

Taming the Multiverse of Capitalist Crisis with the Universe of African Totemic Ancestorhood: A Radical Afro-optimist Proposal

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ABSTRACT

This paper advances the position that the ontology and praxis of African totems, rooted in harmonious relations, are superior to the materialistic ethos of capitalism, which, in contemporary times, has debased the human condition and environment in its most mature centres. African totemic ancestorhood, emphasizing sacred and secular interconnectedness, perceives the human station as an integral part of a balanced universal whole. On the other hand, the paradigm of capitalism, anchored on materialist acquisitiveness, avarice, and full-spectrum alienation, underpins inequality, exploitation, and environmental degradation in the quest for personal pecuniary profit. Hence, the ontology and praxis of the African totemic is anathema to capitalism. The lived history of African thought serving as a guiding principle of trans-generational ethical conduct and enacted, for example, through rituals and ancestral reverence, are as relevant in contemporary times as in aeons gone by when Africans were architects of civilizations. As nations such as China, India, and Russia seek to resurge in contemporary times by reconnecting with their ancestral roots to navigate modern challenges, Africans must take a cue and similarly recover and leverage the (re)constructive power of ancestral ontology and praxis and thereby develop a uniquely Afrocentric governance model to attenuate the disruptions of capitalist crises. This imperative, apart from exposing the vileness of materialistic (social) relations, will grant Africans the agency to chart an organic, dignified path of cohesive resurgence and avoid the ultimate fatal consequences of capitalism.

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“The traditional face of Africa includes an attitude towards man which can only be described, in its social manifestation, as being socialist. This arises from the fact that man is regarded in Africa as primarily a spiritual being, a being endowed originally with a certain inward dignity, integrity, and value. It stands refreshingly opposed to the Christian idea of the original sin and degradation of man.” *Kwame Nkrumah*.

“A people who free themselves from foreign domination will be free culturally only if, without complexes and without underestimating the importance of positive accretions from oppressor and other cultures, they return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection to foreign culture. Thus, it may be seen that if imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture.” *Amílcar Cabral*.

Introduction: Capitalism's Fetish of Crisis-Ridden Desecration and its Antithesis of African Totemic Ancestorhood

In what may count as a terse, but an apt depiction of the legacy of capitalism over the *longe durée*, Yuval Noah Harari in the afterword of his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* had this to say:

We¹ have mastered our surroundings, increased food production, built cities, established empires and created far-flung trade networks. But did we decrease the amount of suffering in the world? Time and again, massive increases in human power did not necessarily improve the well-being of individual Sapiens and usually caused immense misery to other animals. In the last few decades, we have at least made some real progress as far as the human condition is concerned, with the reduction of famine, plague and war. Yet the situation of other animals is deteriorating more rapidly than ever before, and the improvement in the lot of humanity is too recent and fragile to be certain of...We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one. We are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding

² Emphasis mine

ecosystem, seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction (Harari, 2015, p. 352)

To the extent that Harari is on point with his observation, the “we” he employed has more to do with the socio-political imprint of capitalism rather than the generality of Africans who give and take, over the long durée of history, have become unwitting, helpless victims of the same (Hecht, 2018; Welzer, 2012; Nkrumah, 1965). Hence African people, strictly speaking cannot also be included in Harari’s “we” since neither have they “mastered their surroundings, increased food production, built cities, established empires and created far-flung trade networks” or on their own volition played god using “the laws of physics” ala capitalism without any shred or sense of accountability and in the process “wreaking havoc on...fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem, seeking little more than...comfort and amusement”. On the contrary, evidence based on totem ontology and praxis as enacted and mediated through primordial institutions, suggests that Africans have a sense of accountability to a supreme force of creation assisted by a pantheon of deities in maintaining harmony between the sacred and secular dimensions of reality. Consequently, “wreaking havoc on... fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem” with the intent to “seeking little more than...comfort and amusement”, in and of itself, is anathema to the African. Against this background, this paper seeks to explore the regulatory and conformist power of African totems and demonstrate that they are, in principle from a humanist perspective, relatively much more superior to capitalism. Unlike the ontology of African totemic ancestorhood, capitalism has orchestrated the evolution of the human race to the brink of losing the essence of being human: acting as a vigilant steward of harmony amid perturbations either through the machinations of nature or induced by humanity. Drawing inspiration from John Henrik Clarke’s observation that “history is a clock that a people use to find their political time of day... [and as] the compass that they use to locate themselves on the map of Human geography”, as well as Adisa A. Ajamu’s take to the effect that “African deep thinkers are the cultural timekeepers, the cultural compass makers, the cultural cartographers, and the protectors and preservers of ancestral memory” (Ajamu, 1997), I advance the position that African people ought to perceive their current peripherality in the world as resulting from the ravages of capitalism which have also ravaged its centres of origin and has driven humanity to the brink of irreversible deconstruction and deconstitution. Also, I make the point that Africans ought to take due cognizance of the fact that before the ravages of capitalism historically misoriented African people, the continent had a deep-rooted legacy of constant experimentation with the setting up of civilizational systems. And just as the Chinese, Indians and Russians are in

the process of reconnecting with the civilizational ethos of their past, Africans ought to do the same by leveraging the meta-power of totemic ancestorhood to etch the foundational principles with which they can attenuate the crisis-ridden disruptions of capitalism and in the process develop a uniquely Afrocentric human-centred governance alternative to the dead hand of capitalism. The rest of this chapter is set out as follows: a sketch of the crisis-ridden disruptive essence of capitalism, an outline of the ontology of African totemic ancestorhood, an interwoven demonstration of the superior qualities of the ontology of African totemic ancestorhood over that of capitalism and then a conclusion.

The Crisis Core and Desecrative Designs of Capitalism: A Sketch

The essence of capitalism is the production and reproduction of crisis: episodes of instability characterized by distress, disruption and the desecration of harmony in human and non-human relations (Bruff & Horn, 2012; Soros, 1998; Weisskopf, 1991). Understood as such, capitalism degrades, and undignifies the human condition: spiritual and secular alike (Bresser-Pereira, 2014; Øversveen, 2022; Sullivan & Hickel, 2023; Autonomous University of Barcelona, 2022; Wachtel, 1972). By elevating avarice, unbridled materialism and acquisitiveness to the level of an infallible public policy dogma (Azar, 2009; Agamben, 2019; Dorius, 2012), capitalism has banished self-sufficiency in human relations, reprogrammed convivial communal solidarity into the price-indexed communal competition, generated waste through overproduction in a context of majoritarian want and regularly destabilized human systems with rampant episodes of economic genocide via crisis with the vulnerable in society being its primary victims (Patomaki, 2016; Clarke, 1994; Ng, et al., 2013; Heller, 2011; Olivier, 2015; Eisenberg-Guyot & Prins, 2022; Jaffe, 2019; Fligstein & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2015; McDaid, 2020). Michael Perelman commentating on the logical undercurrents, which have sustained the capitalist enterprise overtime while echoing Arthur Young notes, “everyone but an idiot knows that the lower classes must be kept poor, or they will never be industrious.” (Perelman, 2000, p. 15). Further, “poverty is...a most necessary and indispensable ingredient in society, without which nations and communities could not exist in a state of civilization. ... It is the source of wealth since, without poverty, there could be no labour; there could be no riches, no refinement, no comfort, and no benefit to those who may be possessed of wealth” (Perelman, 2000, p. 19). In addition, absolute deprivation is the *condicio sine qua non* and *ultima ratio* for the thriving of capitalism since “[direct] legal constraint [to labour] ... is attended with too much trouble, violence, and noise, ... whereas hunger is not only a peaceable, silent, unremitted pressure, but as the most natural motive to industry, it calls forth the most powerful exertions. ... Hunger will tame the fiercest animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjugation to the most

brutish, the most obstinate, and the most perverse.” (Perelman, 2000, p. 18).

The social epidemic of suicide in the United States of America (US) (Ramchand, et al., 2022; Zeira, 2022; Domise, 2021; McPhillips, 2022), as in other jurisdictions aptly illustrates the human indignities of capitalism. Anne Case and Angus Deaton and others see (Ritchie, et al., n.d.; Gross, 2009; Coghlan, 2018; Mujahidah & Wardani, 2021), note that the American dream of prosperity is in decline given the spectre of broken homes and families with slim prospects of survival. In addition, even though college graduates are becoming healthier and wealthier, people without degrees are committing suicide due to frustrations emanating from social exclusion, pain and despair. According to the authors, the suicidal tendencies are attributable to low compensations for labour in the context of the high cost of living, the growing coercive power of corporations, and, above all, to an avaricious healthcare sector that reallocates working-class earnings into the pockets of the affluent. They observe that capitalism, which has lifted numerous people out of poverty for over two centuries, is now destroying the lives of Americans (Case & Deaton, 2020). The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that suicide rates went up by about 30% from 2000 to 2018 and was the leading course of death in 2020 for people in the 10–34 age bracket (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; Ruch, et al., 2019). Marie-Line Germain (and others (Wan, 2020; Archard, 1987) have argued that even though the workplace ordinarily ought to be a place for self-actualization and fulfilment, it tends to be “a life-threatening stressor” in the US. Consequently, suicides and suicide attempts by workers is a dominant cultural trait of large publicly traded business concerns (Germain, 2014, p. 148).

Gonzalo Martínez-Alés et al have observed, that within the first two decades of the 21st century, “suicide rates in the United States entered a two-phase of uninterrupted increase that affected 44 of 50 US states and every sociodemographic group, though the largest increases were among men aged 45–64 in rural areas, and for suicide by methods other than a firearm. Between 2000 and 2018, suicide mortality escalated by 35%, with the suicide rate at 14.5 per 100,000 people in 2018, the highest rate in more than 50 years. As a result, suicide is currently the second leading cause of death among adolescents and young adults and the tenth leading cause of death overall” (Martínez-Alés, et al., 2021, p. 100). Globally, the US is the only place where the number of civilian firearms in circulation is greater than the population size: 120 guns for every 100 people (Dogru, 2022). The right of an individual to possess a weapon stipulated in the Second Amendment of 1791 is an entrenched constitutional right (O’Donnell, 1991). However, it seems income poverty has indirectly undermined the intent behind the Amendment, which is to secure liberty and freedom; there is a positive correlation between conditions of income poverty and gun-related homicide. In

this specific respect, poverty in and of itself corrodes the necessary and sufficient guarantees for the enjoyment of constitutional rights: being alive.

The foregoing should not necessarily be attributed to deviant behaviour but rather ought to be understood as generated by conditions rooted in the structure of capitalism. At risk of failing a one-on-one causality litmus test, the case can be made that capitalism as it plays out at the micro level of the individual debases and devalues as the philosophy of conviviality in human relations. The logic of the market and its actor's relentless of profit plays out in such a way "a person" has no inherent value unless the market establishes the contrary. In this respect, the human being/life is just a factor of production: a human resource to be exploited in the quest for higher yields in terms of, for example, shareholder value. Thus, in the event of a clash between protecting human integrity and the efficiency of the market, the (state) entrepreneur, more often than not, will go for the latter at the expense of the former (Varul, 2013; Scitovsky, 1992; Sullivan & Hickel, 2023). Further, the capitalist entrepreneur values a person more as a mere consumer at the individual level is reproduced and reinforced through the normalization of interest-indexed indebtedness (Hou & Skeie, 2014; Ewerhart, et al., 2004); the main institutional objective of banks and often the only option available to the majority of people whose level of income is below market determined minimum thresholds and whose only option for survival is debt peonage entrapment (Spooner, 2019, pp. 37–64; Mitchell, 2013; Ntsalaze & Ikhide, 2016). It is worthy of note that "debt peonage" (read people's misery) in and of itself is a commodity traded by banks (Leibowitz, et al., 2013; Cardoza, 2015; The Legal Aid Society, 2010). Third, financially insecure persons or people who are not "credit or debt worthy" are priced out of a chance to live or die in dignity (Herrmann, 2011; Schaber, 2011; Müller & Neuhäuser, 2011). The family units of persons embedded in the regime sketched are consequently vulnerable to the inhumane dictates of market actors, constantly exposed to or fending off crises and hardly supportive of the upward social mobility of its members (Aytac & Rankin, 2008; Akokpari, 2007; Nnonyelu, 2013; Stavropoulou & Jones, 2013). Hannah Smothers notes that even though "a 2019 survey identified a slow but steady increase in workplace mental health programs", "workers continue to report high levels of stress and anxiety, employers are beginning to offer more benefits and solutions specifically targeted at increasing mental wellness." Nevertheless, the author notes that "whether those "solutions" include practical measures, like good health insurance, generous leave policies, fair wages, and a culture that genuinely supports tending to one's mental health –or skip that in favour of gimmicks like giving your low-paid employees free meditation app subscriptions—remains unclear (Smothers, 2020). Her observation is a typical reflection of what one should expect to find under conditions where the quest for

profits takes precedence over the dignity of human life.

The sketched tendencies are reproduced beyond the micro-level of the individual in the form of institutions of structural violence: social regimes that impair the agency of people via the generation and sustenance of social inhibitory factors, which leads to exclusion (Farmer, 2009; Parsons, 2007). People exposed to institutions of structural violence suffer the effects of adverse incorporation as characterized by how society tends to be dominated by the financially secure with the relatively less so ostracized (as outsiders) who have slim options of survival other than trading away their social agency (for example the right to work to enhance personal creativity and self-expression) in return for security (Hickey & du Toit, 2013).

Humanity is currently said to be living in the Age of Anthropocene defined as the permanent disruptive impact of human extractive activities on Earth's geology and ecosystems (Bonneuil, et al., 2016; Chwańczyk, 2020). The genesis of the Age of Anthropocene is linked to the beginning of the steep expansion in the global rate of economic growth from the mid-18th century and the subsequent attendant increase in disruptive consequences such as carbon emissions and habitat loss (Steffen, et al., 2015; Shoshitaishvili, 2020). In this respect, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz echoing Eugène Huzar's observations during the early phase of capitalism note that;

[I]n one or two hundred years, crisscrossed by railways and steamships, covered with factories and workshops, the world will emit billions of cubic metres of carbonic acid and carbon oxide, and, since the forests will have been destroyed, these hundreds of billions of carbonic acid and carbon oxide may indeed disturb the harmony of the world (Bonneuil, et al., 2016, p. 12).

Beyond explaining the crisis-ridden disruptions of capitalism within the epistemic confines of the Anthropocene, the concept of Capitalocene has been used by Justin McBrien to emphasize the point that the feature of human-induced disharmony observed in contemporary times has more to do with regimes of creativity and destructiveness associated with the materialist ontology of modernity as enacted through the channeling of paid and unpaid agency of humans and income calibrated nature in the quest for limitless capital accumulation (McBrien, 2016). The two concepts of Anthropocene and Capitalocene reinforce each other and generate a global order of Necrocene: the dominance of capitalism's inherent design of the "planned obsolescence of all life" enacted through its tendency to leave in its trail the extinction of flora and fauna, languages, cultures, and peoples (Batalla, 2021; Aldeia & Alves, 2019).

The foregoing indicates that a recourse to the capitalist model of governing

the quest for progress in Africa may portend grave danger. Karl Marx makes the point that “the country that is more developed industrially only shows the less developed the image of its future” (Marx, 1974, p. 19). This implies that even if African states and statesmen master the science of capitalist policymaking and implementation just as relatively matured centres of capitalism, they may have to contend with disruptions that have become definitive attributes of advanced capitalism. Nevertheless, unlike the matured capitalist centres African policy makers seek to emulate, the continent is trapped in a condition of ambivalence and thus seems to lack the requisite orientation with which to assess and access the needed inputs (ontological, epistemic and material) required to contain the disruptions of capitalist governance from escalating into profiteering anarchy.

The Ontology and Praxis of African Totemic Ancestorhood in the Context of Capitalist Crisis

General The Right Hon. J. C. Smuts designates two conceptions about the genesis and evolution of the cosmos: first, is the notion that the implicit content of the universe in terms of its form and substance was fixed at the beginning of time and thus unchanging. Consequently, its subsequent evolutionary history is just the unfolding of its essence as fixed at the beginning of time. While this ontology, he notes, anchors the beginning of the cosmos in the past making it the predetermining factor of the present and the future. In this respect, humanity has no agency to antithetically interfere in the evolutionary dynamics of the cosmos; people have to “sail with/in it”. One will refer to this notion as the ontology of the “sovereign cosmos”. The second idea is a watered-down version of the ontology of the sovereign cosmos: it considers the evolution of the cosmos as an unending process of variable forms and substances being created. As such this ontology unhinges the present and the future from the past and assigns humanity the agency to master, interrogate, decode and encode the creative evolutionary essence of the cosmos. Again, one will refer to this idea as the ontology of the “human sovereign”. Without admitting the two ontologies are categorically distinct in reality, they map out different epistemic paths: while the former enacts the path of philosophy, the latter underpins the epistemic system of Cartesian science (Smuts, 1936, p. 84).

Totemic ancestorhood, as an ontological attribute of African peoples, is a philosophical outlook that depicts the notion of sovereign cosmos. Notwithstanding diversities borne out of in situ tendencies such as environmental and pathogenic pressures, cultural synthesis, disruptions, and innovations, the ontology of totemic ancestorhood in Africa is embedded in a substructure of holism with the human constituency perceived as an integral, complementary subset of the cosmos.

As instructed by the notion of “haecceity” also referred to as “thisness” (a “property of being identical with a certain entity” (emphasis added (Rosenkrantz, 1993, p. 1)), the human constituency, in this respect is perceived to be enmeshed in a “cosmological plane of immanence”: humanity exists or remains within the corpus of the universe. Haecceity upholds the idea that a domain of “terra incognita”, beyond human comprehension and the non-material exists. Further, according to St. Pierre echoing Deleuze and Paret, the ontology of terra incognita speaks to “dynamic individuations without subjects or objects” (St.Pierre, 2017, p. 688). In addition, even though haecceity is not unique, it defies qualitative or/and quantitative categories. Not only this, but also haecceity is not a substructure per se but the complete networked connections of the universe’s components. In addition, the history of the cosmos, in terms of haecceity, is not chronologically linear but rather the unfolding of “floating times” that outlast the evolution of the components, forms, and substances of the universe. Chronological haecceity, in the manner, indicated, does not lend itself to being framed in a neat, closed unified narrative (St.Pierre, 2017, p. 689).

The “lived history of African thought” expressed in non-material and non-idealistic terms reflects the ontology of haecceity (Grosz, 2017, p. 9): it is non-material because it is anchored on a notion of “mysterium tremendum”: a “thisness” “outside the self” which manifests in a mysterious inexpressible form (Smith, 1929, p. 23). The non-material expressions of the lived history of African thought spring from “numinous sensations”: perceptive emotions that result from surreal encounters with mysterium tremendum (Maboea, 1999, pp. 11–28; Keeney, 2019). Such surreal encounters trigger awe-inspiring irrational personal and collective experiences subjectively decoded as encounters with mysterious power. Having said this, the ontology of haecceities in African thought accommodates the possibility that encounters with the mysterium tremendum and the capacity to subjectively decode and (for example linguistically) transmit its essence is uneven: while in some instances only one person or select few can detect, grasp and express its essence with ease, there are cases where it can be that the power and quality of mysterium tremendum can be “read” by all and sundry (Rosenkrantz, 1993, p. xi).

The priesthood or spirit mediums embedded in the second, i.e. the ethnolinguistic community (Kilson, 1971-1972; Wiredu, 1998; Ushe, 2017, pp. 168-169) are indispensable. Be that as it may, in as much as encounters with mysterium tremendum are awe-inspiring, it is universally perceived by African peoples as imbued with and having the effect of harmony or alignment in the domains of the secular and cosmos. For example, the Kmt (ancient Egypt) ontology of “Maat”, a common worldview among African peoples across the continent (Martin, 2007, p. 52; Beatty , 1997) is said not to be a concrete expression and that

[I]t cannot be known as an object...does not have distinct parts or entities, but possesses interrelated and interconnected manifestations of a cosmic whole. It is the awareness that does not divide up the world into separate and self-contained units. Distinctions are made, yet there is never any fragmentation (Kambon & Asare, 2019, p. 218)

Ilongo Fritz Ngale using his concept of *AfroSymbiocity* notes that *Maat* is expressed in the four Basotho notions of *Botho* (unity of being), *Pula* (universalism), *Khotso* (communalism), and *Nala* (humanism) (Ngale, 2019, p. 20).

Thus, the concept of African totemic ancestorhood is pitched beyond the domain of the Cartesian plane. It represents the “apodicticity”³ or “apodixis” of the “lived history of African thought”: its emphatic essence on harmony is a palpable, certain or self-evident truth that does not require proof for it is “lived” and defines “living”. Lived as used in this context includes but is not reducible to human life; it encompasses the entire web of universal processes of production and reproduction as specifically enacted in the symphony of all the constituencies of life-animate and inanimate. As such, harmony as expressed in African totemic ancestorhood is a “meta-principle of principles” that underpins the lived truth of the universe in human relationships.

By way of a proxy illustration to represent tendencies in other parts of Africa Robin Horton, for example, notes that among the Tallensi of northern Ghana, religious practices based on reverence for a retinue of ancestors define all spheres of life. Specifically, virtually all lineages; which are patterned along patrilineal lines consistently, stage ceremonies to refresh their collective memories of their ancestors and by that project concrete imagery of their deities which in the process relays the ethical principles of the Tallensi toward their deities to children, to parents, and spouses. In this respect, the ancestors and associated rituals of the Tallensi depict a societal model and enact inter and intragenerational transmission mechanisms. Hence, veneration among the Tallensi counts as the veneration of a hallowed societal model as well as its preservation and transmission system over time (Horton, 1961, p. 110). Relatedly, Timothy Insoll notes in as much as each Tallensi lineage has its own deity to distinguish it from others, joint sacrificial fellowships are enacted to venerate “their collective ancestors” either in a central ancestral shrine known as “Ba’a” or staged across several sacred grooves. In his testimonies, he cites the “Nyoo” sacred groove in particular as significant since it is a shrine for the earth, perceived as a “living force” and manned by the “Tendaana” “Custodian of the earth” priesthood.

³ Apodicticity or its equivalent abstract noun, apodixis refers to logical certainty. See (Marosan, 1995).

It is worthy of note that the earth, in Tallensi ontology, is perceived as a living force complementary to the repertoire of ancestors (Insoll, 2007, pp. 329–330). The “earth as a living force” and its nexus with ancestors in Tallensi ontology, a common trait across Africa, represents a conjoined relational tri-axis (Kanu, 2013, p. 534) with the *Homo sapiens* linked with the vital force of the cosmos through land which is part of the earth system. The said conjoined relational tri-axis has been observed by K.A. Busia who notes that

“[T]o the Asante, the universe is full of spirits. There is the Great Spirit, the Supreme Spirit, the Supreme Being who created all things, and who manifests his power through a pantheon of gods; below these are lesser spirits that animate trees, animals, and charms, and then there are the ever-present spirits of the ancestors (*nsamanfo*) whose consent with the life of man on the earth brings the world of the spirits so close to the world of the living (Busia, 1954, p. 191).

Another view may be gleaned from Kwame Gyekye’s report on an Akan libation recital outlined below confirms the said relational tri-axis

[S]upreme God, who is alone great, upon whom Men lean and do not fail, receive this wine and drink. Earth goddess, whose day of worship is Thursday, receive this wine and drink. Spirits of our ancestors receive this wine and drink (Gyekye, 1987, p. 85)

Relatedly, Kenneth Little reflecting on the spirit ontology of the Mende in Sierra Leone notes that *Ngewo* (the super spirit and Supreme Being) occupies the position at the top of a hierarchy ranked in such a way that Spiritual beings which are of a lower rank than the Supreme Being, can be divided into two groups: ancestral spirits and non-ancestral spirits. The ancestral spirits are the ghosts of deceased current community members, including both past devotees of deities and members of specific families. The non-ancestral spirits are made up of several well-known spirits or *genii* (*Dyinyinga*), who are not restricted to any particular location but are frequently connected with natural occurrences like rivers, forests, and rocks (Little, 1954). The Isukha people of Western Kenya also believe in God (Were/Nasaye), ancestors, spirits in the worlds of the living, the unborn, and the inanimate universe. This belief, as a foundation of the religious system of the Isukha defined the interactions between people, animals, and the spiritual world as well as the individual’s responsibility for maintaining societal cohesion (Kilonzo, et al., 2009, pp. 42-43) and as such is a concrete reflection of Gyekye and Walter P. Maqoma’s thoughts of the status of a person in African societies. According to him, the “person” in Africa is enmeshed in a regime of “humanistic morality” enacted to focus on each community member’s well-being

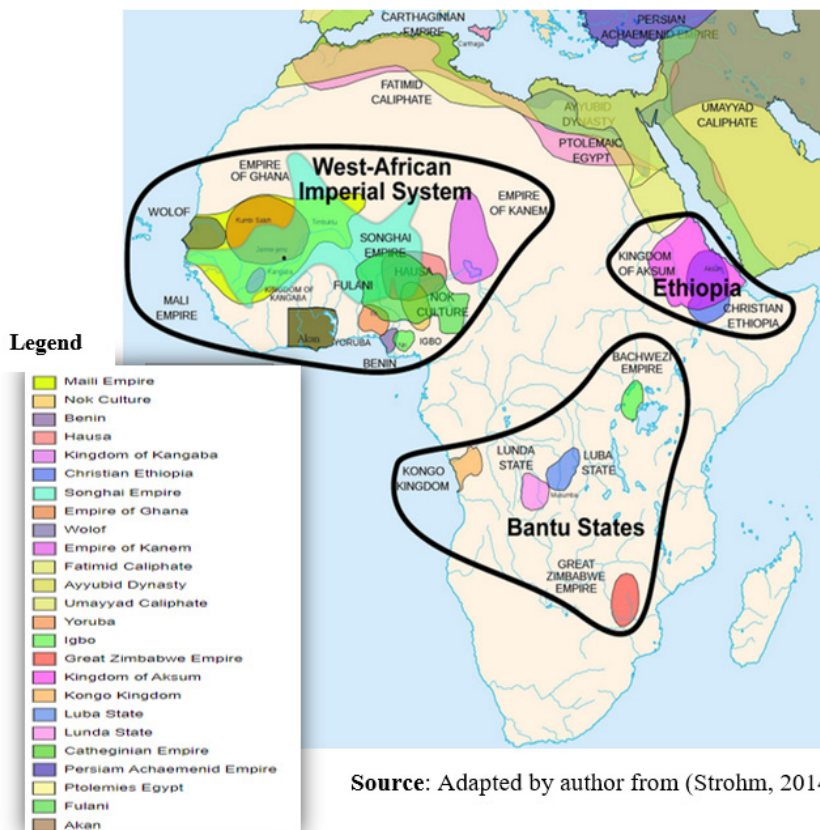
and interest (Gyekye, 1997, p. 38; Maqoma, 2020). Humanistic morality, as noted extends to totems as well. This is expressed in John Mbiti's observation on African tribes to the effect that a

[S]ense of kinship binds together the entire life of the 'tribe', and is even extended to cover animals, plants, and nonliving objects through the 'totemic' system. This it is which largely governs the behaviour, thinking, and whole life of the individual in the society of which he is a member The kinship system is like a vast network stretching laterally (horizontally) in every direction, to embrace everybody in any given local group. This means that each individual is a brother or sister, father or mother, grandmother or grandfather, or cousin, or brother-in-law, uncle or aunt, or something else, to everybody else (Mbiti, 1970, p. 135-136).

Against this background, Polycarp Ikuenobe notes that in African societies, moral principles serve as both semantic and epistemic standards. Hence people ask, "what should I do?" or "how should we behave?" and base their assessments of any situation by seeking to answer the fundamental collective question "what ought we to do?" He adds that such thinking is expressed as a means-end framework and is fundamentally normative and applied in nature. The communal environment of African cultures in this respect results in the informal encoding, learning, and teaching of moral values, virtues, and principles through stories, folklore, parables, proverbs, mentoring, and the role modelling of elders. The sketched regimes of social interaction enact solidarity networks of inter and intra-cultural competence which enable collectivities to negotiate the uncertainties of worldly perturbations. The inception of capitalism in Africa unleashed pressures, which have ruptured solidarity networks and forged a path of dependence of cultural incompetence currently manifesting as full spectrum ambivalence. The foregoing is not to suggest that the pre-capitalist situation in Africa was picture-perfect, far from it. Indeed, there were rampant episodes of disruptions and dislocations through, for example, the trans-Saharan slave trade, wars, slavery, and environmental disasters (Reid, 2007; Uzoigwe, 1977; Boxell, et al., 2019; Kwashirai, 2012; Nunn, 2008). Nevertheless, over the *longue durée* capitalism and its crisis-prone institutional contraptions have amplified the disruptive fault lines of primordial tensions, displaced the axis of the internal evolutionary processes of the continent toward external multiple centres of disruption and frozen as well as broken the internal regenerative resilience mechanisms –sacred and secular– of African people. Indeed the disruptions implied in the sketched dislocations are so acute Africans seem to have autonomously internalized a deep sense of collective self-deprecation, lack of agency and unworthy architects of their regeneration on their terms.

Having said this, the current broken condition of the African is a recent capitalist-triggered historical aberration. Before Africa's post-industrial revolution insertion into the orbit of Euro-American capitalism, the continent was embedded with a motley of autonomously rooted civilizational systems (see Fig. 1, below). The point here is not to advance an implied static contention that civilizational systems existed in medieval Africa, but rather to emphasize the fact that the continent was consistently an autonomous dynamic arena of civilizational degeneration and regeneration until capitalism took hold. Unlike African people, the Chinese and Indians with a similar history of their ancient civilizations being disrupted by European capitalism have assumed a path of assertive regeneration by being clear and single-minded about the corrosive effects of European colonialism and its contemporary manifestations on their primordial models of collective sustenance and reproduction. For example, the statecraft consciousness of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is anchored on the imperative to address the

Fig 1: A Stylized Depiction of the Medieval Civilizations of Africa



Source: Adapted by author from (Strohm, 2014)

debilitating legacy of the Opium Wars (Liu, 2020; Modongal, 2016; Zheng, 2019) which destroyed the Qing dynasty, the largest of the sort in its history and at the beginning of the 19th century the world's fourth largest civilization (Zelin, 2005) and ushered in the *century of humiliation* (1839-1949) (Callahan, 2004). In line with this quest, the CCP pursuit of its *socialism with Chinese characteristics* is ontologically anchored on Confucian thought and the grandeur of China's past (Dessein, 2019; Hu, 2007) with the intention to forge a new China both in name and in essence (Bislev & Li, 2014, p. 21). Similarly, India, which perceives itself as a "wounded civilization" is on a quest to reassert itself in the world community (Maçães, 2020) using Hindu culture as its ontological map. This is not to say Hindu culture *per se* has been or is a ready-made perfect model in place to be utilized. On the contrary that Indian civilization went under has been traced, among others, to the complex diversity of the Hindu ontology which resulted in the decentralization of power; a condition which made it susceptible to foreign invasions (Chatterjee, 1992; Michaels, 2014; Frykenberg, 1993). Given this, under the banner of the Hindutva "Hinduness", the Sangh Parivar⁴ seeks to engineer a "cultural reconstruction", and forge a common Indian identity in a bid to transform Hinduism into a cohesive tendency whose centre of gravity is anchored on the belief that

[J]ust as an individual, a nation... too has an individuality of its own. Individuals and nations in all parts of the globe have distinctive traits and features, each of them having its place in the scheme of the universe. The different human groups are marching forward, all towards the same goal, each in its own way and in keeping with its own characteristic genius. The destruction of the special characteristics, whether of an individual or of a group, will therefore not only destroy the natural beauty of harmony but also its joy of self-expression. The evolution of human life, which is a multifaced one, is also retarded thereby. (Daily Katha, 2015).

Even though post-Cold War Russia does not fit in the same category as China and India as a post-colonial state, it has also sought a path of a resurgence with a conceptualization of a past of greatness in mind. In an April 25, 2005 speech to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, which depicted his angst for the decline, and humiliation of Russia after the end of the Cold War and his resolve to recover from same, he is on record to have said that

[A]bove all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of

⁴ Sangh Parivar is a collective term, which unites Indian political parties, youth and workers organizations as well as the Indian diaspora in the quest for Hindutva. See (Jaffrelot & Therwath, 2012).

disintegration infected Russia itself. Individual savings were depreciated, and old ideals were destroyed. Many institutions were disbanded or reformed carelessly.... Mass poverty began to be seen as the norm. And all this was happening against the backdrop of a dramatic economic downturn, unstable finances, and the paralysis of the social sphere. Many thought or seemed to think at the time that our young democracy was not a continuation of Russian statehood, but its ultimate collapse, the prolonged agony of the Soviet system. But they were mistaken. (Toal, 2017, pp. 55–56)

Fast-forward 2021, the Russian government published a draft decree entitled “Public Policy to Preserve and Strengthen Traditional Spiritual and Moral Values” to counter “Destructive Ideology” for public discussion (MEMRI, 2022). Among others, the policy document spells out Russia’s strategic national interest as safeguarding the Federation’s state security by the “strengthening and protection of [the] traditional spiritual and moral values [and the] cultural and historical heritage of the people of Russia.” It seeks to harden traditional values in the form of: “life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, citizenship, service to the Fatherland and responsibility for its fate, high moral ideals, strong family, creative work, the priority of the spiritual over the material, humanism, mercy, justice, collectivism, mutual assistance and mutual respect, historical memory and [the] continuity of generations, [and] the unity of the peoples of Russia. In what has come to be known as “strategic conservatism” (Kaylan, 2014), the government of the Russian Federation has entered into a strategic alliance with its Orthodox church to set up an ontological bulwark against disruptive internal and external influences (Soroka, 2022; Stepanova, 2022).

The examples cited China, India, and Russia represent a new phase in human history: the emergence of the civilization state (Rachman, 2019) characterized by the rejection of “Western liberalism and the expansion of a global market society”. In addition, “they define their countries as distinctive civilizations with their own unique cultural values and political institutions” and draw “ideological succour from the pre-liberal empires from which they claim descent, remoulding their non-democratic, statist political systems as a source of strength rather than weakness, and upturning the liberal-democratic triumphalism of the late 20th century” (Pabst, 2019). To the extent that the dawn of the civilization state has much to do with the often cited assertions that the traits and strategies of civilization state governments are nothing more than tactical moves drawn from the “sharp power”⁵ manuals of nationalist-authoritarian regimes (Sumner, 2021;

⁵ “Sharp power” refers to the strategies adopted by illiberal governments to stem political and ideational pluralism at home and abroad to maintain their domestic grip on power and gain agency foreign policy transactions. See (Walker & Ludwig, 2017; Walker, et al., 2020)

Brands, 2018; Friedberg, 2017). It is also a symptom of the vigour of the liberal democratic west having ebbed and mutated into crisis (Nielsen, 2020; Coker, 2019, pp. 22–27; Rhodes, 2021) and the associated relative rise of the non-western world (Zakaria, 2009; Kappel, 2011; Tencer, 2012). While commenting the new trajectory of world history being set by civilizational states, Kishore Mahbubani notes that

[O]ur previous paradigms may no longer operate in this new world. The revival of ancient civilizations, like the Chinese, Indian, and Islamic civilizations, has introduced a new global dynamic. The contest is no longer primarily economic or political. There is a new dimension of history, philosophy, culture and mythology that will also resurface and drive world history (Higgott, 2019, p. i).

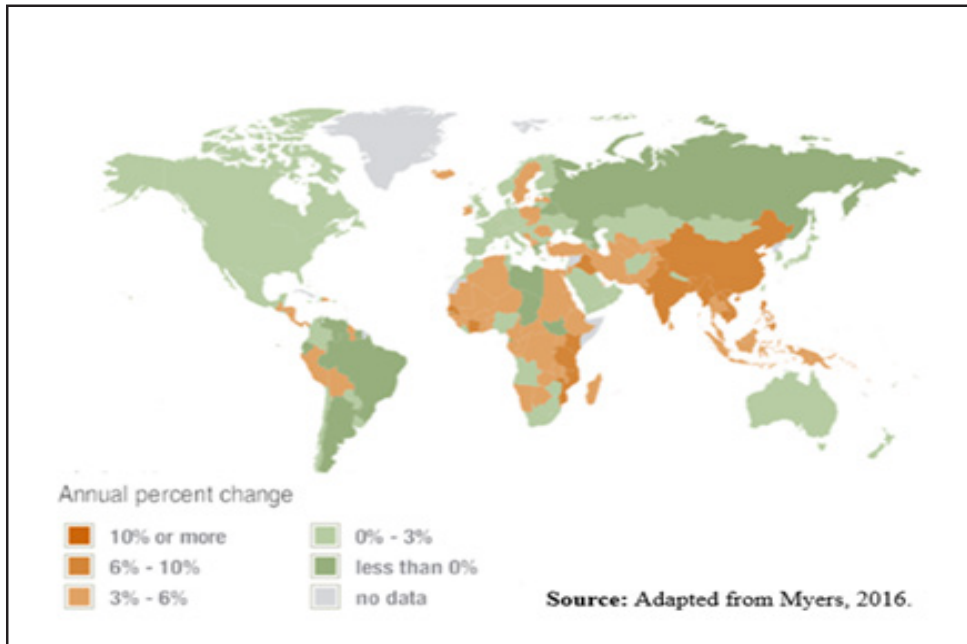
To be sure, Africa is also spoken of as “rising” (Coulibaly, 2017; Mahajan, 2009; *The Economist*, 2020) from a condition of hopelessness at the beginning of the 21st century (*The Economist*, 2000) to a position of global prominence by 2081 (Selassie, 2021). Further, the African Union’s (AU) Agenda 2063 envisages the emergence of a continent worthy of being a global powerhouse of the future through the pursuit of “inclusive and sustainable development” as an expression of a pan-African drive for unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity and renaissance (African Union, n.d.). With the 2018 establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the 3rd Flagship Project of Agenda 2063⁶ and the largest since the inception of the World Trade Organization, Africa’s thought leaders seem to have taken a historically significant step to actualize the objectives of the Agenda.

Nevertheless, even though Africa is in the same league as China and India on the record of setting up civilizations and shares in the common experience of having been exposed to disruptive external pressures, Africa’s thought leaders unlike those of the two Asian regimes frame the essence of the Africa “rising” narrative and future aspirations in economic terms. Granted, the AU Agenda 2063 among others, speaks of a rededication to a Pan-African vision of “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena” (African Union, n.d.). However, as mentioned earlier, Africa’s potential for and current trajectory of progress is calibrated in terms of economic growth, which can be enhanced with a deeper integration into the world economy (Devarajan & Fengler, 2013; Okonjo-Iweala &

⁶ The AU adopted Agenda 2063 when it commemorated the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the Organization of African Unity in May 2013 and by that re-dedicated itself “towards the attainment of the Pan African vision of an “integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena”. Agenda 2063 is made up of 15 Flagship Projects and 7 Aspirations. See (African Union, n.d.; African Union, n.d.)

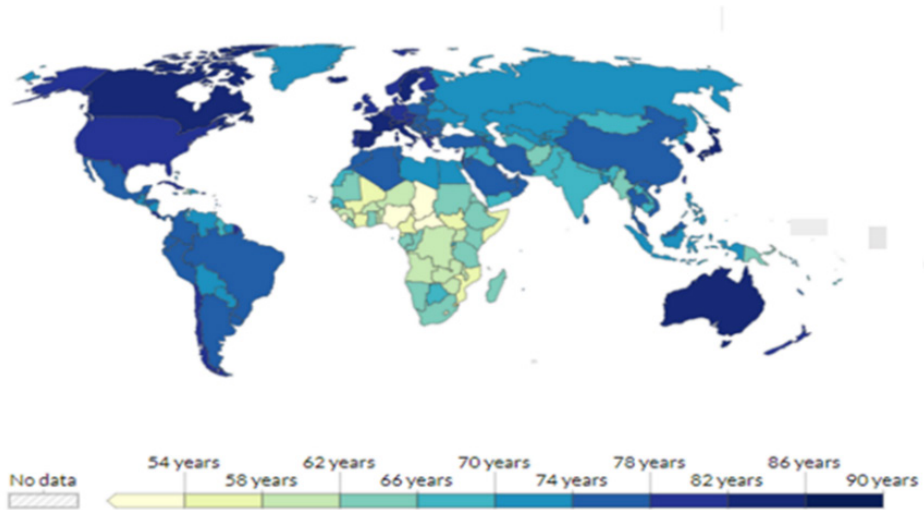
Coulibaly, 2019; EY Americas, 2020; Africa Union , n.d.). Framed as such, it seems (quite unlike China and India) the “philosophy of the market” is the grand ontology guiding the pursuit of African progress/renaissance. Yet, the historical impact of the “market” since the 1980’s inception of the neoliberal era in Africa has been a record of generalized socio-debilitation for the majority of people at the micro, meso and macro levels (Riddell, 1992; Rodrik, 2006; Rodrik, 2017). Indeed, the African economic growth trajectory as driven by neoliberal market reforms has been impressive by world standards (see Fig. 2, below and (International Monetary Fund, n.d.; Armbrrecht, 2016)).

Figure.2: World Economic Growth: Africa in Context



However, George Caffentzis notes that in the course of several rounds of neoliberal policy implementation touted as solutions to the challenge of under-development in Africa turned out to corrode the “quality of life” on the continent, the life expectancy of other regions improved (see Fig. 3, below; see also (Gill & Karakulah, 2017)). He further notes, the decline in longevity on the continent was nothing short of apocalyptic since “the most basic index of well-being” is life itself (Caffentzis, 2002, p. 91).

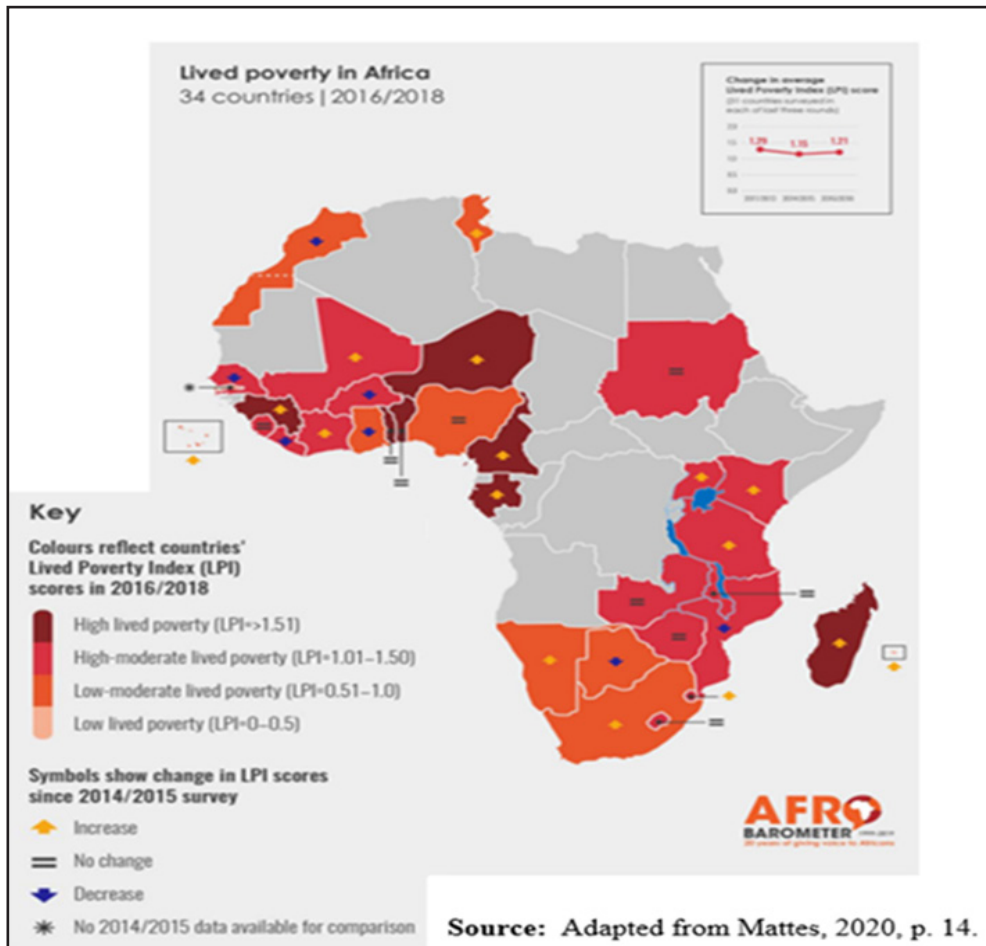
Figure 3: World Life Expectancy: Africa in context :



Source: Our World in Data, n.d.

Another indicator of the paradoxical corrosive effects of economic growth on the human condition in Africa is the significant incidence of lived poverty as uncovered by Afrobarometer (see Fig. 4, below).

Figure 4: Incidence of Lived Poverty in Africa



(Mattes, 2020, p. 14)

The sketched patterns are embedded in deeper structural paradoxes as follows. For example, even though capitalist governance requires state institutions

strengthened with Weberian principles of meritocracy (Kim & Choi, 2017), pro-capitalist state institutions in Africa tend to have a strong operational logic of ethnic favouritism (Ilorah, 2009; Dickens, 2018). Further capitalist governance requires institutionally formalized politics (Heller, 2009) but in Africa, institutional informality is the dominant order (Medina, et al., 2016; King, 2001). In addition, the continent is food insecure (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2022) but it is a major exporter of food (Fox, et al., 2022). Also even though the continent lags behind all regions in the world economy in terms of manufacturing (Ndung'u, et al., 2022), it exports the majority of its raw natural resources, the very inputs that will be required to kick-start any industrialization effort (Custers & Matthysen, 2009). The cited paradoxes cannot be addressed through the agency of increases in per capita income or gross national product since they are incapable of effecting a structural change in the African condition as would be expected in development in the true sense of the word.

The forgoing are clear indicators of the fact that what is said to be African progress is suspect. The human condition of African people, going by the parameters used, are a manifestation of disharmony with a growing gap between the privileged and the less so. Further, the said progress is being hailed at a time when new “converts” to the paradigm of capitalism are adapting it with their cultural values to revive the greatness of their past. African policy makers must take due cognizance of these tendencies for the following reasons. The indicators being used to hail the progress of Africa (and which seems to have become the only “go-to evidence”) illustrate what Anderson Thompson describes as the assimilationist mindset of African policymakers/ intellectuals. Against the backdrop of the hypothetical questions, “where have we missed the mark? Why are some of the best and most talented black minds so unproductive? Why are there so many black intellectual spectators and so few participants in the struggle for African Liberation? (Thompson, 1997, p. 12). He notes that the African policy-making establishment is dominated by faithful “imitators and lovers” of European principles, values, symbols, and beliefs. Being so, African policymakers are akin to *dramatis personae* who use the very principles with which their ancestors were subdued as the script to act on the world stage much to the amusement of an audience who dole out rewards in the form of budgetary support and foreign aid (Thompson, 1997, p. 14). Further, the ontological posture of the African policy-making establishment as opined by Thompson is aptly demonstrated in Malcolm X’s distinction between the house Negro and the field Negro. He notes that

“The house Negro usually lived close to his master. He dressed like his master. He wore his master’s second-hand clothes. He ate food that his master left on the table. And he lived in his master’s house—probably in the basement or the attic—but he still lived in the master’s house. So whenever

that house Negro identified himself, he always identified himself in the same sense that his master identified himself. When his master said, "We have good food," the house Negro would say, "Yes, we have plenty of good food." "We" have plenty of good food. When the master said that "we have a fine home here," the house Negro said, "Yes, we have a fine home here." When the master would be sick, the house Negro identified himself so much with his master he'd say, "What's the matter boss, we sick?" His master's pain was his pain. And it hurt him more for his master to be sick than for him to be sick himself. When the house started burning down, that type of Negro would fight harder to put the master's house out than the master himself would." (African Students Association and NAACP Campus Chapter, 1963)

Besides, the principles with which the progress of Africa is being celebrated by being developed in advanced capitalist states can only be replicated on the continent only if African policymakers replicate the strategy of accumulation by dispossession through conquest and fraud as used by the core centres of capitalism to assume their current global status (Englert, 2020). All the traditional centres of capitalism in the early phase of evolution accumulated surpluses through the utilization of free labour via enslavement (Gerdeman, 2017; Baptist, 2016) and unhindered resource extraction (McQuade, 2019; Fofack, 2019). In addition, the civilizational systems set up on the continent in the past were based on principles different from what eventually undid the historical agency of African people. As noted above, the insertion of Africa's point into the orbit of European capitalism marked the point of infliction at which the capacity of Africans to set up civilizations was curtailed.

Conclusion: African Totemic Ancestorhood and Rebalancing to the Normal of Old

Against the backdrop of the inherent crisis of capitalism predominantly illustrated with examples from the USA, historically the most advanced state organized based on the paradigm of capitalism, this chapter makes the point that the recent acclaim that Africa is making developmental progress is suspect. Thompson's observation is that "when a people lose the knowledge of who they are, that is, their culture, they lose the very foundation upon which their existence and their society are based". He adds that to forestall this loss, each African person must be equipped with a "Grand Vision of the Future". (Thompson, 1997, p. 14). The said, "Grand Vision of the Future" is predicated on an empirically grounded "Grand Legacy of the Past" grounded in ontological principles of harmony antithetical to the recent corrosive regimes which have undone the agency with which civilizational systems were set up. This aspect of Africa's capacity

in history has to be highlighted by the continent's thought leaders and used as a backdrop to contextualize the current sorry state of the continent's people. Such an endeavour will bring to the fore the first principles which underpinned the greatness of the continent's past and enable a clear assessment to ascertain how they can be adapted to the challenges of the present. African people owe themselves a responsibility to address the injustices of capitalism and through that present a humanitarian alternative to the dangers of materialism as the dominant regime of social relations.

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