

British Imperialism in Colonial Africa and the World

Antonio L. Rappa

Singapore University of Social Sciences, The Republic of Singapore

E-mail: rappa@suss.edu.sg

Abstract. At first, my intention in this article was to write about imperialism and agency in sub-Saharan Africa with a focus on British Imperialism. However, as the article evolved over the months, it became gradually clearer that the idea of the agency was not only outdated, based on various reviews, but also unwarranted. This is because of the wide range of possibilities and prospects for agents in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. Therefore, the concept of agency was removed from the title, but it does not make the importance of agency as a recourse for resisting oppression, authoritarianism, and tyranny any less important. One might think that the narratives of imperial colonial Africa have become over-mined since the *fin de siècle* but the reality is that the consequences of those narratives continue to wreak havoc in the modern African worldview regardless of how many millions have died fighting against its largesse. This is sufficient motivation to continue our struggle in the search for authenticity and agency in postcolonial Africa and modern Africa itself. This article is about the cultural logic of African society and how the social construction of village identity is contingent on tribal elders and gate-keepers, shamanism, colonial authoritarianism, and oral traditions. The logic of the African village during the postcolonial era is defined as the skewed colonial rationale for the cartographization and control of the colonial subject as part of a larger western imperialist project and the imposition of alien White rule on Africa.

Keywords: Colonial Africa, Symbolic Interpretation, Cultural Logic, western imperialism, and agency.

INTRODUCTION

To enter colonial space, the Black African subject had to bow down to their White colonial masters. The western imperialist project had taken over 500 years to evolve in general and in specifically in Africa. This article focuses on the English and British imperial project in Africa and how the British rationalized and controlled the African people by cartographization, foreign law and jurisprudence, religion and spiritual compensation, as well as language and literature. The colonial legacy in Africa has not left African society better off during the modern age as seen in the fact that African economic development lags significantly behind Middle East, South Asia, Pacific, and other developing areas across the globe (Englebert, [7]). They were boxed in within the neoliberal capitalist global economy controlled by White nations, by White people, and by the *weltanschauung* of a vast whiteness.

In addition, the existing theories of African economic performance reveal that most African states, mostly with Black populations, account for huge disparities among other Black African nations. Many theories have been

created to explain blackness and to test Black intelligence. The reason why White colonialists and postcolonial scientists measured the cranial capacities, height, weight, and IQ of Black persons is because of the presumption that blackness, incompetence, inefficiency, malaise, and backward development of Black African nations are a direct result, or so these racist White scientists believe, of the darkness of the Black mind. These so-called facts can be read in scientific journals, travel works, academic journals, as well as White literature of writers like Joseph Conrad who made no secret of his intimate thoughts about White superiority and Black inferiority. However, because of political correctness in America and Western Europe, it is virtually impossible to reveal and expose anti-Black White racist writers from the postcolonial era and thereafter.

WHITE IMPERIALISM IN AFRICA

White imperialism and colonialism of African slaves involve the distribution of power and the uneven balance of power between the colonizer and the colonized as Memmi and others have maintained. The assumption that

any performative cultural logic of imperialism in Africa involves a predominantly White western *weltanschauung* or worldview, it will lead us to an understanding of the workings of White western culture, governance, religion, and language as agents of modernity of political change and social reform. When combined, these agents morph into a singular (though not monolithic) surface and overlay that enables the colonial bureaucrat to map out the demarcate of their Black territories and in doing so, their Black subjects.

The subjugation of blackness by whiteness is at one level a mode of symbolic interpretation popular with cultural anthropologists of the 1970s and 1980s beginning with Margaret Mead, Benedict Anderson, and their followers. Their research involved the distillation of various positivist and behavioral observations on the map of Africa.

This was how the data in cultural anthropology evolved from fact, fiction, dreams, myth, legend, and fantasy within a series of psychoanalytic dimensions in which dreams turn into myths; myths turn into legends; and legends turn into meaningful orientalist histories, hence, allowing for the decantation of cultural meaning that has come to subsume meaning and discourse in modern Africa. This stymied the establishment of authentic and indigenous texts forcing local writers to conform to the grammar and vocabulary of modern African writing. Modern African writers like Fanon, wa Thiong'o, and Achebe, e.g., were forced to write in English rather than in their own local dialects.

Frantz Omar Fanon, also known as Ibrahim Frantz Fanon, was a Black, sometimes Muslim, West Indian psychiatrist, and political philosopher from the French colony of Martinique. In addition, the impact of western British colonialism and the imperialism of the English language, not only made him write in English but framed his theoretical worldview in postcolonial studies, critical theory, and Marxism. In contrast, Léopold Sédar Senghor, a Senegalese poet, politician, and cultural theorist, made use of the western colonial idiom to elevate himself to become the first president of Négritude Senegal.

Postcolonialism is the critical academic study of the cultural, political, and economic legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the impact of human control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands. More specifically, it is a critical theory analysis of the history, culture, literature, and discourse of (usually European) imperial power.

Postcolonialism encompasses a wide variety of approaches, and theoreticians may not always agree on a common set of definitions. On a simple level, anthropological study may seek to build a better understanding of colonial life—based on the assumption that the colonial rulers are unreliable narrators—from the point of view of the colonized people. On a deeper level, postcolonialism examines the social and political power relationships that sustain colonialism and neocolonialism,

including the social, political, and cultural narratives surrounding the colonizer and the colonized. This approach may overlap with studies of contemporary history and may also draw examples from anthropology, historiography, political science, philosophy, sociology, and human geography. Sub-disciplines of postcolonial studies examine the effects of colonial rule on the practice of feminism, anarchism, literature, and Christian thought. Peter van Der Veer and Carol Breckenridge as postcolonial scholars were significantly impaired, like McClintock, by their own White scholarship, referencing to White scholarship and upholding of the white idiom under which they lay claim to the cacophony of their careers within the tenements of White postcolonial scholarship. After all, it was always true that the propagation of White colonial culture and civilization was much less about spreading the “good news” of the Christian Church and more so the tragic events of the African Church as a debased form of White religiosity.

METHOD

The method used is a normative approach to examine White imperialism in Africa through the existing Native literature (e.g., Achebe; Fanon; Ngugi wa Thiong'o; and Léopold Sédar Senghor) and White western literature (e.g., McClintock; Memmi; Said; and Vanderveer). However, this approach is not exclusively limited to such a Black authorial/Native-White western dichotomy. I would like to think that this is a worthy approach because it is non-invasive and anti-interpretive. It does not attempt to reduce African blackness and colonial European whiteness to anything that is a part of their original selves. This article attempts to reveal the possible *weltanschauung* of the oppressive White English bureaucrat *vis-à-vis* the suppressed Black African People. The approach has been organized into a brief history of the Roman Empire itself and something I refer to as the Imperial Way, followed by a mixed review of the scholarly landscape.

THE IMPERIAL WAY AND THE BRITISH IMPERIAL WAY

The Appian Way should not be confused with the Imperial Way but with the very beginnings of the latter. The Appian Way was the first Roman metaled road for transporting troops and military supplies since 312 B.C. when it was first built. The Appian Way was a future-oriented technology that came to mark the nature of Roman occupation and expansion. It was part of the Roman architecture of circuses, plumbing, memorial tablets, aqueducts, colosseums, marble statues, double-story houses, imperial barracks, stadia, and metaled roads (Zenith, 1997:691). In the African case, such architecture was mainly found in the main Carthaginian cities (Canter, 1940:197–208), especially

after the end of the Third Punic War. Such architecture was also used to entertain local populations throughout the empire including the people of Corinth (Romano, [25]:585–611).

It ought to have been less surprising among lesser-educated historians and higher-educated scholars that a dire transformation was required from the Appian Way to the Imperial manner of the now foreboding rise of Britannia. With the losses incurred by the Spanish Armada, the end of the Napoleonic era after Elba, and the destruction of the Russian Imperial Tsarist Fleet, the British would literally take over all European colonial territories. These were mapped out and demarcated by British cartographers and French ones at gunpoint. The old Belgian gunboat diplomacy alluded by Joseph Conrad (in his *White Heart of Darkness* novella) paved the way forward in the post-Napoleonic era. Various surveys of British colonial dominions and territories from at least 1470 to 1889 conducted in English led to a profusion of English as the lingua franca and, hence, the main language used in London and its subject colonies. This was the major basis of 20th-century postcolonial theorists and scholars such as Ann McClintock, R. Guna, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Gyan Prakash, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Tom Smith, and others like Pradeep A. Jagannathan. These Anglo-Surveys since the 14th century were meant to cartograph the successes rather than the failures of the Ancient Regime of Great Britain and of the British Commonwealth.

The British imperial way required to have an imperial head of states such as the Empress of India or the Emperor of India. Most importantly, imperial way refers to the possession of an empire, of which the British one was the largest the world had ever seen. The British empire stretched from the Pacific and Asia through the Atlantic, the Middle East, and Africa itself. The Imperial Way is a metaphor I use to define an approach used by the ancient Romans and Roman emperors. The Imperial Way of the Roman Empire lasted from 27 B.C. to A.D. 476. This was when Rome controlled Western Europe (except for Scotland and parts of modern France) to Africa. In contrast, the Imperial Way is a metaphor for how such ancient architecture represented the crowning achievements of Roman imperialism. It is considered a way forward that was used by the Roman emperors and the Roman Empire, a sort of road map, for its governance structures and controls over vast regions of Europe and Africa. It is from the Roman Imperial Way that the British Imperial Way was modeled. And that adaptation was highly effective because most major historians argue that Britain eventually governed and ruled 1/3 of the world's area. In turn, the British administrators ensured the cross-migration of various British citizens, colonial bureaucrats, and colonial subjects. These were sent on work ships, prison ships, and the lot to India, Malaya, Australia (an infamous prison colony), and New Zealand.

The British imperial way did not provide the kind of security and protection that it advertised at the onset. The British during the Second World War, e.g., not only lost most of Burma and all of Malaya but that of Fortress Singapore. The Fall of Singapore was a distinct and indelible blemish on the so-called colonial record of Britannia. The post-war years of the once Great British Empire endeavored to uphold various values and customs and naval traditions that were once celebrated under Britannia's Navigation Laws and English Civil Law. These laws transformed much of the legal jurisprudence of the Empire under the Imperial Way of the British Imperial System as they did simple weights and measures.

COLONIZING THE CULTURAL MILIEU OF BLACKNESS

This review identifies and raises several interesting issues within the socio-political and cultural milieu of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Black Africa. This is because the literature is wide as it is deep but not all the issues explored by Black and White scholars are sufficiently interesting (Curtin, [3]; Irele, [12]). Scholars often focus on the abuses of White colonialism but the reality is that even before the First Contact, there was already Black violence embedded within its culture and society. This was apparent from the Black African oral tradition in terms of human sacrifices in precolonial West Africa (Law, [15]).

The Nigerian scholar Peter Ekeh and others attempted in the mid-1970s to introduce the idea of two public faces of Africa but this has not gained any significant attention (Ekeh, [6]). Part of the reason for this theoretical non-ascendancy was the old assumption that a monolithic public realm remains steadfastly within the realm of utopian politics. Of course, there have been scholars who have attempted even more outlandish works such as the concept of trade unionism in colonial Africa. This is natural with the exception of South African White trade unionism.

In effect, Gilman showed that there was an innate sexual intimacy among Black servants and their White masters. Black-on-Black sexual activities and intimacies were perceived by Whites as being deviant and predictable as early as the 18th century (Gilman, [10]:204). Hence, Gilman claims that such deviant sexuality among Black men and Black women became icons for White-on-White sexuality. Hence, for lesbian cases, it makes the female sexuality even more capricious if not impulsive and whimsical, a kind of game within the larger game of gender. Much of the scholarship on gender in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s in fact emerged out of British imperialism that built on earlier forms of Western European imperialism under what I refer to as the Imperial Way. Of particular interest is Litwack's claim that Whites fear educated Blacks. This

claim did not originate with Litwack but has existed for a long time. However, what is interesting is that his 1998 work does not say anything about women, Black women, in particular, *vis-à-vis* this social phenomenon. The White man's fear of the educated Negro and persons of color referred to the American case and was not applied to Black Africans, South African Blacks, West Africans, or sub-Saharan Africans.

There is a comparative branch of colonial development (Lange et al., [14]) that also examines Western Europe (Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, and British colonies that ranked differently on the political scale of ideological development (De Marco, [4]). For example, Roland De Marco's work typifies a pro-fascist assimilationist regime under *Il Duce* Benito Mussolini. More interestingly, there are more recent works such as Manning's one that claims to analyze the costs and benefits of colonialism but in effect, the benefits all accrue to the White colonial masters, while the costs are all born by the Black colonial subjects (Conklin, [2]). And those focus merely on the religious aspects of White western colonialism in Africa as part of nationalism, human rights, Igbo tribalism, and the state and regionalism (Péclard, 1961; Ekechi, [5]; Ubah, 1998; Gomez, [11]; Koama, 2016). Even Tzarist Russia was part of that famous scramble for Africa in the mid to late 1800s when a Cossack leader attempted to unite the Ethiopian Coptic Church with the (later Eastern) Russian Orthodox Church (Rollins, [24]:432-438). The brevity of their works and my review of the literature have shown that there were also clear sexual tensions between Black servants and their White masters since the 19th century. These tensions also led to the creation of an iconoclastic series of Black sexuality that formed part of Black sexual perversion as well as White sexual depravity. Men and women are after all sexual beings throughout their lives.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, the concept of British Imperialism in Africa and the world was at first the primary purpose of this analysis. I wanted to analyze imperialism and agency in Africa with a focus on the torrid nature of British Imperialism. Later, Asian historians would eventually debunk the flaccidity and distortions of Oxford and Cambridge University historians who dominated with style, arrogance, and grave scholarly inaccuracies. It was the non-White historian and cultural anthropologist who would entrench the Native right to writing. These were to form the first generations of agents of the New World Order. Therefore, the concept of agency was removed from the title, but it does not make the importance of agency as a recourse for resisting oppression, authoritarianism, and tyranny any less important. We thus are now in a position to ask how modern times can identify and quell racist writings based on British and

White imperial dogma; if only to uncover and to learn in modern times the negative examples created by the Imperial Way and the subjectivity of Blacks and blackness and domination of whiteness and White colonialism? Racism presents its self-definition when politicians entrench and define what the Black, White, Native, and Indigenous person is. Racists are those who believe in the Bell Curve of intelligence that posits Asians as possessing higher IQs than Whites, while others are ranked much lower till the moderns discover the Blacks at the bottom. Black bottomness exists in the racist mind as the lowest level of human society that it may even be considered sub-human or non-human. Blackness and whiteness are layers, some thin some thick, but often not melding into a third color. A third color would be taboo for both White and Black folk. Both coloring and mixture eventually merge and form new colors, new approaches, and new things. Indeed, the harder racists try to keep the ethnic world apart and separate, the stronger will be the urge to resist conformity and authoritarianism. Therefore, nonconformity weakens attempts at racial purity. The idea of blackness for White colonialists meant nothing less than stupendous backwardness, inferiority, stupidity, barbarism, cowardice, disorganization, poverty, superfluousness, incapacity, lasciviousness, culpability, and capriciousness. Ironically, many of the colonized Black subjects looked up to their colonial masters with awe, amazement, respect, love, admiration, and even reverence. In America, such Black men were labeled Uncle Toms because of their love and preference for their inferior station and lot in life. This is surely not the case in late modernity. Unless one is racist.

REFERENCES

- [1] Canter H. V. "Roman Civilization in North Africa." *The Classical Journal*, vol. 35, no. 4.
- [2] Conklin, Alice L. (1998) "Colonialism and Human Rights, A Contradiction in Terms? The Case of France and West Africa, 1895-1914." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 103, no. 2, pp. 419-42.
- [3] Curtin, Philip D. (1974) "The Black Experience of Colonialism and Imperialism." *Daedalus*, vol. 103, no. 2, pp. 17-29.
- [4] De Marco, Roland R. (1943) *The Italianisation of African Natives: Government Native Education in the Italian Colonies 1890-1937*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- [5] Ekechi, F. K. (1971) "Colonialism and Christianity in West Africa: The Igbo Case, 1900-1915." *The Journal of African History*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 103-15.
- [6] Ekeh, Peter P. (1975) "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 91-112.
- [7] Englebert, Pierre. (2000) "Pre-Colonial Institutions, Post-Colonial States, and Economic Development in Tropical Africa." *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 7-36.
- [8] Fanon, Franz, Omar. (1961) *Wretched of the Earth*.
- [9] Franz, Fanon, Omar. (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*.
- [10] Gilman, Sander L. (1985) "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 204-42.

- [11] Gomez, Michael A. (2013) "Africans, Religion, and African Religion through the Nineteenth Century." *Journal of Africana Religions*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 78–90.
- [12] Irele, Abiola. (1965) "Negritude or Black Cultural Nationalism." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 321–48.
- [13] Kaoma, Kapyia John. (2016) "African Religion and Colonial Rebellion: The Contestation of Power in Colonial Zimbabwe's Chimurenga of 1896–1897." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 57–84.
- [14] Lange, Matthew, et al. (2006) "Colonialism and Development: A Comparative Analysis of Spanish and British Colonies." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 111, no. 5, pp. 1412–62.
- [15] Law, Robin. (1985) "Human Sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa." *African Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 334, pp. 53–87.
- [16] Litwack, Leon F. (1998) "The White Man's Fear of the Educated Negro: How the Negro Was Fitted for His Natural and Logical Calling." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 20, pp. 100–08.
- [17] Manning, Patrick. (1974) "Analyzing the Costs and Benefits of Colonialism." *African Economic History Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 15–22.
- [18] Memmi, Albert. (1956) *The Colonizer and the Colonized*
- [19] McClintock, Anne. (1995) *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. London: Routledge.
- [20] Oluwole, Sophie B. (1997) "Culture, Gender, and Development Theories in Africa." *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 95–121.
- [21] Orr, Charles A. (1966) "Trade Unionism in Colonial Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 65–81.
- [22] Péclard, Didier. (1998) "Religion and Politics in Angola: The Church, the Colonial State and the Emergence of Angolan Nationalism, 1940–1961." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 160–86.
- [23] Price, Richard. (2006) "One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire, and Their Imperial Culture." *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 602–27.
- [24] Rollins, Patrick J. (1968) "Imperial Russia's African Colony." *The Russian Review*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 432–51.
- [25] Romano, David Gilman. (2005) "A Roman Circus in Corinth." *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, vol. 74, no. 4, pp. 585–611.
- [26] Said, Edward. (1979) *Orientalism*. Vintage Press.
- [27] Ubah, C. N. (1988) "Religious Change among the Igbo during the Colonial Period." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 71–91.
- [28] Van Der Veer, Peter and Breckenridge, Carol Zenith, Richard. (1997) "The Appian Way." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 691–691.