The Seeds of Africa's Renaissance

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***Abstract*—Africa is either subject to centrifugal accounts which offer a fragmented picture of its past and potential or to centripetal examinations that tend to extrapolate their results to disconnected parts as if the continent could be melted into a single analytical unit. The purpose of this article is three-fold. The first part aims at demonstrating that even though Afro-pessimists and Afro-optimists resort to the same criteria, their insufficient correlations lead to dichotomous conclusions. The second part seeks to show that while the emergence narratives might explain occasional phenomena, they fail to include human and technological factors which reframe the African debate into the Renaissance paradigm. By focusing on digitalization and education, the third part intends to shift the academic research towards the spill-over effects of Internet in what arguably constitutes Africa's Renaissance.**

***Index Terms*—Africa, emergence, renaissance, internet.**

I. Introduction

Africa is alternatively portrayed as suffering from T.R. Malthus' three Fates (wars, epidemics, famines) and, by extension, from an irreversible spiral of dysfunctions; or as the new economic frontier implying the emergence of a dormant continent. Given the contradictory nature of these assertions, Guy Gweth urgently invites "multilateral institutions, research centers, consulting groups and young African leaders (…) to offer analytical frameworks telling the narrative of an Africa emerging in its own way"[1]. Indeed, the evasive trends currently shifting Africa's destiny raise three sets of questions which this papers aims at, if not solving, at least better reformulating. One should first try to identify the criteria used to assess a unit as big as a continent and explain why their interpretation leads to diverging views. On a more consensual not, and notwithstanding the opposite conclusions that they draw, Afro-pessimists and Afro-optimists both seem to assume that Africa is now reaching a crucial junction in its historical trajectory. Frederic Worms and Patrice Maniglier define such a historical moment as "a way of determining the relevant divisions, the decisive rifts and, at a deeper level, of shifting the axis around which essential alternatives are dealt"[2]. This paper will thus seek to discern and examine the dynamics propelling Africa on such a momentous course. Finally, an attempt will be made at transcending not just Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism but the unexpectedly common paradigm that underpins both views so as to redraw the routes along which Africa will sail in the coming years.

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II. Disentangling Discourses on Africa(s)

A. Beyond Afro-Pessimism and Afro-Optimism

Except from coastlines, map's delineations and legends are more often than not a representation of the cartographer's bias –that is, the other type of legends- rather than one of reality. Africa's conceptual mapping is no exception to this rule. It epitomizes perhaps better than any other continent divergences of views and intricacy of facts. A recurrent problem in the Afro-pessimism vs. Afro-optimism debate has consisted of tingeing the continent's future with promising forecasts that ignore bleak facts, vice versa, and alternatively both, without specifying how they are actually interlocked. Irrespective of these prophecies' fulfillment, as the terms suggest, Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism betray the attitudes of their eponymous endorsers instead of simply reflecting the object of their analysis. The Afro-pessimist tradition can be dated back to René Dumont's *L'Afrique noire est mal partie* (1962) [3], and has been updated by more recent publications such as Serge Michailof's *Africanistan* (2015) and other endorsers of *somalization* and *sahelistan* [4]. As for Afro-optimists, they include many African analysts but also the Boston Consulting Group (*The African Challengers: Global Competitors Emerge from the overlooked Continent* [5] or Goldman Sachs (*How Exciting is Africa's Potential?* [6]. To give consistency to its expectations, this Janus-faced pathology has taken liberties with the very definition of Africa, which varies according to its historical framework, geography, institutions, demographic trends and economic performances. As far as history is concerned, Afro-pessimists deploy chronologies of flexible lengths focusing either on the lost decade (1990s), the aftermaths of the first oil shock or the colonization period. On the other hand, the Afro-optimists tend to stress the resilience of Africa since the 2008 economic slowdown (with an average 5% growth), its taking-off in the 2000s or the uplifted spirit of decolonization in the 1960s. Among the latter, few note that in terms of population and wealth Africa was ahead of Europe until the end of the first millennium (around 12% of the world population and wealth respectively compared to 15% and 3% now) [7]. This selectivity of scale also contaminates Africa's geography. According to the Afro-pessimists, the 15 inland countries are condemned to a deterministic isolation while only their coastal neighbors reap the fruits of overseas trade and globalization. Both sides, by considering part of the continent and unintentionally extending their judgment to its whole, imply the existence of such a thing as its unity. But underneath the façade membership to the African Union (of which Morocco and Tanzania are not members) and the common yet differentiated stain of colonization unity eludes Africa. A leading analyst in the Africanist field, Philippe Hugon,

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distinguishes among five main regions (Western Africa, Central Africa, Eastern Africa, Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean islands) but, like many others, systematically excludes five states (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt) from his main publications [8] whereas they often serve as intellectual and commercial platforms from which domestic and foreign students and multinationals seek to expand their research centers and markets southward. Globalization allowing for a more deterritorialized interpretation of geography, Africa's diaspora –whose remittances are estimated at three times the amount of global aid- also plays a decisive role in connecting the continent to the rest of the world. This over-simplistic geographic cut-out has nonetheless persisted for it roughly matches the institutional perspective which, for one, includes Northern Africa and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), as well as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the West, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) in Central Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in the South and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) in the South. While Afro-optimists stress the advances of liberalization, democratization and supra-nationalism, probably transfer-printing the idea that a loss of sovereignty is tantamount to entering the post-modern world; Afro-pessimists underline the contrasted nature of the member-states of Africa's remnant 200 institutions which mirror economic realities. In the case of the above-mentioned five economic institutions, they cannot help but point to the fact that one or two powerhouses lead the flock: Algeria and Morocco in the AMU, Nigeria and Ivory Coast in the ECOWAS, Cameroon in the ECCAS, South Africa in the SADC, Ethiopia and Kenya in the COMESA. This in turn orientates the debate towards the economic sphere where Afro-optimists insist that Africa is only second to Asia in terms of savings and growth rates whereas Afro-pessimists remind them that Africa only represent 2% of the world GDP, 3% of international trade -12% of which is intra-African compared to 60% in Europe and Asia, 40% in North America [9]. Whether continental or regional, averages can be misleading figures and the IMF thus resorts to dualistic taxonomies -oil exporting countries (8) vs. oil importing countries (37), middle-income countries (19) vs. low income countries (26) and fragile countries (19) vs. low income countries excluding fragile ones (10) [10]. This performance-driven assessment is not very explicit in terms of the nature of economies and gives the impression that oil is the only exportable raw material. P. Hugon further diversifies the list: Guinea (bauxite), Liberia, Sierra Leone and Botswana (diamonds), Mauritania (iron), Niger (uranium), Togo (phosphate), DRC (copper, coltan) and Zambia (copper) [8]. But the question of whether natural resources are a curse or a blessing still remains. To answer it, the former French Foreign Affairs Minister Hubert Védrine and his commission conclude that 6 out of 8 of the oil exporters (Angola, Nigeria, Sudan, Gabon, DRC and Equatorial Guinea) [11] have contracted the Dutch disease whose symptoms are high investment rates from the state and multinationals in primary industries with highly unstable benefits. Immune to their objections, Afro-optimists hail emerging champions like Nigeria but also Kenya, Egypt, Morocco and South Africa, omitting to interrelate macro-economic with non-economic factors, demography being a case in point.

B. The Tectonics of Economics and Demographics

The most spectacular mismatch in conceptualizing Africa's dynamics derive from the unheeded collusion between the tectonics of economics and demographics. "From 1950 to 2050, the African population is expected to grow from 228 million to 2,435 billion people (…), that is, an increase by a factor of ten." François Cailleteau further elaborates by warning against an "unprecedented demographic disruption in the history of the world population (...) The fastest growth in a big area over a long period of time, was until now, that of the European population between the end of the Napoleonic wars and WW1. This population had multiplied by 2.5 within a century, four times slower than Africa today." [12]. This human wave is typically interpreted as an unmistakable proof of Africa's growing influence in world affairs by Afro-optimists while Afro-pessimists present it as a demographic tsunami "employable Africans (25-59 year-old) account for only 40% of the population while the 0-15 year-old lot also accounts for 40%"; now Africans represent 1/7 of employable staff in the world but only 1/20 are hired in modern sectors" [13]. Once again, a careful examination offers a more nuanced vision of reality. J.-J. Boillot and S. Dembiski distinguish among four main demographic models: a first one which combines high mortality and birth rates (Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Burkina, Guinea, Angola, Congo, Chad, Uganda, Somalia) ; a second one characterized by a classic transition with a regular drop of mortality for 50 years combined with a drop of birth rate for 20 years (10 countries well spread out across the continent like Ghana, Senegal, Gambia, Gabon, Eritrea, Sudan); a third one disrupted by aids, with mortality picking up suddenly and fecundity falling down, so that the natural population growth rate also drops (all Southern Africa is comprised in that model but also Kenya, Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and the Central African Republic); the fourth model is disrupted by conflicts with sudden mortality peaks and a strong fecundity (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi and Rwanda, DRC) [13]. Contrary to what macroeconomics benchmarks would have us believe, the second model, the only one granting a stable demographic dividend in the mid-term, features none of the emerging champions, with Nigeria in the first model and South Africa and Kenya in the third one. This is not to say that the laws of demographics necessarily take precedence over the pace of economic growth. Rather, it stresses the contradictory discourses induced from rational but parallel examinations. While considering the interaction between demographics and economics, one should also assess the sway of the afore-mentioned diaspora. Like South Africa and Kenya in the third model, Cameroon is a prominent regional actor, at least within the Francophone sphere. But like them, its demographic pattern betrays unfavorable auspices –lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, higher death rates, lower population growth rates [14]. These hindrances are aggravated by an underinvestment in education which results in 18 to 20% of students choosing overseas universities [13]. Considering that its diaspora (around 2.5% of its total population) sends around 2% of its GDP in remittances, the Cameroonian government has set up welcome policies to facilitate the diaspora's participation in local development projects. This is also the case in Senegal with the Keur Salam project offering estate incentives for its expatriates to come back or in Togo where remittances accounted for 10% of the GDP in 2014, that is, 1/4 of the state budget [1]. These figures have been voluntarily taken from various countries to better underline the fact that under economic data lie individual choices in terms of career and education. To the extent that the demographic and economic spheres overlap, the efforts by African governments to turn the brain drain –a curse for the Afro-pessimists- into a brain gain –a blessing for the Afro-optimists- will be a key lever of what is commonly labeled as Africa's emergence. The following section will however argue that macro-economics and similar top-down approaches which fit into the emergence paradigm provide unsatisfactory explanations for the causes that produce the results they brandish as they tend to shun what sets the matrix of societies into motion.

III. Renaissance not Emergence

This research has so far tried to show that the standards against which one should gauge the dynamics currently shaping Africa constitute an issue that should not be left to the Manichean Afro-pessimist/Afro-optimist impasse. Relinquishing it to Afro-realism –a balancing act between the previous two currents – is of no more help for its rhetoric and policy tools are equally bogged down in the emergence paradigm. Like G. Gweth has convincingly argued, its denominators are too heavily cast in macro-economics. His consulting group, Knowdys, established that emerging countries must answer to seven common denominators: 1) a growth of foreign trade superior to international exchanges; 2) a regular rise of GDP and income per inhabitant; 3) long-term foreign investments; 4) the presence of multinationals on the territory; 5) a diversified economy not only based on exporting natural resources; 6) a consistent demography making for a critical mass of consumers; 7) and the youth's optimism in a better future" [1]. Instead of a concept and a reality that Africans have themselves conceived and experienced, "emergence" is a culturally West-centered concept which has been stretched to too distinct entities to be operational. "In 2007, the World Bank creates the 'emerging economies' category including China, India, Bangladesh, Colombia, Egypt, Hungary, Iran, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Thailand, and Turkey." [1]. According to the World Bank –founded in 1944 when the West was building the post-war order-, countries might emerge from economic backwardness to get closer to dominant powers –among which the West featured prominently until recently. Emergence is therefore an ideological indicator of the supremacy of values that shape intellectual perceptions across the globe, a mental category exported by the West and attached to others to seek to mark and maintain a material and intellectual gap. In that respect, the cumulated failures of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) jointly carried out by the WB and the IMF, of the developmentalist paradigm –based on the exploitation of raw materials, infrastructures building, the optimization of energy offer- and of the Brundtland Report –confining sustainable development to the economic, ecologic and social spheres- could be seen as cynical yet successful strategies to preserve a hierarchy between the emerging and the advanced, fending off the latter's club. To justify the rigidity of the status quo the once colonial then neo-colonial argument was put forward that African cultures could not embrace the rationality of development (Hegel, Levy-Brülh, De Gobineau, Towa, Khabou, Sarkozy) [15]. Three main obstacles fly in the face of this stance. First, abundant examples show that Africans, whether as individuals or states, have succeeded by Western standards. Charles Bolden is the first African American administrator of NASA while many African countries have presented higher growth rates than Western ones for the past 15 years. Second, eminent intellectuals have proved that the West does not have the monopoly of rationality. There are in fact myriads of rationalities with their own specific idiosyncrasies. Third, and most importantly, a persistent, misleading view consists of claiming that only rationality leads to progress. One tends to forget that intuition and creativity have spurred the evolution of mankind in at least similar proportions, including throughout Western history. The European Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries was certainly triggered by quantitative, tangible and technical factors –demographic growth, typographic printing, the birth and internationalization of capitalism. But the philosophical impact of humanism, the invention of perspectives in fine arts and the slow yet irredeemable spread of knowledge through books and universities were just as decisive in giving momentum to the qualitative leap that pushed Europe from the Middle Ages to the early stages of modernization. Going back to the failure of grafting the concept of emergence to Africa and in line with Ernest-Marie Mbonda's arguments in *Les réalités et les défis d'une renaissance africaine* [16], this paper argues that the term Renaissance is more appropriate than emergence in so much as it combines quantitative and qualitative, rational and irrational, macro- and micro- factors. The prefix 're-' implies that an initial *naissance* or birth took place. As far as both demographics and economic production are concerned Africa is currently closing the colonial moment and its post-colonial disruptions to exceed pre-colonial levels in demographic terms while regaining some of its economic vitality. Moreover, the term Renaissance is not as West-centered as it might sound. Korea, for instance, also experienced a second wind when the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910) instituted Neo-Confucianism as the ruling ideology: while arts and sciences flourished hand in hand, its population, which then received mass education through local schools, doubled from 5 to 10 million in the 15th century thanks to new agrarian techniques. Similarly, "the existence of a young and abundant workforce, gathered around urban poles, constitutes a new factor that was so far missing in the Sub-Saharan economic take-off. This very factor made possible the power of the Roman Empire at the beginning of our era, the birth of European and American industries in the 18th and 19th century, the emergence of the Asian Tigers in the 1980s and the rise of China in the international economy" [17]. Timing might be ripe for Africa to assert itself in a new context that has seen a procrastinated economic slowdown since 2008-2009 with a subsequent questioning of its macro-economic tenets. The knowledge economy and soft values have come to balance military and economic zero sum games. Africans themselves have become aware of their ability to shape their destiny in their own terms. This awareness translated in the will to cultivate and shape a dormant yet swelling potential. At the institutional level, the AU launched in 2013 an agenda on the Renaissance of the African continent based on the integration of Africa, the promotion of inclusive and sustainable growth, the investment in human capital and an industrialization that preserves natural resources. But it is especially the upsurge of online associative movements and think-tanks (Dirigeants Afrique-Europe de la Jeunesse 2014, Afroacademy, Oser l'Afrique, Club 2030 Afrique, the Junior African CEO Network, Nexus Africa) from expatriates as well as African residents that is indicative of this collective awareness. M. Mondo captured the multilevel nature of this process and baptized it Afro-responsibility, that is, a "humanized emergence" whereby micro- and macro- considerations merge into a meso-approach positioned "on the efficiency boarder of the emerging process between the factors of economic production and the factors of social production that coexist with the micro well-being of populations" [18]. The following section will analyze the role played by what have been identified throughout history as two catalysts for change: technological innovation and the democratization of knowledge.

IV. Unchaining Africa's Potentialities

A. Africa in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

The mix of a demographic boom with the trickle-down spread of more affordable technological inventions –steam, electricity, electronics- and their insertion in production processes were the key to the first three Industrial Revolutions that respectively took place from the 1780s, the 1870s and the 1960s. As the rush by new TIC giants such as Google, Facebook and the 2015 Africa Internet Summit seem to indicate, access to Internet will determine whether Africa can be an actor in the fourth Industrial Revolution –the digitalization process towards cashless societies- rather than a victim of it as was the case during the first three Industrial Revolutions. While the installation of undersea cables is well underway, it is inland capacity and last-mile connectivity that represent the biggest challenges, "only about a third of people in Sub-Saharan Africa (having) access to grid electricity" [19]. Yet, recent trends are encouraging: "Internet penetration in Africa jumped from very low levels in 2009 to 16% of individuals in 2013 and over 20% in 2015." [19]. The dematerialization of African societies could compensate for what has so far postponed their Renaissance for, contrary to other waves of modernization, this time Africa does not content itself with exporting natural and human capital and importing knowledge and equipments. In a collection of interviews with 69 young African leaders, G. Gweth gives examples of endogenous levers of growth that spell the demise of what Denis Lambert calls technological mimetism –"this tendency to identify oneself with the most advanced achievements of the West, and abandon the most accessible ways" [1]. Verone Mankou, from VMK, created the first smartphone conceived and produced in Africa; the first African tactile tablet conceived by a Congolese is now commercialized in Europe and India [1]. But what is most innovative about these achievements is not their material aspect but instead the underlying ways of thinking and business models on which they rely. In Bamako (Mali), Tidiane Ball has opted for collective intelligence and social innovations and not the usual elite empowerment through individualism and gentrification that characterized Western history. His open space offices gather companies from a variety of fields (health, education, IT, urbanism) to spur cross-field hybridizations and facilitate knowledge transfers, thus limiting training costs. The success story of Celtel -a start-up which became within less than 7 years a giant covering 15 countries resold in 2010 for $12 bn to the Indian group Bharti, which re-baptized it Airtel- obeys to such a logic: "very low costs, the constant support of social networks and light equipments, whose maintenance is entrusted to stakeholders" [13]. These bottom-up initiatives have in turn inspired institutions like the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF), which copy-pasted this successful format to launch the 2015 digital contest 55H in Benin, Senegal, Morocco and Gabon. Hundreds of youngsters were invited to pool skills and aggregate experiences to create products, services and applications that tackle problems such as urban waste management, eco-friendly accommodations and food security. At the pace at which the digital divide is currently dwindling (mobile broadband connection is predicted to triple from 20% to 60% in the next five years [19]), the question is not so much whether or Africa will be a player in the fourth Industrial Revolution but rather how it will shape it. Part of the answer lies in how far Internet will penetrate other fields, starting with education.

B. Education and Internet's spill-over effects

In a knowledge economy, education is the best return on investment. It is probably the field in which the benefits of collective intelligence through Internet will have the strongest impact, even though currently only 5% of young Africans reach university, with just 3 universities in the world top 500, all of them in South Africa. This focus might however betray top-down, elitist preoccupations for the real challenge remains alphabetization through primary and secondary schools with 30% analphabets in 2015. To reduce the illiteracy gap, bottom-up, local initiatives have blossomed to integrate the new TIC in life-long training and education programs through e-learning, radio-learning and peer-learning (Educamer; Code4Africa; the use of internet in Benin, Burkina and Kenya for educative contents in primary and secondary schools, to name but a few). They have been joined by foreign multinationals like Orange Labs which together with the Nigerien Education Ministry conducted experimental projects by providing digital tablets for middle school students in Niger [11]. Such thirst for knowledge can also be felt at higher levels with hundreds of technological institutes and business schools flourishing to match the demand in TIC. There too, the local demand for knowledge has been matched by foreign offer, with more and more joint programs between, for instance, the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and the network of schools of electricity companies in Africa such as 2IE in Burkina Faso, the National Superior Polytechnic School of Yaounde and the Ghana institute of Management and Public Administration [11]. Concomitantly, France is willing to develop massive and open online contents (CLOM or MOOC) towards Africa. This win-win initiative enables France to enhance its linguistic influence online while inverting the brain drain hemorrhage into a brain gain for African countries. But technology and knowledge transfers do not always follow a North-South axis. Morocco –often excluded from the main bulk of the Africanist research which focuses on and segregates Sub-Saharan countries from their Northern neighbors- tripled the number of foreign students over the past five years, who now amount to 7500 students, 68% of which coming from forty other African countries [20]. In the light of these evolutions, the fourth Industrial Revolution is not just industrial by nature but expands to education and potentially any other field. Therefore, the combination of all Internet spill-over effects throughout the whole spectrum of society thanks to decreasing costs of equipment and services might result in a phenomenon known as technological leap or leapfrog. In other words, the backwardness that has been accumulated in terms of physical infrastructures and intellectual capital during the first three Industrial Revolutions, could exponentially shrink in the transition from the analogical to the digital realm. Due to the all-embracing nature of the dematerialization process on the brink of which we have hardly landed, it is hard to fully grasp the repercussions ahead. As of now, new e-commerce and e-payment solutions are circumventing the infrastructures and transportation backlogs, reducing commissions and boosting the financial input of the African diaspora as well as intra-African trade and cultural exchanges. This is not to say that the Internet is a panacea for all the challenges facing Africa nor that other parts of the globe benefit to a lesser extent from digitalization. Rather, it simply stresses the fact that in the fourth Industrial Revolution characterized by the additive synergies offered by Internet, Africa can cooperate on an equal footing with its partners and even create its own model of Renaissance.

V. Conclusion

This research started by acknowledging a paradox: while analysts converge in that Africa has reached a critical threshold, they fail to reach the same conclusions as to whether Africa will sink or swim through the third millennium. The latter part of the paradox was deemed to result from the use of arbitrarily truncated criteria (history, geography and institutions), not properly interconnected criteria (economy and demography) and, to make matters worse, from an insufficient analytical toolbox straitjacketed within the emergence paradigm whose lenses were dismissed as too West-centered, too economy-centered and too reliant on top-down approaches. As for its former part, the concept of Renaissance has been preferred to describe and interpret Africa's shifting dynamics. While not rejecting all together a meticulous resort to emerging narratives, this research has sought to complete and balance its quantitative bias with arguably less tangible yet no less relevant variables such as African decision-makers' awareness of standing at a cardinal moment in the continent's history; their will to take a proactive stance through all the spectrum of private, civil and public projects; their ability to identify critical issues that were examined in this paper –mending the digital and knowledge divides, integrating the diaspora in developing strategies, fostering intra-African cooperation- and others that should pave forthcoming avenues for research –the impact of digitalization and mass education on non-traditional (health, environment) and traditional (conflicts) security issues as well as case studies of new patterns of collective intelligence and social innovations-; and to create endogenous solutions channeling the spill-over effects of Internet. Like other parts of the world at other epochs, Africa can boast with material –human, natural and technological capital- and immaterial assets –awareness, will and creativity- to embrace the fourth Industrial Revolution and cultivate what are solely for now the seeds of Africa's Renaissance.

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