

BOOK REVIEW: *The Shackled Continent – Power, Corruption, and African Lives*

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A child stands, blank faced, in front of what seems to be a tarnished wall, paint peeling off, grasping at her shirt. The child is poorly dressed, barefoot, shirt ripped at the shoulder. Face cocked to the side as if she is hoping for or expecting the return of someone. This picture touches readers, as you began to think of ways to help this child. This picture also reflects the reality in some impoverished African states where people suffer due to tyrannical leaders who refuse to allow economic changes that could result in a stronger economy. Countries in Africa, such as Angola and Zimbabwe, are stagnating, unable to develop economically, and cannot resolve societal tensions. In his book *The Shackled Continent: Power, Corruption, and African Lives*, Robert Guest concludes that the most important reason why Africa is often trapped in a powerless and poor state is because of its leadership.

There are several theories as to why Africa faces economic impoverishment. Remnants of colonialism, poor education, and lack of industrialization are a few theories. However, Guest gives a few more reasons to consider: geography, history, colonial remnants, poverty, sickness (specifically AIDS), and – most importantly – poor leadership. According to Guest, since independence “Africa’s governments have failed their people...this is a pretty good summary of what holds Africa back” (p. 12). The governments of many African countries do not allow their citizens to be free, to own property, or even vote. How can any country sustain itself if they are under the control of a bad leader?

In order to properly develop African economies, the past needs to be left behind and citizens must continue to progress. Guest notes: "Grieving for past wrongs is natural and human, but it can also provide an excuse for despair" (p. 11). South African president Thabo Mbeki further states that "renaissance will only succeed if its aims and objectives are defined by the Africans themselves, if its programmes are designed by ourselves and if we take responsibility for the success and failure of our politics" (p. 11). Africa cannot prosper as a continent if many Africans continue to hold on to the past and blame history for its current problems, despite the consequences of colonialism. Although European colonists have caused several African countries such as Angola and Zimbabwe to suffer, they also left resources. According to Guest, colonists left behind "helpful things such as roads, clinics, and laws. If colonialism was what held Africa back, you would expect the continent to have boomed when the settlers left. It didn't" (p. 9). African countries can take advantage of these opportunities, yet many African countries cannot fully prosper without the proper leadership to fully harness these resources.

Africa is commonly framed in the media as being without resources, yet many countries in Africa are actually endowed with rich minerals such as diamonds, cobalt, and tantalum. However, civil wars in countries such as Angola have resulted in poverty and the unequal distribution of these resources. Guest notes that "Angola is the world's ninth largest oil producer, but more Angolans are poorer than they were when the stuff was first discovered" (p. 63). Angola's oil fueled a civil war that resulted in the country being stripped of its resources, with only a small population enjoying the wealth. Conversely, poverty exacerbates war; when there are no resources, no hope, and no food, citizens rebel against of the government in hopes of solving the problems on their own or gaining enough attention to spur change. Guest outlines the economic and social problems that hinder the development of the continent, with chapters such as "The Vampire State".

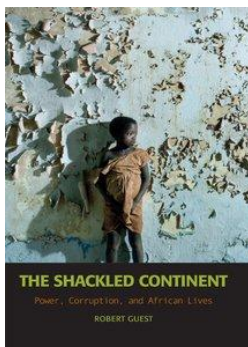
The Shackled Continent is well-written, and Guest's background as a field journalist is reassuring. He provides interview accounts from several Zimbabweans, for example, who explain their personal experiences of living under an authoritarian government. Hlupo Nkomo, a Movement for Democratic Change polling agent, monitored the rigged voting elections in Zimbabwe. If he was caught as a MDC activist, "he could be kidnapped and his genitals would be jolted with jumper cables" (p. 43). Interviews with people "on the ground" help persuade the reader that the information is true and reliable.

It was also very enlightening and refreshing to have a chapter dedicated to the destruction that AIDS and STDs has on the continent. Commonly, colonialism is viewed as the root of the fiscal and social tensions in Africa, but other factors are sometimes not considered. Guest explains that he doesn't know why Africa is badly cursed with AIDS, but he was provided with some clues. A South African taxi driver boasted to him that sex "was the only form of entertainment in his town" and that when they did partake in this activity, they did not use protection (p. 93). People infected with STDs often cannot continue to work, and the government may levy taxes to help provide health care. Researchers at ING Baring forecast that the African economy was 17 percent smaller in 2010 than it would have been without the HIV virus, for instance (p. 95).

Guest does not ignore past violence or brutal leaders. He provides a brief summary of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, for instance, and links that violence to current problems in the state of Rwanda. Hutu politicians who sought to keep themselves in power organized mass violence that killed roughly 800,000 Tutsis. This is just one example of how tribal/ethnic conflicts and poor leadership can lead to genocide and further destruction of an entire nation. Guest also dedicates an entire chapter to Robert Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe. Readers are given insight on how the corruption of a president can harm his country. Guest explains that Mugabe has not transitioned from colonist mindset, but rather has enslaved the minds and bodies of his citizens. Guest states: "He seizes private property, fixes the

price of gas at below of what it costs, tries to create money by printing it and so it causes hyper-inflation” (p. 13). Although Mugabe is not the token leader in Africa in which other presidents follow suit, readers are given a glimpse of how one president can cause the corruption of an entire country. Through hyper-inflation and rigged elections, Zimbabwe is failing socially and economically. Mugabe is stunting the growth of Zimbabwe and challenging human rights.

Disturbing pictures of Africa in the media and discussions of the continent’s instability may make someone easily feel as though Africa is beyond repair. However, Guest has not given up on Africa; although he discusses how countries in Africa are suffering, he also believes that Africa has the capability to flourish. Guest states that “in the long run, I believe Africa will prosper. Any country can make the transition from poverty to comfort” (p. 23). He describes Zimbabwe as so warm and beautiful that is “should be choking with tourists” (p. 29). His examples show that although Africa has suffered and is continuing to suffer, its bountiful resources can fuel the continent into becoming a rich, developed region of fiscal stability. As I remain hopeful for Africa, Guest does as well, which is refreshing and inspiring. I would recommend this book for all of those who want to learn about the state of the African continent in a concise and eloquent manner. If you want a history lesson of Africa, I would refer you to another book; however, if you are looking for a book for understanding Africa’s current situation and future potential, this would be my first choice.



Book Information

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