

## Book Review: The Failure of Leadership in Africa's Development by Ike Okonta

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**Ike Okonta, *The Failure of Leadership in Africa's Development*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020. vii-221 pp. \$95.00.**

Apologists for Africa's scientific and technological underdevelopment contend that to blame Africa's political leadership is akin to blaming the victim. African and African-descended intellectuals contend that Africa did not have a chance to assert itself, given the humiliation, pillage, and domination the continent was subjected to by Arab and European invaders. This narrative has been peddled and seared, like religious dogma, into the psyche of African people for decades. The weakness of the analytical perspective framed by African intellectuals is that they never questioned why the continent was pillaged and dominated for hundreds of years. That is where *The Failure of Leadership in Africa's Development* steps in to fill this analytical gap, as well as offer meaningful suggestions to lift the continent from its development doldrums.

The book opens with nagging questions about Africa's underdevelopment. The continent is extremely wealthy, resource wise. Africa is immensely endowed with extensive reserves of precious minerals and metals, including diamond, gold, copper, iron ore, bauxite, tin, chrome, cobalt, manganese, phosphates, uranium, etc. In addition, the continent has vast acres of arable land. Given Africa's plethora of natural endowments, the continent seemed to have been predestined from historical beginnings to play a leading role in the world economy. However, the continent did comfortably play that role early on in its history. For instance, Ancient Egypt not only led Europe and Asia in the development of agriculture, especially the production of grain, but also led the world in metallurgy, writing, engineering, and military technology. In the long stretch of history, Egypt, unfortunately, lost its leading role and became vulnerable to conquest, colonization, and subjugation by the Phoenicians, Greek, Romans, Arabs and modern Western Europe. As the author puts it, "... since the 5th century BC, Africa has lagged behind all other

areas of the world in almost every significant arena of human life - economics, politics, religion, science, technology - and because of this lag, a long succession of conquerors and colonizers have historically taken advantage of her weakness. Yet, during the intervening years, the continent has failed to awaken from its economic, technological and military slumber” (p. 2). Today, the United Nations Development Program and the World Bank rank Africa as the least-developed region of the world. How did a continent so richly endowed with enviable resources to transform herself into an economic and technological colossus become not only poor and weak, but also a doormat for all conquerors that ever set foot on the continent? What knocked Africa into a comatose stupor?

Africa’s chronic underdevelopment has stirred the scholarly curiosity of intellectuals, including Schwab (2001), Ayittey (1999), Davidson (1992), Rodney (1982), and Diamond (1977). Their writings are the most recent attempts to offer explanations. The book carefully examine three conflicting theories that attempt to explain Africa’s underdevelopment: Race, Geography and Colonialism. Racialist theories argue that a hierarchy of intelligence exists among human beings, with Caucasoid at the apex, Mongoloid closely following behind, and Negroid at the bottom of this hierarchy. European race theorists assert that superior Caucasians built more technologically advanced civilizations that were beyond the intellectual capacities of Negroes, despite the fact that Africa was the birthplace of *Homo sapiens*. European philosophers, anthropologists, explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators believed that African people suffered from arrested intellectual and mental development. In fact, French race theorist, Arthur de Gobineau (1915) claimed that the “black race, of all the other races, placed the least value in improving its material condition and, consequently, lacks the very spirit of civilization” (pp. 32-33).

Some scholars have pushed the perspective of a benign geography as the cause of the scientific and technological stagnation of Africa. For example, Cheik Anta Diop (1974) claimed that Europeans “developed a spirit of conquest and a love for mechanical contrivances because they inhabited a cold and inhospitable terrain where they were forced to live a nomadic life.... Indo-Europeans, from the beginning, placed a high value on aggression, greed, and the love of warfare” (p. 38). Contrastingly, Diop argued that Africans were awash in an abundance of natural resources that “they had no need to be technologically inventive” (p. 39). Indeed, historical evidence supports the claim that pre-colonial African societies showed no interest in scientific and technological advancement. Is it surprising that African medieval empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu surrendered to the better-armed and horse/camel-riding calvary of the invading Arab-Muslim conquerors that sacked their empires? Similarly, the Ashanti, Congo, and Zulu kingdoms caved in to European armies. Other geographical arguments point to the lack of contact with Mediterranean civilizations due to the Sahara Desert. Historical evidence does not support this claim. For example, during the height of African medieval empires, commerce existed between the Sahel and the Mediterranean region through various Trans-Saharan Trade routes. Mansa Musa, emperor of Mali reportedly made a famously extravagant trip to Mecca via Egypt through Trans-Saharan Caravan routes. While cataracts on the Nile, Niger and Congo rivers disrupted intra-continental water navigation and trade, the author ably showed that geography is not destiny.

The Colonialism Perspective appears to be the most popular explanation for Africa's underdevelopment. Thanks to Rodney's book that championed and propagated this perspective. European colonial powers integrated the continent into the global economy as producers of raw materials for European factories and industries. Undoubtedly, colonialism disrupted the economy

and culture of African societies. Nonetheless, it is proper to note that colonialism was neither a death sentence nor a terminal disease. The United States, [South] Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore were colonized but are today developed societies. Further, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Mexico and India also were colonized but are today on the frontlines of emerging economies. The author methodically highlights the following arguments that puncture the validity of the Racial, Geographical, and Colonialism paradigms. On the racial superiority of Caucasians,

the history of human development in various parts of the world shows that neither progress nor regress is necessarily the product of high or superior intelligence. Rather, it is the result of fluctuations in cultural and political behavior. For example, the Romans of the first century BC were more technologically advanced than the Celts and the Franks of the same period, yet the English and the French today are more technologically advanced than the Italians” (p. 36).

The historical examples of China in various centuries and the Meiji Restoration in Japan support this argument. Ergo, culture, rather than high or low intelligence, sparks technological progress or regress. With various historical illustrations around the world, including the construction of bridges and underground tunnels across large bodies of water and the exploration of outer space, the author showed that geography is not destiny. In sum, the cause of Africa’s underdevelopment is the historical indifference of her leaders and elites to technological progress. The fact that during the span of the conquest of Africa by European colonial predators, African armies responded in the battlefields with spears and bows and arrows to rapid-firing Maxim and Gatling guns is clear testament to the calculated nonchalance of African leaders to scientific and technological advancement. Furthermore, that highway, railroad, airport, seaport, and various other architectural and engineering projects today in African countries are contracted out to Chinese firms is another testament to the indifference of the continent’s leadership to technological development. More than any other writer, Okonta has provided a balanced,

intellectually rigorous and logical analysis of the technological backwardness of Africa. The book has offered a monumental analytical contribution to understanding the nagging questions about Africa's technological stagnation. Can the continent eventually catch up with the rest of the world in scientific and technological skills? Possibly, but only with cultural and political leadership reorientation. *The Failure of Leadership* should be required reading for students of history, politics and African development.

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