

A Farewell to Africa Rising, and Other Grand Narratives on Africa

LSE's *Atta Addo* discusses the impact of Ebola on the grand narrative on Africa.

Recent events of the **sudden catastrophic spread**, and **several botched efforts to contain Ebola** in affected African countries, have ripped the delicate garment off the “Africa Rising” narrative with which many had begun to fall in love. For a while, certain champions of Africa insisted that pessimism about Africa is based on stereotype, and that broadly speaking, African countries, and Africa as a continent are on a novel development trajectory. What Ebola exposed were some **fundamentally weak African institutions, lacking strong leadership, and bereft of self-efficacy**—a far cry from the splendour, hastily adorned through borrowed robes of the generalising “Africa Rising” narrative.



While true that Ebola has been restricted to a handful of Africa’s fifty-four countries, its symbolism, if not impact, has been sufficient to mire narratives like Africa Rising that assume a common African polity, real or imagined, that is in control of its fortunes. Even with variation across countries—from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea that fared worst, to Nigeria and Senegal, that managed to contain the disease’s spread **despite the odds**—the heart-wrenching stories and knee-jerk **dependence on foreign powers, uncovered finger-pointing leadership**, weak governments and **unresponsive institutional structures** that make it possible for **foreigners to feel a need to “save Africa.”**

Ebola’s impact is a reminder that optimistic Africa narratives are prematurely celebratory. The **epidemiologic and economic** devastation of Ebola’s blow in Africa is more than a case of bad luck. Inasmuch as we like to believe Ebola is a global problem—partly for political correctness, and partly for international camaraderie and fellow feeling toward its unfortunate victims—the African context contributed aggravating factors that are hard to ignore. For while the **lethality of the virus is to be reckoned with**, the **systemic and institutional decay, ignorance, superstition, shocking mistrust and fear** that facilitated its apocalyptic explosion in a few weaker African countries cannot be overlooked or written off as general developing country problems. Neither can one fail to notice the **sub-par collective response from unaffected and supposedly better-off African states.**

It is disheartening, such social, political and institutional challenges in African countries, and tempting to believe change is impossible. It is similarly tempting to clutch onto any sign of positive change, no matter how flaky—spurious economic gains or fleeting booms in infrastructure for

example—and proclaim it harbinger of a soon-coming African utopia. Thus, being seemingly apologetic for calling Africa “Hopeless” in 2000, and the “Dark continent” in 2007 among other doomsayings, *The Economist* in 2011 made a u-turn and joined the praise singing, with a cover that claimed an “Africa Rising”, and another in 2013 that extolled Africa as “A Hopeful Continent”. *Time Magazine* similarly joined in the euphoria in 2012, touting the rise of Africa.

As if peace, prosperity, and progress can be wished into being with scented narratives, Afro-optimist narratives such as the “Africa Rising” stories have been *zeitgeist* in the last few years. A simple Google search of the phrase “Africa Rising”, at the time of writing this article in November 2014, turns up over 21 million references. But irrespective of *la chanson du jour*, Africa is neither hopeless nor hopeful. It simultaneously carries potential for hopelessness and hopefulness. When it comes to the task of building strong states, citizens and leaders of African countries have a choice to make, of what to carry into the future and what to leave in the dump of history.

Where is the African in the grand narratives?

Africa’s reality is multiple realities that are good, bad, and ugly. And as one cannot understand rainfall by looking simply at drops of water falling from the sky, it is inappropriate to attempt to understand contemporary situations by looking simply at immediate headlines and ignoring complex causal webs set in motion by invisible hands of time and antecedents. Aside from the importance of history, there are particularities of place and context with which to contend. But none of these are thoughtfully considered when Africa is lumped up and spoken of in sweeping generalities that hide important variations and crucial details. This is a problem of both Afro-pessimist and Afro-optimist narratives of Africa.

True, African countries’ challenges are owed partly to incidents and accidents of history, place, and context. Slavery, colonialism, unforgiving natural and geographic conditions, and foreign interventionism are barely the stuff of which fantastic developmental outcomes are made. For example, scholars like Acemoglu and Robinson have established an empirical link between patterns of colonial influence, geography and culture, contemporary institutions, and long-run economic growth.

Yet, the story does not end there, as it might seem from reading Afro-pessimists and apologists writing about Africa. History, place, and context need not be inescapable or deterministic. But sadly, a way out of such pessimism and gloom about Africa has been to adopt rosy narratives that selectively highlight positive developments or completely romanticise unsavoury realities. From the Negritude narratives of the 1930s to Black is Beautiful narratives in the 1960s, to the latest “Africa Rising” narrative; Afro-optimism—a form of subversive discourse—is not new to Africa but has little bearing on the lives of many Africans. We have no reason to believe malnourished and poor people in African countries feel particularly beautiful or proud, or that leaders are inspired by commitment to some romantic grand narrative. If Afro-pessimism can be accused of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, Afro-optimism may be conversely accused of keeping the bathwater, along with the baby. They are similarly out of touch with Africa’s complex and changing realities.

Worse, both keep mum on the role of human agency in social and historical change. People and their choices matter! But this is not the impression one gets from either narrative. Rather, it gets enigmatic: how does history or other deterministic explanans make leaders loot their already fragile countries in Africa when they possess agency and can choose not to do so? And if such abuse of national resources continue, how will improved terms of trade or structural improvements better the lot of African countries, as some argue it will? Equally unclear: how is “Africa Rising” exactly? Is it by inhalation of helium or a generous dash of baking yeast?

How do some countries in Africa manage to challenge their rise when others elsewhere rise to the challenge? It is time to focus on people and the choices they make! Despite complex causal webs that characterise all social, economic and political phenomena, human choice is a circuit breaker

and can permit or disallow change. The difference between Mobutu and Mandela is the choices they made. And the difference between better-off and worse-off nations has much to do with human agency and choices.

Change is not only possible for Africa's countries but also inevitable. How and what kind of change depends on the choices of Africa's leaders and people. Rather than clutching to faceless grand narratives—pessimistic or optimistic—we might focus instead on how human agency and choices matter. You may ask: what determines choices? And aren't social structures, institutions and culture what matter? An answer might be: who determines social structures, institutions and culture, if not people and their choices?

The line of reasoning that reaches for explanatory narratives beyond the individual, baits many into over-intellectualising problems such as bad leadership in Africa. Not to be naïve—there are things beyond the individual that matter. For example, formal institutions like law and regulation, and informal ones like customs influence human agency and choices. But the challenge is to not lose human agency and choices in a maze of agent-less narratives.

On the subject of leadership in many African countries for example, the agency and choices of citizens must be of as much interest as that of leaders. Today, most citizens across Africa's fifty-four countries have a chance, once every four years or so, to elect a leader who will not tyrannise, plunder, or otherwise humiliate them through ineptitude, narrow self-interest or avarice. Yet, several voters in many countries in Africa do not appropriate this miracle of democratic choice rightly. The **common story is of citizens selling their franchise** for such things as food or party-emblazoned t-shirts, voting along ethnic and other parochial lines, or otherwise falling for the empty populism of politicians that is devoid of vision, intellect, and moral character.

For such reasons, it might seem that citizens in African countries, the electoral majority at least, have a hand in electing and legitimising bad political leadership. But does the electorate deserve bad leadership any more than an abused spouse deserves abuse from a partner? Perhaps the comparison is even more distressing. For when a spouse is abused there may be a place of refuge to run—a friend or an aunt, perhaps. Where do citizens of sub-Saharan African countries go when their leaders abuse power or misrule? Many take to the high seas in overcrowded boats and **never make it to their intended destination**, Europe.

But all is not lost. If there is a lesson to be learnt from **uprisings in Burkina Faso, Egypt, and elsewhere** in Africa, it might be this: like an abused spouse, tyrannised and misgoverned citizens always know when they are fed up and ready for change. And as with an abusive spouse that remains oblivious, bad leaders seldom see the high-speed train of change coming, until it slams them in the face and runs them over.

By moving from grand narratives that lack human agency, to narratives focused on people and their choices, we may begin a more meaningful task of empowering Africans to **take ownership for needed change** in their communities and countries. When we applaud change-makers and bring righteous pressure to bear upon those whose actions contribute to social, political, and economic ills, we humanise the process of change. As I have noted with the example of Mandela, human choice and action have the potential to break circuits of historical, institutional, and structural forces that deceptively appear deterministic.

This power of human agency and choices to create change echoes in the words of a now iconic man of African ancestry: "Yes, we can!" As a young black African looking forward to a truly new dawn in Africa, this is the kind of narrative that gives me a place in the continent's future. **Change in Africa lies with Africans** and our choices. It is only right that narratives reflect this.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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