the area of conceptualizing Statehood, sovereignty, power, border, and security. This work canvasses interdisciplinary approach to the subject matter. Thus, using case study analysis, this paper argues that the Westphalian narrative lacks the understanding of the dynamics of contemporary African societies, and concluded by examining alternative pathways that can promote global understanding.

Keywords: *African Studies, Global Studies, intellectual imperialism, International Relations Theory, state.*

Introduction

The Westphalian narrative has been the guide of International Relations (IR). Consequently, the non-European world has been neglected through fabrications in Eurocentric texts. While the Westphalian European States were able to resolve the anarchical challenges through cultural reconstruction, the non-European cultures were often appraised based on the Eurocentric paradigms. Indeed, international theory acts as a tool that legitimizes Anglo-American imperialism in International Studies. For instance, colonization in Africa¹ entails the force-feeding of African materials into the Western-centric structures. This phenomenon produced a distinct (hybrid) system with exotic challenges in Africa. The manifestation of these challenges in the decolonization process is often ignored in the neo-liberal, neo-realist and structural theories. As Craig Murphy put it, ‘More than one out of ten people are African. More than one out of four nations are African. Yet, I would warrant that fewer than one in a hundred university lectures on International Relations given in Europe or North America even mention the continent’ (Murphy 2001: ix). This is not surprising, considering the annals of European imperialism in the continent – slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism. The Afro-European relations since the fifteenth century

¹ Note that ‘Africa’ throughout this article refers mostly to Sub-Saharan Africa.

have been colored by European dominance and characterized by the mythologies of African inferiority (Ofonagoro 1980: 58–59; Awolowo 1977: 18–21). Consequently, many Eurocentric scholars often ignore the African contribution to the field. This was an attempt to justify the western centric hegemony in world affairs.

The decolonization process in Africa involved an attempt at political, economic and intellectual emancipation of the African people. Intellectual decolonization in Africa involved the review of the colonial curriculum to accommodate the African experience. For example, a review of academic curriculums pioneered in the field of History led to the development of the subfield of African History despite stiff opposition from Eurocentric historians. The decolonization of intellectual materials is a continuous process, and the failure of the existing Eurocentric outlook to comprehend the African experience necessitated a review of the existing IR paradigms to enhance global understanding. This work canvasses interdisciplinary approach to the subject matter. Thus, using case study analysis, this paper argues that IR theory lacks the understanding of the dynamics of contemporary African societies, and concluded by examining alternative path ways that can promote global understanding.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first is this introductory section followed by the conceptual framework for the analysis, while the third section examines the contributions of Africa to IR theory; the concluding section summarizes the analysis and offers clues to further studies.

Mapping Intellectual Imperialism

Imperialism is multidimensional involving the subjugation and exploitation of a people by another. The elements of imperialism can be divided into three major categories – exploitation, cultural domination, and intellectual rationalization (Atalas 2000: 23–25; Mudimbe 1988: 2). In this regard, imperialism involves the exploitation of the human and natural resources of a society by another. It entails the bastardization of the colonized culture and an attempt to replace it with that of the colonialist. The exploitation and domination that are inherent in imperialism are often justified within an intellectual framework of the colonialist. Political and economic imperialism in Africa involved the integration of the continent into the Eurocentric political, economic and social system. In this respect, Africa became the source of raw materials and market for European industries. Its pre-colonial political institutions were made subservient to Western European democratic governance, while its culture was eroded by Western centric values. Scholars have argued that this phenomenon impeded the development of the continent (Awolowo 1977: 28–29; Rodney 2012: 17–31). The themes of political and economic imperialism in the history of Afro-European relations are widely documented and need not bother us in this study. However, this paper takes a departure from the traditional perspective of imperialism which lays emphasis on the political and economic dimension of imperialism. It examines the dynamics of intellectual imperialism in Africa with a special concern about its impact in international studies.

Intellectual imperialism is the unjustified tendency of the intelligentsia to ignore alternative theories, perspectives, or methodologies (Jussim 2002: 18). Indeed, intellectual imperialism is a shared fate of all colonized people. Ward Churchill reminds us about the curriculum challenges in the post independent United States. According to Churchill:

The American educational system as a whole seems hopelessly locked into a monolithic European paradigm in terms of acknowledgeable heritage, methodology, and conceptual structure... Reliance upon a monocultural tradition within a multicultural arena constitutes an essentially transparent form of intellectual domination, achievable only within the power context of parallel forms of domination (Churchill 1981: 51).

Colonialism involves both the material and intellectual subjugation of the colonized. The Europeans armed with Eurocentric pedagogies planted Western education vis-à-vis Christianity in Africa. Consequently, for a period of about 100 years after the British bombardment of Lagos (1851), the continent applied the Eurocentric educational curriculum hook-line and sinker. This era witnessed the writing of 'African History' through the lenses of European traders, missionaries, travelers, and adventurers, who sought to justify European imperialism in Africa. For instance, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper asserts:

Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African History to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not a subject of history. Please, do not misunderstand me. I do not deny that men existed even in the dark countries and dark centuries, nor that they had political life and culture, interesting to sociologists and Anthropologists; but History, I believe, is essentially a form of movement, and purposive movement too. It is not a mere phantasmagoria of changing shapes and costumes, of battles and conquests, dynasties and usurpations, social forms and social disintegration (Trevor-Roper 1963: 871 cited in Fage 1981: 31).

This Eurocentric view of African History was conceived out of the desire to justify European imperialism in the continent (Fage 1981: 32). In this period, the history of the world was viewed through the Eurocentric lenses of the colonialists. This was exemplified by the text of the *Cambridge Modern History*, Volume 14 published between 1902 and 1910. Describing the content of this volume, Fage lamented 'This is Eurocentric to the point at which it almost totally ignores even European activities in the outside world' (*Ibid.*: 33).

The emergence of African History as a field of historical inquiry gained momentum with the rise of African nationalism after the World War II. It was an attempt at intellectual decolonization of the African past. The authentication of non-written sources such as, African oral tradition was promoted through the convergence of historical and cultural disciplines – History, Archaeology, Anthropology, Linguistic and Art History under the umbrella of African Studies. Today, African History is a celebrated discipline in the world of academia. Amongst others, African historiography has enriched historical methodology by extending the scope of the discipline to encompass the Eurocentric sacred writings and oral tradition. Also, prior to the eighteenth century, African arts were regarded as primitive objects and products of a barbaric culture (Mudimbe 1988: 10). It is interesting to note that by the twentieth century, African arts have strongly influenced European arts as exemplified by the works of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. This shows a transition from an unproductive ethnocentric standpoint to an objective paradigm in the discipline of History and Art History.

The most enduring colonial institutions in Africa are the Universities. The African nationalists failed to domesticate Western education to soothe the yearnings of the African environment. Thus, the post-independence period witnessed a continuous dependence of the African universities on European structures (Mazrui 2003: 141–142). These universi-

ties remain the agent of neo-colonialism in Africa. Most university teachings, research and reading texts emphasize western philosophies and Eurocentric realities. European languages became the language of prestige while the African languages were relegated as vernacular (with a salient exception of Swahili in East Africa). The university curricular reflected the western experience (Mazrui 2002: 68–69). For instance, the National University Commission (NUC) is empowered by the Decree (Acts) No. 16 of 1985 and Decree (Acts) No. 48 of 1988 to administer a minimum standard for all programs taught in Nigerian Universities (NUC-Benchmark for Undergraduate Programs in Nigerian Universities 2007: i–ii). An analysis of the NUC Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) for the undergraduate program in International Relations reveals that out of 45 courses offered, only six (that is IRS103, IRS308, IRS309, IRS402, IRS409, and IRS411) reflect the African experience, others are rooted in the Eurocentric school of thought (Table 1).

Table 1. NUC-benchmark minimum academic standard for international relations' program

S/N	COURSE CODE	DESCRIPTION	CREDIT UNITS
1	2	3	4
	100 LEVEL	100 LEVEL	
1	IRS 101	Ancestors of the Contemporary Intl' System	2
2	IRS 102	Evolution of the Contemporary Intl' System	2
3	IRS 103	Introduction to African Politics	2
4	IRS 104	History of Europe 1300–1914	2
5	IRS 105	History of Europe 1300–1914 II	2
6	IRS 106	Introduction to Management	2
7	IRS 107	Introduction to Political Science	2
		200 LEVEL	
8	IRS 201	Use of English	2
9	IRS 202	Structure of International Society	2
10	IRS 203	Introduction to Political Analysis	2
11	IRS 204	Political Thought Plato-Machiavelli	2
12	IRS 205	Political Thought Since Hobbes	2
13	IRS 206	Foundation of Political Economy	2
14	IRS 207	New States in World Politics	2
15	IRS 208	Nigerian Politics	2
16	IRS 209	French / Portuguese / Arabic	2
17	IRS 210	Elements of Contemporary Global Studies	2
		300 LEVEL	
18	IRS 301	International Economic Relations I	2
19	IRS 302	International Economic Relations II	2
20	IRS 303	The International Political System	2
21	IRS 304	Diplomacy	2
22	IRS 305	Law of Nations	2
23	IRS 306	Logic and Methods of Political Inquiry	2
24	IRS 307	International Politics in the Post-Cold War Era	2
25	IRS 308	International Politics of Africa	2
26	IRS 309	Field Trip	2
27	IRS 310	Theories of International Relations	2
28	IRS 311	Theory and Practice of Administration	2

1	2	3	4
		400 LEVEL	
29	IRS 401	Foreign Policy Analysis	2
30	IRS 402	Nigerian Foreign Policy	2
31	IRS 403	Human Rights	2
32	IRS 404	Contemporary Strategic Studies	2
33	IRS 405	Foreign Policies of the Powers	2
34	IRS 406	International Institutions	2
35	IRS 407	Research Project	6
36	IRS 408	Race and Ethnicity in International Relations	2
37	IRS 409	Africa and the Middle East	2
38	IRS 410	Asia in World Politics	2
39	IRS 411	International Relations in Southern Africa	2
40	IRS 412	Europe in World Politics	2
41	IRS 413	Technology, Ecology and Environment in IR	2
42	IRS 414	IR in North Africa and the Maghreb	2
43	IRS 415	Politics of Intl' Economic Relations	2
44	IRS 416	The Intl' Politics of Mass Communication	2
45	IRS 417	Middle East in World Politics	2

Source: National University Commission 2007: 96–101.

In this circumstance, the products of the IR program are automatically dislocated from the realities on the ground in Africa. While the African experience showcases the supremacy of the informal non-state cross-border relations in the region, the leading scholars in the field continued to ignore the phenomenon. In this purview, the western-centric hegemony in international studies is a form of intellectual imperialism – a closed system with subjective paradigms. Thus, this paper attempts to fill the gap in the existing literature by examining how the ‘African antithesis’ can help expand the existing monolithic paradigms of International Relations to reflect global understanding.

African International Relations: Challenges and Prospects

The peace of Westphalia marked a departure from the traditional religious aristocracy of medieval Europe. Its resolutions concluded the internecine wars and evolved a geopolitical framework for European relations. IR theory is rooted in the treaty of Westphalia. The Westphalian order was established on two major principles – sovereignty and equality of states. Indeed, it emphasizes the supremacy of the nation state in the international system; State-centric International Relations evolved as a solution to the cycle of European hostilities and political disorder. This Eurocentric philosophy was later planted around the world through colonialism.

The Afro-European intercourse during the colonial era involved the subjugation of traditional African International Relations and the formalization of European type international order. This entails the force-feeding of African materials into the European structure. Notwithstanding, the informal transnational African politics continued to flow as a vital under-current – the nucleus of the postcolonial African International Relations. This undercurrent in the form of informal regional politics characterized by failed borders, and incoherent sovereignty is what Lisa Anderson regarded as alternatives to the states. According to Lisa Anderson, ‘Many of these alternatives, vast religions and ethnic networks... compete with the state and while they may convey fewer rights than established states, they

often protect those rights they do extend far more effectively' (Anderson 2004: 3). The post-colonial period therefore, marked a rebirth of a new Africa in form of distinct hybrid states that are neither European states nor pre-colonial African kingdoms in character.

The African deviancy to the state centric perspective of International Relations can only be understood through an appraisal of the pattern of intergroup relations in Sub-Saharan Africa. The integration between the peoples of West Africa goes beyond trading and involved transnational kinship. The scramble and partition of Africa involved the demarcation of the continent across established ethnic nationalities. For example, in Nigeria, the Hausa pre-colonial state was divided between Nigeria and Niger, the Yoruba people were divided between Nigeria, Benin and Togo, while the Fulani people were divided across the Nigeria-Cameroonian border axis. The new created states were never a nation-state. This phenomenon created social capital across African colonial boundaries. Also, it created social solidarity across borders which serve as a platform for disloyalty to the hybrid states. A major challenge to state planting in Africa is the fluidity of the colonial boundaries. As the concept of sovereignty connotes the formalization of national boundaries, according to Robert Rotberg, states 'constituted repositories of power and authority within borders' (Rotberg 2004: 28). Hence, the erosion of this power across the inherited colonial boundaries owing to uncontrollable informal large scale trans-border movements is contrary to the Westphalian model. It is not surprising therefore, that as of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century this scenario was accelerated by the de-bordering forces of globalization.

This phenomenon created channels of power for transnational non-state actors. The result was the rise of transnational militia networks comprising the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko-Haram in Nigeria, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the Central African Republic, Janjaweed in Chad, and the Arab Islamic Front of the Azawad in Mali. These militia groups have seized the opportunity created by the rapid erosion of power across the national boundaries to challenge the state actors. While the security architecture of Africa is unfolding, informal trans-border trade is exceedingly high in Africa, starving the states of vital revenue, and strengthening the economic power base of the transnational non-state actors (Delvaux 2001: 13–17). According to Christopher Chase-Dunn, this is a response to the globalization of Western neoliberal democracy and its attendant stress on the World's proletariats (Chase-Dunn 2010: 51). Considering the foregoing, it can be deduced that informal trans-border relations in Africa exceed formal International Relations by state actors. This scenario challenges the use of state as a major unit of analysis in Africa. Also, this shows that the functioning of the political entity referred to as 'states' in Africa differs considerably from what constitutes a state in Europe. Indeed, this dichotomy is a major challenge to the existing state-centric theory of International Relations. Observing this phenomenon, Justin Rosenberg posits:

The disciplinary division of labor between the modern social sciences itself reflects uncritically and thereby naturalizes the distinctive social forms of modernity. State, markets, individuals – precisely the things we need to explain – are already assumed to be natural starting points. By conceptualizing particular structures of modern social relations in isolation from each other, this division of labor tends to reify them into self-sufficient actors with their own distinctive properties – hiding both the historical novelty of these forms and the specific social relations which constitute them. And it almost goes without saying that this also effects an ideological closure, drawing in of the horizons of collective human possibility (Rosenberg 1994: 4).

The failure of IR theory to reflect issues in African studies is no longer news. Scholars have rejected the static and mono-cultural conception of IR theory, pointing to the constructivist advances as an outreach to Africa and other non-Western cultures (Price and Reus-Smit 1998: 266; Brown 2006: 125). Constructivists have been preoccupied with the social construction of International Relations with a special focus on trans-border socio-cultural relations. This seems to hold promise for the understanding of the African informal transnational undercurrent. According to Brown:

If IR theory presupposes functioning states and these do not exist in parts of Africa, then the IR theory cannot apply; if IR theory is focused on relations between states, and there are international social processes crossing state borders that are in some sense, non-state, then alternative theories are needed, and so on (Brown 2006: 123).

Brown admitted that IR theory like other theories is limited in scope. He argues that 'they reduce the complexity of the world in order to highlight certain important features... they rely on conceptual abstractions such as 'state' and 'anarchy' to refer to real aspects of the world but in a necessarily imperfect, generalized way' (*Ibid.*: 124). Advancing this discussion, it can be deduced that the problem lies with the disciplinary philosophy of International Relations. This is obvious in the concept of what constitutes the 'international' and the 'transnational', for African challenges to IR theory is embedded in the informal transnational relations fiercely competing with the formal state-centered International Relations. In this perspective, the 'international' that is, state-centered relations are the foundation of IR theory and fits well into the European reality while the African experience emphasizes the 'transnational' which focuses on non-state relations involving a de-bordering process. In this purview, antagonists of the African challenge to IR may be justified if the discipline continues to be defined from the Eurocentric viewpoint. In this regard, IR theory will be extremely handicapped to explain the African situation and the continent will continue to be ignored in the discipline as a precaution against theoretical complications. Hence, the inadequacy of IR theory to diagnose the African dilemma is inherent in the discipline. A call for a distinct framework outside of the mainstream IR theory to address the African phenomenon is a call to liquidate the discipline and the constructivist agenda is a step towards this direction. No wonder, many IR scholars are restricting a shift away from the fundamental IR theory for self-preservation. Apart from the Africa's challenge to International Relations, the emerging pattern of globalization poses a major threat to the field. The state-centric explanation to the global intercourse can no longer stand the complexity of the emerging world order. It seems that the establishment of Global Studies as a distinct discipline is a reaction to the narrowness of IR theory. As Phyllis Pomerantz puts it:

IR has increasingly dealt with voluntary associations of states (international organizations) and non-state actors, such as private companies, terrorist groups, and non-governmental organizations. Nonetheless, much of the analysis still revolves around the relationships of those actors with the state. In contrast, the state is only one of multiple units of analysis used in Global Studies. Perhaps the best characterization of those units is that of informal and formal networks of groups of individuals and organizations linked to each other and to the global economy and polity (Pomerantz 2008).

Indeed, Global Studies (GS) offers a broader framework for the analysis of the African experience. The transition in world history necessitates a transition of IR theory from

a state-centric pedagogy to a holistic transnational global framework as exemplified by the experience of the Global South. Unfortunately, the discipline of International Relations is fundamentally subjective, ethnocentric and therefore imperialistic. It cannot expand its theoretical basis without self-liquidation. This circumstance is what Rodrigue and Stasko (2010: 132), refers to as 'social entropy' – 'the result of generations of people thinking in traditional ways. IR is entrenched in the state system, even while other units of analysis are involved, the state remains dominant. The failure of state planting in Africa vis-à-vis other parts of the Global South rubs International Relations of its universality. Also, the emerging globalization phenomenon, I bet, will continue to erode its foundation in the West – its stronghold. International Relations evolved out of the Western hegemony in world affairs. Its preferences are the great power politics which necessitated the treatment of the colonized Global South as the world's periphery. However, the challenges of International Relations came with decolonization and the failure of the Westphalian state system in post-colonial Africa. This transition in world history poses a potent challenge to the mainstream IR theory, as the concept of an all sovereign state becomes untenable in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. Unfortunately, IR is genetically conditioned to be Eurocentric and the failure of this mirage necessitated the decline of the discipline. This frustration is exemplified by the writing of William Brown who tends to redefine International Relations away from the state-centric debacle. Borrowing a phrase from Justin Rosenberg's 'The Empire of Civil Society'; Brown agreed that emphasis on critical social theory should be restricted within the discipline, otherwise International Relations will 'disappear into Sociology' (Brown 2006: 124–125). Hence, for self-preservation, International Relations could only survive by assigning nuisance value to realities in non-European cultures, especially when such contribution conflicted with its cardinal doctrines. Alternatively, in the quest for objectivity and global outlook, International Relations will inevitably dissolve into Global Studies (GS).

The existing IR theory despite its narrowness represents a first but an incomplete step towards holistic global understanding. It is now being expanded to accommodate experiences of non-European regions within the expansive theoretical framework in Global Studies. Thus, Global Studies represents a new and broader branding of International Relations. According to Rodrigue and Stasko:

It is our job as academics to begin transformation towards new models. We, as scholars and educators, must find ways to address global problems using global linkages between ourselves, our students and our communities. It is commonly reported that when our cosmonauts and astronauts went into space, they saw no political boundaries on the Earth and came back confirmed internationalists and activists. It is in this spirit of global endeavor that we educators need to ignite world change by empowering our world citizens with new ideas (Rodrigue and Stasko 2010: 139).

Thus, in order to involve the African experience into Global Studies, it becomes necessary to re-conceptualize existing paradigms of IR such as state, sovereignty, power, and border to reflect the African scenario. In this regard, IR theory will converge with African Studies (AS) to produce a new knowledge. According to Hegel, the steps towards the discovery of a truly scientific knowledge involve the development of a thesis, antithesis and a synthesis. In this perspective, the Eurocentric IR theory represents the thesis, regional studies such as African studies constitute the antithesis and, a critical appraisal of the two stages of enquiry will produce the synthesis – a holistic and universal Global Theory.

Conclusion

European Imperialism in Africa involved the political, economic and intellectual domination over the African people. The disadvantaged position of Africa in the history of Afro-European relations made the continent subservient to Eurocentric ideologies. It was discovered that decolonization in Africa is an ongoing process which entails an attempt at political, economic and intellectual liberation of the continent. Intellectual decolonization of the continent started with the review of Academic curricular in the field of History and now International Relations (IR). The lessons learnt from the decolonization of the field of History in Africa suggest that the successes recorded can be attributed to the elastic philosophy of history that cuts across all human cultures. In the case of International Relations, the discipline is deeply entrenched in the Eurocentric experience; it is an invention of Europe. Its cardinal doctrines of the superiority of state are a political bible of the West and any challenge from Africa or elsewhere in the Global South to the status quo is deemed heretic. No wonder, renowned IR scholars have treated the Africa's challenge to International Relations passively and with disdain. In a nutshell, the limitation of the discipline to answer the African question is inherent in its genetics – its philosophy cannot accommodate such defiance. To do otherwise, is to face theoretical complications and risk the liquidation of the discipline as whole. However, it was discovered that it may be possible to expand the pioneering paradigms in International Relations to accommodate African realities within the disciplinary philosophy of Global Studies (GS). This should be done by re-conceptualizing cardinal concepts of International Relations such as statehood, sovereignty, power, and border within a global framework.

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