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## Current debates about colonialism, slavery and black lives matter : ethical perspectives on Christian missionary activities in Africa revisited

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**CURRENT DEBATES  
ABOUT COLONIALISM, SLAVERY  
AND BLACK LIVES MATTER**

**ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES  
ON CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES  
IN AFRICA REVISITED**

*Obiora Ike*

*"The refusal to take sides on great moral issues is itself a decision;  
it is a silent acquiescence to evil."*

Ven Fulton J. Sheen (1895 -1979,  
American Bishop of The Catholic Church

**Introduction**

***The Recent Trigger for the Debates on Recalling Past History***

On May 25 2020, the brutal and outrageous murder of a black American citizen under the hands of the United States of America white police officer Derek Chauvin who pinned the life out of him spread virally on video recording.<sup>136</sup> Seemingly protected by State power, under socially tolerated traditions and legal institutions over centuries, these

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<sup>136</sup> Obiora Ike, Executive Director, Globethics.net.

historically atrocious and racially based injustices have continued unabated in that country, and as is widely known, in many other parts of the world.

The *#BlackLivesMatter* 2020 protests forced governments and other entities across the world to reckon with oppressive histories including slavery, colonialism and racism. It emboldened activists globally and boosted a new sense of humanity, solidarity and empathy and thus galvanized a new awakening of people to stand up everywhere with moral courage and demand that they “*want to breathe*”. The last words of George Floyd “*I can’t breathe*” implies a re-visit of the many dark shades of human history, especially the chapters covering slavery, colonialism and racism which calls for the purification of memories in the present through recalling the horrible injustices of the past. To understand the political, cultural, economic and social tempers, we see on streets happening in every continent, - drawing crowds of inter-generational, inter-racial, inter-religious and multicultural activists globally - it is necessary to have some knowledge of the preceding period in order to correct them.

It is precisely because of the centrifugal racial, sectarian, ethnic, and religious strife that plagues our world that we need to expose, analyse, and morally evaluate the dark sides of history. By exposing such historical injustices that continue to victimize, marginalize, and embitter people in the present, we find true liberation using the call of Emeritus *Pope Benedict XVI* to proclaim Truth in Charity, published in the Encyclical letter “*Veritas in Caritate*” (2009). Recently, the Holy Father *Pope Francis* writing a preface to the new book of Cardinal Walter Kaspar found these words to make the point about some oppressive practices of history, which continue into our time. “*We must be shaken by global injustice to be able to wake up and hear the cry of the poor*

*and of our very gravely sick planet,” (Preface to the new book by Cardinal Walter Kasper on Hope and Communion, July 2020).*

Nothing will minimise the injustices and brutality neither embedded in the practice of slavery and colonialism perpetrated on African peoples (and in some cases of Africans within themselves) nor diminish the culpability of the invaders and impostors of these systems. As has been noted elsewhere, “*colonialism throughout the world has always been an essentially violent phenomenon. It was imposed by violence and maintained by its potential capacity for violence*” (Elizabeth Isichei, A history of Igboland, p.9). For Christians, the challenge is to hold to its principal teaching of standing for Life in dignity (Joh 10:10) and to take a stand on issues that bother on the promotion and protection of life of every life and at all times.

## **Arguments against Re-visiting History and its Rebuttal**

There are some who would wish that these conversations were not opened at all. The intent is on shutting down corrective, constructive, and revisionist conversations about past historical injustices and their injurious and traumatizing resonance in the present. They even invoke diversionary registers to try to engineer a backlash or blunt the momentum towards reckoning and corrective healing. These are dangers of silencing history and making pretensions about its revisit.

The first major argument is that talking about past racism, slavery, conquest, colonialism, exploitation; slave raiding, injustices, and myriad oppressions will fray the social fabric, exacerbate societal tensions, and activate the impulse of revenge.

The second argument is that we should consider historical injustices and crimes such as slavery and racial terror and those who perpetrated them in their temporal context, in the spirit of the times in which those

crimes occurred. We should not apply today's moral standards on the past.

There is a third argument that interrogates the issue by asking: "If you start revising the past and tearing down past monuments of racists, violent colonizers, slavers, and other historical criminals, where do you draw the line"?

A short response to these three and possibly other arguments is that these forms of emotional blackmail should be ignored by people of conscience. *John Lewis*, who died a few weeks after George Floyd had witnessed these discriminations based on slavery, colonialism and racial injustices in the United States. His response to historical silencing is apt: "*When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something, to do something.*" (US Congressman & Civil Rights Activist). The task for Christians is found in the mission to preach the Gospel of Love and Justice in Jesus Christ to all creation (Mathew 28 20).

One fact we know is that history cannot be easily divided into watertight compartments. Indeed, there are no clean breaks in history for the events of one era have their origins in the past and their influence upon the years to come. This essentially means that we need to know of past wrongs, correct them and heal social relations in the present. This makes the healing of memory possible and enables an authentic Truth and Reconciliation filtering of history so that society be fundamentally rebuilt from the bottom up. Africa's failure is essentially a European experiment that failed, not African. In order to understand how we got to where we are, we need to connect the dots and face uncomfortable truths.

Right now, the world is already in turmoil, so where is the peace or harmony to be preserved by suppressing historical truth-telling and the sincere, good-faith airing of historical grievances? The focus on placing Christian missionary activities carried out during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>

centuries era of colonial rule over Africa raises heavy challenges that compel facing our own history as Christians. It also provides us with a moment to “*say something*” and “*do something*” so that truth, justice and peace may lead to authentic reconciliation. This paper shall focus on three broad outlines namely:

- What should mission look like today, given the colonial history of the Church?
- How should the accusation that Christianity in Africa is the religion of white people be dealt with?
- How do we deal with the history of colonialism and ‘cancel cultures’?

## **Examining Christian Mission Today in the Face of the Past Colonial History of the Church**

The question concerning how Christian missionary activity would be best continued and transmitted to the people of Africa today was already the topic and subject of the First *Special Assembly for Africa for the Synod of Bishops* convoked by Pope John Paul II and held in Rome in 1994. The focus was on “*The Church in Africa and her evangelising mission – You shall be my witnesses* (Acts 1:8). The summary of the contents of that Synod was given in the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation in Rome which approved the famous document *Ecclesia in Africa* of Pope John Paul II in 1994.

No other activity affecting the life of the entire Church in Africa since the time of the historical Jesus had such an impact, interest and worldwide attention as the Africa Synod of 1994. It took five years to prepare (1989 to 1994). It was attended by 40 percent of the 497 Bishops in Africa who were present at the Synod; 242 members, 46 observers, 20 experts and 7 fraternal delegates added to another 30

assistants of the Vatican Synod Secretariat. By choosing the topic “*Church as family*” the Synod touched the essential point of the question: What should mission look like today, given the colonial history of the church? Father Albert Nolan, Dominican priest had a response to this namely:

“We speak about hope and about motivation and about challenge and about what Jesus said in the past, but we have no News for the people, let alone Good News. If the Gospel is Good News, then it is not a message about hope and about challenge and about the past but it the kind of news about our times that must be a news for our times that will create hope and energise people as Jesus did in his time” (Nolan, A; *God in South Africa*, CIIR, 1988, p. 9 – 11).

The Berlin Conference of 1884/1885 divided an entire continent, its peoples, ethnic lineages, territorial boundaries and cultural legacies for the purposes of European interests. This colonial conquest of African nations deepened the already inflected wounds of the slave trade that separated families and peoples and lasted for over three hundred years. It was followed with yet another onslaught of near 100 years of colonialism which method and interest was brigandage and power for economic profit, resources exploitation, cultural degradation, political hegemony and the total degradation of a people, often without any qualms and even justified under religious, cultural and philosophical theories of the time.

Whereas Christian missionary activity had other motives for their entry into Africa, namely the salvation of souls for the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus Christ (Luke 4:16), their arrival into the scene concurred with that of the political, colonial and commercial dealers, making it difficult for the local natives to easily differentiate or distinguish the foreign groups and their distinctive aims. They were all Europeans and they came as colonialists, traders, or preachers. It was

often difficult for the natives to make any distinction between colonialist and Missionary, the Flag and the Cross-, Preacher and Trader. In many parts of Africa, the three letters of C's representing Colonization, Commercialization and Christianization happened concurrently all in the name of Civilization.

The arrival of Christian missionaries from Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century coincided with the period of the abolition of slavery and its replacement with colonial conquest and commercial exploitation of natural resources described as "*legitimate trade*". In annexure, an old European maritime maps, the West African coastline from 'Ouidah' (in Benin Republic today) to 'Old Calabar Port' (in Nigeria today) was called *Slave Coast*.

The missionaries introduced a new approach that leveraged formal education and Christian faith, built health centres and saved many lives of persons who otherwise died of incurable diseases. They introduced social centres for people to learn new skills and trades for self-sustenance. Many Christian missionaries identified with the local people based on equality of all persons in dignity before God and entire creation. Yet, in some cases, their methods questioned and contradicted this respect of accepting the authentic socio- cultural and belief systems of the people.

Today we know better that these histories have unleashed changes, divided the entire African space into countries without consultation, will or consent of the indigenous peoples but solely at the whims and caprices of the colonials Lords and masters. . These colonial divisions remain primarily responsible for the continued war, instability, disunity and divisions within that continent until today. Colonial boundaries arbitrarily created, separated peoples previously united into new amorphous boundaries and territories for the sake of the coloniser. It truncated the unity of clans and kindred with their relations and languages with disruptions that have until current times completely

affected the ways people lived earlier. The consequences have been largely negative, even though some have found some positive elements in the colonial intrusion into Africa.

The arrival of the Christian missionaries at the heat of this unfortunate colonial episode made them also share some of the persistent ignorance concerning Africa and its peoples. It was a period of Eurocentric dominant worldview, with pejorative prejudices against others, making historians describe the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian mission as “*European cultural export*”.

As is now largely known and acknowledged, much of what is known or written about Africa and Africans in the past and present has been done by non-Africans, mostly Europeans and much of it are incorrect, false and cheap blackmail. One general tendency has been ‘*to look down*’ on Africa and the Africans as people inhabiting the “*continent of hunger, Lions, scorpions, reptiles and monstrous animals*”; “*the land of black people with black souls as dark as the devil and destined to be the wretched of the earth; uncivilised and primitive*”. Thus whatever is bad is termed black. They include “*Black magic, black slaves, black market, black money, black devil, black religion and black is bad*” (Obiora Ike, *Freedom is more than a Word – Towards a Theology of Empowerment*, 1998, p.19 ff.)

The core of the African Synod of 1994 and the decisions of the Synod Assembly focused on a New Era of Evangelisation, which is new in zeal, new in method and new in expression. Described as the Synod of Hope, Pope John Paul II himself had these words to say:

“The Church which is in Africa celebrated with joy and hope its faith in the Risen Christ during four weeks of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. Memories of this event are still fresh in the midst of the whole Ecclesial Community. Faithful to the tradition of the first centuries of Christianity in Africa, the pastors of this continent, in

communion with the successor of the Apostle Peter and members of the Episcopal college from other parts of the world, held a Synod which was intended to be an occasion of hope and resurrection, at the very moment when human events seemed to be tempting Africa to discouragement and despair” (John Paul II: Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no 1).

The theme of the Synod, with focus for Africa on the topic “*Church as Family*” - evaluates and makes very relevant the pathway for the Christian Mission in Africa to follow during these circumstances of our historical re-evaluation and revisiting. By expanding the meaning and language of Evangelization to include an integral dimension, Catholic Christian Mission in Africa is poised to move from the Synod Talk to Synod Action. There are five pillars for this agenda:

- Proclamation of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ made flesh as the saviour.
- Enculturation of the Gospel on African soil as Family in all its dimensions.
- Dialogue within the levels of Church and also with other religions and society.
- Justice and Peace as practical response to serve the poor with good governance, poverty eradication, rule of law and human rights protection.
- The Means of Social Communication which is the technical engagement of proclamation with images, visual, audio, telematics and other methods imbued with Gospel values.

The incarnation of Christianity on independent Africa already started since Vatican II (1962-1965) with the focus on “aggiornamento” was the great fruit and initiative of the Africa Synod. It carried a new image and model of the *Church as Family*. This image corresponds best to the

many belief systems and cultures on this continent, thus making Christians the family of God in Africa. Indeed, this model is full of implications starting with the Bishop. It shall no longer be “His Lordship” but an understanding and compassionate Father.

The Laity Women, especially should find their rightful place in the Church: from being fully consulted in matters concerning them and sharing in the lay ministries, to leading Sunday services and even cooperating in the formation of future priests as teachers and advisors. *“The quality of the Church as Family also depends on the quality of our women folk, be they married or members of institute of the consecrated life”* (Exhortation, no. 121). In this sense, the whole church considered as a “Home”, gives a sense of belonging to all, since it is a community “from which absolutely nobody is excluded”. Such a community gives a welcome access to the family meal, the holy Eucharist. Moreover, this African Church is an extended family with a diversity of tasks and ministries, governed by principles of solidarity and subsidiarity and kept working by dialogue. Such dialogue relates to its own members and with other Churches and religions (cf. John Bauer, 2000 years of Christianity in Africa, 1994, p.510).

The central question of the Synod was *inculturation*. This is best described as

“a marriage of professed faith and concrete life harmony between faith and culture. One must be a Christian and an African without split of personality. The basis of Inculturation is the Incarnation (John 1:14). If Inculturation is faithfully carried out, the African Church would be more mature. Inculturation therefore, understood as integral evangelization, takes into account every aspect of life – intellectual, cultural, social, economic, political, religious and technical (Michel Eneja, Bishop of Enugu, Towards an Indigenous African Church – post Synodal theological review, 1996, p.16 -17).

It is for this reason that the Synod called the Inculturation of the faith “one of the greatest challenges for the church on the continent on the eve of the Third Millennium. It includes the whole life of the Church and the whole process of Evangelization”. Therefore “our local Churches must be involved in the process of Enculturation in an ongoing manner, respecting the two following criteria. Compatibility with the Christian message and communion with the Universal Church” (Propositions at the Synod, 31 – 33; John Paul II Papal Exhortation, 1994, nos. 59 – 62).

The fact that the theme of *justice and peace* attracted the highest number of Episcopal interventions is symptomatic of the fact that it touched the most burning issues of present-Africa and the Bishops deep concern about them. With eloquence, they demanded more justice between the Northern industrialised countries and the south. They denounced unjust corruptions of world trade and called the selling of arms and ammunitions to belligerent African factions a crime. The Synod called for a generous solution to the debt problems and gratefully mentioned the support of the European Bishops Synod in these issues (message no. 32, 40 – 42). Their criticism at the Synod of the local corrupt practices within African nations and at all levels was strong.

Pope John Paul II himself who participated at the Synod joined in this criticism and declared in the exhortation

“Africa’s economic problems are all compounded by the dishonesty of corrupt government leaders who, in connivance with domestic or foreign interests, divert national resources for their own profit and transfer public funds to private accounts in foreign banks. This is plain theft, whatever the legal camouflage may be. I earnestly hope that the international bodies and people of integrity in Africa and elsewhere will be able to investigate

suitable legal ways of having these embezzled funds returned” (Exhortation, 113; see also Concilium 1996/2 p. 139).

At the beginning of the Christian history, there stood out of African soil the figures of the great Church Fathers as a challenge to our theologians to fructify once more the universal Church. When Tertullian formulated the famous principle of the *anima naturaliter christiana* – “*the human soul is by nature Christian*”, he deduced it from the pious African *people of his time*. In the new Africa, their number is ever increasing but calls for guidance – a challenge to African sisterhood and brotherhood, and a call for a spirituality lived by those who believe globally – founded on our common humanity.

From the many dark centuries that led from Antiquity to our modern Christianity as historian John Baur writes,

“there surfaces out of bush, savannah and desert sand the image of the African slave, deported, degraded, exploited, suffering and crying, but overcoming it with a song and a laughter and a prayer in their heart”.

The hope for a Christian future may be justified by the words of Archbishop Tchidimbo who writing from prison said: “*Christianity is above all a religion of the future. There lies the secret of its youth, its eternal youth*”. This future belongs to Christ and to those who trust in him, for Christ is the Lord of history.

## **Examining the Critique that Christianity in Africa is a Religion of the White Man**

There was a time - the year 256 AD – when an African Bishop, St Cyprian of Carthage, sent an inquiry to Rome on introducing some innovations around Enculturation in the local Church. He received this response from the officials of the Church: “*Nothing should be innovated except what was handed down*” (*Nihil innovetur nisi quod traditum est*).

St Cyprian felt offended that the Church in Rome was not ready for discussion on a matter concerning his diocese and territory, which needed action but asked for conformity with Roman tradition. Looking at ancient North Africa, the country of the great St Cyprian, St Athanasius, St Clement of Alexandria and St Augustine of Hippo, we may well rejoice that these saints were the great teachers of the Christian West – that part of Europe which later sent its missionaries to Africa. However, filled with sadness we remember that the Church spread throughout North Africa failed to translate the Bible and the liturgy into the language of the local Berbers.

We now know that lack of enculturation left many of them not evangelized on time; and then, left alone when the Church leaders had fled to Europe for fear of the conquering Arabs, they succumbed to Islam. Moreover, we cannot forget that one of the main causes of this failure was the inner division due to the trending differences in faith understanding of the time in the Church in North Africa into Catholics and Donatists. The Donatists could be likened to the being the first independent African Church movement, that protested against the official rich and not-holy-enough Church (Cf. John Baur, *Christianity in Africa*, p. 515).

Coming to the period between the 15th and 18th centuries, when the European missionaries, under the Portuguese Kings came to Africa, south of the Sahara, many African ancestors accepted the Christian faith with great devotion and wonder, especially in the Kingdom of Kongo and in Warri and Benin. Historical records show that the missionaries failed to build a Church that could be sustainable and outlive their absence. Dissensions with the Portuguese government prevented the formation of a sufficient clergy. The lay catechists were dis-allowed from baptizing catechumens even in the absence of clergy. The Bible was not to be translated into local languages, the faithful could not

participate in the management of Church affairs and the faith could not linger on when the Europeans left. This is the story of the Benin Mission, the Delta and Warri and the Kongo missionary enterprise in Africa. A new experiment had to be done in the 19th century – but this – at the height of the colonial era. .

The observation and constant accusation of a white man's Church designating Christianity in Africa was actually in many places. During the 1960's – a period of anti-colonial struggles for the liberation and independence of colonies it reached its peak.

The African peoples wished to take over political, economic, social and even religious control and power from the white people who had held sway and dominated the destinies of the people in their own space and territories. .Locals did not easily distinguish between the Crown, the Cross and the Flag. The trader, colonialist and missionary are lumped together in the propaganda to gain independence. But since the 1980's, things have indeed changed and locals in most African countries are to some extent, at least externally, in control of their countries and destinies.

Demographic changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries' made it possible for ageing European missionaries to go home and there were no replacements. The novel policies of population and birth control introduced in their home countries to increase prosperity led to a diminishing youth population, with consequent less priestly vocations.

Since the 1980,s African missionaries have become missionaries to their own people. The local churches had at last come of age and were already taking over control of their own Church affairs with many good vocations. Yet, the faces may have become blacks but the mind, practices, thinking and mentality still European dominated. This explains the background for the growth and spread of African independent Christian churches and the Pentecostals movements. Their

rise has given the traditional Christian dominant missionary churches both competition and challenge

The first African country that accepted the Christian message was Egypt, alongside the Kingdom of Ethiopia. Christianity flourished and sustained its life and presence on those territories, because it was enculturated and allowed the Bible much early in their history to be translated into the local vernacular languages around the year 300 AD. They also developed their own Coptic liturgy. Egypt is the country that first developed and introduced Christian monasticism into the religious life of the Church, an idealism which inspired many to apply the Gospel literally by leaving everything and following Christ. The four pillars of the Bible and the Liturgy, Nuns and Monks made the Egyptian Church withstand the pressures of the Islamic occupation of their land that has lasted well over one thousand years. Because Christianity was well incarnated in these cultures becoming part and parcel of their language, clothing, ethics, prayer lifestyle, dance and music, entire cultures, indeed, their national Copts heritage, it has continued to survive all the aggressions of Islamisation from within and outside. These churches still stand out as authentic witnessing Churches within Africa and seen globally as they remain heroic in suffering and triumphant people in the hope its people.

The philosophical background for a white Church, dominated and run by Europeans and centralised in Europe with their other inventions had indeed some background. The middle ages and new times delivered the ideologies of European dominant and racist superior understanding of the world.

An example of this philosophical thinking was Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man". - It was the iconic image that most powerfully expressed the European-centred universalised assumption about what it means to be human in 'modern times' (even though his enormous life-

time oeuvre [1452-1519] made him the first holistic systems thinker (see Capra, 2008)). *Vitruvian Man defined what it meant to be human as someone who is male, white, rational, alone, perfectly proportioned, disconnected from nature and free of any hierarchy (either social or cosmological)*. Hegel the German philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had shared the same prejudices as many of them did. The numbers are many in philosophy as well as in anthropology, sociology, theology and the sciences. We mention but a few including Leo Frobenius, Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant and many of the known British, French, Italian and philosophers of the time.

Following Braidotti (2013), everything and everyone else was ‘othered’: woman via sexualisation, people of colour via racialisation and nature via naturalisation. Complementing this image of the disconnected male self, we have the relentless quest of Rene Descartes to find out what defines him as human. He concluded: “*I think, therefore I am.*” This ultimate foundational statement from the dawn of contemporary Western culture established binary thinking as the ultimate way of knowing – because A is Not A, A cannot be A, and ‘not-A’ at the same time (Nicolescu, 2002). Hence, we have the mind-body binary, but also the other disconnects that follow: self and other, self and nature, self and things.

Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher and ethicist of our times put it this way.

*“In an earlier stage of our development most human groups held to a tribal ethic. Members of the tribe were protected, but people of other tribes could be robbed or killed as one pleased. Gradually the circle of protection expanded, but as recently as 150 years ago we did not include blacks. So African human beings could be captured, shipped to America, and sold. In Australia white settlers regarded Aborigines as a pest and hunted them down, much as kangaroos are hunted down today. Just as*

we have progressed beyond the blatantly racist ethic of the era of slavery and colonialism, so we must now progress beyond the specific ethic of the era of factory farming, of the use of animals as mere research tools, of whaling, seal hunting, kangaroo slaughter, and the destruction of wilderness. We must take the final step in expanding the circle of ethics". (Peter Singer, philosopher and professor of bioethics (b. 6 Jul 1946).

Colonial governance brought with it, the forceful imposition of foreign rule against the compete will of the people and against their interests and entire destiny. Have reparations been paid? Colonialism imposed the exploitative economies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which continue to affect the current problems of disruptions in Africa at all levels. Some of these include the African identity and personality, which were forced or made to follow foreign cultures. Many Africans stretch to become Europeans, and fail neither being Caucasian or real black – a cultural limbo.

To the extent that all history is about standing in the present and looking backwards into the actions of past actors, the historian, whether they acknowledge it or not, is applying the moral and ethical and professional standards of their time to whatever past era they are studying. This is the gist of historians' critique of positivist history, the pretentious 19th century notion of history that has since been discredited. Perhaps the most cited of these critiques of positivist history is Gabrielle Spiegel's book "The Task of the Historian". In that piece, Spiegel also argues correctly in defence of histories of minorities and historically marginalized groups, histories that had been excluded from the dominant archives and canons of the profession, and that demand the moral judgments and analytical interventions that privileged and conceited advocates of positivist history and silencing disapprove of.

To actually do an “objective” history and reconstruct history without the biases and moral conventions of the present, which is what the advocates for silencing history are advancing, the historian would have to time-travel to the past and inhabit the temporal and spatial universe of the particular time and place that they are studying, which is impossible. Alternatively, they would have to write a “history” of their time, of the present. But that would not be history but journalism, and even at that, no journalism manual or theory will tell you that journalism is free of biases or that journalists do not bring their perspectives, moral commitments, predilections, socializations, and their employers’ editorial bents to bear on their stories.

Unfortunately, racial supremacy is not an impression that can be corrected by wiping off the names of colonial masters and beneficiaries of the slave trade. Racism is a structure, and its pillars uphold our modern world. It is a mistake to think you can touch the formidability of its structure by renaming streets. By the time society starts to build a monument to a certain cultural practice or the person that embodies it, it means its norms have calcified. You can pull down statues, and rename streets and neighbourhoods, but the world that slave trade/colonialism built will remain intact.

### **Examining the History of Colonialism in the Context of the Movement “Cancel Cultures”**

Quite well, #BlackLivesMatter has opened the floodgates for a revisit of the past in the present and with a passion not seen for a long time. It should not end in America. This wave of uncomfortable historical conversations with a minefield of many unresolved historical questions should travel from Europe via Australia to Asia and the Middle East and revert to Africa. These questions have for far too long been denied or swept aside in a misguided and failed effort to foster and maintain a façade. What is needed is a new approach of holistic and

sincere historical reckoning and accountability. In addressing the history of colonialism and slavery, we have the advantage of learning from the past and not repeating the same mistakes.

It is important to state that an agenda or call it the ideology that seeks to deal with past colonial history by calling for a call to “*cancel cultures*” is surely the wrong way to go.

Culture is sway of thinking, feeling, believing and living. It is the accumulated experience, knowledge, and wisdom of one social groups stored, for future use, in the memories of people, in books, in objects” (Okere, T, 1974).

Our age is confronted with questions that previous generations did not really have to face. The fact is that many people have rejected the traditional sources of ethical illumination. Today, the old certainties are virtually gone. Shame is seemingly gone. Truth is somehow not fashionable. Integrity and credibility are strange words. Dignity and decency are not seen to be very clear and living in deceit and debauchery happen to be relatively fashionable, albeit for just a short period. This is because the old truths and its search are unquenchable to the human soul and psyche, no matter what pretensions any persons may try to make of it.

One of the great ethical questions that generations of thinkers across all world systems of thought have posed over the ages is this: “what does it mean to be human”? Today, the question becomes: now that we are a geo-physical force of nature with extra-ordinary informational powers, what does it mean to be human in the Anthropocene? To answer this question, we need to bring Sub-Saharan African philosophy into conversation with the ‘post-humanist turn’ in Western social science.

In an earlier paper I wrote, I mentioned that

“today, we cannot remain unconcerned by the debate that is going on around us on culture, on our cultural heritage; on the

Church and culture and the adaptation of Christianity to indigenous cultures; on the relationship between religion, cultures and civilizations; on whether or not Christianity as we got it from Europe is trans-culturally viable; and on whether or not missionary work as have known it is still justifiable (Ike, *Applied Ethics to culture and Development*, 2020).

Let me begin with some analysis and interpretation of the philosophical hermeneutics concerning the concept of culture. In his *“Notes towards the Definition of Culture”*, the Nobel prize winning poet and literary critic T. S. Eliot asserts that the term culture has three different associations according to whether we have in mind the development of an individual, of a social class or of a whole society. Understood in the meaning of cultural anthropologists, culture refers to the entire way of life of a people. It includes the sum total of the mannerisms, beliefs, music, clothing, religions languages, behavioural patterns, food, housing, agricultural methods, as well as their traditional behaviour in a broad sense, including their ideas arts and artefacts. It is the social heritage which an individual acquires from his or her group and which heritage classifies a people belonging to a group (Ike, *Reflections on Culture and Development*, 2020).

Culture makes it possible for us to distinguish between a Chinese, Briton, Jew, Arab, Indian, Swede, Russian, Arab, Igbo, Yoruba, Fuji, Papua New Guinean, Frenchman and German to mention but a few of the many cultural groups under the sun.

Culture *“denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life”* (C.,. Geeertz: *Religion as a Cultural System, in ‘Anthropological Approach to the Study of religion’*).

Culture in contra-distinction from nature is that part of his or her milieu which people themselves created. Why we must eat in order to survive is a question of nature. Why the Igbo fulfils this with “Ukwa” and Okwuru” and the English with “Bread and Tea” are matters of culture. That man and woman enter into marriage is altogether natural. But that an Englishman thinks monogamy the only legally acceptable type of marriage forbidding bigamy, and that a Yoruba person considers polygamy just as reasonable and normal within the norms of that society is matters of culture, which always means: This is the way they have been brought up.

The interconnected relational nature of all reality sits at the very centre of the world-view expressed in both the Christian and African systems of thought. This, in turn, has major implications for our understanding of what it means to be human in the Anthropocene. In short, it results in the replacement of “*Vitruvian Man*” with a relational self that does not depend on the ‘othering’ of anyone or anything. In the words of Rosi Braidotti, one of the chief exponents of the Western post-human turn that is infusing many natural and social sciences:

Sub-Saharan African philosophy has always emphasized ‘*relatedness*’ between all things (animate and inanimate) and beings (humans and non-humans). The underlying science that substantiated the nature-culture binary is questioned across many disciplines. An alternative is offered by the notion of ‘*complex adaptive systems*’ (CAS) (see Preiser, Biggs, De Vos and Folke, 2017).

The other factors are the social and economic practices, political systems, cultural patterns where there are failed attempts to imitate the west in its manifold development models. All these failed.

The concept of *Ubuntu* is that one cannot be a complete human being without the reciprocal affirmation of other human beings—*umuntu ngumtu ngabantu*. The Igbo of modern Nigeria would say “*Onye nwere*

*madu kariri onye nwere ego*” and Akan of Ghana would say: *onipa na oma onipa ye onipa* still expressing the same reality- “*it is a human being who makes another person a human being.*”

Cancel cultures does not fit into the global understanding of culture and what it stands for. The often quoted “*I am because we are*” is pregnant with the profound meaning of the generative essence of being human:

- We are endowed with a divine spark that never dies because it is connected to the source of all life. ‘The dead are never dead.’ Our ancestors are forever part of us; they are the link between past, present and future.
- Humans are social beings. We are wired to be with others, to nurture and shape who we are, and to make sense of our world with one another.
- Our personalities are shaped by what those close to us affirm or sanction. We are whole and endowed with the potential for right and wrong. We are choice-making beings who are socialized to seek what is right.
- We have the capacity to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, self-respect, and respect for others inherent in us that defines our human beingness.
- Harmonious relations within family, community, and society are expressions of character beyond an individual person. The individual is both shaped by and shapes relationships with others to sustain life beyond the self.
- Our human connectedness goes beyond present relationships. We are inextricably related to our ancestors, who continue to live in present generations as guiding spirits. We stand as bridges to future generations who may still be carried as seeds in our bodies or are children born into this unending web of intergenerational connectedness.

- The interconnectedness of all life makes our being possible and demands we contribute to its sustainability. African people are totemic in that they affirm their connections to nature by identifying with an animal and/or a plant that best reflects our clan identities. (For example, the Ramphela's are Bakwena, Kwena (crocodile) is our totem animal. We also have the willow tree as our totem tree. Our clan's history is associated with water and crossing rivers with the help of our totem animal and tree.)
- We have an ecological commitment to conserve and enrich. Our capacity to empathize is the core of our being and essential for the sustenance of life itself. The intimate totemic relationships with plants and animals reinforce our reverence for nature of which we are a part. For many Sub-Saharan African writers, this relatedness to everything (people, nature and ancestors) is central.

## **Conclusion**

### ***The Challenge to Ethical Integration in Thought and Action***

Doing a general but also introspective conclusion to this reflection around current debates on slavery, colonialism and Black lives matter, a few words addressed to the victims and oppressors likewise bring this reflection to a conclusion. Through their actions and moral failings, some African leaders feed the machinery of racial supremacy. Modern Africans and even those in positions of power underplay the enormous implications of racism/slave-trade/colonialism or their consequences in confronting issues that emanate from these discussions towards a new rebirth for their own countries. In this regard, reading the essay by the historian, Moses Ochonu, *Looking for Race: Pigmented Pasts and Colonial Mentality in "Non Racial Africa"*, where he eloquently demonstrates how the vestiges of racism and colonialism have been

deeply sublimated into our socio-political culture and currently manifest through the tropes of class, social differentiation and daily cultural encounters. Or the essay by the ethicist, Nimi Wariboko, *Colonialism, Christianity and Personhood*, to understand how the ideologies of race, colonialism, and Christianity configured us both as a subject of the empire and as a consumer.

Africans must also admit their own culpability right from the days of slavery and ongoing neo-colonialism. African peoples have been accursed with bad leaders who have in the course of history dehumanised their own peoples. They need historical lessons on the long-lasting impacts of slavery/colonialism and racism. They also need to understand how they have been contributing resources to its insidious effects. Until they learn that as members of the political elite and leadership class, they are still not different from what they were in the days of slavery, we have not started. They have to acknowledge that they are still as greedy, brutal, violent, and utterly selfish as they have always been. Until we understand how our forefathers got carried away by the shiny objects of capitalism, we have culpability in the moral vacuum we accuse others of and must decide once again with determination to take a stand against racism. Saying we should teach our children languages and ideologies of black supremacy only demonstrates that we are locked in our bad behaviour. Are we ready to ask ourselves the questions that will set us free?

The African economies are dependent mostly on extraction caused by colonial vestiges as they are not manufacturing. Leaders know this. What they do to stop it? The continent exports crude oil and natural resources but imports the final product from abroad. Colonialism created this structure. Why is it impossible to stop and change? Is anyone surprised that Chinese miners are being caught in African jungles illegally digging up resources now that the future of oil is uncertain? What else would have given a foreigner the gumption to do

that if not that the local leaders are hugely incompetent, corrupt and participating in the rape of their own people? The little revenue realised from selling those raw materials still end up abroad.

Many social, political and economic leaders take most of the hard earned national resources to overseas, to shop for better education, health facilities, pleasure tourism, and even a breath of fresh air that they deny millions of their people at home. In the political and economic game plans of many nations today, the repetition of such brutal behaviour including internal colonialism still defines many people's lives. There is the case of largest populated country in Africa namely Nigeria with more than 200 million people and 400 languages. Like Nigerians who correlate racism with their home-grown tribal differences, the supposed racial superiority could be cured by promoting African values and culture as a counter. Second is how, in their critique of race, they exhibited a massive blind spot on how they – as African leaders – contribute to the impression that black people are innately inferior. As happened recently in that country, lawmakers of a certain State recently admitted their wives spent N80m to travel to Dubai on a frivolous educational trip. How do they justify such an expense? If their wives truly wanted an education, why did they not sit through secondary examinations like normal people? No, they had to go all the way to Dubai at the public's expense even while Lagos schools lie comatose. Why did they not spend the N80m to renovate schools and equip them with functional libraries? Even if your wives needed a seminar for whatever reasons, why not have it in Lagos? You cannot even keep Lagos as clean as it was in the colonial era, but your priority is renaming streets to correct racist/colonial impressions.

Has it ever occurred to these people that they contribute to the myth of black inferiority through their culture of wanton consumption? Do they not know that Dubai people see Africans arrive in their country and

wonder what kind of people these are? The roads that lead to our overpriced housing estates get badly flooded every year, but rather than come up with a solution, we just steal enough money to gape at spectacles in Dubai and elsewhere. These are not problems that are resolvable by doing the easy work of changing labels. People have to change habits wholly. This is the ethical challenge, of doing right because it is right to do so. It corresponds also to the Golden rule that commands that we love others, as we would want others to love us.

There is a challenge here. It corresponds to the Christian teaching about dignity and common good. While it is impressive that the debates about Black Lives Matter goes on, and indeed all lives matter, black transnational solidarity would need far more complex thinking. Until people understand how our present and past bad habits of unquestioned tolerance of everything including consumption patterns and exchange patterns of commodities as established, one would not fully know racial supremacy enough to challenge it. What good does it do to pull down the visual vestiges of colonialism and slave trade while its psychological infrastructure remains lodged in the heads of those who should lead? As the philosopher Socrates of old did say: *"The unexamined life is not worth living"*. It is time for both introspection and renewal. Black lives Matter is one moment for this much-needed momentum to gather. It is hoped that its reverberations shall continue and an admission by the oppressors that evils committed in the past are condemnable even in the present and need reparations.

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