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Africa has a history of sprouting political strong men the way other parts of the world sprout economic progress. Most countries seem to change one strong man for another every couple of years. It does not seem to matter what the ideology is, was: African leaders become dictators with overwhelming powers. It is as if, no matter how admirable leaders appear, as their popularity grows, some latent disease erupts. And, as Lord Acton said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Since Lord Acton was British and traveled only within Europe, we can agree that the influence of power to corrupt is not limited to Africa. Another Lord Acton quote, "Liberty is the prevention of control by others", points to the natural human struggle to unshackle oneself from authority. European civilization dealt with this problem for centuries, removing monarchs in various gruesome ways and eventually imposing versions of democracy. America's founding fathers specifically targeted big-manism through their 3-tier system of government with its checks and balances.   It can be said that human civilization is all about men preventing other men from lording it over other them through institutions of law and government.

Africa had various governing structures before colonial takeover of indigenous governments began in the 17th Century: from authoritarian monarchs with governing councils of chiefs to governing by leadership committees without a single person as leader, sometimes with preference given to age. All in different ways strived to constrain "big man syndrome." African pre-colonial history brims with people rising against rulers who abuse power. Its post-colonial history is, unfortunately, very different. Colonialism imposed dictatorial structures to oppress local populations. Africans inherited those structures and have used them to suppress fellow Africans ever since.

When I left the Nigerian Senate and went into the Advanced Leadership Fellowship program at Harvard, I was not trying to figure out why Africa breeds dictators. Amongst other courses, I signed up for a behavioral science class and a philosophy course titled "Ignorance, Lies, Hogwash and Humbug: On Truth and Knowledge in Democracies", but I found answers to issues I had wondered about. For instance: why was it that when growing up in Nigeria, coup after coup, people filled the street to rejoice and soon enough the same people were denouncing the new leaders? I learned of the fundamental attribution error which explains that we tend to blame people's disposition rather than the situation for events. Could it be that Africa's big men are not to be blamed, but the situation in which they find themselves?

Let's start with the international milieu. Every new leader the international community finds "good" is lauded until the praise goes to the man's head, as endless praise does to mortal men. He starts to abuse his power, yet those who have praised him and plump him up find themselves unable to pull away. Therefore, they turn a blind eye to his atrocities. We have many of these in Africa as I write.

Part of the situation inherited from colonial institutions which makes it so easy for Africa to breed "big men" is that people become complicit in their own violation. In Zimbardo's book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, I learned how societies systematically create evil. In Stanford Prison Experiment, normal North American undergraduate students randomized to guard duty terrorized their colleagues who had been randomized to be prisoners and the acceptance of the situation by the prisoners seems shocking without one understanding of how we humans quickly abide to the roles we find ourselves. The only way for locals to survive colonial oppression was to publicly comply and privately undermine the system through thievery and deception; this continues today as the way the average citizen deals with the elite and government.

On returning to Nigeria from trips abroad, I could feel the envy and malice of people who would never have such an opportunity. I myself felt conflicted as they raced to take the luggage that I had already lugged across two continents. Carrying your own bags indicated low status and left you open to intense scrutiny and harassment from customs officers.

Any attempt to work for the public is suspect by the public themselves and your fellow elite since no one expects any public service. Any attempt to go against the grain just gets you ostracized and disciplined by the system. As a US-trained epidemiologist, I returned to Nigeria to lead a Ministry of Health in one of the 36 states of the country and saw a society with extremely flawed values. At first, I thought the situation was only bad provincially. Surely federal legislators were striving to move the country forward. I ran for the Senate and moved to the capital for 4 years, but this just defined me as a more serious threat.

After dodging bullet after bullet (both literarily and figuratively), I gave up. As I sat in a safe classroom in the US and read *Cultures and Organizations,* by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, I learned that people who go back to their countries of origin after periods of assimilation tend not to fit in. Thus, places that most need innovation and change lose the people most able to think outside the box.

Can we cleanse Africa of this well ingrained disease? God knows I have no magic elixir, but I can offer suggestions from my experience and learning as both an insider and outsider.

1. **Establish good governance as the norm.** Philanthropist Mo Ibrahim offers an annual prize for good governance to an African leader who has recently left office, but has only been able to award it three times in six years. This seems to assume that bad governance is the norm. Psychological studies suggest that high expectations with

punishment for those who fail would succeed better. Give each retiring dictator a pension unless they fail to achieve basic standards of good governance. Then slowly increase the standard for success so that quality of governance will improve.

2. **Place a veil of ignorance.** To remove self-interest from public discourse, the philosopher John Rawls developed the concept of the "veil of ignorance" to make moral judgment on public issues. What kind of society will an African leader want to live in if he didn't have the knowledge that he was at the top of the pile? If they can try and build a society that would be fair to them after leaving office, it will be easier for them to withstand pressure to milk the system.

3. **Expand education.** Most current African elite can trace their trajectory to the top to education of themselves or an ancestor, but Africans see a finite pie, not the possibility of an ever expanding pie most Americans see. If one sees the pie as finite, then rational actors compete for a slice by barring others, but if education enlarges the pie, this means giving others opportunity will provide more for all and even more for the next generation.

4. **Encourage female leadership**. Women can change Africa if the issues they find important are actually brought to the table and discussed. Research shows that when women are in critical numbers in leadership positions (usually around 30%), they then can change deliberations to what is important to them. The few women in all male, misogynistic environments are silenced. They refuse to speak for fear of being ostracized by their colleagues and to get along as we did in the Nigerian Senate.

5. **Credible elections are critical** for citizens to believe and participate as expected in a democracy. Credible elections would be a first step in holding leaders accountable. Many countries need not just election monitoring but supranational institutions to carry out elections.

6. **Local innovation should be encouraged**. Subservient, post-colonialist Africans do not value invention, but instead rely on the west to supply innovation, even to solve local problems. I grew up knowing that great local authors lived and worked in Africa (Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo etc). Now our best writers live abroad (Chimamanda Adichie, Uwen Akpan etc) . Creative young people and members of the diaspora should be encouraged to apply themselves to their nations' local problems.

Africa can keep descrying its "bad apples", the dictators and megalomaniac leaders, but without attempting to cleanse the entire population, any apple that rises to the top is already sick. As an epidemiologist, I see that a population-wide approach is needed to halt the epidemic; the apple barrel needs fumigation and each apple cleansed. Each person should become a responsible participant in growing a healthy democracy no matter their current status since everyone is a potential leader instead of being vocal critics waiting for his/her opportunity to loot. I hope these suggestions start the discussion on ways to inoculate whole populations against big-manism and ignite progress in Africa.