

European Christian Evangelism and Cultural Erasure in Colonial Africa

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It is often argued that the colonization of the African continent in the 19th and 20th century was only made possible through the use of professional military infiltration. While the use of a professional military force was one of the ways in which Europeans colonized African territories, it was not the only way. In addition to military force, many Europeans utilized Christian evangelism and cultural erasure as a means of pacification. Many arguments made about colonialism in Africa point to evangelism and cultural erasure as goals of European imperialism, while other arguments boast that the European powers only wished to colonize for the purpose of economic and resource exploitation. Knowing that most of these theories have grit and evidence to back them up, it is most productive to study how they interact and support each other. Instead of insisting that one theory is absolutely more legitimate than another, it is considerable to identify their causal relationship in the grand scheme of European colonialism in Africa. European powers such as Belgium and Great Britain used Christian evangelism and cultural erasure as tools of pacification in order to gain economic resources in African colonies.

When considering the role of religion in the European colonization of Africa, it is essential to speak of paternalist theory. European paternalism is the idea that Africans were to be seen as the children of Europeans. When they arrived in African territories, their goal was to make the natives feel as though they needed Europeans as father figures that could guarantee salvation in the afterlife following an impoverished and oppressed life.¹ Ruth Slade, author of The Belgian Congo, emphasizes this in her work when she insists, “‘You are my father and my mother’, a phrase often used by Africans addressing a European administrator, expressed very well their sense of dependence upon the invaders who were changing the old patterns of tribal society with frightening speed.”² King Leopold II of Belgium was infamous and known for

¹ Ruth Slade, The Belgian Congo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 1-5.

² Slade 3.

implementing religious paternalism and oppression in Congo. In his letter to the missionaries in Belgian Congo, he boasted, “You must singularly insist on their total submission and obedience, avoid developing the spirit in schools, teach students to read and not to reason.”³ In this vein, Belgian colonists would teach the people of Congo to stay completely impoverished and out of power, for this was the only way to reach salvation and goodness in the afterlife. In other words, the religious paternal attitude towards Africans in British and Belgian colonies was meant to pose missionary colonists as the “gatekeepers” of heaven. In fact, there were even British organizations of missionaries who called themselves the White Fathers and the Holy Ghost Fathers.⁴ In name and method, European colonial missionaries were attempting to gain control through religious paternalism.

Not only did Belgian and British missionaries teach Africans that they could only reach salvation through conversion and obedience, but they also taught them that this was also the only way to become human. It was common to teach them in missionary lessons that to be African is to be subhuman, and the only way to gain full humanity was through European Christianity. Dr. Etim E. Okon emphasizes this point by stating,

“The White man was theoretically placed at the top of the hierarchy, while the black man who was deemed irredeemably inferior and senseless was placed at the bottom. Thus the conquest of Africa and the subsequent scramble and partition of the entire continent were carried out supposedly in the interest of African who required many years of tutelage to become normal human beings.”⁵

³ Luiz Arnaut, “Letter from King Leopold II of Belgium to Colonial Missionaries, 1883,” Departamento De Historia (1990): 1

⁴ Toyin Ialola, Africa; Colonial Africa, 1885-1939 (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2002)

⁵ Etim E. Okon, “Christian Missions and Colonial Rule in Africa: Objective and Contemporary Analysis.” European Scientific Journal. 10.17 (1994): 197-200

In Belgian colonies, the humanization process was encompassed by the concept of “evolues,” in which any African that completed education in a Belgian missionary schools would be eventually considered human.⁶ However, regardless of the Christian social pseudo-evolutionary process, it was prospectively a tool of social control. This can be proven by the fact that even when African people would follow these processes, they were still considered second class and subhuman being citizens. After they completed the process, they were still not allowed to participate in any local or state government roles, or any other position of power for that matter.⁷ While colonizers and missionaries insisted that colonialism was dogmatically beneficial, it was clear that the purpose of missionary work was not to religiously save Africans in the name of God, but to subdue them for power and resource gains. The process of colonization was placed under the narrative that European presence was positive and necessary for African people. Europeans missionaries insisted that their way of life was sinful and in deficit because it was not adjacent to the Christian European standard. If they were made to believe that they could not become human in the eyes of an all-powerful God, unless evangelically colonized, they had little choice but to give up their territory and their way of life. Soon enough, colonial pressure caused conversion to the European Christian lifestyle to be the only safe option.

Another way in which European missionary evangelists subdued African religion and cultural values was through shaming and dismissal. European missionaries painted a picture of inhumanity and savagery as a center piece for African society. They would isolate incidents of violence and debauchery committed between Africans and exploit them as representations of the culture at large. For example, in Igbo tradition, it was common for young men to live much

⁶ Vincent B. Khapoya, The African Experience (Upper Saddle River, Pearson Education, Inc., 2013) 27-115.

⁷ Khapoya 115.

shorter lives than women because of their participation in certain rites of passage. Missionary colonists would cite this as proof of the savagery and inhumanity of Africans, but did not cover their bases when it came to hypocrisy. During this point in global social evolution, the high incidence rate of young men dying through rites of passage was not abnormal internationally. Young European men also died at much younger ages than their female counterparts, similar to young African men, through European rites of passage and cultural norms such as military participation. Regardless of the category of rite of passage particular to the culture, they are all positively correlated with the shortening of lifespans among young men. Chinua Achebe discusses this hypocrisy of culture in his fictional historical novel, Things Fall Apart. The novel is based on the Igbo town of Umuofia, which is taken over by a series of British missionaries and colonists through slow and militant infiltration of the land. The main African male character in the novel, Okonkwo, spoke of this hypocrisy by boasting,

“Does the white man understand our custom about land?” “How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion.”⁸

This fictional observation encompasses a lot about the African perspective of the European intention during rapid increase in colonialism and mission work. Achebe points out, through Okonkwo’s character, that European opinion about customs in the Igbo kingdom are not savage, but are misunderstood through cultural and historical distance. Furthermore, there is much irony in the fact that missionary evangelists were willing to shame Africans for murder or other violent incidents, but in the next instance were willing to harm them in order to subdue or take control of

⁸ Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (New York: Anchor Books, A Division of Random House, 1994) 176

them. Instead of recognizing violence as a human behavior that takes place in nearly all cultures and regions, the European missionaries framed Africans who committed violence as formidably worse.

Europeans missionaries also sought to dismiss and condemn the cultural and dynamic structure of polygamy. Through polygamy, many African tribes and groups maintained structure and kinship ties. This was seen as a cultural norm for many traditional African tribes such as the Igbo in modern Nigeria. As cited previously, many young African men lost their lives during rites of passage. This constituted a surplus women and a shortage of men, thus creating the necessity of polygamy.⁹ The condemnation of African cultures and family structures was often done in hopes of deconstructing their social structure, further dismantling the infrastructure of their society. Once the family structure that holds society together is dismantled, it is easier to take control over a group of people and their resources. Kenyan president, Jomo Kenyatta, expresses the long term effects of African family structural and cultural erasure when he emphasized, “Along with his land they rob him of his government, condemn his religious ideas, and ignore his fundamental conceptions of justice and morals, all under the name of civilization and progress.”¹⁰ The underlying principle of this logic is that cultural and economic domination are done through a series of manipulative efforts. In order to control a people, you must first control their way of life and thinking.

Similar to religious education, missionaries were involved in teaching African peoples about culture and morality out and inside the continent. While they presented their lessons as educational, in a historiographical perspective they are seemingly mediums of cultural erasure.

⁹ Khapoya 27.

¹⁰ Okon 198.

Although Christian evangelism was a major source of erasure, there are other sources of cultural condemnation and erasure that aided in the destruction of African culture and life. Furthermore, there is evidence of communications and collaboration between colonial power education and missionary education. Without the support of missionaries, colonists would have had a more difficult time taking control of the land. Conversely, missionaries would have had a harder time gaining Christian converts without the efforts of the colonizers. The relationship between colonial administration and missionaries is undeniably symbiotic, beneficial to both parties, and represented the common goal of each group, African cultural erasure.¹¹

At the very forefront of these plots against African culture was the manipulation of social Darwinist theory. Social Darwinist theory suggests that the purpose of humanity is to struggle to survive, and with that there are people who survive and those who do not. The people who survive are considered the fittest, and those who do not are deemed unfit to live.¹² While the original theory was guided by individual organisms, Europeans used the theory to explain the ‘success’ and survival of particular racialized groups of people. Many racist social Darwinists of this period would cite Charles Darwin’s The Descent of Man to prove their hateful propaganda against African people. A passage often quoted was,

“At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes, as Professor Schaaffhausen has remarked, will no doubt be exterminated. The break will then be rendered wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilised state as we may hope, than the Caucasian and some ape as low as a baboon...”¹³

¹¹ Okon 199.

¹² G. N. Uzoigwe, “Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935.” Unesco General History of Africa (1985): 22

¹³ Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998): 172

Citations of Darwin were often used as a justification of racist social theory, but it is up to interpretation whether or not his work was intentionally used for race-related colonialism.

Despite opinion on Darwin's intentions, European colonists manipulated the text to boast that they were the 'successful' and surviving group, while Africans were the 'less fit' group and inherently destined for failure. If European colonists were able to teach Africans that they were inherently less worthy, Africans were more likely to be submissive to colonial rule.

Mechanically, European colonizers oppressed African culture by the use of indirect rule in colonies. Indirect rule was used most often and championed by Great Britain in their West African colonies. British colonial rulers would allow African colonial inhabitants to keep their kings and leadership. However, this was under the condition that the African kings be heavily influenced by the opinions and demands of British government. Indirect rule was used as a method of cultural erasure from the inside. If African natives were being taught European values and lessons from African leaders, it would not seem as violent or invasive.¹⁴ The same ethos of control is evident in King Leopold II of Belgium's letter to missionaries in Congo when he expresses, "Your essential role is to facilitate the task of administrators and industrials, which means that you will go to interpret the gospel in the way it will be best to protect your interests in that part of the world."¹⁵ Furthermore, the British and Belgian missionaries utilized the gift of capital to African kings in exchange for their style of leadership becoming more Eurocentric.

Specifically, indirect rule in British West African colonies resulted in the pitting of ethnic groups against one another. Author of The African Experience, Vincent B. Khapoya, highlights this by stating, "One significant political consequence of indirect rule was that it reinforced

¹⁴ Khapoya 119.

¹⁵ Luiz 1.

separate ethnic identities and stunted the development of a national or colony-wide political consciousness.”¹⁶ When colonial powers were able to divide ethnic groups within larger African identities, they were able to distract them from the possibility of Europeans being the enemy. Furthermore, the degradation of inter-ethnic peace and stability created a greater sense of segregation and consequently destroyed the possibility of African unity in the face of the evils of indirect exploitative colonialism.

Explaining the relationship between European colonists and missionaries such as those from Great Britain and Belgium and the African people is complicated and dependent on historiographical perspective. In the Eurocentric colonial view, the invasions of African territories were intended to develop them into the proclaimed moral perfection of western standards such as capitalism and Christianity. They would defend their invasion of these territories through colonial and missionary mediums as intentionally positive, while the perspective of this work declares that the latter were mediums and methods used to exploit the African continent and its’ peoples. Furthermore, European powers such as Belgium and Great Britain used Christian evangelism and cultural erasure as tools of pacification in order to gain economic resources in African colonies. The common goals found between European colonists and missionaries paint a picture of their isolated and interactive intentions of empirical expansion. Studying similarities and relationships between these two European influences in colonial Africa can help those who wish to problematize the unjust legacy of international relations in the 19th and 20th centuries.

¹⁶ Khapoya 119.

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