

# Colonialism

Broadly construed, the term colonialism can be described as the deliberate imposition of the rules and policies of a nation on another nation. Its strategy is the forced placement of a nation over another that gives room for the opportunity to exploit the colonized nation in order to facilitate the economic development of the colonialist home state.

A definition by Ronald J. Horvath sees colonialism as a “form of domination – the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups” (Horvath 1972, 46). Clearly, colonialism is a tool for expansion and a form of exploitation on all fronts. This is why Robert Young’s view on colonialism is that it “involved an extraordinary range of different forms and practices carried out with respect to radically different cultures, over many centuries” (Young 2001: 17).

The idea behind colonialism basically is the conquest and rule over a country or region by another, allowing for the exploitation of the resources of the conquered for the profit of the conqueror. Colonialism is an instrumental process through which a state acquires and maintains colonies in another territory. The outcome of this, which is the colonial stage of society, alters mildly or altogether the economic, political, social and even intellectual structure of the conquered state.

Between the 1860s and 1900s, Africa as a whole was subjected to various forms of aggression from Europe, ranging from diplomatic pressures to military invasions until almost all African states were finally conquered and colonized. The process of colonization came to its complete stage with invasions of the political, economic and socio-cultural spheres of the African societies.

The first attempts at colonization occurred when the Europeans began to seek trade pursuits outside their own continent, and thus discovered that many other nations, particularly in Africa, had wealth in natural resources which had potentials for their own economic gain.

We can simply say that the nature of Colonialism involves a forced relationship between an indigenous majority and a minority of foreign invaders. Of course, its history can be traced to slavery, where indigenous people, particularly of Africa, were forcibly and violently taken as slaves to plantations in Europe and the Americas. Through slavery, Africa’s sons and daughters in large numbers were violently seized and taken to Europe as sellable commodities (Nwolize 2001, 25). However, as slavery was ending in the 1850s, Europe was packaging another round of violent visitation against Africa. This invasion took off in earnest after the Berlin conference of 1884 – 1885. Colonialism came with further violence. Vandalism, murder, torture, looting, rape, death, and destruction were also the order of the day (Afsi 2009a, 62).

Certain perceived basic assumptions seem to have informed the colonial construction of African savagery which was used to justify the nature of colonial warfare. Works of enlightenment philosophers such as Frederick Hegel’s (1770-1831) *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1975) and Immanuel Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798, 2006) essentially informed these assumptions. [Hegel](#) speculates about the continent of Africa and asserts that Africa proper “is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night”. To Hegel, “The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas—the category of Universality” (1975, 174). Hegel here states that Africans’ lack the category of Universality and, also, situates the African at the level of irrationality. “The Negro,” Hegel writes, “exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state” (174). The African was, to Hegel, a complete moron who had no idea of decency and could not distinguish his right from left. Similarly, the racist proclivities of Kant lie in his denial of any intellectual endowments and rational abilities to non-white races.

In a further attempt to rationalize colonialism, Lucien Levy Bruhl (1985, 63) standardizes the colonial discourse when he commissioned rationality as a Western signature, and thus granting what he terms mystic or pre-logical thinking to non-Western peoples. These denigrating words in particular refer to the African. These arguments justify the colonialist’s actions and reasons for invading and conquering the territories of the perceived Dark Continent. With this invasion, the entirety of the lives of this indigenous majority came to depend solely upon the powerful invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the indigenes were

made by the colonial masters. The colonialists gradually perpetuated the socio-economic and political spheres of the state, and finally, the minds of the people. The conquered were made to believe that they were inferior and, as such, only the ways of the colonialists were worthy to be imbibed.

In his article, "Modern Western Philosophy and African Colonialism", E. Chukwudi Eze queries the rationality that underlies the thoughts and assumptions that emanate from the European Enlightenment philosophers who promoted the ideals of individual freedom and the dignity of the human person on the one hand, and who, on the other hand, were associated with the thoughts and promotion of slavery and colonialism (Eze 1998, 217). For European Enlightenment philosophers, Africans were not in the same logical set as normal humans. Therefore, their advocacy for the ideals of humanity and democracy did not apply to Africans. This justified their arguments for the promotion of "imperial and colonial subjugation of non-European peoples" (Eze 1998, 218). This suggests that there is a distinction for the enlightenment philosophers between, in Cornel West's words, "sterling rhetoric and lived reality" or, in Abiola Irele's, between the "word and deed" (Eze 1998).

Refutations have been made against these assumptions, which suggest that Africa, in the words of Walter Rodney (1972), was developing at its pace before the advent of colonialism. However, due to the debilitating effects of colonial rule, African scholars and political thinkers were faced with the serious challenges of socio-political and cultural reconstruction of Africa. The colonialists had imposed European beliefs and values on Africa. Thus, European languages, belief systems, social, economic, and political systems replaced pre-colonial African ones. As a reaction to the effects of colonialism, there was the need to find an alternative ideology for decolonization. The reflective attitude and the thought process in the search of the ideology for decolonization resulted in the abstraction of different philosophical ideas and the development of theories in political philosophy. Consequently, what is known as African social and Political Philosophy started as a reaction to colonialism. This explains the reason why colonialism is an important theme in African philosophy.