Critical perspectives on Africa’s relationship with the European Union

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) has significantly evolved from an initial alliance of expediency – a coal and steel alliance formulated to bind its core members together so they avoid war – into a strong socio-economic partnership of independent countries. Together, its member states and institutions constitute one of the most powerful political entity in the world. Given its initial motivations, the history of the EU as a foreign policy actor is quite minimal. It is almost received knowledge that EU foreign policy is mainly traced back to the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) pillar. Yet, taken from the perspective of African countries for example, foreign policy practices were inscribed into the EU’s integration project right from the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Given this, the EU’s relationship with the African continent as a whole, both in terms of its practice, and in terms of its absence in the narrative history of the EU as a Foreign Policy actor is important for a truly critical engagement with the EU’s external relations.

The relationship between the EU and African countries has however not been one of equals. Rather, it is steeped in colonial patterns of interactions and often, the terms of what that relationship is, and how it functions is one that exemplifies a coloniality of power. Coloniality of power in this sense is a structure of power within which the international system still exists. It is one in which, despite the elimination of formal colonialism, the uneven and exploitative patterns of interaction still persist to a certain degree. Moreover, it is manifested in the insistence on certain ‘patterns of knowledge production and meaning’ (Quijano 2007, 169).

To summarise – the relationship is unequal and draws still on colonial patterns of interaction and patterns of knowledge production reinforcing inequality and coloniality. It thus becomes apparent that the practice and study of what has emerged as ‘EU-Africa’ relations are co-constitutive of each other. Beyond this and importantly, efforts to underscore the problematic practices of the EU in Africa show that the relationship between the EU and Africa is not only one of inequality that persists and that has been articulated as such; but one in which the articulation of this inequality is made on the terms of the mainly European actors both within the academy and outside it, among the so-called civil society (see also Kotsopoulos and Mattheis 2018).
This chapter is motivated by the desire to re-narrate the so-called ‘EU-Africa relations’ through decolonial lenses as a way to challenge the pervasiveness of coloniality in the context of how we know ‘EU-Africa’ relations. Further, through the specific example of the negotiations to replace the Cotonou agreement, it seeks to claim back African agency in the story of the relationship, as a way to challenge the dominant ways of knowing and doing. By interrogating the co-constitutiveness of knowing and doing ‘EU-Africa Relations’, this chapter challenges the knowledge production around the relationship between Africa, Africans, and the EU. The commitment to seeking the transformation of the relationship between the EU and African actors, I argue, must also include centring African experiences and perspectives as legitimate knowledge, and therefore also include agency.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I draw on the decolonial scholarship as a lens through which to understand the persistence of coloniality that sees Africa in very specific ways, in the context of EU-Africa relations. Second, I provide a background to the so called ‘EU-Africa relations’ to date, mapping out the key milestones, particularly the evolution of the EU-ACP relationship and its implication for how we know Africa's relationship with the EU and Europe more broadly. Third, I turn to the most recent process of multilateral negotiations around the successor to the Cotonou Agreement, a process that is the key site of Europe’s political and economic interaction with Africa and which frames contemporary dealings of region-to-region engagement. Here I provide an alternative narrative of the negotiations, discussions that are not visible in the literature even as scholars begin to question the ACP format. I then conclude, briefly, with some thoughts on what is required for an inescapable interaction between the two regions so that it is truly grounded in a commitment to (if not achievement of) active partnership of equals, despite differences in material capacities.

Decolonising EU-Africa relations: Undoing knowledge, discovering agency

‘EU-Africa’ relations are written into the fabric of the EU’s integration evolution where colonial countries fully intended to keep benefitting from their former colonies even after colonisation has ended. In the Treaty of Rome, European countries were defining the relationship they intended to have with former colonies without consultation from those countries. The choice to frame future relations in this way, from the beginning has had a lasting impact on the design of the relationship. The scholarship that has developed in parallel to this relationship has sought to elaborate on the implications of the relationship in critical ways. Often, these analyses show an EU that dominates almost perpetually without regard for processes happening on the African side. I argue however that a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between Africa and the EU requires attention to African agency.

Tieku (2013) defines African agency as ‘the autonomy of African citizens, through their lawful representatives (governments), have to define, act, own, control, and lead on issues that affect them’. For Brown and Harman (2013, 1–2), African agency has an intellectual intent too; it denotes taking ‘African politics, actions, preferences, strategies and purposes, seriously to get beyond the tired tropes of an Africa that is victimised, chaotic, violent and poor’.

African agency, Bah notes is supported by the creation of new instruments, most notably the African Union (AU) to assert the strategic interests of the continent and of African states as a counter to ‘the application of Western global liberal governance in Africa’ (Bah 2016, 149). To be sure, there is no consensus on what African agency is. On the one hand, it can be viewed ontologically or empirically focusing on ‘influence or resistance’ (see Murray-Evans 2015). African agency has been tied to the ways in which Africa(ns) have navigated the often-hostile
international system successfully or influenced norms on the global stage. However, this limits
the possible range of African agency. Consequently, Murray-Evans adopts Hay’s definition of
agency as ‘the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and, in so doing, to attempt to
realise his or her intentions’ (Hay 2002, 94).

While Murray-Evans (2015) further suggests that the development of regionalisms and
its mechanisms suggests unitary preferences, this is not evident from the intentionality of the
AU, for instance. Contestation even over agreed norms which may reveal differing prefer-
ences does not obscure the realisation of African intentionality and therefore agency. Indeed,
such an assumption is not made of the EU, for instance. In this sense, then, even a more
critical outlook on African agency vis-a-vis the EU is still restrictive to colonial lens that
does not engage Africa on its own terms. As such, and to account and embrace contestation
as intrinsic to the development of new mechanisms of regional integration in Africa and its
interaction with the rest of the world, a combination of Tieku, Brown and Harman’s defi-
nitions holds. These new mechanisms can be supported by the application of a decolonial
lens to EU-Africa relations, which is even more urgent. A decolonial lens underscores the
ways in which agency can be manifested and erased through knowledge production about
‘EU-Africa relations’. It reveals that even when scholarship emphasises the problematic
power asymmetries that dominate this relationship this is often done while erasing Africa(ns)
particularly in relations to evolving regionalisation and contested narratives of Africa’s posi-
tion in international relations.

Decolonising EU-Africa relations

The decolonial turn is situated within critical theory and thus is intended to cast a critical gaze
to the scholarship and practice of the EU-Africa relations. Decoloniality as Quijano (2007, 127)
notes is about the ‘destruction of the coloniality of world power’. Moreover, Bhambra (2014,
118) further notes, recounting Mignolo (2007), that
decolonization of knowledge […], occurs in acknowledging the sources and geo-political
locations of knowledge while at the same time affirming those modes and practices of
knowledge that have been denied by the dominance of particular forms.

Rutazibwa (2016, 192) calls it ‘de-mythologizing, de-silencing and anti-colonially de-
colonizing our knowledge production or cultivation practices’. To decolonise EU-Africa rela-
tions moves beyond simply acknowledging the external perceptions of so-called third parties of
the EU (Africa in this context), or simply that the relationship is the aftermath of Europe’s colo-
nisation of Africa. Rather, it is about giving space and voice to the typically marginalised in how
we understand the relationship, albeit contested, while peeling back the ways in which colonial-
ity is still implicated in the relations. EU-Africa relations must be understood as a continuity of
the colonial not a creation of the neo-colonial. This requires a confrontation with Whiteness,
and in particular the supremacy of Whiteness that proclaims the hierarchy of the Global North
over the South in the construction of knowledge and in practice.

Whiteness, according to Yancy (2004) is

a synergistic system of transversal relationships of privileges, norms, rights, modes of self-
perception and the perception of others, unquestioned presumptions, deceptions, beliefs,
‘truths’, behaviors, advantages, modes of comportment, and sites of power and hegemony
that benefits whites individually and institutionally.
Anxieties derived from Whiteness continue in the existing practices of Europe’s relationship with Africa (Gabay 2018). Gabay shows how the Whiteness of coloniality persists even via the more positive actions of European actors when they ‘gaze’ on Africa. It is no surprise then that the AU is not perceived as enough to act as the negotiating partner or dominate in region-to-region cooperation despite being funded significantly by the EU itself. While the AU was identified as a key interlocutor for peace and security (Haastrup 2013 a,b), for the most part, the EU has mainly prioritised states as its main partners in justifying external EU military and civilian missions. Often, and in practice, the Africa, the AU are afterthoughts.

Overwhelmingly, the starting point of these works is the EU’s external relations towards Africa. Africa is not taken on its own terms and is treated as a vulnerable recipient of EU policies. Most of this work offers a critique of the EU for not taking African perspectives seriously. Primarily, there is a theoretical focus whose starting point is Normative Power Europe (NPE) whether engaged explicitly or not, positively or negatively. NPE is the idea that the EU wants to shape what is normal in the world in its own image, or more specifically according to its values. This is the core of the EU’s identity according to Manners (2002). The article in which NPE was outlined has been cited, to date, 4,120 times (Google Scholar Citations, 25 August 2019). It is fair to say it has had a profound impact on the conceptualisation of EU foreign policies in theory and practice, including in Africa. While this does not technically reify the EU’s version of normal, Diez (2005, 627) for example has argued that NPE ‘constructs the EU’s identity as well as the identity of the EU’s others in ways which allow EU actors to disregard their own shortcomings’. Perhaps more importantly, the idea that the EU is a force for good and seeks to shape what is normal creates a hierarchy within the international system and one in which Africa’s norms are non-existent and this is manifested in a variety of different ways.

Take for example, the article by Lenz (2013) which aims to extend the reach of NPE by looking beyond whether the EU keeps true to the norms identified by Manners (2002) in its interactions with others (including in Africa as so much as the scholarship has done). Rather the focus is on regionalism as a norm to be diffused by the EU. The article has the broader aim of avoiding Eurocentrism and overall offers a useful critique of NPE. Yet, the whole project is promoted by the starting and accepted premise that ‘regionalism may be a European invention, but it is not protected by copyright law!’ (Lamy 2001). Except regionalism is not a European invention. In 1910, the first ever customs union was established in Southern Africa – Southern African Custom’s Union (SACU). Granted, this was the invention of white settler colonialist governments, it is nevertheless surprising that the literature on regionalism and vis-à-vis EU regionalism in Africa neglects to mention this example. One example is not in itself enough to make the case; rather it is illustrative of a pattern of absenting the relationship to Africa and Africa’s role within the development of the EU itself and by extension in its external relations. In most cases, African agency is often a bystander in the EU’s engagement with the continent.

To decolonise requires a change in knowledge production practices including discursive changes in how we define the relationship. Indeed, and as Diez warns about NPE, the arrogance of EU theorising and practice will continue ‘unless a degree of self-reflexivity is inserted’ (Diez 2005, 627). Presently, there is a preference for Africa-EU relations but also AU-EU relations (see Mattheis and Kotsopoulos 2017). This is both a call to discursively shift the direction of focus in the relationship but to also acknowledge in real terms the evolution of Africa’s political landscape on its own terms. In 2019, all African states are now members of the AU which justifies a turn to AU-EU relations. The diversity of Africa notwithstanding (the EU with 28 states too is diverse), attention to this regional mechanism or instrument is a first step to acknowledging African agency.
The AU is of course still a young institution. Indeed, its strategy for the socio-economic transformation of the continent will span about 50 years as articulated in Agenda 2063. Yet in recent years, we have seen ways in which the AU has tried to implement its moral agency for peace and development on the African continent. Moral agency refers here to the ‘moral burdens of duty and blame for specific acts and outcomes’ (Erksine 2008). The AU serves this purpose as it takes the primary responsibility for a peaceful and prosperous continent by 2063 (African Union 2015).

Whereas the EU has consistently invested in creating a single transregion, the African Caribbean and Pacific group of countries (ACP), and recently at the expense of the AU, it is worth remembering that the commonality between the ACP is the shared colonial history. The ACP ensures that the political strength of Africa is not exercised since Africa is treated the same as the other two smaller regions, while having more or less to equally conform to what EU institutions want. So how can this relationship, particularly the imperative of knowledge in this relationship, be extricated from one of coloniality? To get to this, the subsequent section seeks to historicise the relationship through narrative and highlight the co-constitutive nature of what the EU does in Africa and how we understand Africa-EU relationship within and beyond the EU-ACP relationship.

A Biography of ‘EU-Africa relations’ and the evolution of Africa-EU relations

Yaoundé, Lomé, & Cotonou

Colonialism has had the greatest influence on the structure and patterns of interaction in the relationship between Africa and Europe. From the onset of its very creation, the EU constructed its foreign policy practices around its relationship with the African continent. The relationship between Africans and what is now the EU has been inscribed in the founding document, the Treaty of Rome (ToR), which established the Convention of the Association of Overseas Territories (OCTs). The OCTs initially referred to the overseas colonies of Belgium and France and when the UK joined, its former colonies too. The commitment set in the ToR was to render overseas aid for development which also guaranteed EU member states’ access to natural resources. African countries dominated the OCT. This commitment that had been agreed by European states without input of African countries framed subsequent relations. It has been a relationship grounded in unequal power asymmetries.

Both African and European actors honed their practices within colonial frames that did not just disappear in the 1960s. In 1963, the then European Economic Community (EEC) and 18 countries, which formed the Associated African States and Madagascar (AASM), signed the first Yaoundé agreement. Subsequent agreements, Yaoundé II, Lomé I-IV, and the current Cotonou agreement constitute what is nowadays referred to as the EU-ACP cooperation. The ACP group represents African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries who are former colonies of European states. It came about as a result of the then European Economic Community’s (EEC) suggestion that a single agreement should make the EEC’s – and now the EU’s – external economic cooperation easier to consolidate. Although the African countries had the chance to negotiate for themselves, the context and framework has been determined mainly by the EEC. Effectively, this helped to further institutionalise power asymmetries between Africa and Europe. In the formation of a bloc that is a loose configuration and whose identity is determined by the colonial history and the ease of which the EU might better administer its trade and aid policies, the EU-ACP arrangement epitomises the colonial matrix of power.
This grouping has provided the basis through which the EU has ‘managed’ Africa in terms of international development aid provision and limited preferential trade exchanges. As scholars like Clapham (1996) argued, however, despite these imbalances in asymmetries, the Lomé Conventions, at least in its early days, allowed for ACP countries to organise and articulate their position vis-à-vis their relationship with the EU (see also Gruhn 1976). What the positional-ity of ACP countries and in particular African ones within this grouping means for Africa-EU relations has been lost from the narratives about the relationship partly due to the latter Lomé convention (see Oyewunmi 1991) which seems to have removed further agency from the ACP countries. Moreover, the material impact of that agreement with its conditionalities, put African countries on the back footing in the context of Africa-EU relations.

The Cotonou agreement & the evolution of Africa-EU relations since 2000

The evolution of the EU’s relationship with the ACP and in particular with Africa has transformed significantly. Since Lomé IV especially, this relationship is arguably more political. Its political nature, and significant economic changes were further codified in the 2000 Cotonou Agreement (see Hurt 2003; Godfrey 2016). The most significant impact of the Cotonou agreement was the move towards the creation of the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). EPAs are agreements created to make the relationship between the EU and ACP countries compliant with the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. WTO Most Favoured Nation (MFN) clause prohibits an actor from giving preferential treatment to another when it is not offered to others within the WTO system. As such, the precepts of Yaoundé and Lomé had to change through new sub-regionalised trade agreements, in short the EPAs.

Since the establishment of EPAs, their study – what they are, their impact and challenges to them – have dominated the post-2000 studies of EU-Africa relations (see Hurt 2003; Carbone 2008, 2013, 2018; Hurt et al. 2013). In those studies, which have paid attention to the African position during the negotiation of EPAs, De Melo and Regolo (2014) for example note that the African negotiating group was at a disadvantage due to how the EPA groupings were organised. While the EU proclaimed to be deepening regionalism, there was no accounting for the variances among countries in Africa.

Indeed, much of the discussion about the Cotonou and the implementation of the EPAs, the processes of regionalism as understood in the target regions – Africa, Caribbean, and the Pacific – are often missing, in favour of the EU’s own commitment to promoting a version of itself. Yet, the impetus for regionalism, particularly in Africa, is very different and understanding this is essential to realising African agency (see Hastrup 2013a). The negotiations for Cotonou and its adoption in 2000 coincided with the process of transforming the Organisation for African Unity to the present African Union (AU). At the same time, a political meeting, the Cairo Summit, between African states and the EU intended to expand the scope of Africa’s relations with the EU. This was held under the aegis of the OAU and EU respectively, rather than the ACP configuration. Although Olsen (2006) argues that the Cairo Summit was largely symbolic and lacked substance, it was a significant moment in EU-Africa relations. It signalled the move from the convenient EU-ACP, as the basis of the relationship between Africa and the EU, to a new kind of cooperation based on region-to-region relations, inter-regionalism, opening the space for the agency of both Africa(ns) and Europe(ans).

The discursive construction of the possibility of region-to-region cooperation has been facilitated of course by the creation of the AU and its broad remit for African regional integration in all aspects. Yet, the practice of deciding how best to engage Africa without Africans

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was replicated in 2005 when the EU released the EU Strategy for Africa. While the new framework document acknowledged that the hegemonic donor-recipient relationship had to change, partly in response to changes on the African continent itself, it was widely criticized for its failure to engage with representatives of African countries, the regional institutions, and African civil society. After this, in 2007, African states and the EU embarked on a new strategic partnership, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) following two years of consultations in Africa and Europe.

Unlike the Cotonou agreement, the JAES has no legal standing. Yet, it was intended to make a turn in the relationship and importantly give Africa its own voice in the way the EU organised its external relations in the region. The JAES sought to engage Africa more broadly and apart from the Caribbean and Pacific, in other words beyond the ACP grouping. The JAES acknowledged the emergence of the new regional interlocutor for Africa, the AU. Moreover, unlike the ACP, North African countries are acknowledged as African within the JAES. Perhaps most importantly, the JAES broadened the areas of engagement beyond economics (development aid and trade) to other areas of cooperation, significantly in peace and security. Presently, there are four main priority areas: Education, science, and technology; resilience, peace, security, and governance; migration, mobility, investments, and African structural transformation.

The discursive basis for the JAES was that Africans and the EU were renewing their relationship on the basis of equality, partnership, and local ownership. Perceptions of African actors from this time remain thin in the academic literature and certainly from the dominant narratives of ‘EU-Africa’ relations. In 2007, Africa was in a good place. Growth rates were more or less stable and the progress towards democratisation evident. Kotsopoulos and Sidiropoulos (2014) further note that Africa’s voice had become louder in the international stage in part due to the work of the AU. By demanding that the EU’s approach to Africa can no longer be determined just in Europe and thus instigating two years of consultations with an eventual agreement to codify a shift in relations, we see manifestations of African agency with existing relations.

Some studies of course concede that in certain areas of engagement there is evidence of Africa exercising agency through the AU to achieve equality, partnership, and local ownership (Carbone 2013; Haastrup 2013a, b; Whitman and Haastrup 2013). For the most, there is agreement that the relationship is driven mainly by a donor-recipient relationship and less than a full equal partnership.

As has become even more evident in recent years, the treatment of African migrants in the context of European regimes has been consistent with the human rights values that the EU tends to insist on as a conditionality. I would however suggest that the inability of Africans to achieve their own aims within the relationship does not preclude agency, it simply highlights structural constraints. In this, reflections in this chapter challenge the dominant trends in the literature. The dominant narrative about the relationship has been driven by limited attention to the perceptions and practices of the African side of the relationship. We find this pattern in both the scholarship on EU-Africa relations and sometimes in practice when we consider the co-constitutive nature of the scholarship with the relationship itself (for recent exceptions see Delputte and Williams 2016; Carbone 2018).

This omission is mainly rooted in the approaches which mainly take the relationship from the perspective of EU foreign policy. Consequently, like Dimitrova and Kramsch (2017) I seek to ‘problematise and deconstruct normative assumptions’ around the range of European practices in foreign policy that are often the basis on which ‘preferential relations with the EU are established’ (Dimitrova and Kramsch 2017, 800). The aforementioned authors note that while there is increasingly research on the external perceptions of Europe (Chaban et al. 2013; Lucarelli 2007; Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010;), these often re-inscribe Eurocentricity because
they use approaches that are still specific to the EU (Dimitrovova and Kramsch 2017, 798; Kotso-poulos and Mattheis 2018). By drawing on the nascent theorising on African agency and the decol-

They are key to the relationship between African agency and the Decolonial literature, and on EU-Africa relations or more appropriately Africa-EU relations, a more active, dynamic and flawed ‘Africa’ is rendered more visible in the field and in the practices of EU foreign policies in the continent. In the next section, I engage with the current process of negotiating post-Cotonou relations, rather than policy outcomes themselves, as a way to reveal the ways in which African agency is articulated and is challenged within ‘Africa-EU relations’.

Negotiating post-Cotonou relations

The EU’s positionality as the dominant partner in the relationship hasn’t shifted despite com-

mitments to partnership and equality. Indeed, and despite the JAES which was intended to cre-

ate a new opening in ‘EU-Africa relations’, the trade/aid relationship continues to be the pri-

mary prism of relationship. For example, while the JAES has always had migration within its remit as a domain of partnership, the EU has tended to force through its own preferences, particularly since the so-called migration crisis. Successive agreements and the formal rhetoric around change have provided the EU a way to mythologise its existence in Africa as different from those of the individual countries that make up the EU itself, the former colonisers. The EU myth of difference is sustained even by the critical literature whose main challenge to problematic EU practices is that it does not accord with the EU’s own values as if those are neutral. This is what the lens of EU foreign policy theorising gives us – when Europe is the starting point. African agency is thus forsaken for the myth of a value-driven EU as the ultimate goal of reform.

As the main vehicle for the prior relationship, the Cotonou agreement is coming to an end in 2020. The desire for change has been motivated by a variety of things. On the part of the AU, there was a commitment to restructuring the relationship once and for all after several tries. On the part of the EU, there was a renewed urgency to keep a foothold in Africa particularly as other actors became more prominent, for example, China. As Carbone (2018) notes, the renegotiation of Cotonou was already on the agenda of the AU by December 2015. The EU for its part expressed the intention to re-negotiate the relationship with Africa still within the ACP framework.

From the onset the AU was uneasy about this. There was scope to negotiate as a continent, and a framework including trade and development was already present within the JAES. It therefore made no sense that the EU kept insisting on the ACP context despite acknowledging the distinctiveness of the three regions that made it up. On 18 March 2019, the AU adopted a decision that it intended ‘to use the post-Cotonou process to conclude a completely new framework for cooperation with the EU on a Union-to-Union, continent-to-continent basis, outside the ACP context’ (Carbone 2018, 481). This declaration was significant because it came on the same day that 44 countries signed up to the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA). The ACFTA is the largest trade agreement in the world. It is significant not only for Africans but for understanding the patterns of trade. Moreover, according to its champions it opens up African countries to each other and the world. It is an important marker of African agency in international politics and even the EU acknowledges its presence as significant. Indeed, the EU has already committed €50 million to supporting the implementation of the ACFTA over two years. Yet, the EU remains committed to the ACP and has therefore been at odds with the AU on what a new relationship will look like.

While acknowledging that the main negotiator on behalf of the ACP was a Togolese diplo-

mat, the AU appointed Professor Carlos Lopes as the AU Special Representative for Partners-

ships with Europe, who was previously executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa. Lopes has been vociferous in his critique of the EU’s engagement in Africa and has
consistently gone on record to argue that the relationship must change so that Africa’s own agenda is respected. Of the arrangements possible under Cotonou, he noted

There is a high degree of cynicism about the EPAs. […] The European Commission cannot deny the lack of transparency, and even imposed secrecy, in the way the EPAs were negotiated. One of the casualties of the EPAs is the fragmentation of Africa trade negotiations in blocks and countries to whom different clauses were offered at the very moment the Continental Free Trade Agreement was supposed to occupy minds. Another is the possible lost opportunity for a real economic partnership based on the future. (Lopes 2017, 12)

In the same text as the above, Lopes’ fundamental call is that the narrative on EU-Africa/Africa-EU relations had to change in a way that accounts for the changes happening on the continent. For example, the creation of ACFTA, the proposals towards a Monetary Union, and reforms within the AU should all be internally driven. This call was issued especially to those who are ‘progressive’ and well-meaning (Lopes 2017). This is especially important since much of the scholarship has focused on the detail of the renegotiation, taking the ACP for granted, without further reflection on its continued utility, and despite the AU’s position that the relationship between Africa and the EU needs to move beyond the Cotonou template (see Schmieg 2019).

In laying out the perspective enabled by the mandate given by the AU, Lopes is clear that African ambitions can no longer be subsumed to those of its closest partner so far. As evidenced by the recent ACFTA, there is at least part of African elites and people that is committed to deeper regional integration. Under Cotonou, the EPAs had done much to challenge this deepening of integration. With the opportunity of a do-over, and a template in the JAES, the move towards a focus on Africa on its own terms is a priority for the African side.

Yet, the EU was reluctant to move away from an arena where it has thrived and continues to straddle a relationship with Africa through the AU and the ACP. One interviewee involved in the African side of the negotiations noted that EU colleagues attempted to draw individual African states away from agreed African positions with the promise of bi-lateral concessions if they remained within the ACP framework (Interviewee A, 7 January 2019). This directly undermines the EU’s own claims of fostering deeper regional integration in Africa. Even though the EU feels challenged by the Chinese engagement in Africa (thus centring China rather than Africa) so much so as to suggest a new Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs favouring investment over development aid, the African impetus remains a footnote. With the best of intentions, Africa is positioned as having to respond to the direction of the winds dictated by the EU especially when framed as being mutually beneficial.

Nevertheless, at the AU-EU Foreign Affairs Ministerial Meeting in January 2019 the AU worked hard to get its message across. This was particularly significant since the EU kept the agenda for the meeting ‘hidden’ until the last minute despite overtures from AU member states and the AU Commission. The section on economic cooperation of the Joint Communique (AU-EU 2019) is worth paying attention to. Firstly, the AU side emphasised the importance of continental priorities in any external engagement going forward. Specifically, it committed the EU to the support for ACFTA, the Single Air Transport Market and the Protocol on Free Movements of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment, issues that are being contested in Europe but where Africa seeks to progress. The development of trade relations is framed as predicated on the support for these African initiatives. And secondly, while the launch of the Africa-Europe Alliance was acknowledged, the African side showed caution (perhaps a healthy skepticism) calling for ‘further consultations to ensure that implementation of the Alliance concept responds to the priorities of both continents’ (AU-EU 2019, 2). In short, decisions
about Europe in Africa and the content of ‘EU-Africa relations’ will no longer be determined by Brussels or European capitals.

Nowhere in the document are post-Cotonou negotiations under the EU-ACP framework acknowledged. When I asked my interviewee of this omission, ‘Apparently not [sic] mention of ACP?’, the response was ‘No. We pushed hard for this. So, commitment to C2C. ACP can do what they want but continental agenda will be discussed C2C’ (Interviewee A, 23 January 2019).

Given the ways in which colonialism is entrenched in the ACP relations, and the AU’s pushback against it, of what use is its continuation for ‘EU-Africa relations’?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I show the evolution of the so-called ‘EU-Africa relations’, arguing that the ACP format obscures African positionality and agency. The emergence of the African Union as a viable actor has been supported by recent developments on the continent such as the ACFTA among others. While the literature critiques the EU’s behaviour towards Africa in the context of the ACP, the argument tends to focus on Europe’s power over Africa ignoring the moves made by African actors. Using a decolonial lens, the analysis above shows the co-constitutive nature of scholarship and practice that reinforces coloniality, with also a tendency to ignore Africa’s or Africans’ agency.

In the past, the lack of attention to Africa could be initially down to the fact that in comparison the AU was seen as a newer actor, which had weaker institutions than the EU and indeed still relies significantly on the EU for its everyday function. Presently, however, it is more than evident that the AU has a strategic vision that takes Africa’s future and agency in global governance seriously, but which is not properly engaged by scholars.

The chapter maps out an endeavour to decolonise EU-Africa relations and acknowledge the agency of African actors, and in particularly acknowledge the changes to Africa’s socio-economic and political landscape as championed by the AU. To decolonise our knowledge, our practices, we are asked to remember the history of this relationship and acknowledge its lingering practices, even when there is the best of intention. Within this approach it is still possible to acknowledge the affirmative work being done by EU practitioners and scholars in European member-state capitals and in delegations, work that shows unending commitment to alleviation of poverty, peace and security, and human rights. Moreover, it is still possible to highlight the significant challenges faced by the continent including those caused by its ruling elites. Yet, to move forward the relationship between Africa and Europe, we must continually recognise the impact of both the prevailing European prism which reinforces coloniality, and of the invariably unequal relationship between Africa and the EU.

Notes

1. C2C refer to Continent-to-Continent or Region-to-Region.
2. The group of ACP countries has recently changed into Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS)

References


