

Understanding Nowadays Africa through Discursive/ Imagery Fragments

Felix U. Kaputu

Abstract: The concept of “the invention of Africa” captivates the continent’s characteristics attributed to Western endeavors focusing on “unhistorical” Africa, slavery, colonization, post-coloniality, poverty, cooperation, and underdevelopment. Today, a persisting interrogation of the continent’s present and future seeks to discover how African leaders have moved people toward their well-being. The text produces a coherent narrative about African political leaders’ failure to innovate and “reinvent” the continent for responsible access to the common good and globalization.

Keywords: invention of Africa; glocal socio-political rhetoric; discursive/imagery fragments.

Compreendendo a África de hoje através de fragmentos discursivos/imagéticos

Resumo: O conceito de “invenção da África” captura as características atribuídas por empreendimentos ocidentais com foco na África “não-histórica”, escravidão, colonização, pós-colonialidade, pobreza, cooperação e subdesenvolvimento. Hoje, uma persistente interrogação sobre o presente e o futuro do continente procura descobrir como os líderes africanos direcionam as pessoas ao bem-estar. O texto produz uma narrativa coerente sobre o fracasso dos líderes políticos africanos em inovar e “reinventar” o continente para um acesso responsável ao bem comum e à globalização.

Palavras-chave: invenção da África; retórica sócio-política glocal; fragmentos discursivos/imagéticos.

At a time when the world continues addressing Covid-19 consequences for an adaptation of worldwide politics of cooperation and swift reactions to a global pandemic, investments, capital movements, ecosystem preservation, and climate change measures, Africa sends unclear signals. It reveals uncertain “pictures of reason and (...) ethico-political space” about its general present and future socio-political orientations, more than sixty years after the independence of most of its countries (Edkins 2014, 15, 36, 41; Kaarbo 2011, 63, 1005, 112; Gondwe 2020, 3). Such politics revolving around glocal construct rhetoric on development, the assessment of health, hunger, ecosystem preservation, climate change challenges, and the continent’s general and shared socio-politico-philosophical choices, stand for the great topics that the most influential scholars include in their use of re-invention of Africa, and Africa’s global representations. When referring to a new era of the continent, they also prefer to refer to Africa’s re-invention in their observation of a continuous brain drain from the continent for the advancement of Europe (Nkwazi 2019, 29, 33). Those who could assist the continent bring grist to the mills of global superpowers instead. Another kind of “invention” looks at how Europe underdeveloped Africa with tools and roots going as far back as 1885 when Africa started its most significant contributions to the capitalist development backbone of Europe (Rodney 1982, 75-90; Burgis 2005, 103-106). Whatever the perspective scholars choose to analyze the situation from, and whatever re-invention they imagine, Africa is the loser whose space is often perceived through foreign lenses and does not seem ready to decide independently about its destiny and the destination of its resources, including the human capital.

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perspective that covers general viewpoints revolving around socio-cultural-political proceedings, images, and postcoloniality from scholars such as Mudimbe (1988), Mbembe (2001) and Fukuyama (2014) within a continuation of grammatology, poststructuralism, colonial rhetoric, image juxtaposition, and narrative production from Derrida (1978), Kanneh (1998), and Bhabha (2012). For the comprehension of the “invention of Africa,” I rely on socio-political narrative construction and social storyline digging out distant memory fragments (Baert 2018; Schegel 1998; Azoulay 2019; Ruchel-Stockmans, 2015a; Didi-Huberman 2009; Larsson 2013). I will simplify the historical time duration to emphasize the most frequent oral and visual media news about Africa to give a sense to the concept of “invention or a re-invention” in a postcolonial context (Harmon 2002; Otto 2005, 6-7).

RATIONALE AND POSITIONING ABOUT THE STATE OF THE ART: USING FRAGMENTS AS A COMPREHENSION STRATEGY

Political discursive fragments find their primary substance in an archaeological (physical and figurative) exercise, digging up several layers of the past to find split art and architectural pieces and putting them together for better knowledge (Cline 2001, 245-261; Hayden III 2020; Till 2011). The collected pieces allow one to contemplate the past and formulate hypotheses/imagination, as arts/images reveal social bonds and agency (Sircello 1990; Emrali 2018). In this context, many years ago, Mudimbe (1993) held that fragments produce “discourses of knowledge and discourses of power” from the “*memoriae loci*,” as images speak. In the same vein, Mudimbe (1988) raises the pertinent question of the invention of Africa as an output of the philosophical, historical order of knowledge and the selected socio-political choices made locally or abroad. Irony, metaphors, and ambiguities characterize social interlocutors (Mudimbe 1993, 1988, 1986; Evans 2004; Larsson 2015; Stepan 2006). Scholarly publications on the agency of images and their performative power propose a strategy to move through fragments and update a comprehension of the African socio-political rhetoric embedded in political discourses (Azoulay 2019; Ruchel-Stockmans 2015a, 2015b; Adande 2002; Bacquart 2000; Diagne 2011; Abt 2005).

In addition, approaching the general African condition in the light of Azoulay and Ruchel-Stockmans’ theory mentioned above on the performative power of images (and the images of power) reinforces the present paper’s objectives aiming to question if Africa is currently reinventing itself (or being reinvented) and moving in new directions for its socio-political wellbeing with the possibility of getting original explanatory, appropriate set of theories without wasting time on the formalization of the early findings from other scholars.

ACADEMIC RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

My objective is to highlight contemporary African socio-political directions linked to media images and information about African countries circulating in media, such as France 24, Radio France International, BBC Africa, CNN, and many local and foreign newspapers (Dunn 2019). I will use “fragments” to connect the material and immaterial aspects of the research theme encompassing African political narratives and social constructs while revisiting collective memories (Ruchel-Stockmans 2015a, 2015b; Giddens 2007; Appadurai 2013; Hilgers 2015; Anderson 2006; Schlegel 1998; Stallabrass 2008). Lübecker (2013) and Vansina (2004) hammer with much strength on the same nail, as they insist that images organize the narrative and build comprehension of historical and cultural resources. This approach will raise postcolonial questions on permanent versus temporary and dynamic socio-political directions. With additional assistance from a qualitative and participatory research finding analysis perspective, the questions turning around the invention or re-invention of Africa will also benefit from participatory actions in socio-political constructs (Charmaz 2012; Dietz 2013; Reckitt 2018; Appadurai 2005, 2013, 9-60; Giddens 2007; Bhabha 2012; Comaroff 2012). Callon (2001) and Corrigan (2012) will enrich the methodology with an adaptation of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) on information transmission, with Roberts (1996, 23-25) adding a component on distant memory recuperation of public discourses and representations.

A QUICK COLLECTION OF RECENT POLITICAL “FRAGMENTS” OF AFRICA

When Covid-19 broke out and quickly expanded to the world, many predicted a quick blow that would rapidly wash out as many people as possible, with high statistics of death records in poor locations, if not entire continents, such as Africa (Cilliers 2020; United Nations 2020). Against all surprises, Africa, often presented as the poorest continent due to a general lack of medicinal resources, resisted better. For many observers, the apparent African success could be the starting point of a new social pattern that Africa would use to engage in glocal socio-political rhetoric, development, assessment, and re-invention using local coordinated politics. The continent is thriving in the politics of poverty, inequality, and human and land insecurity (Department for International Development 2010). Unfortunately, the continent still hesitates to participate in many global challenges (Baylis 2008; Appadurai 2013).

During this same time, apart from the Boko Haram incessant attacks on the Nigerian population and the abductions of school girls and boys addressed differently, the Islamist violence has, under different names, extended to the Sahel and West

Africa with repeated actions in Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Cameroun, and increasing threats to the entire region. The Horn of Africa has prolonged regular death and violent destruction in Somalia and Ethiopia, turning around wars, suicide bombs, and people's displacements (Woldearegay 2019; Kidane 2011, 10-18). The violence has taken another orientation in Eastern Africa. It combines killing people with water scarcity or floods that oppose peasants and herders over water wells, grazing fields, land occupation, and religious hatred without respect for physical and religious borders, eventually letting Islamists reach and turn upside down local situations in countries such as Mozambique (Mlambo 2022).

Nonetheless, an observation of Sub-Saharan Africa reveals the presence of many socio-political actors, local and global. Ancient partners strive to help keep their traditional impact and habits constructed through many years in the countries that were once their colonies. France is a particular case whose mobile defense forces and war materials were shown on television, while the local populations were throwing stones intended to mark the end of a friendship when the Jihadist attacks extended to many African countries and necessitated an international reaction. Even though fighting Jihadists up to a given level, Africa still needs much international assistance. Despite the intensity of such images, a careful watcher would question how a military body converted into politicians through unelected transitional practices would not again use the local population in scapegoating France, accusing it of being responsible for all failures accumulated over many decades in Western Africa. Simultaneously, the Russian Wagner paramilitary troops, whose presence was hidden for long months, have become active. Local news depicts them favorably, suggesting Russians are the ideal partners for launching Africa toward new socioeconomic and political horizons (Grissom 2022; Ehl 2023; Fasanotti 2022; Súkhankin 2020; Súkhankin 2018). However, world-advised observers quickly point out how these Russian troops bring about a new kind of colonization in Central Africa, reproducing a pre-independence pattern characteristic of colonial times (Lanfranchi 2023; Bowen 2023, 5-30). African countries were mobilized to produce the natural products needed for the quickly expanding industry in the North while not paying attention to socio-political emergence. Most African countries use the same model of economic exploitation and a capitalist system inherited from colonial practices, for which France is openly condemned (Kohnert 2022). Seen in that way, nothing new will result from flirting with Russian representatives as long as their agenda does not necessarily bring about innovative cooperation that focuses on local people's benefit, access to rapid development, and active participation in worldwide exchanges while constructing its development tools. It is all about "robbing Peter to pay Paul."

Criticism against Russia has increased for different reasons in the last few years. Apart from its disturbance of the African countries where European countries (and to some extent the United States of America) took years to construct international (under)development theories and policies implanted during the colonial times, Russia seeks to change its image constructed all along the cold war and extended into satellite countries in Africa (Daly 2023). Russia tries, by all means, to advertise new images about its foreign policy and cooperation with Africa to bring about new possibilities different from what European countries offer. Russia pretends to be more respectful of its African partners: but rhetoric still needs more proof, as the current situation is not unanimously accepted. Apart from its increasingly suspicious links with West African countries, especially in Central Africa through Wagner forces, Russia has reinforced its presence in South Africa, scheduling military exercises for the entire continent. Consequently, when the United Nations organized a vote against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many African countries voted abstention.

Like Russian projections on Africa, Chinese cooperation is labeled original and often different from European countries conserved since colonial times. It is often criticized for aggravating African poverty and underdevelopment while keeping the continent in the same unfortunate situation (Centre for Chinese Studies 2006, 13). China reinforced its partnerships for decades, launching projects early in the sixties after the Bandung Conference (Stahl 2018). It has become a significant investor, if not the most important (Van Dijk 2009, 10, 84; Jacques 2009). It is present in all countries where it has developed different cooperation lines, investment credits, and African minerals exchanged for Chinese construction works (Centre for Chinese Studies 2006, 16, 21; Pillsbury 2015).

Turkey, on its part, is increasingly active in its embassies, opening easy contacts for business and other partnerships. The number of African students quickly increases in Turkey; Turkish goods are massively imported: clothes, prefabricated houses, and investments. More and more Turkish business people are visible in many countries.

In the same way, other Middle East countries reinforce their presence on the continent. Whatever the reasons for their connections to Africa, trade, or influential, political, and ideological presence, they have changed most Africans' preferred business destinations. For ordinary and business people, Europe and the United States of America are no longer priority destinations as business and studies can easily be pursued in these new partner countries. Besides, these countries quickly offer visas to Africans for different reasons, such as health, studies, tourism, and faith.

Meanwhile, Rwanda, despite its genocidal past – that weakened it for many years – illustrates its power rhetoric by being at the center of international attention.

Its military forces are on the front lines to defend the sovereignty of countries under Islamist attacks, such as Mozambique or Central Africa, or engaging in such contracts with Benin. Wherever the Rwandan Forces officially go, they stand for peacekeepers and positively represent Africa. Rwanda has attempted to solve the global problem of illegal immigrants to the United Kingdom. Although the question is still on the table and attracting controversies, Rwanda shows what Africans could achieve if the global systems paid enough attention to African countries' potential.

Unfortunately, a similar dynamic does not resonate with the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). South Africa takes the lead with a few stable countries that balance the power of the superpowers, whatever happens at the world level. Unfortunately, South Africa does not have as much influence in Africa and needs to extend its economic possibilities to other countries. On the contrary, it has provoked xenophobic violence toward other nationals living there. A few West African countries reignite the old memories of recurrent putsches, thus stopping imagining democracy.

Whereas international politics display many signals of instability in Africa and unreliable connections, the same well-being and socio-political problems noted throughout decades (which seemed solved) are still present locally (Tordoff 1997). Health issues related to HIV-AIDS, Ebola, Malaria, Cholera, and animal-man transmissible diseases persist wherever access to health facilities is reserved for a few people or nonexistent.

At the same time, gender-related injustices concerning education, employment, excision, social inequalities, and gender-based violence persist in many places. Some countries stand for champions in their positions against LGBTs and any other gender interpretation that may go against traditions, religious interpretations, and the reinforcement of local patriarchal communities (Shaw 2023). On the contrary, many countries have developed new political classes that build up new ethnic orders and affiliations in selecting partisans and opponents based on suspicious ethnic criteria. LGBTs and other minorities, such as people with albinism, continue being treated under magic and witchcraft perspectives, with their body parts often chopped and sold at high prices for magic reasons.

In many countries, general poverty makes it difficult to develop local policies regarding fertile land use, forest conservation, and economic transformations – simultaneously at the center of global attention – to address ecosystem issues and climate change consequences due to greenhouse gases. Insignificant attempts are linked to positions taken in the North during the Conference of the parties on the potential that the South offers to the world to balance world pollution. Unfortunately,

countries in the South rely more on the finances that the North would offer to start new initiatives or rural development challenges. It is the same discourse revolving around the colonial pattern repeating itself in keeping the North-South, with the North always being the first to decide.

FROM FRAGMENTS TO NARRATIVE, DISCOURSE, AND NARRATIVE ON AFRICAN NEW INVENTION

The above-highlighted evidence of current events in Africa, though not all, and though not entirely producing a coherent progressive evolution, have the advantage of touching upon different African countries despite their diversity all around the continent. These isolated cases are the fragments that build up a series of random sequences whose connection through theoretical lenses should produce a logical narrative addressing the research topic and its different goals through specific indicators to illustrate the “invention” and new directions for the entire continent. These fragments will help to consider if Africa has taken a new direction or original decisions for its re-invention, different from the colonial and postcolonial dynamic constructions (Ifi 1997; Etchells 2003). Beyond their suddenness, sparse, and particular characteristics, none of the events mentioned in the preceding section covers with the same intensity the continent or meets similar consensual agreement from all countries, or at least regional representations of socio-political coverages.

On the contrary, the mentioned cases often concern a few countries. It is also evident that finding originality and the necessity to correctly answer the ongoing lack of birth control, children’s death, and recurrent diseases is challenging. Some of these problems have lasted since colonial times. Others have become recurrent in the postcolonial era. The case of diseases surprises scholars, and countries freed from cholera, leprosy, and other diseases are again exposed.

Since the present text intends to raise awareness about a continent, it is a situation that resembles, in many ways, an engine turning without the necessary connections to the central belt: the energy is lost. It remains insignificant without producing the predicted results. Let us look at that through a selection of the topics documented in the preceding part. The text reveals twenty topics that African leaders must pay attention to if they consider socio-economic-political directions for the continent. They must have clear orientations, including indicators of profound change. The urgent situation primarily documented by media includes the following: (1) Covid-19 and other recurrent diseases with particular attention on pollution-related diseases; (2) Boko Haram and other Islamist insurgent forces; (3) climate change effect and ecosystem heating; (4) coherent follow-up of the Arab Spring; (5) industrialization

of vital sectors such as farming; (6) water scarcity and desertification versus flooding; (7) cultural valorization; (8) education; (9) gender; (10) minority treatment; (11) nation construction; (12) gross product per capita; (13) China; (14) Russia; (15) Turkey; (16) Saudi Arabia; (17) inflation; (18) democracy; (19) new orientation of local resources; and (20) socio-political innovation productive decisions. They show slight improvement or a will to change from the colonial or postcolonial paradigms. However, the most apparent trends reveal how African intellectuals' presence and ambiguous roles in the continent's development do not show leadership, resistance in politics, and choice for different socio-political philosophies.

Covid-19 arrival revealed how Africa needs to prepare to address sudden health concerns. Many countries count on global assistance (Cilliers 2020). Only a few countries singled out working in partnership with European countries and mainly with France over a few issues have decided, under confusing and inexperienced circumstances, to leave ancient colonial partners. As the twenty-first century engages in unprecedented shifting, global power moves towards different centers attempting to emerge a more multipolar global system, which unfortunately still seems to forget Africa or include it objectively in global challenges without using it (Stah 2018, 21, 22, 22, 26; Funke 2023). Fortunately, Covid-19 turned endemic quite quickly. At the same time, other recurrent diseases such as Ebola, Malaria, Tuberculosis, and pollution-based diseases continue in several countries without getting appropriate solutions for Africans.

The continent must find common ground for addressing its crucial issues regarding socio-political and development policies reviewed by the primary policy organizers. This observation also concerns other sectors mentioned above and more, for which Africa should identify and construct its development patterns with partners of its choice. African countries need a common ground to address challenges while making African originality and the capacity to continue in new directions possible. The exact comprehension and questioning affect several other industrialization sectors, as

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technologies must be adapted to local needs and growing expertise. Africans should think about getting their adapted and appropriate technologies. Climate change has also consequences observable in many locations. Many attempts need a sense of consensus on the approaches needed and to be taken for the entire continent's interest. The African Union or another similar continental institution should change into a catalyzer for getting African solutions to African problems.

CONCLUSION

The above text has the ambition to question Africa as a continent, whether it is reinventing itself – and, if there are such attempts, how far they have gone. Fragments have been selected as the best way to collect bits of a narrative that tells a coherent story about Africa through usable indicators. However, a quick revision of similar sources was necessary to obtain a broader perspective on the research question. Apart from scholars whose works have produced narratives by gathering ideas, images, pieces of information, and archaeological findings, in a bid to have a coherent account, the text has suggested a much more serious focus on two authors' theories (Azoulay 2012, 2019; Ruchel-Stockmans 2015a, 2015b). Both document and revolutionize a comprehension of socio-political events, their impact, and local evolution. These scholars' theories helped collect story details about African socio-political information. Different information about Africa broadly broadcasted on media (such as France 24, BBC, Voice of America, and new Turkish and Chinese channels) were collected to produce a coherent narrative. Such information is first broadcasted in official and television chains before expanding to local public multimedia or vice versa.

These pieces of information collected through the above-advised techniques weave a narrative that documents the research question and focuses on its different aspects. The produced narrative opens possibilities for comparison with other continents and countries concerning positive well-being indicators regarding health, education, social stability, global cooperation, leadership, and success. The invention or re-invention of Africa does not mean the creation or re-creation of the continent *ex-nihilo*, a process that could require a theological approach. Instead, it is all about visiting different socio-political aspects that reveal well-being improvement and clearly show that the continent has taken new directions for its development. It is also about discovering whether the continent has innovated its development strategies without reproducing the same patterns and schemes that prevailed during the colonial era or in the early postcolonial reproduced colonial practices. Among the reasons that all African countries advanced for their independence was their decision to take into their hands the fate of their respective countries (Meridith 2011, 2014). They had decided to

choose what they thought to be the best political regimes, economic production systems, demographic growth, health projects, educational, and cultural choices addressing whole societies.

A quick tour of the continent through the collected fragments addressing the above-mentioned socio-political aspects led to simple but straightforward conclusions. The entire continent has yet to make decisions that show a clear scission from ancient politics inherited from the colonial era. Wherever there are timid attempts to change the fate of local people, they are not enough to reveal, without a doubt, new orientations and well thought strategies. On the contrary, they reproduce the same capitalist abuses that prevailed during the colonial era and pushed African countries to claim independence (Conklin 1997; Engler 2015). Country resources are still in the hands of a few people, whereas most people face poverty challenges. In addition, education presented in several constitutions as the priority that would quickly lead to economic, cultural, and social independence has remained a reproduction of the colonial system. At the same time, female education and leadership have not yet reached a level that would give place to new gender considerations. Disabled people, LGBT people, and other minorities, such as people with albinism and HIV-AIDS patients, are still associated with witchcraft or religious beliefs in many places.

The world observes a sudden return of military coups, especially in West Africa. Diseases eradicated in the past and new ones related to climate and ecosystem changes, pollution, and new diseases transferring from different species are emerging again. They all continue to show how Africa is far from taking off through original strategies. On the contrary, weaknesses concerning socio-economic strategy, military power achievements, and academic and scientific improvements are far from pointing at new, fresh, and creative horizons. With the above, the text has demonstrated how Africa, as a continent, is far from starting on its own while getting rid of precarious conditions once imposed by the colonial powers. Africa still has to search for proper re-invention strategies and tools. 🇳🇬

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