



# **The Shackled Continent: Africa's Past, Present and Future. Robert Guest**

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### **The Shackled Continent: Africa's Past, Present and Future. Robert Guest**

Robert Guest  
Africa is the only continent to have grown poorer over the last three decades. Why? The Shackled Continent, Robert Guest's fascinating first book, seeks to diagnose the sickness that continues to hobble Africa's development. Using reportage, first hand experience and economic insight, Robert Guest takes us to the roots of the problems. Two fifths of African nations are at war, AIDS has lowered life expectancy to as young as forty years old and investment is almost impossible as houses that could be used as collateral do not formally belong to their owners. Most shocking of all is the evidence that the billions of dollars of aid, given to Africa has had little perceptible effect on the poor The Shackled Continent offers, sometimes controversially, explanations for this state of affairs. In this magnificent and engaging book, Robert Guest provides an invigorating history and an inspired commentary on the enigma of modern Africa

### **The Shackled Continent: Africa's Past, Present and Future. Robert Guest Details**

Date : Published June 1st 2005 by Pan Publishing (first published April 2nd 2004)

ISBN : 9780330419727

Author : Robert Guest

Format : Paperback 290 pages

Genre : Cultural, Africa, Nonfiction, History, Politics, Economics, Sociology, Social Issues, Poverty

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# From Reader Review The Shackled Continent: Africa's Past, Present and Future. Robert Guest for online ebook

**Priyanka Sofia says**

I picked up Robert Guest's *Shackled Continent*, a book that seeks to understand Africa's poverty and development issues, with much trepidation. A continent rich with its history, people, languages and complex with its colonial past, the Atlantic slave trade, and post-colonial challenges reduced to a single descriptive word: shackled.

Guest's approach is unnuanced and lacks cultural sensitivity. Take this bit from the section on 'Why Africans need property rights': "When I asked the nomad how much his house cost, he had no idea what I was talking about. He looked at me quizzically and explained, as if to a fool, that he had built it himself, with materials he had at hand...He could not put a price on the place, because it would have never occurred to him to sell it". Guest does note that it was a stupid question and that he probably asked it because he had house prices on his mind – he was trying to buy property in London that month. Vignettes such as this one make you wonder how different – and how much more authentic – this book might have been had it been written by an African author with an understanding of the region and its peoples.

When you fail to understand a region, you don't care about cultural nuances. Why would you when the people of the region – the 'backward, primitive natives' are solely to blame for the lack of the post-colonial development of the continent. Never is the role of IMF or World Bank criticised; indeed, they are seen as saviours. The solution put forward by Guest, therefore, lies in Africa embracing the aforementioned neo-colonial powers. Ever heard of the White Saviour Complex, Guest? Clearly not, because a champion of the aforementioned Complex, Bob Geldof has endorsed this book ("An excellent book. Timely, provocative and written throughout with a passion for Africa and Africans").

I wish Monique Ilboudo, a poet and human rights activist from Burkina Faso, was better known. Here is her poem 'I suffer' from *The World Record: International Voices from Southbank Centre's Poetry Parnassus*:

I suffer  
From a lack of means  
From SAP  
That come and go  
From the devaluation  
That humiliates me  
From the IMF  
That crushes me  
From a value system  
That excludes me  
From the single-mindedness  
That smothers me.

I suffer  
From the aid  
Generous or disguised  
From the pity  
Feigned or sincere

From the arrogance  
Malicious or mocking

I suffer  
From the look  
That discriminates against me  
From chartered flights  
That turn me away

I suffer from being a dumping ground  
From eating leftovers  
From wearing rags  
From thinking the thoughts  
Of Others

I suffer  
And I am not proud  
Of my powerlessness

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## **Akin says**

(sigh)

I wish I could like this book. I really do. The problem, for me, wasn't the tone or basic presumptions, which any number of self interested commentators described as neo-colonialist or patronising.

It's just that the arguments were pretty slight, often repetitive, and nowhere up to the analytical standard that one would expect of an 'Economist' journalist - perhaps this is an editing issue, because it seems that the book was marketed as mainstream rather than specialist (the cover reads 'the international bestseller' - what, a book about Africa's problems? I don't think so.)

One can't really argue with the general thrust of Guest's arguments - more trade, more production, economic liberalisation, less - much less - corruption and nepotism. But the glib, pithy manner in which the medicine is prescribed assumes too many things and argues too few, and introduces a homogeneity to the problems of the continent that simply isn't correct or true.

I'm not sorry I read it. I'm sorry, though, that it isn't the far superior book that it occasionally promises to be

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## **Lucija says**

A great book for any first timer to Africa, but also a great book for a seasoned traveler to the continent.

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## **Michael says**

// From my 2004 book diary:

If you've travelled in sub-Saharan Africa then you undoubtedly have a fair few unanswered questions about how and why things are as they are. Look no further for a fairly brief but informative look at the issues that plague this beautiful continent (HIV/AIDS, poverty, war, corruption and so on) ... and some radical and not so radical suggestions for how this can be changed in the years to come.

Should be compulsory reading for the "Africa Commission" not to mention NGOs and for that sake anti-globalisation protesters.

Ah yes - and it has not been too well received by New African - Controversial book?- Yes. However a more balanced and less emotional review turn to the Guardian.

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## **Larbi says**

The Shackled Continent: Power, Corruption, and African Lives, by Robert Guest - former Africa editor for the Economist – is an exhaustive and lively book that tries to explain the reasons behind Africa's poverty . It accounts for the hard economic situation in African and how to make it better « Africa- is in a bad way and this book is my attempt to explain why. » R. Guest. The author makes it clear from the beginning of the book that he means by Africa the sub-Saharan Africa, excluding the Arab countries of north Africa. Africa is a mineral rich continent, with tourist potential and a fertile ground advantageous for agricultural. However, it is growing poorer. Guest notes that so many factors are the stumbling block to the development of African nation ; such as geography, slavery , the remnant of colonialism, AIDS and bad government to name but few.

Most of the African countries are tropical. Such weather is convenient for many deadly diseases to flourish “Africa has the worst of them: Malaria, Yellow Fever, rare but deadly viruses such as Ebola, and a host of energy sapping parasites”.

Another factor to blame for Africa's misfortune is slavery. Although Guest doesn't consider slavery a serious element contributing to Africa's poverty for the reason that « the Trans Atlantic slave trade ended in the 19th Century,” so that can hardly explain 21 st Century problems, but , in fact, it has tremendous negative aspects on the history of most of African countries.

Guest admits that it is « easy to find colonial roots for modern problems ». South Africa ; for instance, was one of the first African countries to gain independence ; however, it remained under the control of a white minority through a biased unfair system of racial segregation known as apartheid until 1994. Practically, African countries have gained their independence, but the colonialists have left most countries under ethnic conflicts and disputes over borders that are intently left ambiguous with neighbouring countries. Guest claims that the colonialists « left deep scars. » but he adds « they also left behind some helpful things such as

roads, clinics and laws. » despite all these problems handed down from the colonialists, Guest still doesn't consider all these unfortunate defects excuses for the modern problems believing that « If colonialism was what held Africa back, you would expect the continent to have boomed when the settlers left. »

AIDS in Africa is the most threatening disease ; regardless, of all the advances achieved in modern medicine. Guest points out that not only do soldiers and migration help the virus to cross borders, but prostitution, witchcraft, and some cultural beliefs worsen the problem « some young African women believe that without regular infusions of sperm, they will not grow up to be beautiful » these myths must be « rebutted » he adds.

Guest , with powerful arguments and an exceptional lively style , is able to convince the reader that the misery of Africa is caused by African themselves. To solidify his statements, he quotes from The great African Novelist, Chinua Achebe: “ The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, of the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. » In fact, all the external factors mentioned so far can be successfully overcome if the people in power were not corrupt. African countries would have progressed, he added, if their leaders believed in democracy and engaged seriously in promising projects.

Finally, Robert Guest ,through his amazing book , has shed light on the major problems hindering Africa's improvement. He clearly believes that African countries can improve. It is through access to primary education, reducing bureaucracy, privatisation and fundamentally embracing the free market that these countries will prosper.

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## **Rejoice Tapon says**

Robert Guest is the African correspondent for the Economist, I really like *The Shackled Continent*.

I agree also when he said, "If Africa is to prosper, it must do so the way all prosperous countries have done. By making things and providing services that other people want to buy."

A South African, who was a war veteran and who now raises chickens, told Robert, "If South Africans work hard, the country could grow like Japan!"

The author cautioned him saying that the Japanese labored for a century before they caught up with the west.

The South African responded, "Yes, we can do it, and besides, raising chickens is better than fighting."

I am on the same opinion as the South African guy.

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## **Cailin Deery says**

Robert Guest is the African correspondent for the Economist, and though he would normally be restricted by the Economist's analytical viewpoint (which he describes as objective), the *Shackled Continent* is slanted

towards his own views which are capitalist, neoliberal, reasoned, and occasionally offensive. The Shackled Continent looks at the economy, aid programs, and politics of sub-Saharan Africa between about the 1960s and the book's publication in 2004.

I have mixed feelings about this one. On the one hand, I think Guest offers valuable criticism of foreign aid and why it isn't really working, does a decent job of exploring political obstacles which impede reform, and manages to cover a tremendous amount of information in quite a small book. On the other hand, many of his criticisms have huge blindspots. He equates incomparable economies, makes sweeping claims outside his expertise (on genetically modified foods; on local opinions of Shell or the damage the drilling has done in Nigeria; on other forms of environmental damage that are the result of development; on why capitalism is what Africa needs; etc), and leaves too many arguments undeveloped. What one reviewer in the Guardian said has to be quoted for its hilarity: "Robert Guest is exploring the dark continent with intrepid adventures, carrying not the Bible but the Economist to assure the benighted tribesmen that they can be saved by putting their faith in free-market global capitalism, which will rid them of their local superstitions and bring them a new era of prosperity."

The best points raised in the Shackled Continent are definitely those around foreign aid. Aid, clearly, is not working. But why has it proven to be such a failure? Much of it ties back to regulation, aid policy and the very despotic governments the West hope to suppress as a result of aid. Guest's recommendations are that donations should be both more generous and more selective. Only governments that are committed to reform should be given money, whereas others should only be offered advice. Also:

"Donors should probably devote a smaller proportion of their aid budgets to helping individual countries, and more to fostering the kind of technology that benefits poor people everywhere, such as vaccines."

Guest argues that despite supposed political doctrines, most sub-Saharan countries are really Statist, meaning the government has full control over the economy and social programs (or lack thereof). Many African countries suffer from predatory politics, as unfortunately politics are seen to be the most attractive method of gaining wealth and retaining power. These poorly-run governments plunge their countries into further debt creating poverty and economic stagnation, which also happen to be the two key indicators or factors associated with civil war.

These political leaders often have no understanding of economics, so exercise flawed reasoning which add to their countries problems. The median African country has a GDP of only \$2 billion, which is about the same as a small town in Europe. They are also seduced by shortcuts, like price fixing. What Guest says about price fixing is too hilarious to go unquoted:

"Price fixing is a bit like jumping off a tall building shouting, "I abolish the law of gravity." You cannot simply decree that something is worth more than anyone will pay for it or less than sellers will accept for it."

Guest argues that rich countries should open their markets to goods from Africa, as it would have far more potential to reduce poverty than aid. So, too, would freehold land ownership. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Africans 'own' their homes, but under traditional law rather than by deed. This means that their assets aren't fungible and so they have no bargaining power. In some countries (Ethiopia, Mozambique), freehold land ownership is illegal.

I would be really interested to hear what another economist has to say about this one. I'm not totally sold, though.

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## **itchyfeet\_\_ says**

Good points: engaging and illuminating stories from a range of countries, good balance of case studies to illustrate points and broad discussion of theoretical ideas, practical "real world" solutions were suggested.

Bad points: Guest obviously has no idea that socialism can be a spectrum (the same as capitalism) and dismisses any slightly left-of-centre ideas brusquely. Guest is also quite condescending and not self-aware enough in regards to his own Western, conservative, capitalist ideology and culture. Also sometimes sexist e.g. assuming "he" for doctor or MP, etc.

Overall: interesting content, thought-provoking ideas, irritating author.

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## **Mitul Choksi says**

An excellent insight into the woes of Africa. The author does try to oversell capitalism as the only solution to Africa's problems. Although he sells it pretty well, he overdoes that part. But all in all, a good read.

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## **Steven says**

The Shackled Continent asks the all-important question about Africa; why is it the only continent that has grown poorer over the last 3 decades". Robert Guest applies his years of experience covering the continent for the Economist magazine and traveling throughout Africa. Though his opinions may be controversial with African governments and westerners alike, they do make a lot of sense.

It is a fact that Africa was carved up, ruled and exploited by colonial powers for centuries. There is no denying that the forced migration of millions of Africans and the establishment of puppet governments were unjust and both contributed to Africa's modern problems. However, African leaders and western powers and special interests have been using history for far too long as a shield to avoid taking responsibility for recent failures. Corrupt African governments, ill planned foreign aid, political instability and inconsistent policy have all contributed to keeping Africa in the third world.

Mr. Guest points out that European colonialism has not been limited to Africa. Yet, Japan, India, China and the US have become industrial and technological powers despite being colonized at one point or another. In each of those cases the bulk of development came from within, even with foreign assistance. The question becomes, what makes Africa different?

As was obvious from the start of the book, Guest is a strong advocate of a free market and of smarter assistance to Africa. By way of example, he shows that the most successful nations have had stable, peaceful governments (at least by comparison), have had wise monetary policies and have encouraged direct foreign investment. The least successful nations have been marked by conflict and instability or had autocratic governments and closed markets. In sum, nation that are closed off to innovation and investment or are heavily dependent on state subsidies to industry will remain underdeveloped. One memorable passage responds to opponents of multinational corporate expansion into Africa on the grounds that the jobs they create are exploitative of a population that will accept less pay. Guest offers the opinion that, with exceptions for worker and environmental safety, such jobs are better than the alternative (no jobs and poverty).



Guest does not propose to definitively solve such an intractable problem such as poverty in Africa but it does add to the discussion on the future of Africa:

My five take aways from the book:

- 1) Continuously blaming colonialism and racism for Africa's problems offers no solutions and distracts from the mistakes being made today. Corrupt or incompetent African governments, who happen to be black, often use the specter of colonialism to distract from their own problems.
  - 2) Capitalism - the best way for African countries to succeed in the modern economy is to produce or develop things other people want to buy.
  - 3) Africa has often been held back by both autocrats that steal public money and idealistic governments with a reliance on socialism and state-owned industries that become unsustainable without massive public subsidies.
  - 4) More foreign aid alone may not be the best use of money. Foreign assistance needs to be given to stable counties that have sensible and sustainable economic policies. Direct aid should be given with the greatest benefit in mind; such as increasing the availability of inexpensive medication for Malaria or HIV. In order to get the best use of assistance, African governments should not be forced to spend more resources on reporting than on the actual programing.
  - 5) Finally, the quickest way for developed nations to support Africans would be to take down their own economic protections. More than anything else, the west's generous farm subsidies bring the price of goods so low that African producers either cannot compete or have to sell their own goods at a loss. In this way, the U.S and Europe maintain such a trade advantage on Africa and make it that much harder for Africans to develop their economies.
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### **Amy Meyers says**

I'd give this a 4.5. We are missionaries to the Tsonga and Venda people of S. Africa. We live an hour from the Messina/Beit Bridge border post Guest refers to in his chapter in AIDS. We have traveled in Zimbabwe and Mozambique and speak one tribal language fluently and two others partially. We lived in a rural village for 9 years. I say this to prove that we know, in some senses even more deeply than Guest, what Africa is like, how the people think and live, and we have often grappled with the question of why Africa is poor. As Martin Meredith points out so well in his book State of Africa, or Fate of Africa, the poverty in large part can truly be attributed to the wicked dictators who ravaged Africa AFTER they got their freedom, AFTER the colonialists pulled out or were bombed out. But most people don't have time or interest to pick up Meredith's book. In that case, Guest's book would be the next best option. It covers very well, with memorable examples, the reasons why Africa is poor, from a capitalist perspective. We agree with him on most points. My only criticism and reason I wouldn't give it a 5, is that he doesn't mention their religion, which is the major reason they are still poor. African traditional religion is the driving force behind much of the other problems, including the fatherlessness and dictators they continue to keep voting into power.

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## **Millicent says**

Of course you work for the Economist! No other journal produces such standard dribble about Africa quite like the Economist. I read this when I was 19, and even then I could have done a better job writing about this vast, heterogeneous continent. Way to simplify it to corruption, pot-holes, AIDS, civil wars and poverty, and completely overlook the involvement of western corporations and NGOs like the World Bank and IMF. I just cant.

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## **Nick Harriss says**

An interesting and plain-talking book, albeit with rather simplistic answers.

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## **Elliard Shimaala says**

Before writing this review, I researched the author to find out who he is. I discovered that Robert is a foreign editor for the Economist and appears on two renowned news channels. He also covered Africa for seven years and I think that is what gave him the audacity to write such a prejudiced book about Africa. Take nothing away from Mr Guest, he did his homework well and brought out all the negatives about Africa - just look at his title.

So, what is this book about? Economics. It is about a capitalist author comparing African economies with the rest of the world to prove how far behind Africa is. It is known, whenever African economies are compared to western countries Africa lags behind. Sadly, authors like Robert do not take into account other facets of development when Africa is the subject. In this and many others books, Africa's underdevelopment is more pronounced. Walter Rodney (an authors with a close connection to Africa) argued that, "if underdevelopment were related to anything other than comparing economies, then the most underdeveloped country in the world would be the USA, which practices external oppression on a massive scale, while internally there is a blend of exploitation, brutality and psychiatric disorder". If we take Rodney's argument, the western world needs to reconsider what they call development. People like Robert who pretend to be offering progressive solutions for the "shackled continent" would think twice before writing such books. In hindsight, the issue of Africa's underdevelopment depends on who is telling the story and in most cases, the story is told by a non-Africans (how ironic).

My problem with such books is that they become international bestsellers and the people who buy them build their perceptions of Africa based on them. Robert portrays Africans as violent, corrupt, dependent on aid and with no initiative – thus my use of prejudice. Bob Geldof (a rock star) with equally questionable knowledge of Africa even had the audacity to endorse this book as, "an excellent book. Timely, provocative and written throughout with a passion for Africa and Africans". I don't think so Bob! This book was written to depict Africa for what it is not. To portray lost hope and offer solutions to keep Africa subservient rather than self-dependent. To destroy these perceptions, we need to start telling our stories otherwise Mr Guest and his friends will continue telling the world lies. 21st century Africans should feel insulted by this book because we are making the new Africa.

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**Lulu Opio says**

Very insightful. Africa is indeed a 'Country'

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