

Preconditions for Turkey's Success in Africa

It has relatively been fifteen years since Turkey, under the existing AKP leadership, started showing interest in modern Africa. This interest primarily encompassed socio-cultural, humanitarian, economic and political domains. Against the backdrop of Ottoman legacy in Africa, particularly in the Northern and Horn of Africa, Turkey is currently working hard to find a strategic position. To this end, not only is Turkey engaged in humanitarian and charity activities in these regions and beyond, its political and economic activities are also yielding productive outcomes for Turkey and those involved. Accordingly, many Turkish citizens, companies, and capital firms are choosing Africa as their destinations, and as such, investing billions of dollars in the different sectors of the countries in the continent. Being based largely on the principle of collective gain, Turkey's involvement in Africa is also characterized by nation building, such as the ongoing reconstruction of Somalia in the Horn of Africa.

On the corner of socio-cultural engagements between Turkey and Africa, TIKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency) and Anadolu Agency (Media) are playing indispensable roles, especially in paving the way for intercultural communication and social development. Due to these mutual engagements, an initial success of Turkey's "investments" in Africa can be seen in the reaction of most of these countries to Gulenism and its attempted coup in Turkey. Apart from showing strong support and commitment to the democratically elected AKP government, many of them practically demonstrated their continued allegiance by closing down Gulen-affiliated educational and other institutions in their respective countries.

However, despite these beginnings, the cultural, economic and political engagements between Turkey and Africa are far from being what either of the parties involved considers a "success". If the existing interaction is much less encouraging than it ought to be, then one needs to effectively respond to the question of what can be done to help further the scale up? I will address some important conditions which, if given due attentions, would prove very effective and foundational. In this essay, my focus will be on the importance (precondition) of "knowing" Africa on the part of Turkey.

Knowledge Production: A Paradigm Shift

As of recently, it has become very clear that Turkey is committed to working with countries in Africa. A work that can mutually benefit all those involved. However, Turkey's initial engagement with Africa is based on some problems and challenges that need comprehensive diagnosis and solutions. One important ingredient, I would argue, largely absent in Turkey's approach to Afrimca is to know Africa in its own terms. Knowing, with a fresh and Turkey's eyes (not with the "help" of other's yardsticks and perspectives), Africa in a way that embodies the challenges and prospects of countries in the continent. Unfortunately, except for some fragmented individual efforts (very few academics, development workers, humanitarian staffs, and etc), Ottoman left legacies in the region (various travel accounts, manuscripts, administrative experiences, and etc), Turkey's knowledge of Africa is either very inadequate or misleading.

Turkey's knowledge of Africa is inadequate primarily because the effort directed at understanding Africa in terms of its countries, cultures, histories, and, most importantly, in terms of the aspirations and challenges of its peoples is very discouraging, and compared to the efforts of other western nations, non-existent. To my knowledge, there does not even exist a single research center that exclusively studies and researches Africa. There are, however, many research institutions, think-tanks, and "area study" centers which, in almost all cases I know of since 2013, generally consider Africa a sideline, secondary agenda, perhaps next to the Middle East or Asia. This inadequacy is also compounded by the complete reliance of these research institutions (Turkish media outlets included) and think-tank groups on knowledge produced for some other purposes by other competing forces in the world. In other words, in the absence locally produced primary knowledge about what constitutes Africa (which will inform how Turkey engages Africa), these entities are "forced" to employ data or knowledge produced by foreign media (such as BBC, CNN, etc), Orientalist-colonial scholarships about Africa, and more generally, western (Europe and North America) produced knowledge with its manifest and latent purpose (under "African" history, sociology, anthropology, economics, cultural, and religious studies). Now, it is here where the inadequacy turns misleading.

Western scholarships of Africa, since the onset of the fifteenth century, have been a massive investment

(human and financial) with significant consequences. It did, indeed, help the west (particularly, USA, France and Britain) to acquire its current economic and political might and stature in the world. To this effect, Andre Gunder Frank would say “the development of the West is the underdevelopment of the rest”. In addition to Frank, Robin Walker, Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon, George Ayittey, and many other thinkers from Africa unwaveringly argued that the West deliberately planned and subsequently exploited Africa, and it did so effectively from root-to-branch. For this purpose, the role of Western scholarship was, and still is, very indispensable. Ethnographers and Anthropologists (and Western social sciences in general, see Edward Said’s “Orientalism”), disguised as Christian missionaries, studied the cultures and economic resources of Africa. This knowledge was then used as a tool for practicing slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism of our century. Ayittey, for instance, in his “Africa Betrayed” underscored that in the later periods, the West would train individuals from Africa in Europe, and he would end up being a “parasite intellectual” who goes on to participate in the corruption and embezzlement of his country and people. In this way, the “learned intellectual” from the West becomes a colonial apparatus for the continuing resource extraction and exploitation of Africa by the West. Similarly, Frantz Fanon (in his “The Wretched of the Earth”) also brilliantly portrayed this Western-led colonialism as,

It contents itself with bringing to light the natural resources, which it extracts, and exports to meet the needs of the mother country’s industries, thereby allowing certain sectors of the colony to become relatively rich. But the rest of the colony follows its path of underdevelopment and poverty, or at all events sinks into it more deeply.

In addition to the absence of research institutions and centers studying Africa, universities (public or otherwise) with a program on “African Studies” are also largely under the same problem. Not only the “African Studies” program is inadequately represented in Turkish higher education institutions, but also those universities teaching African studies at masters level are only three, in the first two cases as a full-fledged stand-alone postgraduate program (Ankara and Istanbul Commercial Universities), and in the later case, as a supportive of “Middle Eastern and African Studies” (Gazi University). Here, again, comes the problem of the crisis in knowledge-base. Put simply, since most of the teaching materials and course curriculums are “borrowed” (probably “reformed” in rare cases) from, in most cases, western countries, they are likely to suffer from a sickness which I would call a “Western perspective”. Western scholarship of Africa, in any of its forms, cannot be seen as an independent and neutral intellectual pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. It has its own historical backdrop, prejudices and biases, latent and manifest goals, interests, and functions. If this knowledge (or its adoption) can genuinely serve any entity, it will not be Turkey or any other nation, but it will definitely be the West.

Apart from its functionality to the West, this scholarship trend has long been misleading and significantly damaged the histories, identities, and cultures of Africa. A comprehensive review literature in the study of Africa (mostly by western entities) generally reveals the following four inherent problems, gaps and “sicknesses”. One of the most recurrent theme and representation of Africa is the adoption of “événementiel” approach in Western scholarships and media. In this approach, Africa is aligned with sensationalism that invokes crisis, famines, disease, drought, revolts, civil wars, and the dubious evolution (and thus, not yet “fully” evolved). The second most important trend commonly shared by many western scholarships of Africa is the adoption of “binary oppositions”. Any complex issue or problem associated with Africa is simply appraised (and therefore downplayed) between two conflicting epistemic categories, such as Blacks/Arabs, Primitive/Modern, North Africa/Sub-Saharan Africa, and etc.

The third problem involves the use of “Synecdoche” (when a part of something is used to allegedly “represent” the whole). A scholar studying (and thus writing and lecturing about) a particular ethnic group residing in some part of one of the countries in Africa is portrayed as symbolizing the entire continent. This is indeed one of the most recycled instances, especially among Western Media. Fourthly, the tendency to abuse specific concepts and words related in some ways to Africa. When writing and presenting Africa, there is an excessive exploitation (and extension) of such words and concepts as “tribal”, “savage”, “dark continent”, “primitive”, and so on. This also includes the general tendency to recycle “Africans” for people of different color, culture, history and identity. Finally, these days it has become a mundane reality to portray Africa as a “resourceful” and “underutilized” continent. Academic journals, from political science, sociology, to economics, are all infested with articles obsessively trying to figure out which country is going to “Africa” and how it is going to benefit from its “engagement” with “Africa”? Is it China, India, Turkey, Japan, America or France? In some obvious and sometimes subtle ways, these social scientific discourses send a signal that confirms to the already running attitude that views Africa as an “innocent-rich-heaven-land” for the smart and calculative others.

In short, if Turkey is to truly succeed in its developmental engagements with Africa, then the first

necessary step would be to “know” Africa in its own terms, in its past and present circumstances. This demands both reformative and transformative moves on the part of Turkey. On the one hand, Turkey must work hard to effectively and carefully refine and judge between relevant and irrelevant data or knowledge available about Africa. By reforming, this way, the already available knowledge-base, Turkey may protect its engagements with Africa, and as such, pass this challenge with little or no friction which many “interested” countries did not. The transformative move, on the other hand, is the ultimate panacea to this problem. Being comprehensive, this step requires a complete paradigm shift in Turkey’s approach to Africa. It demands, among other things, a knowledge production (entails new “words”, “concepts”, “ideas” relevant and good enough to facilitate mutual engagement with Africa) that will inform Turkey’s attitude, and thus, policies toward Africa.