

Secondary Source Archive: *Voices of Postcolonialism*



So far in this unit, we have largely explored political decolonization – the transfer of sovereignty from big empires to independent states in the second half of the twentieth century. We have also asked how this change happened.

But, what if political decolonization didn't really end all the elements that made up colonialism? What if—even when sovereignty was transferred to a new government—some vestiges of colonialism remained in a society, or across the world? What if elements of the colonial economic system persisted, or had enduring ramifications for the world in which we live? What if indirect rule still impacted governance, or operated in some ways? What if colonialism left a cultural legacy in social or cultural organizations, or in the education systems that had been built in former colonies?

In this reading, we will look at short excerpts from the writings of three scholars who suggest that decolonization didn't necessarily really end colonialism. Below, you will find an introduction to each source, followed by a brief excerpt and questions for discussion.

VOICES OF POSTCOLONIALISM

INTRODUCTION

NEO-COLONIALISM: KWAME
NKRUMAH

POSTCOLONIALISM: NGŨGĨ WA
THIONG'O

CURRICULAR DECOLONIZATION:
MEERNA SABARATNAM

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Neo-Colonialism

Neo-colonialism is mainly a term applied to economic policy and reality after the end of formal colonial rule. Neo-colonial theory argues that economic systems in the former colonies continued to be exploitative and unfair even after colonialism ended. Many suggest that former colonial powers, and new ones like the United States, built a new global economic system after the war that controlled banking and global finance. They kept some leaders of the newly independent states on an economic leash by forcing them to agree to certain things – the continued cheap extraction of resources or buying goods from these big economies – in exchange for loans. These loans did provide aid to former colonies, but, critics argue, that aid was really a trap that forced the former colonies into a debt cycle that was profitable for the big economies. Finally, in some cases, they replaced or helped overthrow leaders who tried help the former colony to get out of this trap.

As early as 1965, one of the pioneering leaders of an African independent state, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, defined neo-colonialism in an influential book entitled *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*. Nkrumah began the book by arguing that political colonialism was in retreat, and that it was no longer possible for empires to stop that process. However, in its place a new system of neo-colonialism was emerging. Consider how he described neo-colonialism in the following excerpt.

Key Terms:

Neo-Colonialism

Kwame Nkrumah

Postcolonialism

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Curricular
Decolonization

Meera Sabaratnam

Cocoa production, Ghana, 1957





**Kwame Nkrumah,
*Neo-Colonialism, the
Last Stage of
Imperialism***



Kwame Nkrumah, First President of Ghana

"The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside....

The neo-colonial State may be obliged to take the manufactured products of the imperialist power to the exclusion of competing products from elsewhere. Control over government policy in the neo-colonial State may be secured by payments towards the cost of running the State, by the provision of civil servants in positions where they can dictate policy, and by monetary control over foreign exchange through the imposition of a banking system controlled by the imperial power....

The ideal neo-colonialist State would be one which was wholly subservient to neo-colonialist interests but the existence of the socialist nations makes it impossible to enforce the full rigour of the neocolonialist system. The existence of an alternative system is itself a challenge to the neo-colonialist regime. Warnings about 'the dangers of Communist subversion' are likely to be two-edged since they bring to the notice of those living under a neo-colonialist system the possibility of a change of regime. In fact neo-colonialism is the victim of its own contradictions. In order to make it attractive to those upon whom it is practised it must be shown as capable of raising their living standards, but the economic object of neo-colonialism is to keep those standards depressed in the interest of the developed countries. It is only when this contradiction is understood that the failure of innumerable 'aid' programmes, many of them well intentioned, can be explained.



*Kwame Nkrumah, visits
Belgrade, Yugoslavia, 1961*

In the first place, the rulers of neo-colonial States derive their authority to govern, not from the will of the people, but from the support which they obtain from their neo-colonialist masters. They have therefore little interest in developing education, strengthening the bargaining power of their workers employed by expatriate firms, or indeed of taking any step which would challenge the colonial pattern of commerce and industry, which it is the object of neo-colonialism to preserve. 'Aid', therefore, to a neocolonial State is merely a revolving credit, paid by the neo-colonial master, passing through the neocolonial State and returning to the neo-colonial master in the form of increased profits.

...Neo-colonialism is a mill-stone around the necks of the developed countries which practise it. Unless they can rid themselves of it, it will drown them."

Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965).

Available online at:

- <https://politicalanthro.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/nkrumah.pdf>
- <http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nkrumah/neo-colonialism/introduction.htm>



Questions to Consider:

- How does Nkrumah's neo-colonialism compare to the function of colonialism that we learned about in lesson 1?
- It seems that Nkrumah might include the United States as a neo-colonial power, even though it had few colonies in Africa and Asia (only the Philippines, from 1898 to 1946). Why might that be?
- Kwame Nkrumah was president of Ghana at the same time that Nnamdi Azikiwe (your next reading) was president of nearby Nigeria. What do you think each man might have thought of the other's writing?

Postcolonialism

Economics was just the beginning of the legacy of colonialism, for many, however. Colonialism also seemed to continue in the cultures of former colonies. Under colonialism, European (or white) culture had been held up as superior. European schooling, language, ways of dressing and behaving, religion.... colonial subjects were supposed to admire it all. The civilizing mission told colonial subjects that they should aspire to be culturally Western or European, but racism and segregation meant that they really could never 'become' white, because they were held to be racially inferior.

In the 1960s, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o identified the ongoing damage of this problem, and then need to overturn it. He called for what he called a "decolonization of the mind", arguing that Africans and other colonized peoples should stop thinking in European ways, and accepting their own inferiority. In an important essay from 1986 called "The Language of African Literature", he wrote that "imperialism continues to control the economy, politics, and cultures of Africa" and called for Africans to abandon European languages as one way to start decolonizing themselves. Ngugi told the story of his own experiences, learning in English and slowly becoming alienated from his own society and culture, and feeling inferior as a result. The annotations have been added later to help you understand Thiong'o's text better.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature"



[T]he colonial child was exposed to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his colonizer. Where his own native languages were associated in his impressionable mind with the low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism, this was reinforced by the world he met in the works of such geniuses of racism as a Rider Haggard or a Nicholas Monsarrat; not to mention the pronouncement of the giants of western intellectual and political establishment such as Hume ('...the negro is naturally inferior to the whites...'), Thomas Jefferson ('...the blacks.. are inferior to the whites on the endowments of both body and mind...'), or Hegel with his Africa comparable to a land of childhood still enveloped in the dark mantle of the night.

The question is this: we as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationships to Euro-America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit?

*Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa
Thiong'o*



Sources and notes:

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 17-18, 26, 27.

Sr. H. Rider Haggard (1856-1925) and Nicholas Monsarrat (1910-1979) were British authors of adventure stories, whose stories reinforced racist stereotypes of Africans.

David Hume (1711-1776) was an Enlightenment philosopher from Scotland. He wrote the words above in his 1748 essay "Of National Characters." See <https://davidhume.org/texts/empl1/nc/>.

Thomas Jefferson, author of the *Declaration of Independence of the United States*, wrote these words in his 1787 *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (New York: W. W. Company, 1972), 143.

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was a German philosopher of the early nineteenth century. His use of this metaphor for Africa comes from *Lecture on the Philosophy of History*, which was published posthumously in 1837, but based of a series of lectures he gave at the University of Berlin in 1822, 1828 and 1830. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Willey Book Co, 1900), 91.

Obi Wali (1932-1993) was a scholar and politician from Nigeria. His influential essay, "The Dead End of African Literature," appeared in the African journal *Transition* 10 (1963): 13-15. His essay "The Individual and the Novel in Africa," appeared in *Transition* 18 (1965): 31-33.

What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?

But some are coming round to the inescapable conclusion articulated by Obi Wali with such polemical vigour twenty years ago: African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming inevitable revolutionary break with neo-colonialism.

Questions to Consider:

This call for decolonizing language and literature can be said to be part of a movement called postcolonialism. This movement aims to overturn cultural colonialism. It calls not for former colonial subjects to write back against colonialism, but rather for them to reject the languages and systems colonialism gave to them, to instead articulate a vision of the world that makes sense for them, and to speak out about how they experienced, and continue to experience, colonialism.

- How does Thiong'o's postcolonial perspective relate to the definition of colonialism that we learned in Lesson 1?
- What do you think about his proposal? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
- What might the implication of Thiong's proposal be for your decisions about your own education, including what classes you choose to take, what discipline you choose to major in, and what books you choose to read for pleasure?

Curricular Decolonization

Over time (and in a few cases quite early), postcolonial theorists and activists identified the education system as one place where colonialism continued to operate and to be reproduced. Their work began the process of “decolonizing the curriculum”. This term refers to calls for a revisiting of what is taught, who teaches, and how things are taught that has many aspects. Recently, Professor Meera Sabaratnam, a political scientist at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, described the kinds of changes that are necessary to decolonize the curriculum:

**Meera Sabaratnam,
“Decolonising the
curriculum: what’s all
the fuss about?”**

...First, ‘decolonising the curriculum’ asks us to look at our shared assumptions about how the world is. It is accepted in many disciplines that in the past, assumptions regarding racial and civilizational hierarchy informed a lot of thinking about how the world worked, what was worth studying in it and how it should be studied. Such assumptions also informed and justified the expansion of colonial rule in Asia, Africa and the Middle East until the mid-twentieth century... For example, whilst many may not call societies ‘backward’ explicitly today, many theories and practices of development depend on this very assumption. Is this justified? What else does this assume? One interpretation of ‘decolonising the curriculum’ means interrogating such assumptions, models and frameworks for these specific biases...

*The Upper Campus of the University of
Capetown, founded in 1829*



Second, 'decolonising the curriculum' asks the crucial questions about the relationship between the location and identity of the writer, what they write and how they write about it. Would we find it acceptable if the writings and teachings on the situation of women and gender relations were done almost exclusively by men? How would this influence the kinds of perspectives presented? Similarly, is it acceptable if writings and teachings about international regions or global affairs are done almost exclusively by writers from or based within the West? How does this influence our understanding? If we think that there is some kind of a relationship between position and perspective on an issue, and we want to broaden our understanding through engaging with more perspectives, we need to diversify the sources we engage in our scholarship.

Third, 'decolonising the curriculum' asks us to think about the implications of a more diverse student body in terms of pedagogy and achievement. Because we live in a society marked by structural inequalities of different kinds, as educators we must work hard to give our students equal opportunities to flourish and succeed. This includes defining and dealing with racism as it is woven into different aspects of university life.



Questions to Consider:

- What might it have looked like if Sabaratnam's proposal had been applied to your high school curriculum?
- What do you think Sabaratnam might say about the class you are in right now?
- Based on this discussion, what suggestions might you have for professors or university administrators at your college or university about revising curricular requirements for students there?

These are just a few of the definitions and ways of grappling with the legacies of colonialism in the world today. They force us to ask: if these types of colonialism still continue, then what was decolonized?

Further Reading

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Agricultural Officer (left) and assistant inspect cocoa drying at Bunso Plantation, Ghana, 1957, The National Archives UK, OGL v1.0, , https://twitter.com/amazing_maps/status/810582930108153861

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Page 4:

Arrival of the president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, to the Non-alignment movement conference, Belgrade 1961., CC: BY SA, Historical Archives of Belgrade, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dolazak_predsednika_Kwame_Nkrumaha_na_konferenciju_nesvrstanih,_1961._god.jpg
Kwame Nkrumah on Time magazine cover, 1953, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kwame_Nkrumah-TIME-1953.jpg

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Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reads excerpts from his work in both Gikuyu and English during a presentation, May 9, 2019, Shawn Miller/Library of Congress, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ngũgĩ_wa_Thiong'o_2019_\(48139052733\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ngũgĩ_wa_Thiong'o_2019_(48139052733).jpg)

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