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Debra Nicholson
Bowling Green State University

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What to Keep, What to Let Go: A Case Study of Indians from Nyasaland

Debra Nicholson, SAGE student, Bowling Green State University

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Last November, I visited Calgary, Canada, where I met a woman of Indian descent who informed me that she had grown up in Malawi, emigrated to London in 1974, and to Canada in 1981. I was intrigued by her story and recently followed up on my initial face-to-face conversation with Mrs. Daniel (a pseudonym to protect her privacy) on WhatsApp. Although we spoke for nearly three hours, there was, disappointingly, very little that was surprising about her childhood in British colonial Nyasaland, now independent Malawi, the original proposal for this paper. However, one comment Mrs. Daniel made did catch my attention. The memory she found most difficult was recalling the way in which African servants were used in her household to do work they could have done themselves. As I pondered her response to my question, I wondered, out of all the possible memories of childhood, why would the treatment of African servants in her household be the most difficult memory? Mrs. Daniel's comment seemed heavy with racial implications.

In this paper, I explore the position of Indians in the British imperial project in Africa. In particular, I examine their emplacement "in the middle" of the racial hierarchy established by the British. I demonstrate how Indians were put into racialized settings both within the colonial administration and socially. I suggest that Indians were complicit in this racial hierarchy not because they were innately racist, but because they were *colonized* to act in racist ways. In this way, I attempt to theorize a concept of "colonized complicity," whereby the experience of being

“Othered” in colonial Africa was internalized by Indians not only in terms of *being* oppressed along racial lines but also by being *oppressors* along racial lines.

In order to make my case for the concept of colonized complicity, I review the definition of postcolonialism. Then, I utilize the example of Goans (a particular sub-group of Indians) in Africa as a case study in the imperial development of the complicit colonized colonizer. I will then briefly analyze two examples of inquiry that benefit from the application of the concept of colonized complicity. Finally, I will offer one historical and one contemporary example to demonstrate the ongoing legacy of colonized complicity.

“Postcolonialism” is a concept that theorizes that colonized peoples internalized the view of the colonizers who constituted them as the “Other.” John McLeod, in his book, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, offers this description of the process:

Colonialism is perpetuated in part by justifying to those in the colonising nation the idea that it is right and proper to rule over other peoples, and by getting colonised people to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things—a process we call ‘colonising the mind.’ It operates by persuading people to internalise its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonisers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world (18).

As an academic and theoretical concept, postcolonialism has been primarily occupied with the ways in which colonized peoples, cultures, and literatures have internalized or resisted the imperialists’ view of them as “Other,” and therefore “less than.” India was ruled by a British colonial administration that depended on the understanding that Indians were inferior and needed

to be civilized. Once Indians were groomed to be useful, they were sent all over the world by the Empire to expand and maintain British imperial aims.

Goa, an area along the southwest coast of the sub-continent, provided large numbers of desirable immigrants for the British colonial project. Goa was earlier colonized by the Portuguese, and inhabitants were already Westernized, Christianized, spoke some English, and were quite practiced at being colonial subjects. Like Mrs. Daniel's grandfather, who likely arrived in Africa sometime between 1915-1920, Goans "provided subordinate staff across a wide range of occupations, as cashiers, clerks, surveyors, typists, caterers, and the like working under European district chiefs" (Metcalf 181). Nevertheless, their incoming advantages only took them so far in their careers in colonial administration, as they bumped up against the racial hierarchies established by the British empire in Africa, with white administrators and colonialists at the upper echelon, Goans (and other South Asians) in the middle, and Africans at the lowest level. Goans worked closely with the British in establishing and administering colonial power; yet, they never enjoyed "full citizenship rights" from the Empire, and "were subject to discriminatory colonial legislation" (Frenz 114). In other words, Goans did the work of colonization but received perhaps few material benefits and little respect from either the British or resentful Indigenous Africans for their efforts.

Racial hierarchies and enforced segregation followed socially as well. Consequently, Goans developed their own communities, operating their own clubs, churches and schools (Frenz 136), although they were far from homogeneous and not exempt from class, caste and social status exclusions (Frenz 143). Households such as the one Mrs. Daniel grew up in employed African servants at a much lower pay scale (for more taxing work and longer working hours)

than that paid to African servants by Europeans (Dotson 277). Other diasporic Goans' comments sound eerily similar to Mrs. Daniel's comments:

You exploited people but you did not think of it as exploitation—you saw it as life. So maybe until you went out of the country to the West and back; your values were changed—but when you are in there, it was part of your life so you were chosen to be better than your neighbor—whether you merited or not (Frenz 269).

It is from within this fraught racial location—enforced hierarchies of power established by British imperialists—that Mrs. Daniel reported how African household servants were used during her childhood. Because Goans were outsourced from the sub-continent into a trans-colonial setting, empowered up to a certain extent as *ex officio* middle-manager-colonial-accomplices over Africans, they were conditioned, or colonized, to accept, or to be complicit in, the imperial racial hierarchy. This occurred, not because Goans held inherently racist views, but because when they internalized their “Othered” position, they became complicit in accepting the “Othered” otherness of Africans as well.

One could argue that South Asians like the Goans in Africa accepted the *status quo*, and the reason they accepted it so quiescently was because they were already used to hierarchal social arrangements because of the caste system, and leave it at that. One could assume that being oppressed and oppressing others was in their “DNA.”

Aside from the obvious racist, essentializing aspects of this approach, the assumption closes off other, deeper avenues of inquiry. Rather than suggesting Indians were willingly complicit as oppressive co-colonizers of Africans because of the caste system, some scholars suggest that rigid hierarchal racial distinctions were actually initiated by the British in 1871 when

they instituted the census to sort the “population by ethnic group, caste, religion, sect, gender, age, location, and population” (Tejani 41). The most important classification for imperialists was caste because they believed it was the most defining “unit” of South Asia (Tejani 42). This process of caste classification proved difficult, however, because over time, a “Muslim sect would have adopted the customs and culture of its neighboring Hindus and vice versa” (Tejani 43).

Therefore, it may be possible to argue that caste developed into more of a rigid social hierarchy via imperial means than it had been previously in South Asian societies. Caste division was a tool to use Indian bodies as capital more deliberately, based on imagined characteristics, for imperial economic and political gain (Tejani 43). (I suppose one could argue that Indians were complicit with imperialism in answering all those questions and agreeing to be classified.) Thus, the idea of Indians’ supposed racial hierarchal DNA could be contested. But you could also argue that Indians internalized the imperialists’ attitudes, essentially agreeing that the characterization of people should be based on the caste system, which would be, in my view, an example of colonized complicity.

On the other hand, some scholars suggest that Indians were not accepting of their position in the racial hierarchy, that some vigorously and vociferously advocated for equality with the British. So, for example, African Indians in Kenya were not racist in their claims for rights in the imperial hierarchy because of the community they developed while in Africa was based on Indian moral principles, and because of their “civilizational high ground;” that is, it wasn’t necessarily a struggle against Africans in a racial hierarchy but a foundational argument based on what they perceived as parity with the British (Nair 90). Thus, in this argument, African Indians in Kenya had agency insofar as they attempted to break and rise up against the racial gridlock

established by British imperialism. Nevertheless, it is important to note that although Indians frequently advocated for entitlements based on their contributions to the Africa imperial project, this may be characterized as claiming the right to be equal colonizers; itself, perhaps, a mark of colonized complicity in accepting that being able to colonize others is a good thing.

As the British African imperial project came to a close in the mid-twentieth century, vestiges of colonized complicity remained. Some decolonized African nations classified true national citizens as those of a certain essentialized ethnic or racial composition in a process called “Africanization.” That is, those who were not “African” were not permitted to stay in the newly established independent countries, despite the existence of people of other races having lived in African geographic locations for centuries. The most notable illustration of this view of natural citizenship rights was the 1972 Ugandan expulsion of 75,000 Asians (Frenz 236). I would argue that colonized complicity factored into this deportation order: President Idi Amin, of the newly independent country of Uganda, acted on the internalized colonial assumption that true Ugandan value (and citizenship) could be based only on purely racial terms, rather than recognizing that Asians as well as Africans had been existing under imperial power relations which “Othered” people of color and caused people of color to “Other” others as well.

One might say there is a continued legacy of colonized complicity. A recent example involves the installation of a Gandhi statue at a Ghanaian university prior to the visit of India’s President Pranab Mukherjee in September, 2016. Professors and others objected to the statue honoring Gandhi because of his not-so-well-known remarks negatively comparing black South Africans and Indians. The news report took pains to repeat Gandhi’s defense of Indians’ rights in South Africa:

Ours is one continual struggle against a degradation sought to be inflicted upon us by the Europeans, who desire to degrade us to the level of the raw Kaffir whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a certain number of cattle to buy a wife and, then, pass his life in indolence and nakedness (Kermeliotis).

Again, I would argue that the university protest stems from a position of colonized complicity; that is, having been “Othered” by imperialists and having internalized the notion of racial hierarchies, the previously colonized may not accept that Gandhi’s racist expressions about black South Africans were *also* a product of imperialism.

Marie-Aude Fouéré observes in her article, “‘Indians are Exploiters and Africans Idlers!’: Identity Formation and Socio-Economic Conditions in Tanzania,” that despite the rise of a black Tanzanian middle class, black Tanzanians and Tanzanian Indians (who have been there for generations) still view each other with suspicion and “social distancing,” reproducing the racial hierarchies instituted by the British imperialists (Fouéré 392), again providing evidence of the ongoing legacy of colonized complicity.

My intervention in the discussion about imperialism and postcolonialism is that one of the effects is not only that oppression can be visited upon the colonized, but that the imperial system can cause the colonized to oppress others. I argue that the colonized not only internalized the imperialists’ views about themselves as “Other,” but also internalized the imperialists’ views of others as “Other.” Imperialists sought to impose their control not only as a way of exercising power by establishing a hierarchy of race, for example, between whites and people of color (the “Other”), but by ranking people of color into hierarchies, which is especially pertinent in the case of imperialism in Africa where the British Empire relied on Indians to enact their imperialist policies. I offered examples to suggest ways in which the concept of colonized complicity might

lead to the establishment of valuable research questions and interpretations that do not fall into standard (imperialist racist) explanations of Indian attitudes in Africa.

Colonized complicity leads to repercussions not only at the macro level but also at the micro, as evidenced by Mrs. Daniel's rather anguished statements about "using servants" in the Malawian household of her childhood. While colonized complicity manifested itself at that time, it also manifests itself today. Mrs. Daniel may be ashamed of her family's behavior without realizing that taking the full blame for attitudes of the past does not account for the web of imperialist conditions that produced such attitudes, nor does her shame acknowledge the idea that there is nothing imperialists would want more than to be let off the hook for any macro or micro level repercussions from their actions, even a hundred years later.

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