

## Online Article

# Africa Is on the Move\*

### History Imperialism Movements

### Revolutions Places: Africa

In 1975, Walter Rodney wrote, *Africa is on the move*. This line stays with me, digs deep into my sense of historical possibility. What did Rodney mean when he said that line, *Africa is on the move*?<sup>1</sup> In 1974, the previous year, the African national liberation movements defeated the Portuguese to win the freedom of Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé and Príncipe. Most of the countries in the African continent had won their freedom. South Africa, South-West Africa (or Namibia), Rhodesia (or Zimbabwe), as well as Djibouti, Seychelles, and Western Sahara remained in colonial hands. Even in these colonial zones—from South Africa to Namibia to Zimbabwe—the people were on the move, fighting with their bodies and their guns, with their poems and their murals. There was a refusal on the African continent to submit to the rule of the colonial master. Anti-colonialism was fierce across the continent, but there were already signs of ugliness.

Kwame Nkrumah, the first African south of the Sahara to take office and lead a people who wanted him to govern them, sniffed danger in the air from the very start. In 1958, a year after Ghana's independence,

#### Vijay Prashad

Executive Director,  
Tricontinental  
Institute for Social Research

Nkrumah met a young man from Congo, Patrice Lumumba, and a highly respected intellectual from Martinique and Algeria, Frantz Fanon, at the All-African People's Conference, held in Accra. In them, Nkrumah saw the future. If Lumumba's movement succeeded in Congo, this strategically important country in Africa could provide the base for the freedom of the rest of the continent, and if Fanon's sharp wisdom about colonialism, violence and the pitfalls of national liberation could be digested, then nothing could stop Africa. Nkrumah cultivated Lumumba, helping his fledgling movement with material and ideological support, and then sent Ghanaian officials to assist Lumumba when he became the prime minister of the newly freed Congo in 1961. At the end of the All-African People's Conference, Fanon felt that all parts of the African continent would be free by 1960. There was bravery in this. 'Independence is never granted,' Lumumba told the *Chicago Daily News* in July 1960. 'We won our independence by our own blood and effort.'<sup>2</sup> Congo won its freedom as Fanon predicted, and Algeria won its independence in 1962,

a fight in which Fanon participated actively, affirming his hopefulness. These were not just the words of Fanon and Lumumba, but ideas that had a mass character. In 1962, Maria Dulce Almada (also known as Dulce Almada Duarte) told the United Nations that 'the Cape Verdean people are more and more aware that the country's poverty is a myth'—they lived in a rich country whose social wealth was being leached by Portugal, and with the end of Portuguese rule the people would flourish.<sup>3</sup> When his guests left Accra, Nkrumah mused, 'The African Revolution has started in earnest.'<sup>4</sup> This is precisely the feeling that Rodney had eighteen years later, when he wrote, *Africa is on the move*.

In the intervening years, the reality of what Fanon called the 'granite block' set in.<sup>5</sup> This granite block was the rigid socioeconomic order that would concede a few things, but would refuse to alter its basic structure of domination over property and privilege. Lumumba's democratically elected government was overthrown by a Belgian-US-British-engineered coup, supported by sections of Congo's elite—it was intolerable to allow a sovereign nation to control the Shinkolobwe mine, where the United States procured the uranium to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Lumumba was then assassinated in 1961. 'Long live Congo! Long

live Africa!', Lumumba wrote in his final letter to his wife Pauline.<sup>6</sup> *Africa is on the move*, he said. His mentor, Nkrumah, watched from Accra, desolate. There was nothing he could do. Four years later, the British ambassador to Ghana, A. W. Snelling, wrote, 'On the whole, it is in the interest of Britain that Nkrumah should cease to rule Ghana.'<sup>7</sup> The United States had already set in motion plans to overthrow Nkrumah. They hated him for his defence of national liberation on the continent and felt aggrieved that his book, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, was such an indictment of imperialism in Africa.<sup>8</sup> Robert Smith of the US State Department later said that the book (published in October 1965) was 'simply outrageous ... We were blamed for everything in the world.' US aid to Ghana was cancelled as a consequence. The book, and Nkrumah's politics, would be his downfall. Smith revealed in 1989 that the book might 'have contributed in a material way to [Nkrumah's] overthrow shortly thereafter'.<sup>9</sup> In 1966, Nkrumah was ejected from power while he was on a trip to the People's Republic of China.

By 1966, the coups in Congo and Ghana prevented the left from retaining power. Other, lesser-known coups—against Louis Rwagasore of Burundi in 1961 and against Modibo Keita of Mali in 1967—also defined a continent of coups.<sup>10</sup> Many of them were undertaken by militaries on behalf of the imperialists. They were studied carefully by the South African Communist Ruth First, in her 1970 book, *The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'État*, which argued that these coups—now so familiar—occurred because the military was a holdover from the colonial period, other state institutions were

weak, and radical forces were too fragmented to drive an agenda.<sup>11</sup> Colonialism had not produced the kind of liberal institutions that would have power over the military, and the postcolonial attack on the left disoriented the mass bases that might have prevented a military takeover. Mostly, the military entered after a whisper in their ear from a Western ambassador.

Nkrumah took refuge in Guinea, where in 1968 he wrote his account of the coup, called *Dark Days in Ghana*. 'Further examples of CIA activity and the work of other foreign intelligence organizations in Africa could be given. They would provide material for a book of their own.'<sup>12</sup> But even here, having been overthrown, clear-eyed about imperialism and in exile in Guinea, Nkrumah wrote, 'If for a while the imperialists appear to be gaining ground, we must not be discouraged. For time is on our side. The permanency of the masses is the deciding factor, and no power on earth can prevent its ultimate decisive effect on the revolutionary struggle.'<sup>13</sup> Six years later, after the Portuguese had been defeated in Africa, Rodney wrote, *Africa is on the move*. This is a paraphrase of the last paragraph in Nkrumah's *Dark Days in Africa*. Time is on our side. The permanency of the masses is the deciding factor.

In 1972, Rodney published *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, his best-known book.<sup>14</sup> He wrote it while teaching in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, which had won its independence in December 1961.<sup>15</sup> In 1967, Tanzania took a left turn with the Arusha Declaration, in which Julius Nyerere and his party attempted to develop an African path to socialism.<sup>16</sup> In a text written for *Maji Maji* in 1971, Rodney participated in a debate with his

Marxist comrades in Dar over the implications of the Arusha Declaration.<sup>17</sup> The essay was on the concept of disengagement from imperialism (what a decade later Samir Amin would call 'delinking').<sup>18</sup> Could a country such as Tanzania craft a path for itself outside the tentacles of imperialism? A fierce debate gripped its Marxists, and many of their contributions were later published in the second issue of *Tanzanian Studies*, edited by Issa Shivji.<sup>19</sup>

In *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, published after this debate, Rodney showed the depth of colonial power on the African continent, how the economy in various regions of the continent had been designed to be totally subordinate to imperialism. It was a view shared by Nkrumah in his 1965 book, *Neo-Colonialism*, which defined many of the themes of Rodney's work. What is disengagement? It does not mean 'total isolation', Rodney wrote, 'but the reduction of economic dependency, elimination of surplus outflow, utilization of this surplus for construction of nationally integrated economies, equitable cooperation with friendly socialist countries and mobilization of the masses for rapid development and defense. Nationalization is one method of initiating this disengagement.' But nationalisation has its limits, since it does not automatically lead to the better management of the firm or use of the surplus. It is the peasantry who need to disengage from imperialism, Rodney wrote, since it is they who must lead—in the African context—and set the terms for the petty bourgeois intellectuals. 'The Revolution requires,' he argued, 'that the millions who have been gagged throughout history should speak and choose. It is the responsibility of the revolutionaries to find ways and means of indicating to peasants

and workers the relevance of Socialist ideology and perceptions to the latter's day to day lives.'

Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is a book of great scholarship, but mainly of sublime intent. It took the complex history of Africa and showed how the period of colonialism had disrupted Africa's development and left it in a situation of adversity. It showed, as well, how the people had fought off powerful forces as best as they could and how they found ways to survive the storm of colonialism. Then Rodney stopped. He could say no more. Rodney turned his book over to the Tanzanian Marxist, A. M. Babu, for the postscript. Babu was harsh. 'With very few exceptions,' Babu wrote, 'it is sad to have to admit that Africa is ill served by the current conglomeration of what passes for leaders throughout the continent.' And then: 'When Asia and Latin America produce giants, like Mao, Ho, and Che, who inspire and excite the imagination, not only of their compatriots within their borders, but of the rest of the world, including the developed world, Africa has produced only one Nyerere and maintained him in power, while we have murdered Lumumba and have locked up or exiled leaders like Ben Bella and Nkrumah in response to the wishes of the imperialists—our donors, our money-lenders, our patrons, our masters, our trading partners.'<sup>20</sup>

Movements produce leaders. Babu's words were not a judgement about individuals. They were an indictment of the depth of the movements, which had not seen deeply enough the problems facing the continent. Babu's grip on the realities was strong, but also hard to digest. Rodney said similar things about his native Caribbean.<sup>21</sup> He was not comfortable,

perhaps, saying these things about Africa, about which he wrote and where he then lived.

The reality is that imperialism's tentacles had wound themselves tightly across the continent; it had reaped the benefits of colonial power over the economy without being troubled by the inconveniences of colonial political rule. It was this context that led to the suffocation of so many national liberation movements and so many postcolonial states. The malignancy is in the global system, not in the continent.

### **Imperialism Is an Ugly Force**

Imperialism is an ugly force. At its heart is the desire for total control. There is the desire for political control, the denial of the right of people around the world to maintain their own sovereignty. There is the desire for control of access to economic resources, to make sure that only certain countries decide on behalf of corporations what should be done to our resources. There is the desire for control of our societies and cultures, colonising our minds and our aesthetics, our way of life and our way of thinking.

Imperialism is not a matter of the past. The habits and institutions of imperialism remain today, embedded in our social life. The illegal sanctions regime put in place by the United States against about thirty countries—including Cuba, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and Iran—is an example of the habits of imperialism, of the arrogance to suffocate any process that is not dominated by the United States. There is a straight line that runs from the attempt to destroy the Haitian Revolution, beginning in 1804, to the attempt in our time to overthrow

the Cuban Revolution. After the Haitian people shook off the institutions of colonialism and enslavement, France and the United States forced the Haitian people to pay USD 21 billion for liberating themselves; that is the attitude of imperialism. When the Haitian people tried to build some form of sovereignty, every time they raised their heads, they were crushed—by the invasion and occupation of US marines (1915–34), by the US-backed François and Jean-Claude Duvalier dictatorship (1957–90), and then by two US-sponsored coups (1991 and 2004). Haiti is a synecdoche for the long history of imperialism—one that exists in our time.

We know that imperialism is not a relic of the past but an essential part of the structure of our time, the tentacles of imperial thought strangling us alongside the imperialist system of capital accumulation on a global scale. The two—the cultural and the economic—exist in tandem, two snakes dancing around each other, two processes that feed off each other, economic exploitation reinforcing the ideas of cultural inferiority and the idea of cultural inferiority allowing firms to underpay workers in the global South.

Let us look at the structure of imperialism through the eyes of the Zambian children in the Copperbelt region of the country. In 2019, the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research spoke with Gyekye Tanoh, head of the political economy unit at the Third World Network—Africa, based in Accra, about resource sovereignty:

Because Zambia is now utterly reliant on copper exports, the international copper price movements have a preponderant and distorting effect on the exchange rate of the Kwacha [Zambia's currency]. This distortion and the



limited revenue from copper exports impacts the competitiveness and viability of other, non-copper exports as a result of the fluctuations of the Kwacha. The fluctuations also impact the social sector. A study done in 2018 showed that changes in the exchange rates oscillated between -11.1% to +13.4% in the period between 1997 and 2008. The loss of funds from donors to the Ministry of Health in Zambia amounted to US \$13.4 million or \$1.1 million per year. Because of the collapse of the Kwacha between 2015 and 2016, per capita health expenditure in Zambia fell from \$44 (2015) to \$23 (2016).<sup>22</sup>

Socialist Party of Zambia leader, Fred M'membe, told me in 2021 that poverty levels in the Copperbelt Province, the heart of Zambia's wealth, are very high. Strikingly, 60 per cent of children in this copper-rich area cannot read. 'Foreign multinational corporations have been the major beneficiaries,' M'membe explained. A cosy relationship with the Zambian elites enables these firms to pay low taxes and take their profits out of the country, as well as to use techniques such as outsourcing and subcontracting to skirt Zambia's labour laws. This industry 'still operates along colonial lines'. Indeed, in Phyllis Deane's *Colonial Social Accounting*, she showed that two-thirds of the profits were taken out of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia's name during colonial rule) to pay foreign shareholders, while two-thirds of the remainder went to European workers and the minuscule leftovers went to the vast majority, the African miners.<sup>23</sup> This kind of colonial accountability continues through the practice of transfer mispricing.

The copper under the ground enters the cellphones of people around the world, close to six billion of them. The copper is held in your hand. It is part of your identity. You

are shaped by copper wires everywhere. You are directly connected to that child in Zambia. The child is not outside you. The child is intimately linked to you by imperialist exploitation of the copper resources in Zambia. But you do not see it because you buy the phone from a shop. It comes wrapped in plastic and in a nice box. It does not say, *by the way, you are getting this phone at this relatively cheap price because a child in Zambia is illiterate*. I would like to go to an Apple store or some shop and put stickers on all the boxes saying 'this phone is cheap because a child in Zambia is illiterate'. You need to make the connection. The challenge in Zambia is internal to your social condition. Globalisation, therefore, is an objective fact. It is what makes internationalism necessary. You might not be doing anything to change the conditions of that child, which means that you are globalised but you are not an internationalist. That, for me, is objectionable. You cannot have globalisation, the copper from Zambia in your phone, and not be an internationalist, not stand in solidarity with the struggles of the people of Zambia.

There is no 'other' outside; we are related to one another by the social relations of production, but estranged from each other by ideologies of various kinds (including individualism and nationalism). In the opening section of *Capital*, Karl Marx's greatest work, he writes of the fetishism of commodities. In its mystification, the fetish can be seen as having a rational form all its own, whereas the people who interact with one another do so only through the fetish and not directly *with one another*. People in this form do not have an independent or interlaced consciousness; they are related through the thing,

which is seen as an ideal, godlike power, acting under its own volition that subordinates humans. The thing moves, and you take instructions from it. This is the fetish character of the thing, which could be a doll or an idea. Marx said:

'Listen, what happens is that you and I, our social relations, are mediated through commodities or through money, which is merely a commodity, the embodiment of commodities.'

Our links to each other in a capitalist system are formed and mediated through commodities. It interrupts human interaction. There is a wall between us, the wall of the commodity form and the generalised form of the commodity, which is money.

In this way, what divides me from the Zambian child is this movement of copper: mined for low wages, driven to Durban's port, shipped to China, then put into an iPhone. It then comes out of the factory in Shenzhen packaged in Apple's design. Between the child in Zambia and the consumer are a series of transformations, a range of commodities added to each other—with such amazing names as indium and wolframite—and the accumulation of these commodities vanishes into the phone itself. The content of copper in the phone far outstrips that of any other metal. The raw copper becomes processed copper becomes copper wiring becomes highly sophisticated copper instruments. This is then inserted into an iPhone, which is then boxed up. By the time the consumer sees the phone, the child has disappeared. Zambia has disappeared, Chile has disappeared, Peru has disappeared. There is a fetish character that makes the people in Zambia—the child and the miner both—othered, separated from the consumer in the rest of the world. But they are of

course linked intimately by the socialisation of labour, by the social relations underneath the surface.

The phone pings. There is a meme about hunger in Zambia. The consumer feels bad. *Let me donate some money because I do not know anything about Zambia.* Zambians are othered from the consumer in other parts of the world. Their social existence is seen as separate. *Listen friends*, one wants to say, *nothing like that is going on.* The Zambian miner is intimately related to you because the miner's labour is inside your phone. When the consumer says, *I do not know anything about them*, it is true. But, nonetheless, Zambia remains intimately connected to the consumer's life through the mined copper. Zambia is not that far away from everywhere, nor are Zambians.

The wretched conditions of illiteracy are related to the fact that Apple both sells the phone at a reduced price and is still able to make an exorbitant profit. The iPhone retails at a ridiculously underpriced cost. If you calculate what an iPhone should cost if the wages paid along the commodity chain were at North Atlantic levels, each phone would cost nearly USD 30,000.<sup>24</sup> Who is paying for the phone to be discounted to around USD 699 or so? The balance is being paid by the community in the Copperbelt, who are being paid very low wages and where there is barely any support to maintain schools and medical centres. Their standard of living is artificially suppressed so that they can be adequately superexploited. Those wages stolen from them and the money stolen from the Zambian people through taxes become the discount for Apple's superprofits and the lower price for the phone. All of this vanishes from view because of the fetish character of our relations with each other, where

commodities come between us. Because we are othered from other people, set in an artificial remove from them, we see their sufferings and then say, *Oh, I should donate something.* Donations and charity are not bad, but they reinforce the fetish character of our relations, and they demean people since we do not see them. Donations do not change the conditions of the world. Nor do empty words of critique for othering or words of solidarity. Material support is needed. We need to support the efforts of the miners to build their unions, support the Socialist Party of Zambia as it builds the power of the people against the system. The only real decolonisation is anti-imperialism and anticapitalism. You cannot decolonise your mind unless you also decolonise the conditions of social production that reinforce the colonial mentality.

On 23 September 1960, the Soviet Union put forward a resolution for immediate decolonisation. This resolution was opposed by the entire Western bloc, led by the United States. A few months later, forty-three countries from Africa and Asia affirmed the Bandung principles and put forward their own resolution. Eventually, on 14 December, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*. This was the resolution originally put forward by the Soviet Union, then reshaped by African and Asian states. Eighty-nine countries—including the Soviet Union—voted for it, no one voted against it, but nine countries abstained: Australia, Belgium, France, Portugal, Spain, the Dominican Republic, the Union of South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The United States stood with the old colonial powers and South Africa

against a statement that read: 'The process of liberation is irresistible and irreversible.' This statement is key to our thought—the process of liberation is irresistible and irreversible. Or, in Rodney's terms, *Africa is on the move.*

## Notes

- \* First published on 01 May 2022 through the link <https://monthlyreview.org/2022/05/01/africa-is-on-the-move/>  
This article is adapted from his 26 March 2022 speech to the Walter Rodney Foundation on the fiftieth anniversary of How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. The lecture was also delivered in part at the Havana Bien-nale.
- 1. Robert Hill, *Walter Rodney Speaks: The Making of an African Intellectual* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990), 50.
- 2. Patrice Lumumba, *The Truth About the Monstrous Crime of the Colonialists* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 57.
- 3. Maria Dulce Almada, 'Cape Verde: Slaves, Poverty and Aridity', in Aquino de Bragança and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds, *The African Liberation Reader*, vol. 2. (London: Zed, 1982), 30.
- 4. Susan Williams, *White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2021), 50.
- 5. Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963), 109.
- 6. Williams, *White Malice*, 375.
- 7. Williams, *White Malice*, 491.
- 8. Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1965).
- 9. Williams, *White Malice*, 495.
- 10. Ludo De Witte, *Moord in Burundi: België en de liquidatie van premier Louis Rwagasore* (Antwerp: EPO, 2021); Bintou Sanankoua, *La chute de Modibo Keita* (Paris: Editions Chaka, 1990).

11. Ruth First, *The Barrel of the Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'État* (London: Allen Lane, 1970). In *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel Huntington made the case for 'military modernization', namely that in former colonial countries it was only the military that could advance modernisation and, in that case, the United States should not oppose military dictatorships. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
12. Kwame Nkrumah, *Dark Days in Ghana* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), 50.
13. Nkrumah, *Dark Days in Ghana*, 159.
14. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972).
15. Karim Hirji, *The Enduring Relevance of Walter Rodney's How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Wakefield: Daraja Press, 2017).
16. Issa Shivji, Saida Yahya-Othman and Ng'wanza Kamata, *Development as Rebellion: A Biography of Julius Nyerere*, vol. 3 (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2020), chapter 8.
17. Walter Rodney, 'Some Implications of the Question of Disengagement from Imperialism', *Maji Maji* 1 (1971).
18. Samir Amin, 'A Note on the Concept of Delinking', *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center) X, no. 3 (1987).
19. Issa Shivji, *The Silent Class Struggle* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1973).
20. Babu, postscript to *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 287.
21. Walter Rodney, 'People's Power, No Dictator', *Working People's Alliance* (Georgetown), 1979.
22. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *Resource Sovereignty: The Agenda for Africa's Exit from the State of Plunder*, dossier no. 16 (2019): 13. For more details on the copper industry in Zambia, see Neo Simutanyi, *Copper Mining in Zambia: The Developmental Legacy of Privatisation* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2008).
23. Phyllis Deane, *Colonial Social Accounting* (Cambridge: National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 1953).
24. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *The Rate of Exploitation: The Case of the iPhone*, September 22, 2019.