

Opinion – Dismantling Ongoing Realities of Colonization in Africa

Written by Benjamin Maiangwa and Christiane Essombe

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There is often the danger within Africa and elsewhere to talk about the lingering effects of European colonisation on the continent in empty generalisations. We provide in this article some concrete examples to illustrate the ongoing realities of colonisation on the continent, and to actively seek means to undo those impacts including accepting responsibility in instances where those ex-colonial societies have internalized the mentality of coloniality.

What's in a Name?

Current names of many African countries still reveal how these countries were thought of first and foremost as pieces of a colonial project. Countries names were decided and imposed by the colonists upon arriving on a land and declaring such land their own. These names crystallize how European colonists only thought of Africa from their own dehumanizing and patronizing perspective, that only focused on what was beneficial and intelligible to them.

A few examples include: Ivory Coast/Côte d'Ivoire (based on the export of ivory); Cameroon (from the Portuguese 'Camaroes' which means 'shrimps');

Sudan (from Arabic "bilad as Sudan" which means "land of the Blacks"); Nigeria (from Niger (the river) – area); Guinea (thought to come either from the Portuguese words 'Guiné' or an arabized version of the Djenne word "Ghinawen" they both refer to "Black People" or "lands of Black people"). A few countries like Swaziland, Namibia and Ghana have changed their country name by either reverting to their Indigenous name (e.g. The Kingdom of eSwatini) or choosing a new name as an independent people.

Railways and Main Commercial Roads

It is noteworthy that in many African countries the main roads and railway go from the interior of the country to the nearest coast and can be dated back to the colonial era. The exploitative project of the colonists revolved around bringing natural resources to the coast and shipping them out of Africa. If there was no export at the time in a specific area, those roads and railways would not have been created. Indeed, there was no interest for the colonists to encourage intra-continental trading or commerce. To this day roads and railways that aim to connect Africans and their resources to each other are still few and all relatively recent.

Healthcare

Hospitals were first established in small numbers and primarily to provide basic services to workers of the colonial regime "because some minimum maintenance of the workers' health was an economic investment." Access was not designed for local people who were not part of the local elite working in the colonial regime. The lack of access to healthcare and healthcare issues became normalized in any remote, rural area where no exploitative activities were conducted.

Moreover, colonization resulted in a unilateral framing of health only from the western viewpoint which led to a biased reporting of African diseases, with little investment in mental health, preventive medicine, public health, health

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promotion and health education, and dentistry. African traditional medicine was also antagonized and banned. Traditional medicine is still not considered as being equal to western medicine despite having never been thoroughly studied and in spite of the potential of developing an African cultural explanatory model of diseases. It is telling at many levels that in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, no African government attempted to develop vaccines.

The ‘Curse’ of Religion

Religion or combative identities remains a critical aspect of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power. Disguised under a so-called “necessity to civilize”, religion was used to advance Western hegemony and antagonize non-Western people and their spirituality by presenting them as inherently inferior, evil, and in need of salvation. This kind of thinking is oblivious to the fact that foreign religions took root in many African countries because the Indigenous people already had an idea of a Supreme Being or God.

The irony of Europeans assessing African spiritual and religious beliefs as evil when they were themselves involved in dehumanizing, kidnapping and trafficking African people for centuries, seems however to not be questioned to this day by many African followers of these religions.

Monoculture of Cash Crops

The colonists forced specific countries to produce only some types of crops and made impossible a diversified agriculture in African countries. This was engineered so that different colonial powers would have the monopoly on specific crops and trade them with other buyers. Once manually produced in African countries, any refining process that involved factories was conducted in Europe. As Walter Rodney puts it: “It was an inescapable feature of colonialism as a whole, based on the understanding that the international division of labor aimed at skills in the metropolises and low-level manpower in the dependencies”. Decades later, this statement reminds accurate.

The Invention of the African Woman

In her book, ‘The invention of women’, Oyeronke Oyewumi presents how in pre-colonial Yorubaland, social relations were largely based on age and seniority and not on gender or biological sex. There is, however, evidence that when Britain invaded and colonized Yorubaland, patriarchy and the submission of women to men was present in Britain.

In Britain, access to power was gender-based [...]. The system of indirect rule introduced by the British colonial government recognized the male chief’s authority at the local level but did not acknowledge the existence of female chiefs.

It is no coincidence also that global British colonialism in the world was facilitated through the corporation, which is essentially a capitalist institution for “manpower”. Not only were Black people seen as inferior to White people, Black women were also seen as inferior to Black men and to both White men and women. As Oyewumi puts it: ‘African females ... were dominated, exploited and inferiorized as Africans together with African men and then separately inferiorized and marginalized as African women.’ While boys and men received an education that prepared them to apply for positions in the colonial regime, girls and women’s education focused on embroidery and sewing.

Becoming the Colonizer

A long-lasting impact of colonialism is the identity crisis and trauma it caused in the way Black skin and Africa are perceived or talked about. Colourism, that is favouring Black people of lighter hue while stigmatizing and marginalizing Black people of darker hues, can be traced back to slavery and colonialism. During slavery a lighter hue often indicated that somebody was mixed and therefore the offspring of a White person (typically from non-consensual sexual relations with enslaved Black women). This would consequently warrant Black people with lighter skin relatively more privileges than enslaved people with darker skin.

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As whiteness became increasingly associated with civility, beauty, and desirability, if a Black person was of a lighter hue, mixed or not, they would typically face less discrimination and could feel closer to whiteness and the opportunities reserved for White people. Centuries of normalized anti-Blackness and whiteness worshipping during colonialism have unsurprisingly resulted in skin-bleaching and hair strengthening practices which are still common and normalized to this day on the continent.

Afterthought

Any expression that only ties Africa or African countries to inferior standards, or that justify inappropriate behaviours (e.g. corruptions, ethnic bigotry, violence, etc.) by saying “this is Africa”, also illustrate long-lasting internalized colonialism as they oversimplify and generalize African practices and cultures to associate them only with negative connotations and undesirable traits. As Dr. JE Kwegyir Aggrey said, it is time that Africans and those who are committed to Africa’s liberation from a colonial paradigm internalize that “only the best is good enough for Africa”.

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