

The Violence of Colonialism and the Exploitation of Africa. The Myth of Independence

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Global Research, September 19, 2021

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

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“When missionaries came to Africa, we had the land, they had the bible. We closed our eyes to pray. When we opened them, we had the bible and they had the land.” (Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu(1))

The usual portrayal of Africa is of a continent whose people are backwards, unable to move beyond a series of ethnic rivalries and ruled by war-mongering dictators.

The mainstream media rarely ask “What role did rich nations play in getting those leaders into power and keeping them there?” Analysis of almost any African country highlights the worst aspects of the international system, whether it is providing weapons to help dictators get into power, or economic conditions, imposed by the IMF, which make it difficult for well-meaning leaders to reduce poverty. It provides excellent examples of how the combination of war and economic exploitation work together to allow rich nations to achieve their aims.(2) At the same time this causes devastating consequences for people in African countries, with violence, rape, extreme poverty and the spread of diseases all feeding on each other.(3) Throughout Africa, the main players are the US, Britain and France, with China gradually increasing its influence.

The Richest Continent On Earth

The importance of Africa’s natural resources was recognised hundreds of years ago. Rich countries have pursued them ever since. There are many valuable minerals that powerful people are prepared to fight wars over. People in war zones often refer to the term, war GODs, meaning Gold, Oil and Diamonds. Wars have occurred repeatedly in Angola, the Congo, Ghana and Sierra Leone as there is so much profit to be made from controlling the diamond trade.(4) Cobalt and Niobium are used to make equipment that has to work in extreme conditions and are therefore used in space, weaponry, nuclear reactors, submarines, chemical refineries, blast furnaces and oil tankers.

Coltan is used in mobile phones, computers and video games and is therefore in great demand by corporations from advanced nations. Central Africa holds 80% of the world’s

cobalt reserves and 60% of the world's cobalt.(5) It is estimated that the resources of a single country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are worth \$24 trillion, but little of this wealth is used to benefit the poor. For overseas companies, dictators and warlords, it can be profitable to exploit these resources during both peacetime and war. A proper government expects to be properly paid. In war zones, corrupt governments who assist big corporations can get away, literally, with murder. Rich countries support repressive regimes so their corporations can continue extracting these resources.

Colonial Exploitation

Throughout history we find evidence that white people have regarded black people as inferior. Examples of these attitudes can be found in the speeches of many famous people. Field Marshall Montgomery once said of Africa's resources "The African is a complete savage, incapable of developing these resources himself".(6) This attitude has been used by US, British and European politicians to justify appalling treatment of many people in Africa, whilst stealing their resources.

Until just after the second world war, Africa was divided up into European colonies, mostly British and French. Many people in Britain have been brainwashed into believing that colonialism was mostly about rich countries 'taking civilization to the natives'. The evidence strongly contradicts this. It was mostly about rich countries plundering resources for their own benefit. Large quantities of crops and raw materials were brought to Britain from its colonies at prices well below the going rate.(7) This involved huge amounts of violence against the local populations, including widespread murder, torture and rape.

As a by-product of the colonial system, some countries gained a railway system, but this was primarily to transport resources to coastal ports, and to move soldiers inland quickly. Some of the population received education, and some countries gained a civil service, but this was just a small minority who effectively administered the system on behalf of their British rulers. The British governor in Sudan once said "We have been able to limit education to the sons of chiefs and native administrative personnel."(8) Data for Tanzania suggests that when Tanzania gained independence in 1961, only one person in six could read.(9) The country only had 2 engineers and 12 doctors. After three decades of development after independence, almost everyone could read and the country had trained thousands of doctors, engineers and teachers. Most other African countries had been similarly under-developed by their European colonisers.(10)

Neo-colonialism: The Myth Of Independence

After World War 2 it became clear that European countries were no longer able to continue controlling their colonies. Britain and France did not give up their empires easily. There was widespread violence as people fought for their independence. Winston Churchill is remembered for being a successful war leader but he was also a 'stubborn imperialist'. Colonies were eventually granted independence, but often on terms that were acceptable to Britain, France and other colonial powers. The term independence is an excellent example of government propaganda. A 1947 report stated that we (the British government) must "convert formal into informal empire". Colonialism did not really end. It merely continued in a different form, which has been called neo-colonialism. Rich nations tried to ensure that the new governments of their former colonies would continue to allow European companies to control mineral and other resources. A Foreign Office memo stated "Britain must ensure that any major obligations it gives up are taken over by its friends."(11)

The political systems in these countries changed, but in some cases the economic systems did not. After independence, some countries continued with their colonial role of providing a small number of crops or minerals, and this still continues today. In Kenya there were, and still are, large numbers of highly profitable mines and estates. In the 1950s British rulers in Kenya slaughtered, tortured and locked up hundreds of thousands of Kenyans who objected to the way they were exploited. Kenya eventually gained its independence in 1963 but before that, land was redistributed in a way that created a small class of landowners and a large class of people without land.(12) The landowners effectively became the new ruling class. They do not represent their poorest people and they have followed policies that benefitted themselves and foreign elites.

Some African leaders realised that these arrangements were too generous to colonial powers. They wanted to use the resources of their country for the benefit of their people. When they tried to re-negotiate contracts for oil, uranium or other minerals, they found themselves being overthrown by new leaders backed by rich countries. This system of rich countries trying to continue exploiting the region using corrupt leaders is the root cause of many of the problems in Africa. Of the 107 African leaders replaced between 1960 and 2003, two thirds were murdered, jailed or slung into exile. Up until 1979, 59 African leaders were toppled or assassinated. Only three retired peacefully and not one was voted out of office. No African ruler ever lost an election until 1982.(13) Rich nations have been active behind the scenes during many of these problems.

Uganda is a good example. Uganda gained its independence in 1961. The leader there, Milton Obote, had a mixed record, but in his early years he tried to create policies that were designed to help many of his people, including some of the poorest. Representatives at the British Foreign Office recognised that these policies were in the best interests of the people, but not in the interests of British corporations. The British Government objected to these policies, worried that it would set a precedent that other countries would follow. (Sudan nationalised many foreign-owned businesses shortly afterwards.) Idi Amin was a soldier in the Ugandan army and he took power in a violent coup. Despite knowing that he was a mass murderer, Britain supplied him with weapons, believing that his government would be better for British interests. It is estimated that over 300,000 people died during his rule. Britain only stopped supporting him when other countries realised how extreme he was, and his connection to Britain became an embarrassment.(14)

The French Still Exploit Africa Too

These problems also occur in those countries that were French colonies. For nearly 40 years (until 2005), a brutal dictator called Eyadema Gnassingbe governed the small West African country of Togo(15) but was rarely mentioned in the Western press. You may not be familiar with him because, on the whole, he followed policies that were acceptable to French elites, and was therefore rarely criticised by leaders from rich countries. In another former French colony, the Ivory Coast, French companies own almost half the land and they still control the water and electricity, ports, railways, tobacco, rubber, construction, public works, telecoms, banking and insurance.(16)

The US are now the dominant power in Africa

With the US's rise to power after World War 2, it has gradually become the major player in Africa. In 1960, the CIA and the Belgian government helped to overthrow and then

assassinate Patrice Lumumba, the leader of Zaire (now called the DRC), in order to replace him with the dictator, Mobutu.(17) He ruled until 1997, stealing at least \$4 billion during that time. He was a murderous tyrant who tortured and executed political opponents. The US supplied him with large quantities of weapons, which he used to repress his own people. The US has exploited the region ever since by helping other repressive regimes in neighbouring countries.

Rwanda and Uganda have become the power-centre for US control of central Africa. They help the US exploit minerals in the region.(18) In the 1990s, the mainstream media talked about 'the Rwandan genocide' where millions of people were murdered. However, the media failed to explain that the violence was by both sides at different times, and that one group was backed by the US and Britain, and the other side was backed by France.(19) The US-backed leaders now control the region, and French is being replaced by English as the main language in some areas. The violence began years earlier and continues today. Rape, murder, child trafficking and sexual slavery are commonplace.(20) The huge death toll is mostly due to famine, malnutrition and disease.(21) America has supplied weapons to many of the groups involved in the fighting, and British weapons exports to the region are at record levels.(22)

Control By The IMF

Some African countries are run by leaders who would genuinely like to help their poorest people, but they are heavily constrained by international organizations, such as the IMF and the WTO (Discussed in earlier posts.) In one analysis of IMF policies in Africa, the conclusion was that these policies had failed in 31 out of 34 countries. Millions of people are still dying from malnutrition and disease, having applied IMF policies for decades. Some of these countries, such as Nigeria, were once classed as middle-income countries, after making significant progress before the IMF became involved, but are now listed among the poorest countries in the world, with as much as 70% of the population living in poverty.(23) Foreign companies can make huge profits because there is little to stop them exploiting the locals, who have virtually no rights. The privatisation of healthcare and the corporate control of basic resources in Africa has been a disaster for many, particularly the poorest.

A country like Zambia provides a good example of how the current economic system virtually guarantees that some countries will remain in poverty. Zambia was doing quite well after independence. By the early 1970's it had become one of Africa's richest nations by following sensible policies, such as lots of government spending on healthcare and education. But almost all of its export earnings came from copper. The price of copper plummeted because there was too much being produced in other countries, such as Chile. At the same time, the price of imported oil rocketed. The prices of both oil and copper were manipulated by organisations from other countries, beyond the control of the Zambian government. It needed to borrow money from the IMF, but the IMF imposed the conditions outlined in earlier posts. Zambia has been extremely poor ever since.(24)

What about China?

The mainstream media repeatedly carry stories about China exploiting Africa. However, the arrangements that China has with African countries have so far been much less exploitative than the arrangements that the US and the former European colonial powers have had.(25)

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This article was first posted at medium.com/elephantsintheroom

Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda, and explaining war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.

Notes

1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Tutu

A similar quote is also attributed to Jomo Kenyatta.

2) Eric Ture Muhammad, 'Africa: US Covert Action Exposed', Corpwatch, April 25, 2001, at <https://www.corpwatch.org/article/africa-us-covert-action-exposed>

Mark Curtis, *Ambiguities of Power*, p.212

3) Kathleen Kern, 'The Human Cost Of Cheap Cell Phones', in Steven Hiatt, *A Game As Old As Empire*, pp.93-112

4) 'Central Africa: Diamonds Economy', at <http://www.africafocus.org/docs02/cent0206.php>

5) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coltan>

6) Mark Weber, 'General Montgomery's 'Racist Masterplan'', *The Journal for Historical Review*, March/April 1999, at http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v18/v18n2p33_Weber.html

7) Mark Curtis, *Ambiguities of Power*, p.16

8) 'Darfur: Origins of a Catastrophe', Feb 19, 2006, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/16/AR2006021601898.html

9) The Heart of Africa: Interview with Julius Nyerere on Anti-Colonialism, *New Internationalist Magazine*, issue 309, Jan-Feb 1999, at www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/30/049.html

10) Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 1972

11) Cohen-Caine Report, cited in Mark Curtis, *Ambiguities of Power*, p.16

12) Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit*, p.331

13) Global Issues, 'Conflicts In Africa: Introduction', at <http://www.globalissues.org/Geopolitics/Africa/Intro.asp>

14) Mark Curtis, *Unpeople*, pp.245-261.

Obote did regain power some years later and proved to be not much better than Uganda's other leaders.

15) Gnassingbe Eyadema, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnassingb%C3%A9_Eyad%C3%A9ma

16) Boubacar Boris Diop, 'Ivory Coast: Colonial Adventure', Le Monde Diplomatique, April 2005, at <https://mondediplo.com/2005/04/10diop>

17) William Blum, *Killing Hope*, pp.156-162

The British intelligence agency, MI6, might also have been involved in the assassination of Lumumba, see Gordon Corera, 'MI6 and the death of Patrice Lumumba', BBC News, 2 April 2013, at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-22006446>

18) 'Report of The Panel of Experts On The Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of The Democratic Republic of The Congo', at www.un.org/News/dh/latest/drcongo.htm

19) Michael Chossudovsky, *The Globalization of Poverty*, pp.103-122

Wayne Madsen, *Genocide and Covert Operations in Africa*, p.478

20) For detailed information on Central Africa see Keith Harmon Snow, at <http://allthingspass.com/journalism.php?catid=14>

Annie Kelly, 'Sexual slavery rife in Democratic Republic of the Congo, says MSF', The Guardian, 23 July 2014, at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/jul/23/sexual-slavery-democratic-republic-congo-msf>

21) Zofsha Merchant, 'Democratic republic of the Congo', World Without Genocide, May 2020, at <http://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/congo>

22) 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly: A decade of Labour's arms exports', Saferworld, May 2007, at <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/264-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly—a-decade-of-labours-arms-exports>

Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit*, p.190 for information about Britain supplying weapons to both sides in the Congo.

AOAV, 'UK arms exports to the DRC, Action on Armed Violence, 23 Nov 2018, at <https://aoav.org.uk/2018/uk-arms-export-to-the-democratic-republic-of-congo/>

23) Sam Bramlett, 'Top 10 facts about poverty in Nigeria', The Borgen Project, 25 Feb 2018, <https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-poverty-in-nigeria/>

24) Ngaire Woods, *The Globalizers*, pp.141-178

25) David Haroz, 'China in Africa: Symbiosis or Exploitation', *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol.35, No.2, Summer 2011, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45289533>

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