



“Their Color is a Diabolic Die,” Colonialism and the State of Environmental Justice in Africa

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Research Note

Abstract

Environmental justice is crucial to the discourse on the African environment since Africa bears a significant share of the world’s resources, and conversely, it is home to a large number of globally disadvantaged people, whose access to the wealth of their native lands is beyond their reach. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how colonialism and the structures it has laid down in Africa are impeding environmental justice. Content analysis was used in the data collection. In this article, drawing from the slum arrangements in the cities of four African countries colonized by the British and French as case studies, it was revealed how colonialism has caused the degeneration of the African environment. Furthermore, colonialism created a class system that has fed social and economic inequality and has resulted in an intra-racial system of oppression that has made Africa’s poorest neighborhoods more vulnerable.

Keywords: Colonialism, Environment, Justice, Slums, Vulnerability

1. Introduction

One of the casualties of colonialism in Africa was animism. Animism, according to Fikret Berkes (2001), is the ‘belief in spiritual beings’ (Berkes, 2001). African animism ensured that there was respect for nature. The belief that spirits inhabited natural things like trees allowed for the preservation of forests, in the conviction that they signified some spiritual essence. The relationship with nature in pre-colonial Africa was moderated by a spiritual consciousness. The spiritual role that forests served was that of a cathedral where people could worship. It also served as a huge resource for traditional pharmacy (Nkwi, 2017). The biodiversity of trees provided an endless range of cures to almost all known ailments and was the school where traditional herbalism was learned. It is still believed in Africa that there is no disease in Africa whose cure eludes what can be yielded from plants in the forests. The notion of a spiritual essence helped with maintaining a healthy space between human technology and ecological habitats. Oluwaseye *et al* have criticized the condescension with which traditional animism is treated. They argue that the conception of traditional animism as paganistic and primitive is a disarticulation of the concept. They further claimed that animism is closely tied to nature (Oluwaseye, Olaloluwa, & Ogbulogo, 2020). Colonialism brought a disruption to the perception of nature in Africa. Since the aim of colonialism was to exploit the resources of the colonial subjects, colonialism introduced an exploitative approach toward nature. As a consequence, many forests that used to be cathedrals, have given way to many economically exploitative practices like logging and real estate development.

Ancient trees have been hewn, and exotic animals have been exterminated through forest fires started by humans. Dominguez and Luoma have argued that the predominant conservation policies that have been encouraged by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors have malignant effects on native people and their environment (Domínguez & Luoma., 2020). One of the ecocentric ideas wrongly applied is fortress conservation. They perceived fortress conservation as inflicting ‘real harm on indigenous communities and overlooks sustainable solutions to deepening climate crises (Domínguez & Luoma., 2020).’ The criticism of fortress conservation seems to be that indigenous people do not pose a threat to their environment as much as environmentalists think, since these people have, through their traditional lifestyles, maintained a symbiotic relationship with their environment.

The objectification of people in colonies and the exploitation of their labor and resources were essential to the colonization process (Domínguez & Luoma., 2020). It ensured not just environmental displacements for many colonial subjects but disrupted the lives of native dwellers within the colonies. Ongolo *et al* maintained that overexploitation of resources was ingrained in the foreign colonial order (Ongolo, Kouassi, Cherif, & Giessen, 2018). Despite the evolution of the world and its systems, there are still in unabated existence, colonial methods of land conservation (Adams & Mulligan, 2003). This is possible because British colonial influence was so pervasive that it not only affected every aspect of the lives of the colonized but nature too (Adams & Mulligan, 2003). What strengthened colonial control of land and natural resources was the aggressive start that colonialism had in the territories. Many stories of powerful kingdoms that fell to the colonial powers from West Africa to East Africa, made the message clear.

Environmental justice in Africa is a casualty of colonialism and the imperialistic assertion of racial privilege. From the economic exploitation of Africa that brought about the destruction of many forests on the continent, to toxic waste pollution, trophy hunting of rare species, and environmentally dangerous experimentation, there have been protests by nature which has seen some devastating effects on rural life. The discourse on colonialism and its effects might seem to have grown stale, but complex interactions between colonial ways of resource and environmental management and sustained inequality prove that colonialism in the context of environmental justice in Africa has evolved to reflect a system of intra-racial oppression and consequently has impeded the realization of environmental justice in Africa (Lalude & Lawal-Arowolo, 2022).

Intra-racial oppression was created by a system of colonial class ideology that evolved in the inevitable social restructuring that colonialism brought with it (Mhonopi, Urim, & Iruonagbe, 2013). Intra-racial oppression which translates to environmental inequality and environmental injustice has roots in the colonial social stratification that saw representatives of the British and French empires distinguish themselves in the power structure that existed in both colonial systems. In the context of the French colonial and neo-colonial system, it was developed along the lines of an assimilation policy that was imperialistic and later an association policy that seemed to be more accommodating of indigenous cultures. While these colonial policies ensured a psychological acquisition of indigenous people and established French superiority, the resulting imperialistic practices created inequality in the French colonies. In the British colonies too, imperialism also created class structures that became colonial legacies of inequality. There is a significant amount of literature that has examined the negative influence of colonialism on the colonized, this has made it necessary to also consider how colonialism has affected the environment, and this question would be the mainstay of this article. The first part of the article introduces the concept of colonialism and its legacies in the former African colonies. The second part of the article examines colonialism and its influence on environmental politics. The third part of the article examines colonial legacies and the proliferation of slums in selected African cities and then concludes the article.

2. Deconstructing Colonialism and its Enduring Impact on African Environmental Politics

Colonialism as a historical event in Africa, saw the domination of the African people by European powers. The description of colonialism by scholars often joins with that of imperialism. Colonialism as a

concept is used interchangeably with imperialism and this is because of their convergent meanings. However, they diverge on an etymological level. While colony derives from the Latin word, *colonus* which means farmer, suggesting that colonialists were meant to be settlers who kept allegiance to their country, imperialism derives from the Latin word, *imperium*, which denotes command. Therefore imperialism as a word captures the situation where a country controls another either through settlement, sovereignty, or indirect means of control (Kohn & Reddy, 2017).

Colonialism has informed so many changes in Africa and is continually defining socioeconomic and environmental relations, from income inequality to the gentrification of villages and the displacement of indigenous people. The impact of colonialism in many African countries today is sustained by the cultural integration of colonial approaches to environmental management by policy-makers. Murombedzi (2016) argued that the access and control of natural resources have justified class division and socioeconomic stratification (Murobedzi, 2016). This was a long-standing process from colonial times when a clear distinction between colonialists, their subjects, and indigenous people created the basis for social friction, which is today referred to as the postcolonial resistance.

Sule (2018) opined that nature is implicated in the friction of colonial change that has tried to wrench the animist Africans from their ways of life, and it is inextricably linked to nature (Sule, 2018). Nelson (2003) argued that religion was interface through which the West gained access to Africa, despite that the motives were ulterior, unlike what was presented. He further saw the extension of this interface of religion through which environmental colonialism happened (Nelson, 2003). Environmental colonialism precipitated a global power structure that allowed wealthy countries to profit from an Africa that had been negatively impacted by imperialism (Duquette, 2020). It would be important to recall that the major drive for colonialism was expansionism. Colonists exploited natural resources in Africa and grew their wealth notwithstanding the environmental costs to indigenous people.

McQuande (2019) was of the perception that the devastating effects of the exploitation of natural resources are linked to colonialism (McQuande, 2019). He further stated that not much is known of the destructive impact of the exploitation of natural resources on the African environment, but that the stress of mining gemstones and other resources causes land degradation, pollutes the air and contaminates local water resources, and impacts negatively, biodiversity and human health (McQuande, 2019). European colonialism had one major mission in Africa, and it was about advancing the economic interests of Europe. To put in motion the machinery of exploitation that would boost Europe's industrial growth, the colonial powers established governance structures and economic mechanisms that allowed for the effective exploitation of Africa's natural resources (Kalu & Falola, 2019). After the independence of many African states, these colonial structures of governance and the economic mechanisms of exploitation remained in place, only that they became manned by a few privileged Africans who had either hijacked power in post-independent African states or who had the support of former colonial powers. The influence of colonialism on the societal arrangement of former colonies created a system that has sustained growing income inequality and class exploitation. For instance, the transplantation of the British class-consciousness into the societies of its former colonies created African aristocracy, whose exploitation of the lower strata of society has yielded economic vulnerability and political helplessness. The British society was stratified along with classes and the rigid stratification which mostly defined social interactions has been described by sociologists as class consciousness.

British class consciousness was a consequence of the British traditional attachment to institutionalized nobility, which formally recognized upper class in British society. Neale categorized early nineteenth-century British society into three classes: aristocracy, middle class, and working-class (Neale, 1968). Although according to Neale, there was no clear distinction between the two lower classes, the class structure was a viable framework to define the economic, social, political, and cultural forces (Neale,

1968). This class structure becomes even more important when contextualized in the colonial history of Anglophone Africa to explicate the current inter-racial oppression that has created a significant level of environmental injustice.

To further corroborate that inequality in modern Africa derived from the colonial times, Alvaredo, Cogneau, and Piketty (2021) found that income inequality in British and French colonies was high and Europeans earned higher than autochthons (Alvaredo, Cogneau, & Piketty, 2021). Indigenous leaders who spoke against the colonialists were annihilated and those who supported them were rewarded politically and economically. This political alliance of both colonialists and indigenous leadership that exploited the commonality is still in existence, in the neocolonial arrangement that has seen African leaders negotiate power with external forces against the interests of their constituency.

3. Colonial Legacy and Urban Environmental Injustice in African Cities

Bigon (2008) found that the creation of slums in Nigeria is related to colonial urbanism and situates the making of the slum in the colonial practice of exploitative governance (Bigon, 2008). Fox (2013) corroborating Bigon's finding, discovered, amongst other factors, that the colonial form of governance was responsible for the formation of slums in Africa (Fox, 2013). The British class consciousness that had seeped into the creation of the African colonial and neocolonial society had inadvertently stratified itself into a contrived aristocracy, middle class, and a lower class. This had implications for inequality in residential arrangements.

According to the UN-Habitat, Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest slum distribution compared to any other region in the world. Over 60 percent of the region's urban population lives in congested slums, without water and sanitation facilities (UN Habitat, 2003). The neglect of the city's lowest-income earners becomes even more critical when it becomes the target of consolidatory pollution. Consolidatory pollution occurs when pollution from an external source meets with the internal failure of a community's waste management. This usually is the case with slums when they become even more polluted when they are sited close to a landfill and which exacerbates the already existing pollution caused by poorly managed waste generated by the community.

In Lagos, a large sprawling city in Nigeria, slums present a glaring contrast to affluent neighborhoods and mirror environmental disparities in African neocolonial urbanization. Lagos has a history as a British crown colony and the stark socioeconomic distinctions between its demographic reflect the colonial legacy of class consciousness. More than 70 percent of residents in Lagos are slum dwellers (Badmos, Rienow, Callo-Concha, Greve, & Jürgens, 2018) and there is a concern about the vulnerability of this significant demographic. Murillo, Oliveros, and Zarazaga argued that slum dwellers are more vulnerable to environmental risks because they have accessibility challenges resulting from their location on marginal land and their lack of public services (Murillo, Oliveros, & Zarazaga, 2021). There is also the risk that flooding would displace slum dwellers. According to Adelekan, the situation becomes even more severe as storm surges become frequent (Adelekan, 2010). McGranahan, Balk and Anderson also found that economic activities and urban expansion can increase the environmental demands that would instigate flooding and put slums at risk (McGranahan, Balk, & Anderson, 2007).

In Nairobi, Kenya, the creation and sustenance of slums are rooted in a complex trail of politics and rent-seeking with politicians and government officials benefitting at the expense of slum dwellers (Bird, Montebruno, & Regan, 2017). Putting it in perspective, Bird, Montebruno, and Tanner Regan have attributed the sustenance of slum arrangements to the corrupt, illegal allocation of land (Bird, Montebruno, & Regan, 2017). In navigating the problem of slums in Africa and their common roots in colonialism, Albuquerque and Guedes have argued that the current trajectory of urban planning in Africa would not have become so stark in the contrasts it presents in the opulence and poverty that often mark the level of inequality and vulnerability found in Sub-Saharan African cities (Albuquerque & Guedes, 2021).

In 2019, the Ivorian government was reported to have destroyed a portion of Boribana, one of the largest slums in Abidjan in favor of a fourth bridge to decongest the city. France 24 reported that people were paid off and some who thought the money was not enough, decided to stay back preferring that the government would have resettled them instead. According to the media platform, many of the slum dwellers were displaced and some went to other slums (France 24, 2019), inadvertently complicating the problem of slum congestion and increasing vulnerability levels. The perception of slum dwellers as negligible, and their exploitation and repression is a reflection of the colonial picture. In the shadow of neocolonialism, the class arrangement in Sub-Saharan Africa that brought about socioeconomic disparities is a substitution of colonial authorities where colonial forms of governance and processes are yet to give way to a suitable system for African countries to thrive in.

In a further examination of the colonial and neocolonial damage of Africa and its tremendous impact on environmental justice, the Central African Republic, colonized by the French in the 19th century has failed to develop, despite having gained independence in 1960, yet it has been plagued by endless conflicts and political instability (Siradağ, 2016). It is further defined by widespread poverty and according to the UN-Habitat, has a population of 95 percent of it living in slums (United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), n.d.). With a teeming number of vulnerable people, the dystopian picture that the Central African Republic presents is overwhelming even as the country is under the control of a small number of the elite (Bank, 2021). Bangui the capital of the Central African Republic is home to many slums which houses vulnerable people that have been made even more so by the fragility of the country.

Asides from the conflict that took place in 2013 that displaced many Bangui residents, and has since exacerbated the fragility of the country, Bangui has been further ravaged by environmental problems and this has caused a humanitarian crisis. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2019) reported the displacement of over 20,000 people by floods from heavy rains in Bangui (IOM, 2019). There is a complicity of the foreign powers in the lack of environmental justice in Bangui, and this is predicated on the ground that outside the intervention of international organizations, other external interventions have been pursued to further exploit the situation. For instance, Ramani (2021) wrote of Russia's involvement in the Central African Republic that went beyond the expansion of diplomatic influence to counter French dominance in the country to grapple with France over leverage in the country, thereby effectively undermining the urgency of stabilizing the polity (Ramani, 2021).

Environmental injustice in Africa is strengthened by the absence of social justice. In the countries that were used as a context for this work, social justice is lacking. The United Nations have defined social justice 'as a normative concept centered on the principles of fairness, equality, equity, rights, and participation (UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 2013).' To show the state of social justice in the countries used in this work, the Ibrahim Index for African Governance (IIAG) provides reliable data. The IIAG ranked Nigeria 32 out of 54 African countries on the scale of Participation, Rights, and Inclusion with a rating of 46.6 percent and a negative trend of -3.7 since 2010. The specific scores were broken down, with participation at 42.5 percent, rights at 46 percent, and inclusion and equality at 44.7 percent (IIAG, 2020).

The IIAG ranked Kenya 19 out of 54 African countries on Participation, Rights, and Inclusion with a rating of 46.6 percent and a negative trend of -0.6 since 2010 with a rating of 51.6 percent, and the scores were broken down, with participation at 40.9 percent, rights at 54.3 percent and inclusion and equality at 49.7 percent (IIAG, 2021). Côte d'Ivoire and the Central African Republic, also ranked poorly as Côte d'Ivoire ranked 17 out of 54 African countries while it scored 54.2 on the Participation, Rights, and Inclusion rating. Although it had a positive trend of +3.6 since 2010 it had sub-scores of 59 percent on participation, 57.6 percent on rights, and 48.3 on inclusion and equality (IIAG, 2021). The Central

African Republic ranked at 39, while it had a Participation, Rights, and Inclusion score of 35.6 percent and a negative trend of -1.8 since 2010. It had sub-scores of 38.6 percent on participation, 36.1 on rights, and 23.6 percent on Inclusion and Equality (IIAG, 2021). The importance of social justice to environmental justice has been argued by Solomonian and Ruggiero specifically on the ground that ecological degradation and social injustice mutually reinforcing (Solomonian & Ruggiero, 2021). This is why in Africa, social injustice is a prime mover for environmental injustice and would often play out in the stark contrasts of affluence and poverty in African residential arrangements.

4. Conclusion

Africa has complex problems which are not easily simplified or tied to a single source. However, there is no doubt that colonialism has changed the way Africans perceive many things including the environment. This has sustained a system of environmental injustice since the independence of many African countries. The proliferation of slums in many African cities is a solid evidence of the state of environmental injustice in many neo-colonial African states. Furthermore, the vulnerability of the slum dwellers which is often ignored by African governments makes it even more severe. The colonial emergence and the sustenance of slums by the corrupt institutions and processes in African states indicate that the unjust systems put in place by colonialism have endured and are currently affecting the lives of many vulnerable Africans who would have a harder bargain with the current trend of climate change. With the absence of social justice in many African countries, it is apparent that there would be no environmental justice if social institutions are not engaged to address the myriad of social problems that often erupt in pockets of conflict. The role of former colonial powers in addressing the wrongs of colonialism in their former colonies would be to pressure African governments to abide by the interests of their people and to refrain from exploiting the political failures further. It is also necessary that former colonial powers incentivize good governance and actively promote it for the benefit of African countries where a majority of the population has been excluded from political arrangements.

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