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# The Idea of Development in Africa A History

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## Introduction

The pictures show smiling children in western-style clothing, writing in school notebooks with their decorated pencils; one little girl wears a cross dangling from a silver chain and the headlines bleat “Invest in Uganda’s Youth” and “Investing in Ethiopia’s People.” Welcome to the Africa page of the World Bank website. The World Bank is the largest international financial institution dedicated to supporting global economic development through capitalist projects. A quick glance at the World Bank website offers some insight into how institutions with the economic means to determine international aid policies define development. At the time we write this, the World Bank in Africa website offers an overview of current growth rates for sub-Saharan African economies in a section titled “Africa at-a-Glance.”<sup>1</sup> An “Overview” distinguishes “resource-intensive” countries from those that are “non-resource-intensive” and notes that “many challenges remain” in African nations’ efforts to grow their economies. Among these challenges are unemployment, poverty, and “fragility.” The “Data” section of the World Bank in Africa page includes graphs showing per capita gross national income (GNI), along with population and other statistics. The “Project” section features a summary of a plan to extend access to electricity in West Africa. Other links on the website navigate to discussions of public health, violence, and challenges and opportunities for entrepreneurs. The bottom of the page highlights two “Experts” at the World Bank who are economists from

<sup>1</sup> [www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr](http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr), accessed June 12, 2019. The plan referenced is the “West African Power Pool” project.

Egypt and Cameroon. The reports and data referenced on the front page of the World Bank in Africa website define development in narrow economic terms around resources and wealth, while the images of and stories about African children reify a particular vision of what underdevelopment looks like in Africa: poverty, poor nutrition, and limited access to schooling. This vision is based in what we call the development episteme, the knowledge system that has shaped ideas of development for Africa over the past two centuries.

While providing a broad overview of sub-Saharan Africa's social, economic, and political conditions, the World Bank narrowly defines underdeveloped economies as a problem for the global economy. The World Bank suggests this problem can be fixed through the collection of "Data" that feed into western-style scientific solutions. "Experts" then translate the scientific results into "Projects" meant to expand the national economies of African countries and thus bring Africa's youth into a future defined in terms of neoliberal capitalism and western modernity. Each piece of the World Bank in Africa website represents a piece of the development episteme that advocates this western-style modernity, a modernity that is constantly changing and thus always out of reach.

To the majority of Africans today, "development" does not necessarily mean GNI, growth rates, or statistical assessments of infrastructure in their countries. Development is both more tangible on an individual level – a measure of a mother's ability to pay school fees for her children, for example – and less concrete – such as a general sense of "moving forward" (Swahili, *maendeleo*) or embracing change. Nonetheless, the World Bank's definition of development and, in particular, the idea that some nations lag behind others, has informed and continues to inform international development policies for Africa. *The Idea of Development in Africa* offers an overview that explores where this idea of development came from and how it has shaped Africa's past, present, and visions for the future.

The title of this book is a nod to Congolese philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Idea of Africa* (1994).<sup>2</sup> Mudimbe argues that the "idea of Africa" now pervasive globally materialized during the era of European colonialism starting in the nineteenth century. This idea

<sup>2</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1994). See also V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Indiana University Press, 1988).

became ingrained, co-opted, and reformed – though not completely transformed – by Africans themselves who inherited the language of othering from colonialism and turned it into a language of solidarity in the twentieth century. This "idea of Africa" portrays the continent and its people as stuck in the past and embroiled in poverty and, therefore, the target of necessary and justified intervention. This idea of Africa was thus inherent to the development episteme, and vice versa. The terminology has changed over time, and the speakers now include Africans as well as westerners, but the basic assumptions about the difference between those who are developed and those who need development have not changed. This book provides an overview of the historical foundations of those assumptions (the development episteme) and how it gave shape to the idea of development. Our intention is to engage readers in a conversation about how and why international development efforts in Africa have historically had ambiguous results, and why we need to challenge the basic assumptions underlying our contemporary idea of development.

## THE DEVELOPMENT EPISTEME

The development episteme has been an essential component of the "idea of Africa" in western discourses since the early 1800s. The word "episteme" means knowledge system or the creation of knowledge. Episteme is not merely the creation of knowledge but the hegemony of that knowledge and the idea that a particular epistemology, or way of knowing, is the *only* way of getting at the truth. The "development episteme" thus refers to the knowledge system that claims there are real, measurable differences in "development" between nations, societies, or social groups. It is the "scientific" concept that some societies are "developed" and others are "undeveloped," "less developed," or in the process of "developing." The development episteme promotes the impression that development is the *only* lens through which one can understand African cultures and societies.<sup>3</sup>

Africa's modern history has been a history of development. By this, we do not mean the capitalist economic growth, the expansion of

<sup>3</sup> For more on the hegemony of the development discourse see Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 2012 [1995]).

infrastructure, or the emergence of democratic nation-states that many African countries have experienced. We investigate the history of the ideas, practices, and “problems” of development as the episteme that has shaped the way westerners perceive African people, societies, and environments. Many diplomats, professionals, practitioners, and scholars assert that international development began with the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944 and the creation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the following year.<sup>4</sup> According to the standard narrative, these institutions initially raised funds for Europe’s recovery in the wake of World War II and then gradually shifted their attention toward development of the “Third World,” or what today is often called “the global south.” This book offers a different take on the history of development by examining the origins of the development episteme itself.<sup>5</sup>

The development episteme emerged out of Enlightenment philosophies that justified a sense of racial and cultural superiority among Europeans and instilled in them the impulse to “civilize” the rest of the world. This civilizing mission, which some people in the late nineteenth century described as the “white man’s burden,” laid the groundwork for many of the development discourses and practices directed toward Africa and Africans today. Assumptions about racial difference remained foundational to the development episteme between the 1880s and the 1950s, when more than 90 percent of the African continent was under European colonial control. Gradually after the Second World War, the development discourse shifted its focus from race to culture, but the othering of Africans racially, culturally, and geographically has not disappeared. This othering is not necessarily a reflection of racial biases or nefarious intentions among individuals engaged in development work – quite the opposite. Most people working toward developing Africa aim for justice and equality globally. However, the structures of the development industry nonetheless perpetuate ideological and material inequalities. The central argument of this book is that this logic of difference and differentiation is built into the foundations of the development episteme itself. We offer an overview of how the idea of development, or the development

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Barrie Ireton, *Britain’s International Development Policies: A History of DFID and Overseas Aid* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Corinna Unger’s *International Development: A Postwar History* (Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Aram Ziai, *Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to Sustainable Development Goals* (Routledge, 2016).

episteme, came into being, and how this idea has shaped particular policies and practices in Africa over the past two centuries. Each chapter also provides examples of how the development episteme endures into the present day.

## VERNACULAR DEVELOPMENT

While the development episteme has dominated western ideas about Africa, Africans themselves have generated their own diverse meanings of development. Vernacular development, or the words and phrases Africans have used to describe development, highlights the ways in which development became translated and redefined in African languages and cultures and how the targets of development interventions have designed their own paradigms for understanding economic, political, and social change.<sup>6</sup>

In the Shona language of Zimbabwe, the word *budiriro* is used as a translation for “development.” *Budiriro* literally means “physical and material success.” Anthropologist Erica Bornstein argues that this concept has moral implications in addition to practical ones. Success in material or physical form is not enough. One who is successful must also be humble and generous, for there is a negative connotation to *budiriro*, an underside to development that refers to the potential to corrupt by desire, greed, or envy. Thus, built into the Shona concept of development is both the idea of striving for material gain and the warning about the negative consequences this success might bring.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, development is understood as a process of transforming from one thing into another. For example, the word for “development” in Xhosa, a language spoken in South Africa, is *uphuhliso*, which refers to renewal or improvement of a current condition. This word is also used to indicate empowerment or the ability to overcome challenges. Closer to the English word “development” in its literal sense is the Wolof word *yokute*, which comes from the root *yokk*, meaning to “add” or “increase.” In the *yokute* form, however, the word takes on a new connotation. For example, Senegalese president Macky Sall has

<sup>6</sup> The authors thank Dr. Carolyn E. Vieira-Martinez and the Asili Collaborative Research Group for providing a list of African-language terms related to development, which was compiled from their databases.

<sup>7</sup> Erica Bornstein, *The Spirit of Development: Protestant NGOs, Morality, and Economics in Zimbabwe* (Routledge, 2003), 155.



employed the slogan “*Yoonu Yokute*” to describe his national development plan. *Yoonu Yokute* translates as “The Way Forward” or “The Pathway to Development.” Though the Wolof root word for “development” evokes accumulation or growth – a concept that might imply personal, material success – the word *yokute* has a broader connotation referring to progress for all.<sup>8</sup>

“Moving forward” is a common sentiment conveyed by African-language terms for “development.” As mentioned earlier, the Swahili word *maendeleo*, used widely across eastern Africa, comes from the root word *kuenda* (“to go”), as well as the word *kuendelea* (“to go on” or “to continue”). Anthropologist James Smith notes that in Kenya *maendeleo* can refer to movement in space or to movement in time. As such, *maendeleo* can indicate anything from an individual traveling to a foreign land to a community planning for its future.<sup>9</sup> Similar words and phrases referencing mobility include the Hausa term *ci gaba* used in Northern Nigeria and the Malagasy word *fampandrosoana* common in Madagascar. These phrases have different meanings in different contexts, but they all connote a general sense of heading in a certain direction toward the future. Some scholars have interpreted this as “modernity” rather than “development.” Along these lines, anthropologist James Ferguson has argued that, as development appears to have failed Africa, modernity has replaced development as the goal for those who want to improve their lives and communities.<sup>10</sup>

African concepts of development must also be understood in terms of philosophies about humanity and social change. One common ideal in African philosophies is the notion of *ubuntu*, generally translated as “I am because we are.” This idea originated from southern Africa in the nineteenth century and became widely popular across the continent in the 1950s. It celebrates communal well-being over individual prosperity. African nationalist leaders in particular embraced *ubuntu* as a symbol of pan-African solidarity, and today the word *ubuntu* appears in the names of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious movements, political parties, and even computer software. Africans across the continent evoke this ideal in order to explain their shared

<sup>8</sup> Jean Léopold Diouf, *Dictionnaire wolof-français et français-wolof* (Karthala, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> James Smith, *Bewitching Development: Witchcraft and the Reinvention of Development in Neoliberal Kenya* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4–7.

<sup>10</sup> James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in a Neoliberal World Order* (Duke University Press, 2006).

values and goals for development and to capitalize on its global currency.<sup>11</sup>

Whether African-language words for development imply the amassing of wealth, globalization, individual transformation, community values, or simply heading into the future, they provide insight into the nuances of meaning Africans have brought to development ideas and practices. Alternative visions of development can also reveal some of the assumptions and misconceptions built into western ideals and top-down development policies. Comedic interpretations of international development initiatives on television or the Internet, especially by Africans, poignantly highlight common fallacies about Africa. Before he became the host of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, South African comedian Trevor Noah did a bit as a guest on a show called *Spot the Africa*, which poked fun at western stereotypes about African poverty and underdevelopment.<sup>12</sup> Other artists and activists ridicule the development industry itself. The web series entitled *The Samaritans* features a fictional NGO called “Aid for Aid” based in Nairobi, Kenya. In order to access episodes of the show, which is “about an NGO that does nothing,” visitors make a small donation to fund the production of future episodes.<sup>13</sup> Government development organizations have even funded efforts to flip the script on the development discourse. The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation funded a student group to run an annual competition, the “Radi-Aid Award,” for commercials that highlight stereotypes in NGO advertising, most famously producing a video asking Africans to send radiators to the poor freezing Norwegians because “frostbite kills too.”<sup>14</sup> Another winning Radi-Aid video mocks people and organizations seeking to “save Africa.”

The amount of money generated from development and the number of people profiting from it, however, is no joke. Development is its own multibillion-dollar industry, and has spawned what Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole has labeled the “White Savior Industrial Complex” that drives much of the western urge “to do something” in Africa.<sup>15</sup> For

<sup>11</sup> Michael Onyebuchi Eze, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 89–192.

<sup>12</sup> *Spot the Africa*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH01arkvZGo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH01arkvZGo), accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> *The Samaritans*, [www.aidforaid.org/](http://aidforaid.org/), accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> “The Rusty Radiator,” <http://radiaid.com/>, accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/), accessed June 12, 2019.

well-off people in the global north who struggle with how to tackle societal problems within their own countries, offering "aid" to African countries puts distance between their own lives and those "in need" while assuaging their guilt. It is no wonder that development continues to be the primary lens through which the world sees Africa and Africans.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Development has and still is frequently packaged as a gift from the haves to the have-nots. During the nineteenth century, the humanitarian efforts of missionaries and Europeans who embraced the "white man's burden" portrayed "civilization" as a gift to Africans. This civilizing mission set the tone for colonial and postcolonial international interventions in Africa. Colonial-era development was never simply about helping Africans, but was also an ideological, economic, and political project that sought to exploit African land, labor, and resources. This is not our judgment on development, but was built into the very conceptualization of colonial development policy. The French term for colonial development in Africa was *mise en valeur*, a phrase world systems scholar Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out literally translates as "making into value."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Britain's Colonial Development Act of 1929 stated explicitly that colonial development funding must promote "commerce with and industry in the United Kingdom."<sup>17</sup> The colonial policies of self-sufficiency dictated that the costs of administration, infrastructure, health care, education, and other social services had to come out of local revenues rather than metropolitan resources.<sup>18</sup> Many colonial administrations relied on philanthropic organizations like the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Commission to offset the cost of development programs.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, "After Development and Globalization, What?" *Social Forces* 83:3 (2005) 1263–1278 at 1263.

<sup>17</sup> Great Britain Colonial Office, *First Interim Report of the Colonial Development Advisory Committee Covering the Period 1st August 1929–28th February 1930* (His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1930), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (Yale University Press, 1994), 97.

<sup>19</sup> Edward H. Berman, *The Influence of Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations on American Foreign Policy: The Ideology of Philanthropy* (State University of New York Press, 1983), 133–136.

After World War II, new development policies addressed the demands Africans, colonial officials, missionaries, and humanitarians made for more attention and funding toward "social welfare." Metropolitan funding schemes like Britain's Colonial Development and Welfare Fund, established in 1940, and France's Fonds d'investissements pour le développement économique et social (FIDES), inaugurated in 1946, funneled new life into development and welfare programs that appeared to focus more on Africa than on Europe. European imperial powers offered this "gift" of development in order to quell anticolonial sentiment and convince Africans that their European overseers had their best interests at heart. This was Europe's desperate attempt to prevent what was perhaps already a forgone conclusion, the closing chapter on colonialism. Development was repackaged once more in the postcolonial era, this time as a "gift" from wealthy nations to newly independent African countries and, in trickle-down economics fashion, from nationalist elites to their constituencies. Just like its colonial precedents, the gift of nationalist development was exposed as a broken promise in the 1970s and 1980s when the World Bank and IMF's Structural Adjustment Programs devastated African economies. Even as the policies and practices changed, the fundamental definition of development remained static.

Despite the extractive nature of development policies, Africans were adept at making development work for them. Colonial and postcolonial administrators pushed back against restrictive policies that limited spending on welfare programs. Many advocates for development in Africa believed wholeheartedly that they were altruistic endeavors to combat poverty, disease, or other calamities. However, even where development agents and policies prioritized African interests, they had to contend with the fact that, ultimately, development was required to be profitable. The "gift" of development always had strings attached.

During the nationalist era, some African political leaders debated whether international development interventions in Africa constituted a form of neocolonialism. In his 1965 book titled *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah defined neocolonialism as a situation in which a state is "in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty," but "[i]n reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside."<sup>20</sup> Some argue that neocolonialism is evident in the fact

<sup>20</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (Thomas Nelson, 1965), ix.

that, at the time we write this, some former French colonies' currencies and public financing are still determined by the French treasury.<sup>21</sup> African political leaders have also expressed concern that postcolonial international organizations such as the British Commonwealth of Nations or the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries) (CPLP), founded in 1997, constitute cultural or political forms of neocolonialism.<sup>22</sup> Even where former colonial powers no longer have control over African national economies, they often attempt to influence African politics by leveraging development aid. When an anti-homosexuality bill appeared before the Ugandan parliament in 2011, Britain threatened to withdraw development funding to its former colony.<sup>23</sup> Other donor nations followed suit after a version of the bill passed in 2014, though they backed off when the Ugandan constitutional court revoked the law. In these ways, wealthy countries (often former colonizers) lord their financial power over poorer countries (often their former colonies). Accusations of neocolonialism in Africa were not reserved for former imperial powers. Many Africans have argued that World Bank and IMF policies have increased Africa's dependency on the global north and replicated colonial-era political relationships.

Whether referring to the colonial or postcolonial era, one of the primary aims of the development enterprise has been to make African countries look more like western ones economically, politically, and culturally. Development interventions strive to encourage neoliberal capitalist trade and investment and to pressure African leaders to

<sup>21</sup> The currency used in francophone West and Central Africa (the Colonies Françaises d'Afrique [CFA] franc) was pegged to the French franc and later to the euro. Since 1959, the central banks of West and Central Africa have collected foreign exchange reserve funds from these territories (now independent nations) in order to pay a tax to the French treasury. In 2020, eight West African countries will stop using the CFA franc and change their currency to the eco. The nations using the eco will no longer be required to keep a portion of their foreign reserves in France. The Comoros Islands, a former French territory, also pays into this tax fund, even though it is not a member of either bank. The French government can seize these funds at any time for economic or political reasons. Anne-Marie Gulde and Charalambos Tsangarides, eds., *The CFA Franc Zone: Common Currency, Uncommon Challenges* (International Monetary Fund, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Norrie Macqueen, "A Community of Illusions? Portugal, the CPLP and Peacemaking in Guiné-Bissau," *International Peacekeeping* 10:2 (2003) 2–26.

<sup>23</sup> "Uganda Fury at David Cameron Aid Threat over Gay Rights," BBC News, October 31, 2011, [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15524013](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15524013), accessed January 12, 2018.

institute democratic reforms. On the surface, these are laudable aspirations designed to improve the lives of Africans and make African nations more equal partners in the global market. However, the underlying impetus behind these efforts has always been to facilitate foreign investment and trade and to ensure the continued prosperity of wealthy countries as much as to help African nations become wealthier. One of the fundamental beliefs behind international development is the notion that everyone has the potential to prosper in a capitalist system. This idea has been fiercely challenged by world systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein and historian-activist Walter Rodney, as well as university graduates whose degrees are not recognized in the global north, entrepreneurs shut out of business deals in their own countries, public employees who only occasionally receive paychecks from bankrupt African governments, and others who have yet to see the promised benefits of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>24</sup>

Development funding comes in many different forms, ranging from capitalist investments designed for profit to aid that may or may not require a return on investment (ROI). Humanitarian aid, conditional loans from international institutions, foreign direct investment (FDI), collaborative profit-yielding ventures, and country-to-country assistance are just some examples of development funding. Development projects may be short or long term, one-time transactions or ongoing relationships. The benefits and pitfalls of development projects are not always clear. For example, infrastructural development may be welcomed by some but considered a burden by others if the project requires ongoing maintenance that the state or society is unwilling or unable to perform. Much development assistance consists of humanitarian efforts focused on poor relief, responses to health crises, and other emergency aid that effectively deal with catastrophes, but fail to address the sources of the problems themselves.

Development often seems like a game of Whack-a-Mole: tackling one problem as another one pops up, then going after that problem while a new one emerges, and so forth. Piecemeal action and the emphasis on development "projects" force development agents to focus on one village, one issue, or one initiative at a time. Thus, even

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Duke University Press, 2004), and Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Howard University Press, Revised ed. 1982 [orig. Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972]).

as the development discourse promises equality (by transforming the have-nots into the haves), the ad hoc nature of development intervention perpetuates inequalities through differential access to health care, education, clean water, and other services. Development interventions have been often reactive rather than proactive and solutions are often touted as one size fits all. When development projects fail, the “experts” often offer new development solutions rather than questioning their assumptions about the development “problems.” Development is self-perpetuating. *The Idea of Development in Africa* is not a comprehensive listing of which development projects have or have not worked, but an overview of development in Africa supplemented with case studies that demonstrate the fundamental characteristics of the development episteme and its influence on the present.

Africans have long created their own ingenious methods for sustaining their environments, promoting their economic interests, and protecting themselves from various forms of oppression or exploitation. In the age of international development, many people circumvent governments, multinational corporations, and international financial institutions in order to promote local interests and grassroots initiatives. The turn toward neoliberalism in development since the late 1990s has led to an increase in pan-African, national, and local non-governmental organizations (LNGOs), such as the Forum for African Women Educationalists/Forum des éducatrices africaines (FAWE),<sup>25</sup> the conservationist NATURAMA group<sup>26</sup> in Burkina Faso, and the Mwambao Coastal Community Network<sup>27</sup> in Tanzania, to name a few. While international development institutions and agents maintain considerable power over financial decisions and planning, African NGOs have helped communities maintain control over local funds and have given African recipients of development aid a stronger voice in defining what development means for them.

The early years of the twenty-first century ushered in much optimism about Africa’s development prospects. This “Africa Rising” narrative proclaimed new opportunities on the horizon associated with increasing gross domestic product (GDP), the emergence of financial environments conducive to FDI, and the rapid industrialization of African

<sup>25</sup> See <http://fawe.org/home/>, accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> See [www.naturama.bf/web/index.php/naturama/2016-04-15-18-25-59/organisation](http://www.naturama.bf/web/index.php/naturama/2016-04-15-18-25-59/organisation), accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> See [www.mwambao.or.tz/](http://www.mwambao.or.tz/), accessed June 12, 2019.

economies.<sup>28</sup> The African Development Bank, established by the Organization of African Unity (the African Union) in 1964, and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), formed in 2001, have trumpeted this message of positivity. In 2016, the African Development Bank laid out the following “High 5” development priorities: Light Up and Power Africa, Feed Africa, Industrialize Africa, Integrate Africa, and Improve the Quality of Life for the People of Africa.<sup>29</sup> That same year, NEPAD declared four similar investment schemes in Human Capital Development; Industrialization, Science, Technology and Innovation; Regional Integration, Infrastructure and Trade; and Natural Resources Governance and Food Security.<sup>30</sup> Whereas the African Development Bank is more focused on development financing, NEPAD seeks to coordinate African countries’ national development agendas in order to identify common goals across the continent. The development plans for both entities align closely with the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>31</sup> With the exception of greater emphasis on renewable energy and environmental protection, these development objectives are not new. Reducing poverty, building infrastructure, providing clean water and electricity, expanding modern education and training programs, drawing more Africans into wage employment, integrating African economies into the world market, encouraging foreign investment and trade, and improving the health of women and children have been the goals of development interventions since at least the 1930s, and many of them much earlier. The financial arrangements – colonial government investment, bilateral aid between nations, grants and loans from the World Bank and the IMF, and FDI through private companies and individuals – have varied; however, the essential definition of development in all of these approaches has not changed. We argue for a deeper historical understanding of the idea of development in

<sup>28</sup> *The Economist* dedicated its December 3, 2011, issue to the theme “Africa Rising: The Hopeful Continent,” [www.economist.com/leaders/2011/12/03/africa-rising](http://www.economist.com/leaders/2011/12/03/africa-rising), accessed February 4, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> African Development Bank, *African Economic Outlook, 2017: Entrepreneurship and Industrialisation* (African Development Bank, Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, United Nations Development Programme, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> “About NEPAD,” <http://nepad.org/content/about-nepad>, accessed June 12, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Sustainable Development Goals, [www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html), accessed June 12, 2019.



Africa in order to break the cycle generated by the development episteme.

## BEYOND AN ECONOMIC HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

Until recently, the history of development in Africa has been a teleological story of national economic growth, industrialization, infrastructure building, capitalist enterprises, per capita income, and changing standards of living since World War II. Foundational studies of Africa's economic history recognize that colonial extraction and exploitation of African labor negatively impacted African economies.<sup>32</sup> However, these works often embrace the notion that now-independent African nations can and should aspire toward the western industrialized model of development. They assume a primarily economic and capitalist definition of development. More recent scholarship has critically examined the specific ideas, policies, and practices carried out in the name of development and evaluated their impact on Africa and Africans. These works include studies on socialist development in Tanzania, witchcraft and ideas about development in Kenya, unsuccessful agricultural development schemes in Mali, gender and social development in Nigeria, women's professionalization and colonial development in Zanzibar, the centrality of NGOs to development policies in the Sahel, development of the oil industry, creation of scientific knowledge for development, colonial development, and gender and development.<sup>33</sup> *The Idea of Development in Africa* builds on these efforts

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Routledge, 2014 [orig. Addison Wesley Longman, 1973]); Ralph Austen, *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency* (James Currey, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Smith, *Bewitching Development*; Monica van Beusekom, *Negotiating Development: African Farmers and Colonial Experts at the Office Du Niger, 1920–1960* (Heinemann, 2002); Abosede A. George, *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos* (Ohio University Press, 2014); Corrie Decker, *Mobilizing Zanzibari Women: The Struggle for Respectability and Self-Reliance in Colonial East Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOS in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jesse Salah Ovadia, *The Petro-developmental State in Africa: Making Oil Work in Angola, Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea* (Hurst, 2016); Helen Tilley, *Africa As a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950* (University of

to move beyond a narrow economic history of development in order to identify the key development ideas, practices, and “problems” that have shaped Africa's past and present. We address the following questions: What has driven the development impulse in Africa over time? How has development been defined and who has defined it? How did the development episteme become the dominant framework for understanding African political, economic, and social dynamics?

Development has come in many different forms and was not always called “development,” but we define it in three ways. First, development entails the development episteme, or the creation of knowledge about Africa's social, economic, political, environmental, intellectual, and physical conditions and how to improve them. These ideas have been generated primarily by non-African governments and individuals located in the global north. Second, development refers to the specific policies and practices arising from this “knowledge” imposed onto African communities. Third, because it is based in an unequal relationship between the “haves” and the “have-nots” (that is, those who claim to have development and those they proclaim do not have and therefore need development), development is a discourse of power that “experts” have inflicted on Africans, though Africans have also challenged, redefined, subverted, or engineered development theories and practices.<sup>34</sup> In short, development entails knowledge production, the power to implement this knowledge, and the impact this knowledge and power have on the experience of individuals caught in the system. Parts I, II, and III of this book correlate with these three definitions of development, respectively, and historicize the relationship between them. *The Idea of Development in Africa* thus maps out the origins of the development episteme in nineteenth-century imperialism and colonialism (Part I), how the development episteme determined the trajectory of colonial and postcolonial international development policies and practices for Africa (Part II), and how it shaped approaches to specific development “problems” in Africa during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Part III). Each chapter presents the reader with an introductory overview of the topic and specific examples from the past and present that represent the issue discussed in the chapter. By

Chicago Press, 2011); Joseph M. Hodge, Gerald Hödl, and Martina Kopf, eds., *Developing Africa: Concepts and Practices in Twentieth-Century Colonialism* (Manchester University Press, 2014); April Gordon, *Transforming Capitalism and Patriarchy: Gender and Development in Africa* (Lynne Rienner, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 10.

putting the past and present into dialogue, this book offers readers a new way to think about the relationship between development, power, and the creation of knowledge about Africa and Africans.

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Development has become its own industry invested as much in its continued existence as it is in eradicating poverty, generating growth, and facilitating global trade. This does not discount the fact that many African individuals and societies have benefited directly from development and many have embraced fully the ideology that Africa and Africans need development. Despite the rhetoric on saving, helping, and equalizing, the development industry has done more to maintain global and local inequalities than it has to dismantle them. This is part of the legacy of European colonialism in Africa, a legacy international development has yet to shed, regardless of the intentions of development experts and advocates. We analyze the ways in which development has been conceptualized and implemented in order to expose the inequalities embedded in the development episteme, and thus spark a conversation among development experts, investors, volunteers, and local, national, and international leaders about the inadequacy of viewing Africa through the development lens. It may be impossible to decolonize development fully or disentangle Africa from the development discourse; nevertheless, we believe it is worthwhile to imagine other ways of understanding Africa's place in the world.

## Part I

### Origins of the Development Episteme

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## CHAPTER 1

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### From Progress to Development

The smoked monkeys brought the point home. During my first day on a boat on the Congo River, I'd embraced the unfamiliar: how to bend under the rail to fill my wash bucket from the river, where to step around the tethered goat in the dark and the best way to prepare a pot of grubs. But when I saw the monkeys impaled on stakes, skulls picked clean of brains and teeth thrusting out, I looked otherness in the face – and saw myself mirrored back.

–Maya Jasanoff, "With Conrad on the Congo River," 2017

On August 18, 2017, historian of British imperialism Maya Jasanoff wrote in the *New York Times* about her journey along the Congo River that followed the route Joseph Conrad took in the 1880s.<sup>1</sup> Jasanoff's expectations, reactions, and language demonstrate the rhetorical loop of ideas about development in Africa that has existed for more than 250 years. Echoing Conrad, whose book was "a meditation on progress," Jasanoff herself asked, "what counts as progress?" Her goal was to "take the measure of what has and hasn't changed since his time." By using the language of "progress" Jasanoff offered to modern readers an analysis that directly linked the nineteenth-century concept of progress with twenty-first-century notions of development.

Joseph Conrad published his novella *Heart of Darkness* in 1899, which told the story of a steamboat captain sent up the Congo River to bring back an ill ivory trader, known as Kurtz. The story's narrator questions

<sup>1</sup> Maya Jasanoff, "With Conrad on the Congo River," *New York Times*, August 18, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/opinion/joseph-conrad-congo-river.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/opinion/joseph-conrad-congo-river.html), accessed February 4, 2020.

whether the experience of colonization in the Congo drove Kurtz, a highly respected European, to madness before he died. As Jasanoff noted in her article, Conrad was as critical of European colonial exploitation in the Congo as he was of the "backwardness" of the Congolese people he encountered. Conrad's representation of Africans as backward or savage was typical of European opinions at the time.

This view evolved out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment idea that all societies progressed in a linear fashion toward modernity, the pinnacle of which was European civilization. In this construction "modern" or "progressive" societies were those that mimicked European cultural, social, economic, and political structures. While Conrad questioned the costs of European progressivism in 1899, Jasanoff accepted this concept at face value. The idea of progress defined in terms of western modernity had become so pervasive by the twenty-first century that even as Jasanoff recognized Conrad's criticism of colonialism, she did not call into question the concept of progress itself. Either the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) had progressed (implying that it more closely resembled western civilization) or it had moved backward; Jasanoff offered no other option.

Conrad's novella gave witness to the rush of late nineteenth-century European colonialism in Africa. The move to colonize Africa was based on the founding idea that European civilization was superior to all other forms of civilization and would bring enlightenment as it spread across the globe. European explorers, missionaries, and colonists saw Africa as a "dark continent" because it did not have the "light" of western civilization shining within it; they saw themselves as the humanitarians who could bring modernity to Africa. As to the question of whether the civilization Europeans envisioned in the nineteenth century had finally come to the modern country of the DRC, Jasanoff's response was a resounding "no." Instead, she decried that "measured in relative terms, most people in Congo were probably better off 100 years ago" than in the present day.<sup>2</sup> This statement was remarkable for its overlooking of the rapacious nature of Belgian colonialism in the region, in particular the period between 1887 and 1907 during which an estimated ten million Congolese were killed and forced to work in a brutal quest to extract rubber and line the pockets of King Leopold II.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

Throughout her narrative of the boat trip, Jasanoff defines for her readers what she means by progress or, in the case of the DRC, the absence of progress. First and foremost, she references the lack of speed with which anything is achieved in the country. Instead of embracing the rapid modern convenience of air travel, Congolese continue to travel primarily by boat. Given the riverine environment of the DRC, boat travel is the most economical and environmentally friendly means of movement within the country. Jasanoff also laments that Congolese river towns lack visible progress by comparing them to the fake towns from "the set of a western" film. Twenty-first-century Congolese towns, in her opinion, cannot even measure up to the Hollywood fantasies of a nineteenth-century US frontier. Furthermore, Jasanoff tells the reader that while the Congolese people are very friendly, they are still culturally backward. She points to foods such as monkey brains and grubs to demonstrate the deficiency of Congolese cuisine, culture, and civilization. It is no wonder that Jasanoff concludes that the DRC was "better off" under Belgian colonialism; according to her, the Congolese have failed to develop because they are not westernized.

Jasanoff's article illustrates the persistence of ideas about linear progress in western discourses on development in Africa, but one thing has changed since the nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century European ideas of progress centered around Christianity. The European "civilizing mission" of the 1800s entailed efforts to modernize, westernize, and Christianize non-western societies, especially in Africa. By the 1920s the civilizing mission, as it had been known, morphed into the concept of "development," which continued to define progress in terms of the remaking of African societies in the mold of the west. Even though Jasanoff does not use the language of the civilizing mission or of Christianity, she still frames her idea of development within a language of linear progress that is directly linked to the adoption of western cultural values. This chapter explores the nineteenth-century origins of the language that Jasanoff uses to describe the DRC and how it became foundational to development studies in present-day Africa.

## MAKING THE PROGRESSIVE WEST

During the medieval period many Europeans explained events as God's will. The flow of life – birth, youth, maturity, old age, and death – became a metaphor for civilizations, which were believed to

go through a similar cycle as humans. With the Scientific Revolution, Europeans slowly moved out of the "dark ages" into the "light" of knowledge based on empirical studies rather than tradition or superstition. Enlightenment philosophy introduced the notion that social evolution and progress resulted from scientific inquiry and technological advancements. "Modern" European civilization, especially that of Western European countries, became the model of progress for all societies around the world.

The definition of the word "civilized" evolved over time, but Europeans of the early modern era adopted the word to describe "the west" as distinct from other societies they considered "primitive," or less developed. Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen argue the concept of "the west" began with divisions between the eastern Orthodox and western Latin Christian churches. By the eighteenth century the occident (the west) was mostly defined as Western or Central Europe.<sup>4</sup> However, "the east" was much less clearly defined and usually incorporated Islamic societies near Europe. It was in the nineteenth century that the terminology of the west came to mean societies descended from Western Europeans, including colonial settler states such as Canada and the United States. In European discourses the meaning of the orient (the east) expanded from "non-western civilization," such as Islamic societies, to societies "lacking civilization." "The east" then incorporated larger Asia and came to be defined phenotypically, or in racial terms.<sup>5</sup> This racialized geographic distinction between "the west" and "the east" became part of a stratified racial hierarchy that positioned "the west" above all other regions of the world and that placed Africa on the bottom rung. Simultaneously, western societies defined their form of civilization as "modern" based on their adherence to progressivist ideas.

Those progressivist ideas came from Enlightenment thinkers who detached philosophical and scientific ideas from theology. No longer beholden to theology for explaining the world around them, they emphasized the creation of knowledge based on empirical evidence. The rise of scientific knowledge and technological developments brought the notion of progress to the center of Enlightenment theory. Philosophers such as Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Antoine-Nicolas

<sup>4</sup> Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents* (University of California Press, 1997), 49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–55.

de Condorcet, and Immanuel Kant argued that societies moved in a linear fashion toward modernity. Immanuel Kant described the Enlightenment as a "maturity of thinking" that used science and empiricism to fundamentally reframe the episteme of European societies.<sup>6</sup> The foundation of progressive intellectual growth allowed European theorists to see themselves at the forefront of knowledge creation globally. Europeans perceived their civilizations as the yardstick against which all other societies should be measured.<sup>7</sup>

European explorers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to distinguish themselves as more "civilized" and developed in comparison with the diverse human communities they encountered around the world. Edward Said labeled this process as Orientalism, the racial "othering" of "eastern" people and the eroticization of Arab culture in particular. Othering was a tool of modern European imperialism because it mapped non-European cultures and people onto a global racial hierarchy that reified white men as the pinnacle of progress.<sup>8</sup> European efforts to collect ethnographic data about "other" cultures were not merely a sign of their ethnocentrism or curiosity. Enlightenment progressivism made it imperative for Europeans both to empirically document their knowledge about other societies and to transform these societies into "civilized" ones modeled after the west.

The scientific turn in the development discourse was not entirely disconnected from religion. American sociologist Robert Nisbet argues that the "idea of progress" was actually Christian doctrine secularized.<sup>9</sup> The Protestant religious revivals of the nineteenth century both fueled the rise in missionary societies across Europe and the United States and linked Protestant beliefs with progressivist ideas of labor and economic reward. The new missionaries of the nineteenth century were interested in spreading the gospel and bringing a "civilizing mission" to Africa and Asia. Civilizing primarily required conversion to Christianity, but also the adoption of western cultures and technologies. Progressive ideas allowed westerners in Africa to see

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (1784), in Allen W. Wood, ed., *Basic Writings of Kant* (Modern Library, 2001), 133–142.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*. Fourth edition (Routledge, 2017 [orig. 1980]), 171–316.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 172.

themselves not as colonizers exploiting other societies but as humanitarians sharing the gift of their civilization and bringing economic development to their new converts.

Western Christian missionaries worried about "backsliding" among their African converts and the threat of "regression" among westerners who embraced African traditions or beliefs. To return to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz, the brilliant ivory trader, was driven "mad" by the savagery around him. This brutality represented the dangers of "going native" by adopting the social and cultural practices of "less civilized" societies. Enlightenment philosophers argued that regression meant simply becoming less civilized; however, by the end of the nineteenth century, European distinctions between *who* was civilized and *who* was not had an implicit racial connotation.<sup>10</sup> Lewis and Wigen note that in the nineteenth century, "non-western cultures came to be dismissed as entirely stagnant, if not barbaric, while racism came to be cloaked with a new intellectual respectability."<sup>11</sup> Thus, western progressivist ideas of "civilizing" slowly adopted racist implications without ever explicitly marking progressivism as a racial ideology.

### PROGRESS, MISSIONARIES, AND THE CIVILIZING MISSION

The nineteenth century saw major changes in how European missionaries and governments engaged the civilizing mission and sought to develop African societies to look like western ones. Western portrayals of Africans transformed over the century from those featuring a simple, innocent people bound by the shackles of slavery to those depicting savages and cannibals who *needed* to be introduced, by force if necessary, to the European model of progressive civilization.<sup>12</sup> An early effort made by British abolitionists to develop a westernized African community failed dramatically when the African participants refused to embrace the capitalist exploitation of their labor. In response, the colonial government imposed a framework where missionaries did the work of social and cultural development while the government focused

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," *Critical Inquiry* 12:1 (1985) 166–203.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans."

on economic development; this framework would come to dominate colonial social and political structures into the twentieth century.

Religious revivalism in Europe and America during the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries sparked the abolitionist and missionary causes in Africa. One of the earliest examples of the European civilizing mission in West Africa was the founding of the colony of Sierra Leone. In 1787 Granville Sharp, a leading British abolitionist, helped to establish the colony with 340 Black ex-slaves from North America. Sharp envisioned a colony where the Black settlers, all of whom were already Christians, would own their land, create their government, and slowly bring Christianity and western values to Africans. He hoped for a self-sufficient, model society that would demonstrate to Europeans the humanity and dignity of ex-slaves, thereby reinforcing efforts to abolish the slave trade. After four years and the death of 292 settlers, other British abolitionists declared the experiment a disaster.

Henry Thornton, an associate of Granville Sharp, took over control of the Sierra Leone colony but incorporated it into a charter company called the Sierra Leone Company (SLC). The new company's stated goal was to "promote civilization in Africa," but as a company that had to generate profit for its investors, its central aim was economic development.<sup>13</sup> The company took ownership of all the land and assets of the original colony, imposed a white British governor on the surviving Black settlers, and set economic goals for anyone living in the settlement. Thornton instituted a model wherein the civilizing of Africa would be achieved through western-style "disciplined work" done by Black people and supervised by white Europeans. Civilizing Africans may have been the stated intention of the SLC, but the primary outcome was the introduction of western-style economic development.

Twelve hundred new settlers, originally ex-slave maroons from Jamaica who had settled in Nova Scotia, agreed to move to Sierra Leone in 1792 with hopes of leaving behind the racial bias they encountered in Canada. These settlers, all of whom were Protestant Christians, viewed themselves as free British subjects, not Africans. However, the white founders of the SLC insisted on

<sup>13</sup> Cassandra Pybus, "'A Less Favourable Specimen': The Abolitionist Response to Self-Emancipated Slaves in Sierra Leone, 1793–1808," *Parliamentary History* 26:4 (2007) 97–112 at 99.



calling them Africans.<sup>14</sup> As Thornton decreed, the settlers were treated as economic laborers without rights of representation in the government. Over the course of the next decade the settlers resisted the actions of the SLC governor, Macaulay. Macaulay blamed resistance not on his economic policies but rather on the influence of Black ministers among the Methodist settlers. Macaulay brought European teachers and religious leaders to the colony in an effort to undermine the Black ministers and control the Black settlers. Eventually, when he left the colony in 1799, he took twenty-five African children to be educated in England. He viewed African children as the future of civilizing in the continent because they were more malleable than the ex-slaves. Macaulay, much like many other abolitionists of the time, had come to believe that enslavement fundamentally corrupted Africans' ability to become civilized or develop economically.

The British government took over Sierra Leone from the SLC in 1808 and officially designated it a colony of Britain. After the British abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, British naval vessels began "liberating" Africans by intercepting slave ships. Many of these "liberated" Africans were deposited in Sierra Leone and handed over to the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries to be educated in the "civilized" ways of Europeans.<sup>15</sup> From the perspective of British officials, freeing Africans from slavery also meant freeing them from the "savagery" of a society that accepted slavery. Numerous liberated Africans brought to Freetown, Sierra Leone, tried to leave the missions, and government officials and missionaries eventually imposed apprenticeships and indenture contracts to discourage flight and "teach" them how to "work."<sup>16</sup> They needed to keep the liberated Africans in the colony as workers in order to make the colony cost-effective. This policy demonstrates the direct link between the civilizing mission and economic aspects of colonization.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>15</sup> Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Everill, *Abolition and Empire*, 20, 36. See also Philip D. Curtin, *African Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Waveland Press, 1967), 289–316.

### 1.1 Samuel Ajayi Crowther

Before quinine became widely used as a prophylaxis against malaria in the late nineteenth century, European leaders worked to find alternative means of spreading Christianity in Africa because of the high rate of mortality among European missionaries. At Freetown and other mission stations missionaries began training African converts to proselytize. One of the most well-known indigenous West African missionaries was Samuel Ajayi Crowther. The British Navy took Crowther off a slave ship in 1822 and transported him to Freetown to live with the CMS. Crowther quickly proved himself adept at learning English, and within four years he was sent to England on one of several trips to study. He was the first student to register at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone in 1827, and he soon became a teacher. However, Crowther is better known for his work with the British Niger Expeditions of 1841, 1854, and 1857. The initial expedition of 1841 ended disastrously with most of the white participants dying from disease. Thus, the leaders of the later expeditions insisted that the majority of the participants were of African descent. The 1857 mission was unique among other CMS missions of the time because of its all-African staff, most of whom were from the settler and liberated African community in Sierra Leone. In 1864 Crowther was consecrated as the first African Anglican bishop for the territory of western Africa outside of the "Queen's control."

Sadly, toward the end of Crowther's life, white missionaries began to feel threatened by an all-African Christian church. By the late 1880s most white missionaries had embraced the view that Africans represented an inferior race. Accused of malfeasance by white missionaries, Crowther was forced to resign his position in the Anglican church and died two years later in 1891. His life came to represent the different stages of the civilizing mission in Africa – from the partnership between Africans and Europeans at the beginning of the nineteenth century to Africans as "the White Man's Burden" by the end of the century. Africans could be taught western civilization, but they could no longer be partners in the process of becoming "progressive."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Curtin, *Africa Remembered*, 289–316.

Setting a precedent for future colonies in Africa, European missionaries in Sierra Leone took responsibility for civilizing Africans through education, medicine, and social welfare work while the British colonial administration promoted economic development through "legitimate" trade in the agricultural and mineral commodities wanted in western countries. Government officials and white missionaries did not always see eye to eye during the colonization of Africa, but this division of responsibilities in Sierra Leone became the norm in European colonies across the continent. The civilizing mission of missionaries went hand in hand with government-led economic development. Western missionaries often had good intentions in bringing the civilizing mission to Africa. Some missionaries, however, became uncomfortable with Africans who wholly embraced European cultures because this blurred the line between the "civilized" and those in need of civilizing.

#### LEGITIMATE TRADE, COMMODITY PRODUCTION, AND THE CIVILIZING MISSION

The calls for ending the slave trade and shifting to "legitimate trade" existed decades before British abolitionist Thomas Buxton published his book on the topic in 1840.<sup>17</sup> However, it was Buxton's influence on a young missionary, David Livingstone, that brought England the pithy call for "Christianity, Commerce & Civilization" in order to bring progress and modernity to Africa. In 1857 Livingstone published his first book about his travels in Africa to great acclaim. In it he laid out his vision to "civilize" Africa and Africans.

Sending the Gospel to the heathen must . . . include much more than is implied in the usual picture of a missionary, namely, a man going about with a Bible under his arm. The promotion of commerce ought to be specially attended to, as this, more speedily than any thing else, demolishes that sense of isolation which heathenism engenders. . . . My observations on this subject make me extremely desirous to promote the preparation of the raw materials of European manufactures in Africa, for by that means we may not only put a stop to the slave-trade, but introduce the negro family into the body corporate of nations, no one member of which can suffer without the others suffering with it . . . for neither

<sup>17</sup> Robin Law, Suzanne Schwarz, and Silke Strickrodt, "Introduction," *Commercial Agriculture, the Slave Trade and Slavery in Atlantic Africa* (James Currey, 2013), 1–27 at 1–3; Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy* (John Murray, 1840), 306.

civilization nor Christianity can be promoted alone. In fact, they are inseparable.<sup>18</sup>

Livingstone envisioned social and economic development emerging from the combined influences of civilization, Christianity, and (legitimate) commerce. Livingstone journeyed across the United Kingdom between his trips to Africa, calling on British men and women to close the "open sore of Africa" by ending the continent's slave trades and facilitating trade with Europe. Although he railed against the slave trade in his numerous letters, travelogues, and public speeches, he often had to rely on slave traders for protection, guidance, and information during his travels. Nonetheless, he hoped Africans would barter raw materials instead of people in exchange for the products of European industrial capitalism, and consequently develop a desire to become civilized.

Livingstone and other Europeans either did not understand or ignored the reality that much of the "legitimate commerce" produced in Africa during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relied on locally enslaved labor.<sup>19</sup> This was true of the trades in spices from the Zanzibar Islands, palm oil from West Africa, and rubber from the Congo. While Europeans eventually ended slavery in the continent in name, they endorsed forced labor in deed. As Eric Allina argues in the case of Portuguese company rule in central Mozambique, forced labor was "slavery by any other name."<sup>20</sup> In 1899, Portuguese officials argued that "the state, not only as a sovereign of semi-barbaric populations, but also as a trustee of social authority, should have no scruples in obliging and, if necessary, forcing them [Africans] to work, that is, to better themselves through work, to acquire through work means for a more prosperous existence, to civilize themselves through work."<sup>21</sup> Even the International Labour Organization's 1930 statute banning forced labor included a caveat for certain types of coercion necessary for "educational purposes"

<sup>18</sup> David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa, Including a Sketch of Sixteen Years' Residence in the Interior of Africa, and a Journey from the Cape of Good Hope to Loanda on the West Coast; Thence across the Continent, Down the River Zambesi, to the Eastern Ocean* (John Murray, 1857), 28.

<sup>19</sup> Landeg White, *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 23. European officials clearly understood that legitimate trade was produced by locally held slaves. In an 1874 report, Frederic Holmwood reported "legitimate" items being produced by slaves. See United Kingdom National Archives (hereafter UKNA), Foreign Office (FO) 881/2572.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Allina, *Slavery by Any Other Name: African Life under Company Rule in Colonial Mozambique* (University of Virginia Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.



and "the public benefit."<sup>22</sup> The socialization of Africans into western modes of capitalist trade and labor coincided with the intersecting causes promoting Christianity and development in Africa.

In contrast to the religious foundations of the British civilizing mission in Africa, the French civilizing mission, or *mission civilisatrice*, was an overseas expression of broader French republican ideals. French imperialists interpreted the civilizing mission as an extension of the political concepts of equality and freedom that emerged from the 1789 French Revolution. The French believed that if Africans embraced French culture, they would be free from their own forms of oppression, such as slavery. Historian Alice Conklin argues that French liberalism was not merely rhetoric designed to obscure capitalist greed and colonial exploitation. Much as Granville Sharp had envisioned for Sierra Leone, early French colonizers intended for Africans under their stewardship to gain basic human rights denied them by their "uncivilized" societies. After the federation of French West Africa in 1895 the government "aimed at ending slavery and eroding the power of chiefs – in true republican spirit – in the name of the rights of the individual."<sup>23</sup>

Conklin's work on French colonialism is a good reminder to examine the motivations of European colonizers (or all historical actors, for that matter) from their own perspectives as well as their historical impact. Whether inspired by French political liberalism or Christian universal humanism, many Europeans embraced the progressive ideas of the civilizing mission and the development discourse as a means to *welcome* Africans to a new modern humanity. However, contradictions between these universalist ideologies and late nineteenth-century racial othering persisted in all European efforts to colonize Africa. It is also important to remember that the economic side of the civilizing mission, especially the effort to develop commodity production, buttressed the capitalist foundations of European colonialism in Africa.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Roger Maul, "The International Labour Organization and the Struggle against Forced Labour from 1919 to the Present," *Labor History* 48:4 (2007) 477–500.

<sup>23</sup> Alice Conklin, "Colonialism and Human Rights, a Contradiction in Terms? The Case of France and West Africa, 1895–1914," *American Historical Review* 103:2 (1998) 419–442 at 424. See also Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford University Press, 1997). French West Africa expanded to include the region covering the contemporary nations of Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal.

## EVOLUTION OF SOCIETIES TOWARD DEVELOPMENT

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution explains changes in biological species over the course of millennia, but during the nineteenth century many scholars interpreted evolution in social terms. Social evolution is the belief that societies, like species, evolve from simple to more complex forms over time. Nineteenth-century social evolutionists argued that different contemporary societies represented separate stages of a single evolutionary ladder depending on their level of progress. This flattening of evolutionary time onto social or geographical difference in the present resulted in the highly racialized distinction between "primitive" and "civilized" societies. Western concepts of social evolution associated capitalism, technology, and whiteness with "civilization," development, and modernity, an association still prevalent in contemporary ideas of development.

While many historians have referred to social evolution as "social Darwinism," it was not Darwin but other scientists and writers who promoted the theory. In 1857, two years before the release of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, Herbert Spencer published an article titled "Progress: Its Law and Cause."<sup>24</sup> He offered a pseudoscientific "Natural Law," which argued for a linear progression of evolution in all aspects of the universe. When *On the Origins of Species* made its debut Spencer incorporated Darwin's theory of natural selection into his own theory of social evolution and coined the phrase "survival of the fittest." Social Darwinists argued that the strongest societies survived, gained power, and developed while the weak were destined to disappear. Some social Darwinists believed that class stratification was also a product of natural selection and that the poor and weak were undeserving of help. Social evolutionists employed Darwin's ideas about natural selection to justify colonizing "weaker" societies. Some argued that colonization would help other societies develop, thereby preventing their extinction. Whether or not they bought Spencer's "survival of the fittest" concept, many nineteenth-century Europeans used the theory of social evolution to explain racial difference, which

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative, Volume I* (D. Appleton, 1910), 8–62. The chapter, titled "Progress: Its Law and Cause," was first published in *The Westminster Review* in April 1857.

generated a brand of racism that culminated in the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century.

Nineteenth-century artistic and scientific images conveying the theory of social evolution reinforced the association of development with whiteness and industrialization. One notable example is John Gast's 1872 painting *American Progress* (see Figure 1.1). It portrays "primitive" hunting-based societies (in this case, Native Americans) fleeing in the path of "advanced" white agriculturalists (who are also shown as progressing over time as they embrace industrialization and capitalism). As American society expanded westward, white Americans believed they were taming the landscape with new technologies. In Gast's painting white men overcome the foreboding darkness of untamed nature with the bright light of civilization, represented by trains and telegraph wires. The popularity of Gast's painting, which was reproduced and distributed widely, demonstrates the salience of the social evolution theory and scientific progressivism among European and European-descended people around the globe in the late nineteenth century.



**FIGURE 1.1** George A. Crofutt. *American Progress*. Chromolithograph, ca. 1873, after an 1872 painting by John Gast. Source: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

## AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT AS THE "WHITE MAN'S BURDEN"

By the end of the nineteenth century European powers claimed that colonialism was the best means for spreading "civilization" in Africa. The major shift toward colonization came after the Berlin Conference held between November 1884 and February 1885. The conference was organized by German chancellor Otto von Bismarck to quell imperial rivalries. In attendance were representatives of all major European imperial powers, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States. The participants agreed that imperial powers' "spheres of influence" in Africa would be recognized once these powers demonstrated occupation of their claimed territories. The meeting sparked an era of "New Imperialism" that, when combined with the Christian abolitionist movement and social evolutionist thinking, sped up European colonization of the African interior in the name of progress and the civilizing mission.

Late nineteenth-century poetry, paintings, and political cartoons provide insight into how westerners envisioned this New Imperialism. One of the most iconic representations of the civilizing mission was a poem entitled "The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands," written by British author Rudyard Kipling and published in an American newspaper in February 1899.<sup>25</sup> Kipling sought to encourage the United States to fulfill what he saw as its imperialist *duty* in the Philippines. In the poem he urged the "White Man" to carry those people untouched by western civilization "toward the light" even though it may appear to him a futile and thankless endeavor. This poem was read widely in Europe and the United States and sparked a wave of poetry, paintings, and political cartoons with similar themes. These works suggested that non-western people were ignorant, superstitious, brutal, and cruel perpetrators of vices such as sexual promiscuity and drinking. In contrast they portrayed colonialism as a philanthropic movement, arguing that "uncivilized" people would only learn how to develop and become modern with the help of whites. The religious undertone of spreading the "light" of civilization was intentional, though here the "light" referred as much to the

<sup>25</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," *New York Sun*, February 10, 1899. The poem was originally written about British imperialism but for publication in the United States Kipling switched its focus to the Philippines.

Enlightenment, industrialization, and the white race as it did to Christian salvation.

Not everyone agreed with Kipling's representation of the "White Man" in contrast to the "Others" he wanted to save. A compelling critique of Kipling's poem was H. T. Johnson's "The Black Man's Burden," published in an American missionary magazine in April 1899.<sup>26</sup> Johnson was a middle-class, African American minister who argued that the "Black Man's Burden" was that people of color around the world had to endure the atrocities and oppression of white imperialism. While artists and writers such as Johnson brought criticism of imperialism to the fore, many still believed in the superiority of western societies and viewed Africans on the continent as distinctly underdeveloped. Some African Americans resented the racial distinction made between the "White Man" and the "uncivilized man" in Kipling's poem and argued for the inclusion of African Americans as part of the "civilized" world by virtue of their geography, social status, economic class, and other markers of modernity.<sup>27</sup>

Americans actively participated in the construction of racial stereotypes of Africans as people who need westerners to bring them civilization and development, a trend that continued into the twentieth century. For example, the first Tarzan movie, a 1918 US silent film, sparked a "jungle film" trend that exploded in the 1930s and 1940s. Many of these films were ostensibly set in "Africa" though exact locations were not specified and filming usually took place somewhere in the Americas. They often featured a white savior rescuing either people or the environment from evil, "tribal," or "cannibalistic" Africans. Africans thus appeared in the films as either naïve innocents or treacherous cannibals, but always unmodern and in need of western intervention.<sup>28</sup> As such, they contributed to the racist discourses that legitimated the missions to "civilize" Africans through imperialism, trade, and Christianity. European and American literature, art, film, and other media captured the ethos of the day and presented a lasting

<sup>26</sup> H. T. Johnson, "The Black Man's Burden," *Voice of Missions* 7 (Atlanta: April 1899), 1. Reprinted in Willard B. Gatewood Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden, 1898-1903* (University of Illinois Press, 1975), 183-184.

<sup>27</sup> Michele Mitchell, "'The Black Man's Burden': African Americans, Imperialism, and Notions of Racial Manhood 1890-1910," *International Review of Social History* 44:7 (1999) 77-100.

<sup>28</sup> N. Frank Ukadike, "Western Film Images of Africa: Genealogy of an Ideological Formulation," *Black Scholar* 21:2 (1990) 30-48.

image of Africans as underdeveloped in the western imagination. This image continues into the twenty-first century with Hollywood productions such as *The Last King of Scotland* and *Blood Diamond* that portray saving Africans from the savagery of evil dictators and greedy capitalists as the modern "white man's burden."

## POVERTY AS A DEVELOPMENT PROBLEM

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Europeans became more concerned about the problem of urban poverty that emerged in tandem with the Industrial Revolution.<sup>29</sup> Previously, the middle and elite classes of Europeans had viewed poverty as a part of the natural social order and thus it required no intervention on their part. Individual poverty was viewed as a moral failing rather than a symptom of the systemic exploitation of poor people. According to Gareth Stedman Jones, this idea faded when thinkers such as Thomas Paine and Antoine-Nicolas Condorcet argued that the elimination of poverty was central to creating a progressive society.<sup>30</sup> In the progressive ideologies of the late nineteenth-century poverty became a development problem. Reformers rendered distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor based on hierarchies of race or ethnicity and the willingness of the poor to conform to modern bourgeois standards of respectability.<sup>31</sup> European discourses associated poverty with savagery and the discourses on class and race echoed one another. By the twentieth century poverty was much more than the absence of food and shelter; it became a problem that development needed to solve.

<sup>29</sup> William Olejniczak, "Royal Paternalism with a Repressive Face: The Ideology of Poverty in Late Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Policy History* 2:2 (1990) 157-185; James Symonds, "The Poverty Trap: Or, Why Poverty Is Not about the Individual," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15 (2011) 563-571.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, however, argues that the structure for ending poverty offered by Paine and Condorcet looked very different from the charitable and state-sponsored policies of the present day that generally end up reinforcing poverty. Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty: A Historical Debate* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 87; Michael B. Katz, "The Urban 'Underclass' As a Metaphor of Social Transformation," in Michael B. Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 10-11.



While poverty reform was necessary for modernizing the “social body” as a whole, after 1800 governments and many affluent people defined “the poor” as those who were unwilling or incapable of progress or becoming modern.<sup>32</sup> By this definition poverty was not an economic state but rather a “state of mind.” In the twentieth century scholars used the term “relative poverty” to denote how economically poor a person is in comparison to the rest of the population in their country. A person could be “poor” in their country but considered economically affluent in another country; thus poverty is often understood in social rather than economic terms.<sup>33</sup> These concepts have endured in contemporary studies of poverty.

As European colonization gained momentum in Africa, people in Europe expressed fears about degeneration of the white race. This fear showed up in debates on the so-called poor white problem beginning in the late nineteenth century. Churches that actively participated in urban reform movements in the west brought this same approach to their overseas missions. Reformers who sought to “civilize” poor whites later advocated the civilizing mission for Africans. However, these reforms were distinctly racialized. Poverty relief was the primary tactic for “civilizing” poor whites, but Christianity and colonization were the tools for “civilizing” Africans. Furthermore, it was not until the end of World War II that missionaries, reformers, and colonial officials fully came to recognize the Black poor in Africa as deserving of economic aid.

In the early twentieth century, white political leaders in South Africa discovered their own “poor white problem.” South Africa’s poor whites lived in close proximity to Black Africans geographically and culturally. Thus, political leaders feared poverty would increase incidents of miscegenation, the sexual union of people from different racial groups. Miscegenation challenged the notion that western civilization was and would remain superior, undermining the primary justification for European rule in Africa. Political leaders believed that if whites began “regressing” by intermarrying with “less civilized” groups such as Black Africans, then they could no longer claim superiority. The history of western responses to poverty around the globe reveals the

<sup>32</sup> See Poovey, *Making a Social Body*; Steven Beaudoin, *Poverty in World History* (Routledge, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Grace Davie, *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa: A Social History of Human Science, 1855–2005* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

inherent racialized aspect of colonization. The foundations of present-day definitions of poverty lie with nineteenth-century racialized conceptions of respectability, progress, and what it meant to be “civilized.”

In the early 2000s David Everatt conducted a survey in South Africa to measure the percentage of households living in poverty. He asked how many households were headed by females, what were the rates of illiteracy and unemployment, which households suffered from a very low annual income, how crowded were households, what kinds of building materials were used in housing, and whether they had sanitation, water, and electricity.<sup>34</sup> These survey questions make clear that poverty has come to be defined by the absence of certain markers of modernity rather than merely the absence of food and wealth alone. Such studies imagine a modern household headed by a man with a formal-sector job and a modern home large enough to afford privacy for individuals. The western ideal of a heteronormative nuclear family structure has come to signify both wealth and progress. As long as poverty is defined in terms of western ideas of modernity and standards of living, certain societies and cultures in the world will always be categorized as “poor.”

This paradigm of poverty is beginning to change as new research challenges the racial and cultural connotations of impoverishment. Over the past decade Martin Burt has sought to dissociate assessments of poverty from western norms of modernity. His organization, Poverty Stoplight, surveys communities to find out whether and how people see their households and communities as impoverished. This approach prioritizes local knowledge and values regarding standards of living. The organization also maps community responses so that other organizations can adjust their interventions according to what local communities want.<sup>35</sup>

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Missionaries’ efforts in the nineteenth century to bring “Christianity, commerce & civilization” set in motion a progressive ideology that led to modern development practice in Africa. These three words captured the Enlightenment ideology of social progress, the capitalism of the Industrial Revolution, and the mating of Christian doctrine with secular social Darwinism. These concepts are the bedrock on which all future ideas of modern development theory would be built. At their heart they

<sup>34</sup> David Everatt, “The Undeserving Poor: Poverty and the Politics of Service Delivery in the Poorest Nodes of South Africa,” *Politikon* 35:3 (2008) 293–319.

<sup>35</sup> See [www.povertystoplight.org/en/](http://www.povertystoplight.org/en/), accessed August 2, 2018.

presume that western civilization is the highest form of social development, that all societies must progress in a linear fashion to attain this status, and that development will come through an economic transformation that will reshape social and cultural aspects of societies. Moreover, as Maya Jasanoff's *New York Times* article reminds us, westerners continue to dictate the development discourse that assesses the progress of Africans today. The foundations of international development did not emerge from post-World War II global economic relationships, as common knowledge often presents; rather, this book demonstrates that international development ideas and interventions emerged in the wake of the European Enlightenment and in the context of European imperialism. Nineteenth-century liberalism, which promulgated both a singular, linear notion of progress measured in terms of western modernity and a hierarchy of social evolution that ranked contemporary societies around the world, still forms the guiding premises of modern-day development discourses about Africa.

### Further Reading

On concepts of progress see Hamza Alavi and Teodor Shanin, *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing Societies"* (Palgrave, 1982); Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (Transaction, 1994); Leslie Sklair, *The Sociology of Progress* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); Isser Woloch and Gregory S. Brown, *Eighteenth Century Europe: Tradition and Progress, 1715–1789*. Second edition (W. W. Norton, 2012).

On ideas of the civilizing mission see Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford University Press, 2010); Tunde Adeleke, *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (University of Kentucky Press, 1998); Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Cornell University Press, 1990); Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800–1930* (Cornell University Press, 2003); Waibinte E. Wariboko, *Race and the Civilizing Mission: Their Implications for the Framing of Blackness and African Personhood* (Africa World Press, 2010).

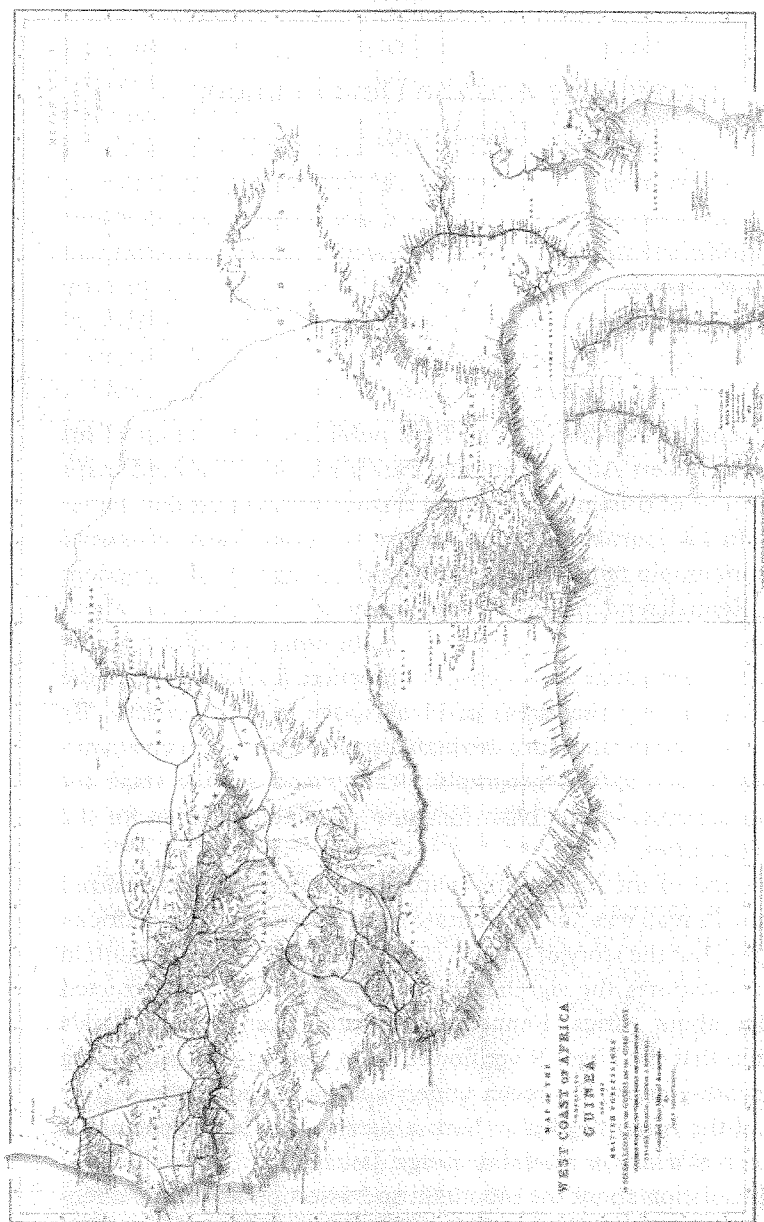
On ideas of poverty see Felicitas Becker, *The Politics of Poverty: Policy-Making and Development in Rural Tanzania* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Grace Davie, *Poverty Knowledge in South Africa: A Social History of Human Science, 1855–2005* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2009 [orig. 1987]).

## CHAPTER 2

### Knowledge and the Development Episteme

In 1799 Scottish explorer Mungo Park published an account of his travels in the West African interior. Park's narrative featured maps created by one of Britain's preeminent cartographers of the day, James Rennell. In his journal entry for August 23, 1796, Park referenced a distant mountain range, which locals said belonged to the kingdom of Kong. Rennell rendered Park's brief and nondescript notation about the "Kong Mountains" as a long mountain range stretching across much of western Africa in a west-east direction. Earlier maps of the region showed only vast areas of blank space in this territory. By drawing a mountain range into this blank space, Rennell lent epistemological legitimacy to this geographic feature and set the stage for European expertise as the basis for knowledge about Africa for the next two centuries.

By the end of the nineteenth century European scholars realized that Rennell's map was not an accurate representation of West African topography, but the story of how he came to draw the Kong mountain range demonstrates the significance of how Europeans constructed knowledge about Africa. Rennell extrapolated from Mungo Park's declaration that the Niger River flowed from west to east. According to nineteenth-century European understanding of geography, a river the size of the Niger needed to have a significantly large geographic source such as a lake or mountain range. James Rennell literally drew Park's speculation about the mountain and assertion about the directional flow of the river onto the map of West Africa (see Map 2.1). This was how the European scientific imagination gave birth to the



**MAP 2.1** Map of Africa by August Heinrich Petermann, 1880. Note the thick line representing the Kong Mountains running across western Africa. Source: Stanford University Libraries, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/maps-of-africa/catalog/tx703z86529>, accessed August 2, 2018

nonexistent Kong Mountains in western Africa. Although Rennell had no firsthand knowledge of the mountains and no evidence they existed, his position as a leading cartographer, combined with Park's apparent expertise in geography, lent "scientific" legitimacy to the Kong Mountains, which the Europeans believed were real for almost 100 years.

As Thomas Bassett and Philip Porter have argued, maps offer "authoritative power [because] the inherent quality of maps as images gives them a unique role in shaping knowledge. The authority of maps is based on the public's belief that these images are accurate representations of reality, or 'true' maps."<sup>1</sup> European epistemologies, or ways of knowing, have constructed ideas about Africa through maps, travelogues, ethnographies, and other documents. European imaginations, such as Rennell's fabrication of the Kong Mountains, produced an idealized version of Africa ripe for western economic and cultural development. Into the twenty-first century a western development episteme, or knowledge system, continues to shape the way Africa was and is understood in international discourses.

This chapter explores the ways Europeans created knowledge of African societies while discounting and ignoring African knowledge systems throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. African societies had their own epistemologies, and Europeans were certainly aware of African written and oral traditions, art, architecture, and other forms of intellectual production. The Egyptian and Sudanese pyramids, the rock-hewn churches of Ethiopia, the monumental walls of Great Zimbabwe, and many other features that dotted the continent's landscape testified to the existence of advanced ancient and medieval African civilizations. Yet by the late nineteenth-century Europeans questioned whether these civilizations were truly African. They perpetuated the mythology that ancient Semitic societies visited the continent, founded these civilizations, and then disappeared. As Europeans discovered more evidence of these precolonial civilizations, they became less convinced that Africans could have produced them.<sup>2</sup> Despite being sympathetic to African communities or curious about

<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Bassett and Philip W. Porter, "From the Best Authorities": The Mountains of Kong in the Cartography of West Africa," *Journal of African History* 32:3 (1991) 367–413 at 370.

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Reid, *A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 167; Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*. Third edition (Westview Press, 2013).



African cultures, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century explorers and colonizers were men and women of their time. As Europeans imbued with the notion that their cultures and technologies represented the pinnacle of civilization, they viewed themselves as culturally superior to Africans.

During the nineteenth century Europeans developed scientific methodologies that generated new knowledge about Africa. This knowledge reflected Eurocentric ideas about progress and became the foundation for the development episteme. More recently, scholars of the global north have introduced forms of knowledge about Africa that do not perpetuate the notion of western superiority, but that still rely on some of the same assumptions built into nineteenth-century European epistemologies. To appreciate the way western ideas of development evolved in Africa, it is crucial to look at the trajectory of how nineteenth-century Europeans formulated their knowledge about the continent. A better understanding of how this "knowledge" came to dominate global paradigms about "science" and "development" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries illuminates the remnants of nineteenth-century thinking in more recent development discourses.

### THE PRODUCTION OF EUROPEAN SYSTEMS OF KNOWLEDGE

The American and French Revolutions embodied Enlightenment ideologies that declared "all men are created equal." Enlightenment ideals offered an egalitarian way of approaching the world, yet they also helped to solidify racialized discrimination within western societies. At the same time that the American revolutionaries could claim "all men are created equal," they instituted the three-fifths clause in the American Constitution. This rule acknowledged the (partial) personhood of enslaved men and women, but it also enshrined and legitimized their subjecthood as noncitizens. In the revolutionary American imagination people of African descent were not equal to whites. This contradiction undergirded attitudes toward Africa and Africans in the global north, even those of white abolitionists who worked to end the slave trade and slavery.

While "knowledge" itself may be based on objective facts and information, its collection and construction by individuals was deeply subjective. Many stereotypes and biases against African epistemologies

crept into the way this scientific evidence was constructed. This knowledge shaped the subsequent project to develop African societies along "scientific" lines. While different forms of knowledge coexist in any society, it is how those forms of knowledge are valued and categorized that prioritizes their use. Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, came up with the classification system for defining the natural world that is still used today across the world. The Linnaean system was critical to both European exploration and empire building, as Mary Louise Pratt argues, because it allowed westerners to create order out of the perceived chaos of non-western societies.<sup>3</sup> Colonial and postcolonial development specialists, in particular, employed Linnaeus's method for categorizing the natural world in producing knowledge about Africa.

Carl Linnaeus's 1735 book, *The System of Nature*, used a binominal nomenclature or taxonomy for describing objects of the natural world according to first their "genus" and then their "species." All animals, plants, and rocks could be classified within this system based on a set of characteristics. By the 1750s Linnaeus had perfected his method for categorizing plants, animals, insects, and minerals, and he began sending his students to collect data from all over the world to add to this database of knowledge. As Europeans moved out into the rest of the world, the "knowledge" they compiled using the Linnaean system gave them the sense that they "knew" these regions of the world.<sup>4</sup> In theory anyone familiar with the Linnaean system of categorization could become an amateur scientist and participate in the creation of knowledge by searching for and cataloging new specimens. In practice this job was available almost exclusively to middle- and upper-class white men. From this point forward scientific inquiry became central to all European-led expeditions to other parts of the world. However, as Johannes Fabian has demonstrated, these amateur scientists practiced the Linnaean system very haphazardly.<sup>5</sup>

Before Linnaeus's classification system different systems and forms of knowledge coexisted. When Europeans traveled beyond their continent they learned about new cultures, societies, and environments

<sup>3</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (University of California Press, 2000).

from their own observations and also from engaging with people from those regions. People communicated knowledge about their societies and value systems to newcomers. Once the Linnaean system became the primary method for cataloging information about the natural world, Europeans tended to base their knowledge of Africa on their own observations and classifications rather than on indigenous epistemologies. While some still asked Africans for local names of plants and animals, they also assigned names to these objects in Latin in order to fit within the Linnaean system. Europeans' belief in the superiority of their own epistemologies meant that they engaged less and less with local systems and forms of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Western explorers and scientists concluded that Africa was epistemologically deficient and that valuable knowledge about Africa could be produced only by Europeans.

European imperial expansion during the nineteenth century facilitated the creation of more "knowledge" about Asia and Africa, and in turn this knowledge facilitated imperial conquest.<sup>7</sup> European epistemologies created the academic fields of study about non-western places and people that still shape scholarship on these societies today. For example, nineteenth-century European writings constructed the idea that "the Maasai" of Kenya and Tanzania were a "warrior tribe," though they actually consisted of disparate groups of people with complex relationships to cattle herding, agriculture, and trade.<sup>8</sup> The power to "know" and therefore define another as a one-dimensional "Other" was instrumental to claiming superiority over that "Other." European travelers, missionaries, traders, and colonial officials simplified and stereotyped African societies, codifying which kinds of knowledge were "useful" for colonial rule and discarding the rest. Oversimplified descriptions of African people and societies continue in some development discourses of the present day, as Dorothy Hodgson explains in the case of "the Maasai."<sup>9</sup> A simple internet search returns countless websites describing the "Maasai warrior," not to mention the numerous published works (including

<sup>6</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

<sup>7</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, eds., *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (Ohio University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Dorothy L. Hodgson, *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development* (Indiana University Press, 2001).

autobiographies) on the topic.<sup>10</sup> Understanding the imperialist origins of discourses on African cultures and communities reveals the problematic assumptions and misunderstandings that continue to shape development "knowledge" about Africa and Africans today.

## VISUALIZING EUROPEAN SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS ACROSS AFRICA

Cartography, or mapping, was one of the first scientific endeavors to shape how modern Europeans would engage with Africa scientifically, economically, and culturally. In 1788 a group of wealthy British men formed the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior parts of Africa (better known as the African Association) in order to investigate the "unknown" regions of the continent. This group of explorers, scientists, abolitionists, and bankers intended both to further European knowledge of Africa and to reshape the lives of Africans. They argued, "by means as peaceable as the purposes are just, the conveniences of civil life, the benefits of the mechanical and manufacturing arts, the attainments of science, the energies of the cultivated, and the elevation of the human character, may be in some degree imparted to nations hitherto consigned to hopeless barbarism and uniform contempt."<sup>11</sup> Their goals for transforming Africa anticipated the colonial development plans of the twentieth century. The African Association funded projects like Mungo Park's expedition to find the source of the Niger River that sought to produce scientific knowledge designed to facilitate future economic exploitation.

Besides inventing the Kong Mountains, Park also dramatically recounted in his book how he nearly starved to death, was reduced to rags, and was even enslaved at one point. While Park's book was not the first European travel narrative about Africa, it became immensely popular

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, "Life of a Maasai Warrior," [www.bush-adventures.com/maasai-warriors/](http://www.bush-adventures.com/maasai-warriors/), accessed December 26, 2017; Olivia Yasukawa and Thomas Page, "Lion-Killer Maasai Turn Wildlife Warriors to Save Old Enemy," CNN World, February 8, 2017, [www.cnn.com/2017/02/07/africa/maasai-tanzania-wildlife-warriors/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/07/africa/maasai-tanzania-wildlife-warriors/index.html), accessed December 26, 2017; Tepilit Ole Saitoti, *The Worlds of a Maasai Warrior: An Autobiography* (University of California Press, 1986); Corinne Hofmann, *The White Masai* (Bliss, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Kate Ferguson Marsters, "Introduction to Mungo Park," in Kate Ferguson Marsters, ed., *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (Duke University Press, 2000), 1–28 at 9.

and helped to spur generations of western men (and a few women) who wished to expand European knowledge of Africa and gain fame for exploring what they considered a "barbaric" land. In the following years increasing numbers of western men embraced the adventure of traveling into the interior of the continent to "discover" new things, people, and places. These men named landmarks – real and imagined – that brought the Africa they "discovered" into existence for the European imagination.

Europeans visualized Africa as a space devoid of people. It was a tabula rasa (blank slate) ready for Europeans to conquer and develop. Cartography was key to European conquest of Africa. Maps defined and named spaces, allowing for Europe's intellectual appropriation of the continent.<sup>12</sup> Europeans labeled African lakes, mountains, and other natural landmarks with European names in order to solidify their claims to those territories. For instance, David Livingstone reported that he "discovered" the massive waterfall along the border of present-day Zambia and Zimbabwe, which he named "Victoria Falls" after Queen Victoria of England. Ignoring the Kololo name Mosi-oa-Tunya ("The Smoke That Thunders"), Livingstone believed he had the right to name this natural wonder because he was the first European to set eyes on it. By applying an English name to the falls, he claimed the "scientific" expertise to catalog and characterize Africa's geographic wonders without recognition of the African epistemologies that had already done so.<sup>13</sup> This was the first step toward conquest.

Maps filled with European names for Africa's physical features were a crucial by-product of scientific exploration. They represented the ways in which Europeans planned and developed spaces. They were central to the work of military officials, missionaries, colonial officials, and merchants, all of whom contributed to the early project of building colonial knowledge about Africa. Nineteenth-century European expeditions in Africa often lacked trained surveyors, and not until after 1870 was any kind of systematic surveying done of the African continent. As the discussion of the Kong Mountains demonstrates, nineteenth-century European maps of Africa were drawn from the published accounts of missionaries and explorers. Mapmakers relied on geographers and their theories about cartographic features to locate specific landmarks. As such, they reflected European imaginations more than actual African landscapes.

<sup>12</sup> Fabian, *Out of Our Minds*, 180–208.

<sup>13</sup> JoAnn McGregor, "The Victoria Falls 1900–1940: Landscape, Tourism and the Geographical Imagination," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29:3 (2003) 717–737.

The Kong Mountains are not the only example of European mis-mapping of Africa. Until 1850 most maps of the eastern cape of South Africa, for instance, were wildly inaccurate. Again, cartographers reproduced the mistakes of their predecessors, as well as those of travel narratives. William Cornwallis Harris created a new map in 1834 based partly on his own travels and partly on the accounts of other travelers. Harris was not a trained surveyor, neither did he have surveying equipment with him on his journey. He ended up excising an area of approximately 60,000 square kilometers from his map of South Africa. The absence of this region, which was in the shape of a pie piece, foreshortened the territory between the coast near Maputo, Mozambique and Pretoria, South Africa. Over the next twenty years other cartographers repeated this mistake, which led to the excision of the Pedi ethnic group from numerous nineteenth-century maps of southern Africa. This seemingly small mistake had a big impact during the 1830s when Boer (Dutch-descended) settlers flooded the region. By foreshortening this area Boers came into conflict with people they did not even know existed. Boers traveling into the area anticipated entering the Portuguese colony of Mozambique, out of the control of the British Cape colony. Instead they found themselves roughly 250 kilometers away from their desired destination. A few years later, in 1839, the Natal Association of the Eastern Cape replicated the error in a map of South Africa it included with an investors' prospectus. This report created the perception that land in the area was fertile and uninhabited. These advertising maps designed to lure investors and settlers in turn informed other scientific maps produced by the Arrowsmith and James Wyld cartography firms of London. These repeated mistakes in map-making reproduced European capitalist visions of African spaces rather than the actual contours of African geographies and societies.<sup>14</sup>

## APPROPRIATING AFRICAN KNOWLEDGE AND LABOR

Searching for the source of the Nile River was one of the main obsessions of nineteenth-century European explorers and geographers. This

<sup>14</sup> Norman Etherington, "A False Emptiness: How Historians May Have Been Misled by Early Nineteenth Century Maps of South-Eastern Africa," *Imago Mundi* 56:1 (2004) 67–86.

quest set off a series of rival European expeditions in which African guides and interpreters played a central role. The labor of Africans in the process of European exploration is often overshadowed by the celebrity of European explorers who claimed to have "discovered" African landmarks. Richard Burton was a quintessential example of a European explorer who appropriated the knowledge of Africans without giving them credit. When Burton decided to search for the source of the Nile River he was already famous for his pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina as the first European nonbeliever in more than 300 years to sneak into the Hajj. In 1854 Burton and a small entourage that included John Hanning Speke started off on their first expedition to East Africa to search for the source of the Nile. Their expedition was a disaster, and both men were wounded. Two years later they set off again in search of the great "sea of Ujiji" they had heard about from Africans living on the East African coast. This "sea," which Burton believed to be the source of the Nile, turned out to be Lake Tanganyika bordering the present-day countries of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Burundi, and Zambia. Both men fell ill, but Speke recovered enough to continue traveling when they heard about another "great sea" in the interior. Eventually, in 1858, Speke's African guides led him to a large freshwater lake bordering the present-day countries of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. Speke "named" Lake Victoria (also after Queen Victoria) and claimed it was the true source of the Nile. As it turned out, Lake Victoria is the source of the White Nile, while the Blue Nile originates in the Ethiopian Highlands. Speke's development set off a rivalry between him and Burton, who also sought fame and recognition for their geographic discoveries. Neither man mentioned in his books and lectures the many Africans who made their "discoveries" possible. They excised from history the African geographic experts who told them where and how to find the lakes and the numerous African employees who carried their equipment, translated for them across the region, negotiated for food and supplies from local communities, and nursed them when they were too sick or injured to travel.<sup>15</sup>

From the time of the first major European explorations of sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth century to the period of conquest in the nineteenth century, Europeans relied on Africans to mediate the transfer of knowledge. During the first centuries of contact, many of the African "informants" were the African wives or romantic partners

<sup>15</sup> For similar examples from Central Africa see Johannes Fabian, *Out of Our Minds*.

of European men. These women educated European men who traded and in some cases settled in African territories such as modern-day South Africa, Senegal, Guinea, Angola, and Mozambique.<sup>16</sup> Later, during the scientific and political scramble for Africa, most European explorers (women and men) turned to African men as their main informants. As African individuals moved across the continent with Europeans, mediating cultures and information, they brought both insider and outsider perspectives of various communities. Gender, class, religion, and ethnicity affected the ways in which Africans understood information and shared it with Europeans. For example, Europeans labeled one southern African ethnic group the "Matabele" based on what their Sotho and Tswana interpreters called the people. However, the "Matabele" actually referred to themselves as "Ndebele." Thus, while European explorers learned about the Ndebele from an African perspective, it was a non-Ndebele viewpoint that shaped European production of knowledge about them for almost a century.

Many Africans working for Europeans as interpreters and other assistants during the early twentieth century were educated in western, most often missionary schools. As such, African assistants were adept at filtering information through a western lens in order to translate it to Europeans. This filter transformed African knowledge into European "facts." James Christie, a medical doctor located in East Africa, noted with appreciation the help he received from indigenous informants in researching his 1876 book.<sup>17</sup> French West African colonial officials depended on a network of African ethnographers, many of whom were teachers in the colonial service and graduates of the *Ecole Normale William Ponty* (an important high school) in Senegal.<sup>18</sup> The case of these ethnographers again demonstrates how much knowledge Africans were producing, not only about their own communities but also about other African societies and cultures.

Europeans often viewed knowledge produced by Africans as less valuable, even when their research depended on it. As James Christie admitted, "Europeans are very apt to discredit or undervalue

<sup>16</sup> George Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Ohio University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> James Christie, *Cholera Epidemics in East Africa* (Macmillan, 1876), ix.

<sup>18</sup> Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, transl. by Aina Pavolini Taylor (Indiana University Press, 1987).



information from natives.”<sup>19</sup> At times European scholars acknowledged African assistants for collecting “facts” but not always for their interpretations of these “facts.” In most cases European scholars did not share credit with African contributors to knowledge production or, worse, assumed Africans were less knowledgeable about their own societies than European scholars. Examples abound of Europeans critiquing the work of African scholars, such as Paul Marty, who “regretted the author’s [Moctar Diallo’s] lack of knowledge . . . and utter misunderstanding” of Islam in West African societies.<sup>20</sup> Often Europeans made the choices about the type of information collected and the methods used. This created a particular vision of what constituted viable knowledge about Africa. Johannes Fabian argues that many Europeans believed that African knowledge lacked precision.<sup>21</sup> Europeans “corrected” the findings of African scholars or outright appropriated the knowledge Africans produced, and thus claimed the mantle of legitimate knowledge and expertise about Africa and Africans.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.1 Mary Kingsley

Mary Kingsley was one of the earliest European female explorers to visit Africa. She took her first trip to west central Africa in 1893 after receiving an inheritance at the death of her parents. Kingsley had spent her twenties caring for her ailing parents. She was inspired by reading her father’s library and hearing of his own global travels. Scientific exploration of Africa during the nineteenth century was generally a masculine venture. Kingsley, a single woman in her thirties, was quite unusual for her time. She traveled with only a few African porters and an interpreter, shocking both Europeans and

<sup>19</sup> Christie, *Cholera Epidemics in East Africa*, ix.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Hervé Jezequel, “Voices of Their Own? African Participation in the Production of Colonial Knowledge in French West Africa, 1910–1950,” in Helen Tilley, ed., with Robert J. Gordon, *Ordering Africa: Anthropology, European Imperialism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Manchester University Press, 2007), 119–144; Ruth Ginio, “Negotiating Legal Authority in French West Africa: The Colonial Administration and African Assessors, 1903–1918,” in Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Fabian, *Out of Our Minds*, 186–190.

<sup>22</sup> Jezequel, “Voices of Their Own,” 148.

Africans with her disinclination to be “protected” by western men. When one French consul refused to give her permission to pass through a region because she lacked a husband, she noted, “neither the Royal Geographical Society’s list in their ‘Hints to Travellers’ nor Messrs. Silver, in their elaborate lists of articles necessary for a traveler in tropical climates, make mention of husbands.”<sup>1</sup> While Kingsley challenged imperialist notions of masculinity, she rejected the label of being a New Woman or having an interest in women’s suffrage, as she was represented in the press. She insisted she was interested in exploring Africa for purely scientific reasons.

Kingsley represented a generation of colonial scholars who were sympathetic to their African subjects yet remained avidly imperialist and implicitly racist. She was opposed to the imposition of European cultural ideas on Africans, such as the missionary requirement that their converts practice monogamy. Kingsley argued that African wives had too much work to do all by themselves and that they needed co-wives. Moreover, as missionaries forced African male converts to repudiate all but one wife, other wives and children were left without the support of a husband. This created social breakdown in some societies. Kingsley also lamented that the type of education missionaries offered Africans had little resonance in their cultures. For example, teaching girls of the Fang ethnic group to sew, wash, and iron western clothing made little sense when most girls would never wear this kind of clothing. She did not question the right of Europeans to “educate” Africans, only that they needed to readjust their approach.

Kingsley’s books and speaking tours popularized the new science of anthropology. She encouraged anthropologists to expand beyond a focus solely on physical anthropology and embrace cultural ethnology by studying African religions, legal codes, and medical systems. Her own account is filled with analyses of the biological, geographical, spiritual, social, political, and economic phenomena she encountered. Kingsley has come to represent empathetic Europeans who recognized the contradictions inherent to European imperialism, but who also viewed European cultures as superior to those of Africans.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa* (Macmillan, 1897), reprinted in Patricia W. Romero, ed., *Women’s Voices on Africa: A Century of Travel Writings* (Markus Wiener, 1992), 43.

## DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE FOR CONQUEST

During the period between 1870 and 1900, the era of the European scramble for Africa, scientific exploration was central to the mission of colonization. By the early 1880s European nations were rushing to send expeditions to claim African territories before they fell into the hands of rival imperial powers. Knowledge created by European scientists and scientific societies helped to define the terms of colonization. These scientific societies also determined the future terms of development by emphasizing particular areas of study for economic and political interest. As historian Helen Tilley explains, "Geographical societies made an essential contribution to the conditions that precipitated the scramble for Africa, acting not in isolation but precisely through their intricate connections with economic, diplomatic and military forces."<sup>23</sup> While scientists generally were not concerned about government agendas, by the 1870s they became more embroiled in the imperialist efforts of the European governments that financially supported their expeditions into Africa. For example, Louis-Gustave Binger's excursion to West Africa in the late 1880s had both the scientific purpose of surveying western Africa and the diplomatic authority to sign treaties with African leaders in order to "claim" territory on behalf of the French government.<sup>24</sup>

Scientific societies supporting European exploration of Africa in the nineteenth century set the stage for scientific research into the twentieth. One of the many prominent intellectual societies that emerged in the 1800s was the Royal Geographical Society of London. This organization was formed in 1830 and eventually absorbed the African Association, the same group that sponsored Mungo Park's travels. In 1870 another scientific organization called the Epidemiological Society of London approached Dr. James Christie about inquiring into the spread of cholera in East Africa. Christie explained that tracking a cholera epidemic necessitated the study of "the geography of the localities, the ethnology, commercial connections, and the manners and customs of the tribes through which the epidemics passed before the subject was comprehended in a satisfactory manner."<sup>25</sup> Scientific organizations, their

<sup>23</sup> Helen Tilley, *Africa As a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870-1950* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>24</sup> Bassett and Porter, "From the Best Authorities."

<sup>25</sup> Christie, *Cholera Epidemics in East Africa*, xiii-xiv.

research journals, and their international meetings created a cohesive genre of development scholarship. As the nineteenth century came to a close, scholars and scientists realized that national and commercial needs would always come first in the race to document African lands and societies.

In 1876, in a step to consolidate his claim to the Congo, King Leopold II of Belgium held an exclusive meeting in Brussels to discuss the creation of an International African Association (IAA) for geographical studies. He invited thirty-seven delegates from seven European countries, the power brokers of various scientific fields who were charged with mapping out a program for creating new knowledge about the continent of Africa. These geographical leaders established specific guidelines for all expeditions in Africa. They hoped to set up five "scientific stations" across the continent that, according to Helen Tilley, would focus on

astronomical and meteorological observations, collecting specimens of geology, botany and zoology, mapping the surrounding country, preparing a vocabulary and grammar of the languages of the natives, making ethnological observations, collecting and report the accounts of indigenous travelers in unknown regions, and in keeping a journal of all events and observations worthy of note.<sup>26</sup>

The depth and breadth of studies envisioned for the scientific stations indicates the enormous scope of Europeans' fascination with Africa. Scientists at King Leopold's conference envisioned the IAA as a pan-European commission with quasi-oversight of scientific expeditions into the continent. However, nationalist interests drove many of these expeditions and kept the IAA from ever fully functioning.

Within a few years of King Leopold's 1876 geographical conference, the race between European nations to explore and claim territory in Africa intensified almost to the brink of war. In order to avert conflict, Otto von Bismarck of Germany invited delegates from European countries, the United States, and the Ottoman Empire to meet in Berlin in 1884. In what came to be known as the Berlin Conference, King Leopold II of Belgium and other European countries including Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Italy laid out their claims to different parts of the continent and the rules by which they would recognize the claims of other imperial powers. The United

<sup>26</sup> Tilley, *Africa As a Living Laboratory*, 43.



States remained as an ally but not a colonizer of Liberia, an independent colony in West Africa founded in part by freed American slaves. King Leopold II claimed the Congo Free State (today, the Democratic Republic of Congo) for scientific, religious, and commercial purposes. It was to be free for exploration, evangelization, and trade by individuals from any nation as well as a slave trade-free zone. The Congo Free State came to represent the worst of colonial exploitation, with an estimated ten million people dead from forced labor, mutilation, torture, disease, and environmental degradation during the twenty years of Leopold's rule over the region.<sup>27</sup> When western powers challenged Leopold's rule in the first decade of the twentieth century, they learned the powerful lesson that colonial powers must act with civility toward their subjects in order to engage them in the modernizing project.

### THE DEVELOPMENT EPISTEME

European colonialism relied not only on the production of knowledge deemed necessary for developing Africa economically and politically but also on the dissemination of European "knowledge" to Africans as part of the civilizing mission. While the former required help from scientists, the latter depended extensively on missionaries. Scientific societies published the work of amateur and professional scholars who amassed a body of knowledge useful for colonial rule, while missionaries offered their assistance in constructing principles and procedures for creating "civilized" or "modern" African communities. The combination of the two established an episteme, or knowledge system, that would undergird modern development into the twenty-first century. This is what we call the development episteme.

The cadre of experts King Leopold II invited to participate in his 1876 Brussels conference attempted to address the first question by producing a plan for a scientific approach to colonization.<sup>28</sup> Fourteen years later Arthur Silva White, the secretary of the Scottish Geographical Society, published his book, *The Development of Africa*, which laid out a framework for what the west needed to know in order to economically exploit the continent. His table of contents included

<sup>27</sup> Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Tilley, *Africa As a Living Laboratory*, 41–42.

sections on geography and geology, climate, ethnology, linguistics, political structures, religion, and commercial resources.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the late nineteenth century experts from the many scientific societies across Europe vied to expand their knowledge about Africa and to assemble a framework for the operation of colonial power.

The transfer of knowledge from Europeans to Africans produced the other side of the development episteme. Since the late nineteenth century the development episteme has shaped most development work done in Africa. Nineteenth-century Europeans assumed their knowledge was valuable to Africans. Even missionaries, whose primary focus was religious conversion, believed in "civilizing" Africans by introducing them to western epistemologies. Their efforts to reshape African societies also shaped the development episteme westerners continued to reproduce over time. Medical and education work came first as a means to entice Africans to the mission stations and communicate religious ideas. As mission communities grew, missionaries focused on teaching new methods of agriculture and industrial education. These four areas (medical, educational, agricultural, and industrial) came to structure the forms of knowledge westerners felt were necessary for Africans to progress into civilized people and developed societies. Africans would be judged on how well they adapted to and adopted the development episteme that came with European colonization.

At the same time Africans were partners in creating the development episteme.<sup>30</sup> Europeans offered different skills to the communities they entered and many noted what evoked the most interest from Africans. For example, European travelers in southern Africa quickly learned that Zulu leaders appreciated the practices in western medicine that appeared to have a direct or immediate impact on healing. As Karen Flint argues, "healing the body became a means by which Europeans sought to demonstrate the superiority of western medicine and, by extension, western culture, civilization, and religion."<sup>31</sup> Missionaries without extensive medical skills relied on books they brought with them to Africa to introduce basic western medical

<sup>29</sup> Arthur Silva White, *The Development of Africa* (George Philip & Son, 1890), ix–xi.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> Karen Flint, *Healing Traditions: African Medicine, Cultural Exchange, and Competition in South Africa, 1820–1948* (Ohio University Press, 2008), 95.

principles to their congregations.<sup>32</sup> Africans may or may not have seen western medicine as superior, but they definitely found it useful in certain situations. At each stage in the establishment of the development episteme, Africans embraced knowledges and technologies when they offered specific values. Like medicine, acquiring a western education and industrial skills led directly to employment opportunities. Accepting western agricultural education or jobs offered landless Africans access to land, seeds, and tools. The development episteme was not an invention solely of westerners; rather it evolved in conversation with Africans who differentiated between the elements of western knowledge or technologies they found valuable and those they did not.

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The development episteme emerged in the nineteenth century out of both the scientific endeavor to produce new knowledge about Africa and the missionary-imperialist project to disseminate European Christianity, commerce, and "civilization" to Africans. The knowledge explorers, cartographers, medical doctors, biologists, economists, ethnologists, and other scientists produced about Africa facilitated colonization by claiming mastery over the continent's environment and people. Missionaries and colonial officials drew on this scientific information to assert their technological expertise and moral right – even obligation – to "civilize" Africans. Scientific research also facilitated the imperialist development and exploitation of Africa's raw materials and industries. European scholars suggested their expertise was needed because they *knew* Africans best, better than Africans knew themselves. Yet the development episteme was formulated in dialogue with Africans whose own knowledge and interests often determined which development efforts would succeed and which would fail.

### Further Reading

On the creation of knowledge about Africa, see Joseph Morgan Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Ohio University Press, 2007); V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Indiana University Press, 1988); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and*

<sup>32</sup> Landeg White, *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 40.

*Transculturation*. Second edition (Routledge, 2007); Helen Tilley, *Africa As a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Helen Tilley, ed., with Robert J. Gordon, *Ordering Africa: Anthropology, European Imperialism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Manchester University Press, 2010).

On European mapping of the African continent, see Thomas J. Bassett and Philip W. Porter, "From the Best Authorities": The Mountains of Kong in the Cartography of West Africa," *Journal of African History* 32:3 (1991) 367–413; Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, eds., *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); Isabelle Surun, "French Military Officers and the Mapping of West Africa: The Case of Captain Brosselard-Faidherbe," *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011) 167–177.

The most prolific British author in the genre of exploration literature was Richard F. Burton. For examples of his work, see Richard F. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa, or, An exploration of Hārar* (Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856); *The Lake Regions of Central Africa: A Picture of Exploration* (Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1860); *Wanderings in West Africa from Liverpool to Fernando Po* (Tinsley Brothers, 1863); and *Zanzibar: City, Island, and Coast* (Tinsley Brothers, 1872). Other explorers' works include Mary H. Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa: Congo Francais, Corisco and Cameroons* (Macmillan, 1897); Mary H. Kingsley, *The Story of West Africa* (H. Marshall & Son, 1899); David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* [electronic resource]: *Including a Sketch of Sixteen Years' Residence in the Interior of Africa, and a Journey from the Cape of Good Hope to Loanda on the West Coast, Thence across the Continent, Down the River Zambesi, to the Eastern Ocean* (John Murray, 1857); John Hanning Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (Harper, 1864); and Henry Morton Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding of Its Free State: A Story of Work and Exploration* (Harper, 1885).

## CHAPTER 3

### Eugenics and Racism in the Development Episteme

In 1949 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held a meeting of cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and other scientists from around the world to attack the problem of racial prejudice. The atrocities of the Holocaust made it politically expedient to discredit racist theories about the inherent inferiority or superiority of racial groups. UNESCO asked the meeting participants to study “scientific materials concerning questions of race” and to devise “an education campaign based on this information.”<sup>1</sup> The scholars firmly believed that non-westerners were less developed than westerners, but they debated whether it was because of racial or cultural differences. Sebastián Gil-Riaño argues, “the participants in the 1949 meeting were located within traditions of human science that attached conceptions of race to discussions about the improbability of so-called backward peoples.”<sup>2</sup> The outcome of the meeting was the 1950 UNESCO Statement on Race that debunked earlier “scientific” theories about the essential connections between race, intelligence, and development. For instance, they contended that intelligence tests “do not in themselves enable us to differentiate safely between what is due to innate capacity and what is the result

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, “The Race Question, 1950,” 1, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000128291>, accessed February 5, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Sebastián Gil-Riaño, “Relocating Anti-racist Science: The 1950 UNESCO Statement on Race and Economic Development in the Global South,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 51:2 (2018) 281–303 at 287.

of environmental influences, training and education.”<sup>3</sup> The scientists concluded, “‘race’ is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth.”<sup>4</sup> The debate over difference was no longer one of race but now one of social and cultural influences.

The 1950 statement immediately garnered significant global debate, especially among European and American physical anthropologists and geneticists who strongly disagreed with its scientific implications.<sup>5</sup> The dissenting scholars worked on their own Statement on the Nature of Race and Race Differences, which UNESCO published in 1951. They argued, “Man, we recognized, is distinguished as much by his culture as by his biology.”<sup>6</sup> Despite their disagreements over the biological nature of race, all of the scientists involved in the debate emphasized that intelligence and corresponding stages of social development were influenced by cultural factors. As such, they defined the “difference” between Africans and westerners as one between “primitive” or “tribal” cultures and “modern civilization.” “Culture” replaced “race” as the marker of developmental difference, but “culture” never completely abandoned its racial connotations. The UNESCO debates reinforced the “scientific” argument that (white) western modernity was the benchmark for measuring the developmental status of all other cultures.

This shift in discourse from “race” to “culture” in the UNESCO scientific debates points to World War II as a watershed moment in the history of international development. Indeed, many historians date the emergence of development to the end of the war, when the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations (UN) came into existence. The policies and practices of these institutions have both reshaped and been shaped by the development episteme. They have contributed to the foundation of knowledge that has determined and continues to determine international development policies in the present. By pulling back the veil on how social Darwinist and eugenic ideas undergirded international development policies before and after World War II, this chapter demonstrates how

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Text of the Statement Issued 18 July 1950,” 7, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000128291>, accessed February 5, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Jenny Bangham, “What Is Race? UNESCO, Mass Communication and Human Genetics in the Early 1950s,” *History of the Human Sciences* 28:5 (2015) 80–107.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Statement on the Nature of Race and Race Differences,” Paris, June 1951, 37, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000122962>, accessed February 5, 2020.

racist assumptions of African inferiority were embedded in the development episteme itself.

## SCIENCE, RACE, AND THEORIES OF EVOLUTION

Carl Linnaeus's *The System of Nature* (1735) classified all humans and primates under the category of *anthropomorpha*. This move was controversial because it placed humans on equal footing with animals in the natural world. Christian theologians believed that humans were made in the "image of God"; therefore to equate humans with animals was, by extension, to debase God. Linnaeus eventually refined his system of classification and organized humans into four "races" based on their skin tone and continental origins. These four "races" were European, American, Asian, and African. Linnaeus's secularization of knowledge classification built the foundation for "scientific" constructs of race.

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a German scholar often credited with being the "father" of physical anthropology, expanded on Linnaeus's categorization in the multiple editions of his book *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775, 1782, and 1806). He identified five distinct "races" based on his study of sixty skulls: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, Ethiopian, and American. While his argument was ostensibly grounded in his investigation of the skulls, the evidentiary support for his classification presumed categories based on skin tone. Blumenbach argued that all humans derived from a single origin and that environmental factors degenerated the human stock, resulting in the different skin tones and other attributes of the five races.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many western scholars drew on the work of Linnaeus and Blumenbach to "prove" the superiority of the "white race."<sup>7</sup> Over time numerous scientists attempted to claim that race is genetically linked to behavior. This is called biological determinism or racial essentialism. Often these ideas blended into social Darwinist thinking of the late nineteenth century

<sup>7</sup> Blumenbach used the term "Caucasian" to describe a "white race" – yet his terminology was deeply flawed. Using the term "Caucasian" replicates the theories of pseudoscientific racism. See Carol Mukhopadhyay, "Getting Rid of the Word 'Caucasian,'" in Mica Pollock, ed., *Everyday Anti-racism: Getting Real about Race in School* (New Press, 2008).

that applied biological concepts of natural selection to social phenomena in order to justify white and western domination and imperialism.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these theories originated in the study of anthropology. Anthropology, which some scholars in the 1970s accused of being the "handmaiden of colonialism" because of its historic role in exploration and conquest, was a product of nineteenth-century European and American interest in the study of other humans and their cultures.<sup>9</sup> Long before the separation of the discipline into subfields, which we discuss further in Chapter 5, anthropologists did not distinguish between studies of human origins and studies of "other" cultures; in fact, they were two sides of the same coin. The establishment of the French Société ethnologique de Paris in 1839 and the Ethnological Society of London four years later formalized the academic field of anthropology. Over the next few decades scholars from these and other anthropological organizations generated a robust debate about human genesis and evolution. The major anthropological debates of the day concentrated on two questions: whether all humans had one common ancestor (genesis) and whether they evolved from earlier proto-humanoids (evolution). The answers anthropologists of the late nineteenth century gave to these questions helped to shape early colonial perceptions of Africans as racially inferior.

In the 1840s intellectuals debated whether all humans share a common descent (monogenesis) or whether the "races" of humanity represent separate species unique to their environments (polygenesis). This question engendered disagreement for more than a century, and not until after World War II, when work on early humans by paleontologists provided incontrovertible proof for monogenesis, did this theory become the standard hypothesis for human evolution. The reasons for individual belief in monogenesis or polygenesis ranged widely. For example, Christian leaders were monogenists based on a biblical understanding of Adam and Eve as the common progenitors for all of humanity. On the other hand, Charles Darwin was convinced by the theory of monogenesis because he knew that interbreeding between different species causes infertility, which did not happen among different groups of humans.<sup>10</sup> Many monogenists like

<sup>8</sup> Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*. Third edition (Westview Press, 2013), 42–43.

<sup>9</sup> Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Ithaca Press, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> Henrika Kuklick, "The British Tradition," in Henrika Kuklick, ed., *A New History of Anthropology* (Blackwell, 2008), 55.



Blumenbach believed in a single human species even though they identified biological varieties of human “races” based on physical appearance.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to monogenists, polygenists believed that different human “races” represented distinct “species.” Polygenist arguments were found on both sides of the Atlantic, but the strongest proponents were located in the United States. Swiss biologist Louis Agassiz, who gave a series of lectures across the United States in 1847, argued “that the unity of species does not involve a unity of origin, and that a diversity of origin does not involve a plurality of species.”<sup>12</sup> Agassiz and other polygenists used the example of dog breeds to make their case. Did all dogs come from the same ancestor, or did they evolve out of similar species in different locations over time? Dogs can interbreed and at the same time appear to have very different physical traits. Polygenists argued similarly that humans evolved separately in different places, adapting to their environments to create different species and races (see Figure 3.1). Many Southerners in the United States used the theory of polygenesis to justify slavery by arguing that Africans are not the same species as Europeans. To them, owning slaves was not unlike owning dogs, cows, horses, or other species. Both groups, monogenists and polygenists, generally viewed Africans as fundamentally inferior to Europeans, but they had different justifications for the inferiority.

While some disagreements continued to exist in the late nineteenth century over the origins of humans, Darwin’s theory of evolution eventually united monogenists and polygenists by making the case for a unified human evolution with later environmental influences that created regional differences. When Charles Darwin published his book *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, he was not the first scholar to offer an evolutionary theory to explain the natural world. As mentioned in

<sup>11</sup> Various intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries set up different categorizations of races. Most systems (including that of Linnaeus) had either four or five divisions that were generally grouped geographically: European, African, Asian, and American. Some systems included a fifth category that subdivided Asians into East Asians and South/Central Asians. For a discussion of racial classification systems see Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20–65.

<sup>12</sup> Original citation Louis Agassiz, “The Diversity of Origin of the Human Races,” *Christian Examiner*, 4th Ser., 14, 110–145, cited in Thomas Glick, “Anthropology, Race, and the Darwinian Revolution,” in Henrika Kuklick, ed., *A New History of Anthropology* (Blackwell, 2008), 225–241 at 225–227.

From Nott and Gliddon *Types of Mankind* (1856)

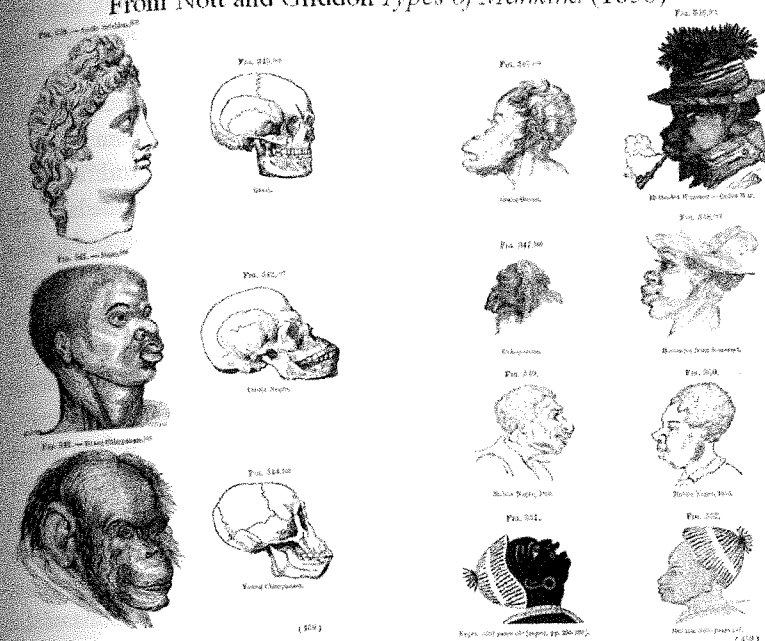


FIGURE 3.1 Chart of the “Types of Mankind”. Source: Josiah Clark Nott, George R. Gliddon, Samuel George Morton, Louis Agassiz, William Usher, and Henry S. Patterson, *Types of Mankind* (J. B. Lippincott, Grambo, 1854), 458–459

Chapter 1, Herbert Spencer also coined an evolutionary system for understanding human development that was based on his interpretation of the differential levels of human and societal progress. Darwin’s book used the idea of natural selection to explain how different species evolved over time in response to their environment. Not until his 1871 book, *The Descent of Man*, did Darwin address the issue of human evolution. He argued that “those groups who displayed the greatest social cohesion would be advantaged in the struggle for life over those who had less.”<sup>13</sup> Evolution, according to Darwin, was not necessarily a progressive ideology. As Darwin noted, societies do not always act rationally for the survival of the species, evident by the fact that many societies send their fittest young men into warfare. Nonetheless, Darwin employed Occam’s razor (see Box 3.1) to argue that all humans evolved from one progenitor and that “races,” or visible biological and cultural

<sup>13</sup> Glick, “Anthropology, Race, and the Darwinian Revolution,” 227.



differences, were formed by surrounding environments. He argued, "The great variability of all the external differences between the races of man, likewise indicates that they cannot be of much importance; for if important, they would long ago have been either fixed and preserved, or eliminated."<sup>14</sup> Darwin was not devoid of racialist thinking; he believed in a racialized, hierarchical distinction between "civilized" and "savage" societies and that, over time, the former would either absorb the latter or otherwise cause them to become extinct.<sup>15</sup> Whether categorized as different species or as different groups within the human species, both monogenists and polygenists subscribed to this hierarchical mapping of race during the nineteenth century.

While scientific debates around evolutionary ideas eventually brought Africans into the family of humans, they were consistently defined by nineteenth-century scientists as less than equal to other "races." In *On the Origin of Species* Darwin wrote of "evolutionary dead ends." These dead ends represented traits that either evolved poorly for the environment or did not evolve at all in response to environmental change. Many influential Europeans such as novelist Charles Dickens came to see Africans as poorly evolved versions of the human species and as such an evolutionary dead end. Thus, even as Africans were finally incorporated into the family of humanity, they lost their future as Europeans presumed they would "die out." The only means to save Africans was by creating a civilized environment around them that would allow them to "evolve" to the level of Europeans.

### ANTHROPOLOGY, PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC RACISM, AND EUGENICS

During the nineteenth century many Europeans believed in a hierarchy of races ranging from the most "civilized" to the most "primitive" with Europeans located at the top and Africans at the bottom. Pseudoscientific racism, the teleological practice of using scientific techniques to justify a belief in the racial inferiority of non-European

<sup>14</sup> Charles Darwin, *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Second edition revised and augmented (John Murray, 1874), 198.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Darwin, *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Vol. I (John Murray, 1871), 236–240. Darwin believed extinction would result from the poor health of "savage" races and their inability to adapt to changing environmental and political conditions.

people, provided "scientific" evidence to justify this hierarchy. Well-regarded scientists such as Robert Knox and Paul Broca employed anthropological methodologies including craniometry (measurement of the size and shape of the cranium) and phrenology (correlating skull measurements to personality) in order to confirm their beliefs about racial difference. Modern scientists have long debunked the notion that racial difference can be explained in terms of phenotype or craniometrics. Nonetheless, early physical anthropologists were determined to "scientifically" prove that Africans, as a race, were less intelligent than Europeans. By the end of the century pseudoscientific racism had helped to shape Francis Galton's theory of "eugenics," the science of determining how to "improve" human groups. European colonial officials in Africa drew on these and other pseudoscientific theories about race to transform Africans from evolutionary "dead ends" into "uncivilized" people.<sup>16</sup> The work of all of these "apostles of objectivity" was founded on the premise that the veracity of their theories would be confirmed by collecting mountains of data.<sup>17</sup> Nineteenth-century scientists failed to understand that no amount of data could correct for misinterpretation and confirmation bias.

#### 3.1 Scientific method and confirmation bias

What we call the scientific method has evolved over many centuries and cultures into a system based on observation, measurement, and experimentation. Darwin's theory of evolution is a classic example of the scientific method. During his time in the Galapagos archipelago he observed that similar species of birds and other animals differed across each island. Darwin pondered his observations for four years before he came to the idea of natural selection. He then spent the next twenty years

<sup>16</sup> Many hierarchies existed within this larger framework, such that some Europeans were defined as lower than others, most famously the Irish; likewise, some Africans were defined as "more civilized" than others – often based on physical appearance or social status within their regions. For further discussion of how different white "races" were defined, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (Verso, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould described Francis Galton and other pseudoscientists as "apostles of objectivity" because of their belief that scientific research would prove them correct about their theories of race. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (Norton, 1981), chapter 3.

gathering the evidence to support this theory. Darwin was very careful to look at different theories and ideas about evolution that were in vogue during his time (the 1830s and 1840s) so that he could avoid confirmation bias in his work. Confirmation bias occurs when scientists approach their data with outcomes already determined and look only for evidence that supports those outcomes. For example, many nineteenth-century physical anthropologists examined the size and shape of human skulls in order to confirm their belief that Europeans were superior to all other "races." Their work was eventually discredited.

Two methods in particular have helped scientists avoid or at least become more aware of confirmation bias. One is Occam's razor, the principle that if more than one hypothesis can explain a particular phenomenon, then the simplest hypothesis is probably correct. Another useful concept is reproducibility. If another scientist can successfully reproduce the experiment and come to the same conclusions, the results may be confirmed. Reproducing another scientist's research may also reveal that person's biases. For example, during the 1970s paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould attempted to replicate the work of nineteenth-century craniometrist Paul Broca. Gould demonstrated that, despite Broca's rigorous data collection, his biases about racial inequality led him to incorrectly interpret the evidence and argue that race determines intelligence.<sup>1</sup> Biases are still present in some scientific work today, of course, and may be inadvertently introduced at various points in an experiment: research design, data analysis, and/or publication. Awareness of the potential for confirmation bias helps scientists to mitigate this problem in their research.

<sup>1</sup> Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*.

The career of Robert Knox, a Scottish doctor and scientist, demonstrates the deep connections between the history of imperialism and racism in South Africa and pseudoscientific research in nineteenth-century physical anthropology. Knox was a military doctor based in the Zuurland region of South Africa between 1817 and 1820, at a time when the British and the Xhosa were fighting in the Cape-Xhosa Frontier Wars.<sup>18</sup> Knox and other scientists working in South Africa during this period

collected the skulls of the Xhosa people killed in the war and used them to test out their theories about race, intelligence, and evolution. The victims of colonial violence became the specimens of study for scientists like Knox who sought to prove that Africans and Europeans were separate species with distinct biological and cognitive attributes. Building on his experiences in South Africa and the earlier work of Linnaeus and Blumenbach, Robert Knox published his book *The Races of Men* in 1850, which argued that race determines behavior and character. He classified races based on attributes such as skin color, hair texture, head shape, and other physical features. The origins of the science of physical anthropology was entangled with the history of conquest and bolstered a white supremacist ideology that dominated South African politics until the end of apartheid in 1994.<sup>19</sup>

Knox's work measuring cranial capacity deeply influenced French anthropologist Paul Broca, who founded the Society of Anthropology of Paris in 1859. Broca firmly believed in the superiority of Europeans and the inferiority of Africans based on the notion that human intelligence correlates to a linear, hierarchal scale of racial difference. To prove this theory, Broca measured the ratio of the radius to the humerus bones (the lower to upper arm bones) among the skeletons of different "races." Initially, he was pleased to find a significant difference between the European and African skeletons held at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. However, when confronted with the skeleton of Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman brought from South Africa to France in the 1810s, Broca found that Baartman's ratio placed her significantly higher on his scale than Europeans.<sup>20</sup> Having failed to prove his theory, Broca started over, this time following Knox's work to argue that cranial capacity was both racially determined and corresponded directly with intelligence.

In 1861 another anatomist, Louis Pierra Gratiolet, challenged Broca by arguing that brain size is not indicative of intelligence. Rather than using scientific evidence to respond to Gratiolet, Broca used "logic." He contended, "In general, the brain is larger in mature adults than in the elderly, in men than in women, in eminent men than in men of mediocre talent, in superior races than in inferior races. . . . Other things equal, there is a remarkable relationship between the development of intelligence and the volume of the brain."<sup>21</sup> Most of Broca's peers in the

<sup>19</sup> Dubow, *Scientific Racism*, 27–29.

<sup>20</sup> Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 86–87.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Shillington, *History of Southern Africa* (Macmillan, 1987), 21–42.

scientific community, predominantly white men themselves, were easily convinced that women, people of color, the elderly, and the poor were “naturally” less intelligent than wealthy and healthy white men. As long as he provided “scientific” arguments about racial and gender differences, Broca and his colleagues believed their work was without bias and based in sound evidence; they were convinced their work was “objective.” Scientists of the nineteenth century were unaware of their confirmation bias. They did not see that they relied on assumptions to interpret evidence instead of allowing the evidence to drive their conclusions.

### 3.2 Sara (Saartjie) Baartman

An 1810 advertisement in London's *Morning Herald* announced, “The Hottentot Venus. – Just arrived, and may be seen between the hours of one and five o'clock in the afternoon, at No 225, Piccadilly, from the banks of the river Gamtoos, on the borders of Kaffraria, in the interior of South Africa, a most correct and perfect specimen of that race of people . . . the Public will have an opportunity of judging how far she exceeds any description given by historians of that tribe of the human race . . . Admittance 25 each.”<sup>1</sup> “The Hottentot Venus” was the exhibition name of Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa. Baartman had agreed to travel with Hendrick Cezar to Europe, but whether she fully understood the ways in which she would be displayed is unclear. Starting as early as the seventeenth century, European travelers brought human “exotics” home to display to the public. By the mid-nineteenth century racialized and sexualized “Others” had become regular curiosities at world's fairs, circuses, and other exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> With the scientific revolution under way, many amateur and professional scientists were fascinated by people from other parts of the world. Traveler's tales of steatopygia (a particular shape of buttocks) and an “apron” of skin in front of the genitalia of some Khoikhoi women had preceded Baartman's appearance in London. Scientists of the day were obsessed with studying Baartman's body and particularly her genitalia, while to European men and women she symbolized stereotypes (and fantasies) of the hypersexual African woman.

When Sara Baartman died in France in 1815 she was dissected by French anatomist George Cuvier. Her skeleton was kept for future scientific experiments, her genitalia put in jars of formaldehyde, and parts of her body left on display in the Musée de l'Homme until 1974. Cuvier studied Baartman's genitalia in order to prove that Baartman was actually a “lower primate” and not fully human.<sup>3</sup> He discovered that the “apron” on Baartman's genitalia was an extended labia minora, prompting him to conclude that all women in Africa naturally had extended labia minora. The closer one moved toward the Mediterranean Sea, he argued, the smaller the labia minora on women's bodies. He surmised that the reason female circumcision was practiced in Ethiopia was to remove this “disgusting” elongation. Cuvier assumed that Khoikhoi (and African) women were less than human based on his assertion that Baartman's genitalia were an aberration from those of the typical (white) woman. Cuvier's reputation as the greatest scientist in France of his time gave him the power to co-opt Baartman's body for scientific study and lent legitimacy to his theories about racial difference.

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Holmes, *African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus* (Random House, 2007), 6–7.

<sup>2</sup> The 1851 Great Exhibition in London had Inuit, Native Americans, and Africans. In 1853 displays of “Zulu Kaffirs” and “Aztec Lilliputians” were posted in the *Illustrated London News*. See other references in Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter, eds., *Archives of Empire*, Vol. 2 (Duke University Press, 2003), 134. See also Dana S. Hale, *Races on Display: French Representations of Colonized Peoples, 1886–1940* (Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, “The Hottentot Venus,” *Natural History* 91:10 (1982) 20–27 at 26.

The work of Knox and Broca became the basis for Francis Galton's theory of eugenics. In his 1883 book, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, Galton coined the term “eugenics” from the Greek word meaning “well born.” Eugenics is the science of improving population groups through the manipulation of breeding. Combining Knox's views on race and Darwin's concept of natural selection, Galton proposed that human races could be improved through the careful selection of “positive” traits and the weeding out of “undesirable” or “inferior” traits. Many of the “traits” that Galton viewed as



genetic were actually social or economic. Galton's theory of eugenics was designed to deal with the "problem" of the degeneration of the white race, which was defined at the time in terms of the problem of "poor whites." The late nineteenth century in Europe was a time of rapid industrialization and an ever-expanding population of urban poor. Several decades before colonial officials used the ideas of eugenics to transform the lives of Africans, eugenicists targeted "poor whites." As discussed in Chapter 1, the "poor white problem" seemed to arise wherever people of non-European and European descent lived in close proximity, such as in the settler colonies of South Africa, Kenya, and Algeria.<sup>22</sup> "Poor whites" were seen as more vulnerable to degeneration because of concerns about the impact of the environment and miscegenation ("race mixing"). Eugenic ideas quickly gained in popularity among middle-class Europeans who linked degeneration to interracial contact, poverty, and prostitution.

Eugenics would come to play an important role in colonial development policies in Africa. In the first decade of the twentieth century eugenicists focused their efforts on the impoverished white communities of settler colonies. By the 1920s eugenic ideas began to filter into colonial development policies for Black Africans. During this period two broadly construed camps of eugenics emerged, and these positions – positive and negative eugenics – originated from the nurture versus nature debate. Positive eugenicists aimed to improve the white race through the increased reproduction of people with ideal traits and improvement of the race in general through social welfare. The efforts of positive eugenicists were based on the Lamarckian theory of inheritance. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck was an early nineteenth-century biologist who developed the idea of soft inheritance, or the inheritance of acquired characteristics. One way that positive eugenicists sought to improve the race was by bettering the lives of the working class through more sanitary housing, nutrition, and education. Maternal welfare was also important to positive eugenicists because they believed it ensured the healthy development of

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of the "poor white problem" see Dubow, *Scientific Racism*, 120–165; Chloe Campbell, *Race and Empire: Eugenics in Colonial Kenya* (Manchester University Press, 2007); Susanne Klausen, *Race, Maternity, and the Politics of Birth Control in South Africa, 1910–39* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Lundy Braun, *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 109–138; William Schneider, "Toward the Improvement of the Human Race: The History of Eugenics in France," *Journal of Modern History* 54:2 (1982) 268–291.

the next generation of humans.<sup>23</sup> Positive eugenic policies fit well within the development episteme and helped to shape colonial development policies.

The key component of negative eugenics was controlling the fertility of "less desirable" populations. The scientific theories behind negative eugenics came out of the work of German biologist August Weismann. According to Weismann's germ plasm theory, acquired characteristics cannot be inherited. Only innate qualities can be passed to the following generation. In order to cull negative elements from society, negative eugenicists believed, government policies should control reproduction among less desirable groups. Traits viewed as heritable included criminality, poverty, alcoholism, mental deficiency and illness, and prostitution. Eugenicists argued that these cultural, economic, and social characteristics were driven by biology. They attempted to limit the growth of "undesirable" populations through legal and medical procedures such as birth control, forced sterilization, marriage restrictions, antimiscegenation and segregation laws, and generally discouraging reproduction among lower social classes and non-Europeans.

Eugenic ideas "coincided with the rising intensity of imperialist feeling from the 1880s, helping to stoke nationalist fervor and providing a convenient rationale for the colonial subjugation of non-Europeans."<sup>24</sup> This was especially true for settler colonies. In South Africa eugenics research targeted the improvement of the white community, efforts that were replicated in the budding settler colonies of Kenya and Rhodesia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Historian Chloe Campbell argues that calls for eugenic policies in the British Empire came to be far more virulent than in the metropole. The underlying argument of eugenics, that elite Europeans were racially superior to the rest of humanity, was used to justify settlers' claims over land and right to rule. Campbell explained, "as well as expressing the cultural fears of colonialism, eugenics also expressed the modernity of the colonial project in Africa: the newness of settler society and the perceived rawness of African development presented an ideal opportunity to create a society modelled on eugenic insights."<sup>25</sup> In colonial Africa eugenic development policies became cultural practices as much as scientific programs. As occurred with physical

<sup>23</sup> Schneider, "Toward the Improvement of the Human Race."

<sup>24</sup> Dubow, *Scientific Racism*, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell, *Race and Empire*, 3.

anthropological theories of race, eugenicists masked cultural assumptions as scientific evidence designed to make the case for European racial superiority.

## EUGENICS, RACE, AND LABOR IN COLONIAL AFRICA

European colonial powers implemented eugenic ideas and practices among poor white settlers in Africa as early as the 1890s. Soon after the French began isolated eugenic programs for Africans around the turn of the century. However, it was after World War I that colonial governments throughout Africa expanded their efforts to create the healthiest, most effective labor force through eugenic practices. Colonial efforts in housing, public health, education, and agriculture—the four areas of intervention that we examine more closely in Part III of this book—contributed toward eugenic efforts to improve the quality of the African workforce.

Colonial officials drew on positive eugenic theories and practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to address fears about declining population in African colonies. Medical and public health departments implemented eugenicist ideas to create healthier workers for the state and healthier living spaces for European settlers. For example, early twentieth-century mosquito eradication and inoculation schemes in the Zanzibar Islands were explicitly designed to improve the “quality” of the African labor pool.<sup>26</sup> During the early years of colonial development officials sought to increase African life expectancy not merely for its value to African societies but, more importantly, to improve the health and productivity of labor for the colonial economy.

The work of General Gallieni in Madagascar offered one of the first models for employing positive eugenic methods in Africa’s colonial development practices. Initially, Madagascar was to serve as a crucial site for improving the white race through outmigration based on the notion that the island’s climate would foster more rapid population growth than would occur in France.<sup>27</sup> Within a few years a different eugenics project to improve the indigenous Merina community

<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth McMahon, “Becoming Pemba: Identity, Social Welfare and Community during the Protectorate Period” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2005), 167–198.

<sup>27</sup> By the turn of the century the French government regularly fretted over the declining fertility amongst the white population of France.

preoccupied the colonial administration. Gallieni was concerned about the Merina because he considered them the most likely labor pool for colonial industries. Gallieni sought to increase the Merina population from three million to ten million by increasing rates of reproduction and decreasing infant mortality. These pronatalist efforts became the basis for the island’s colonial public health system and the cornerstone of French imperial policies for *mise en valeur* (development). In 1897 Gallieni established hospitals, leprosariums, maternity wards, venereal disease treatment centers, orphanages, and a medical school for indigenous students. By 1901 a Pasteur Institute was opened with the capacity to vaccinate 30,000 people a month. The medical school also indoctrinated locals into western ideas about health and hygiene. Indigenous midwives studied for two years and doctors for five years, all at the cost of the state. Midwives visited the homes of indigenous women and gave advice on best practices for prenatal and postnatal care and infant welfare in order to increase infant life expectancy.<sup>28</sup>

The Belgian administration instituted a similar pronatalist program in the Congo. In 1912 Madame van den Perre of Belgium founded the League for the Protection of Black Children in order to combat high infant mortality in the colony. The League opened the first milk station (*goutte de lait*) to provide Congolese women supplementary food for their infants, teach mothers how to “properly” raise their children, and spread other western ideas about cleanliness and hygiene.<sup>29</sup> These milk stations had been used in Belgium and other European nations in the previous decades to improve the health of working-class whites. By 1910 colonizers shifted their concerns toward declining birth rates among labor populations in the colonies. As with Gallieni’s pronatalist project in Madagascar, these “scientifically based” Lamarckian social welfare policies were designed to ensure a larger, healthier, and more productive African workforce.

Initially, the Belgian and French governments brought eugenic policies to Africa to improve their white population, just as the British in South Africa, Rhodesia, and Kenya sought to improve their

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Cook Andersen, “Creating French Settlements Overseas: Pronatalism and Colonial Medicine in Madagascar,” *French Historical Studies* 33:3 (2010) 417–444.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Rose Hunt, “‘Le Bebe en Brousse’: European Women, African Birth Spacing and Colonial Intervention in Breast Feeding in the Belgian Congo,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21:3 (1988) 401–432 at 405.



"poor whites." Colonial officials quickly realized, however, that the same policies used to improve "poor whites" could be implemented to improve the quality of African laborers as well. Lamarckian or positive eugenic ideas reinforced the ethos of the development episteme through a secular "civilizing mission" described as racial improvement. Such ideas and practices of social engineering informed development policies across the continent well into the twentieth century.

### POPULATION CONTROL AND THE IMPLICIT RACISM OF POSTWAR DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

Julian Huxley, the first director general of UNESCO, took the reins in 1946 determined to bring his ideas of evolutionary humanism to this new international organization. Huxley had been a well-known eugenicist before the Second World War. During the 1920s and early 1930s he urged the British Colonial Office to take a "biological approach in native education" in East Africa because biology was important for teaching "personal hygiene," "social hygiene," and what he called "the eugenic ideal."<sup>30</sup> An earlier version of his recommendations stated more overtly that biology was crucial for teaching "racial hygiene [in order] to inculcate a knowledge of heredity."<sup>31</sup> Huxley gradually abandoned references to "race" and "tribe" in favor of "culture," but he maintained a strong belief in social evolutionary theory. Before World War II Huxley was both an avowed eugenicist and anti-Nazi. Huxley renounced the overtly racist ideas of many eugenicists of his time and argued that the improvement of humanity was an issue of culture rather than skin tone.<sup>32</sup> Huxley promoted evolutionary humanism, which was the theory that "more evolved" societies in the west could and should facilitate the development of "less evolved" societies through a combination of cultural, economic, and social interventions. When he took up the reins as the director of UNESCO most of sub-Saharan Africa was still under

<sup>30</sup> UKNA Colonial Office (CO) 879/123/11, Professor Julian Huxley, MA, "Biology and the Biological Approach to Native Education in East Africa" (Printed for the Colonial Office, April 1930), 21.

<sup>31</sup> UKNA CO 879/121/4, Memorandum Prepared by Professor Julian Huxley and Dr. W. K. Spencer for Advisory Committee on Education in Tropical Africa, 1928, 214.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Weindling, "Julian Huxley and the Continuity of Eugenics in Twentieth-Century Britain," *Journal of Modern European History* 10:4 (2012) 480–499.

European colonial rule, and Huxley accepted that colonialism was the vehicle for developing African societies.

After World War II scholars such as Julian Huxley helped to remove the racialized discourse from the idea of western cultural supremacy and reframe the discourse on development to one about societies and cultures. However, as evident in the 1950 and 1951 UNESCO statements discussed in the beginning of this chapter, race did not entirely disappear from debates about comparative differences. By the 1950s evolutionary humanism itself became redefined as international development and modernization, and the discourse on eugenics had morphed into one about population control.

Other eugenicists imitated Julian Huxley's post-World War II pivot away from the explicit language of race. These eugenicists, particularly those in the United States such as Frederick Osborn, transformed their prewar focus on sterilization and limiting the fertility of "unfit" (usually nonwhite) populations into a cornerstone of modern development policy. Beginning in the late 1940s governments in colonial Africa and elsewhere were no longer concerned about population decline, but about what eventually came to be known as the "population bomb."<sup>33</sup> Neo-Malthusian arguments that global food supplies could not keep up with the exponential pace of population growth fed the panic. Western eugenicists urged the need to control population expansion, especially in the global south, through widespread distribution of birth control.

Much to the gratification of colonial officials, their ongoing colonial vaccination campaigns and other health interventions across Africa in the preceding decades created a population boom on the continent.<sup>34</sup> While officials on the ground valued the birth of more laborers, some scholars and activists located in the European imperial metropolises and in the United States raised the alarm over the booming population in Africa. In 1948 two neo-Malthusian books published in the United

<sup>33</sup> Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (A Sierra Club Ballantine Book, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> For more information on population expansion and vaccination campaigns in colonial Africa see Hannah-Louise Clark, "Administering Vaccination in Interwar Algeria: Medical Auxiliaries, Smallpox, and the Colonial State in the Communes Mixtes," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 34:2 (2016) 32–56; Tiloka de Silva and Silvana Tenreiro, "Population Control Policies and Fertility Convergence," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31:4 (2017) 205–228; William Schneider, "The Long History of Smallpox Eradication: Lessons for Global Health in Africa," in Tamara Giles-Vernick and James L. A. Webb Jr., eds., *Global Health in Africa: Historical Perspectives on Disease Control* (Ohio University Press, 2013), 25–41.

States warned of a coming environmental collapse. William Vogt's *Road to Survival* and Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr.'s *Our Plundered Planet* both spoke to the concern that expanding populations would permanently damage the earth's environment. Vogt was an activist for population control and eventually a president of Planned Parenthood. Osborn was the son and nephew of two leading eugenicists, Henry and Frederick Osborn. While both books have been credited with helping to found the modern environmental movement, their influence was also felt in the new field of demographics.

Frederick Osborn, the longtime secretary of the American Eugenics Society, feared nonwhites in the global south would overrun the white populations of the global north. He used his positions on the Rockefeller and Milbank Foundation boards to finance the emerging field of demography. In the 1930s Osborn was opposed to birth control because the primary users of birth control in the United States at the time were middle- and upper-class white women, exactly the people eugenicists wanted to procreate. In the postwar era Osborn transformed his view on birth control, at least in terms of where it should be deployed. Through financing from the Rockefeller and Milbank Foundations, he helped to establish a major demographic institution known as the Population Council in 1952.<sup>35</sup> The Population Council oversaw the development and distribution of inexpensive birth control in Africa, Asia, and South American countries, work it continues to do into the present day. Demographers at the Population Council did not frame their work in terms of limiting the growth of nonwhite populations; instead, they employed neo-Malthusian rhetoric about the dangers of overpopulation.

The Population Council sought to make fertility reduction a cornerstone of future development policies. In 1963 the Population Council drafted the language for the UN statement on access to family planning services as a human right. As a follow-up to this statement, the UN created the Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) in the late 1960s. The UNFPA institutionalized fertility control as part of all future development paradigms. In the present day advocacy for birth control is a central plank in development programs supporting women in African countries. Contemporary advocates of international birth control programs certainly do not view their work as an example of

negative eugenics. When eugenicists removed overt references to "race" from their policies in the 1950s they shrouded the original intentions of birth control campaigns. For far too long, forced and coercive sterilization has been used to control population growth among "undesirable" groups in Africa and elsewhere, most recently among HIV-positive women in South Africa during the height of the HIV crisis in the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> Many women around the world find access to birth control liberating, but the "right" to birth control also includes the "right" to have children. Awareness of these rights and of reproductive justice debates generally is crucial for understanding the family planning policies that continue to be foundational in contemporary international development discourses.

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The emerging discipline of physical anthropology in the nineteenth century challenged the notion in Darwin's evolutionary theory that all human beings are part of the same species. Combined with social Darwinist ideas of the time, this set the stage for racist discourses that linger in the development discourse. Anthropological studies of human evolution also sparked the eugenics movements of the early twentieth century, creating new theories of race that pathologized Blackness. This racist thinking viewed Africans and people of African descent as biologically different from whites and in need of either eradication or evolutionary intervention. The problem with eugenic theories, whether positive or negative, is that they envisioned Africans as a separate and distinctly lesser race than Europeans.

Positive eugenicists advocated social welfare to "improve" Africans because they believed environmental factors affected their ability to "evolve" – or in twentieth-first-century terms, "modernize." The vast majority of social welfare and development initiatives over the past 100 years have focused on the improvement of education, nutrition, and housing. These are laudable goals taken at face value. However, when combined with discourses on racial inequality, they have other implications. Eugenic efforts to improve poor white and Black communities have their origins in racist ideas of the late nineteenth century. The postwar evolutionary humanist notion that cultural difference determines ability drew on earlier racial hierarchies that viewed people of

<sup>35</sup> Emily Klancher Merchant, "A Digital History of Anglophone Demography and Global Population Control," *Population and Development Review* 43:1 (2017) 83–117.

<sup>36</sup> Vicci Tallis, *Feminisms, HIV and AIDS: Subverting Power, Reducing Vulnerability* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 100–105.

European descent as the evolutionary standard to which all races should strive. This eugenic history of early development policies has largely been forgotten, but the rhetoric on racial difference, now masked as "culture," has stubbornly endured.

### Further Reading

On the history of evolution theories and pseudoscientific racism see Lundy Braun, *Breathing Race into the Machine: The Surprising Career of the Spirometer from Plantation to Genetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Sandra Herbert, *Charles Darwin and the Question of Evolution: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford St. Martins, 2011); John P. Jackson Jr., *Science for Segregation: Race, Law, and the Case against Brown v. Board of Education* (New York University Press, 2005); Dov Ospovat, *The Development of Darwin's Theory: Natural History, Natural Theology, and Natural Selection, 1838–1859* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Diana Wylie, *Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa* (University of Virginia Press, 2001).

On the history of eugenics and physical anthropology see Andrew Bank, "Of 'Native Skulls' and 'Noble Caucasians': Phrenology in Colonial South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22:3 (1996) 387–403; Philip L. Bonner, Amanda Esterhuysen, and Trefor Jenkins, eds., *A Search for Origins: Science, History and South Africa's "Cradle of Humankind"* (Wits University Press, 2007); Chloe Campbell, *Race and Empire: Eugenics in Colonial Kenya* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

## CHAPTER 4

### Decolonizing the Idea of Development

In 1981 Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o called for Africans to "decolonize their minds" by embracing African languages, literatures, and cultures.<sup>1</sup> He criticized the first president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, for collaborating with western governments to continue neocolonial policies that disempowered Kenyans. Ngũgĩ (to which he often referred) argued that Kenyatta's education in colonial schools made him more accepting of the western development paradigm, which, in turn, promoted the extension of western-style schooling and westernization more generally in postcolonial Kenya. Acceptance of western cultures and languages, he explained, subjugated Africans to the interests of western governments. Kenyatta, like most early African leaders, was a product of missionary and colonial education, and he used his western education to challenge colonialism. Yet in the postcolonial period he was constrained by both the limited economic power of his country in the face of neocolonial forces and his own efforts to reinforce and institutionalize his political power.

Kenyatta's earlier experiences negotiating with the British government illustrate the difficulty in assuming a binary collaborator/resister framework by distinguishing Africans who collaborated with (former) colonizers from those who resisted colonialism and neocolonialism. In

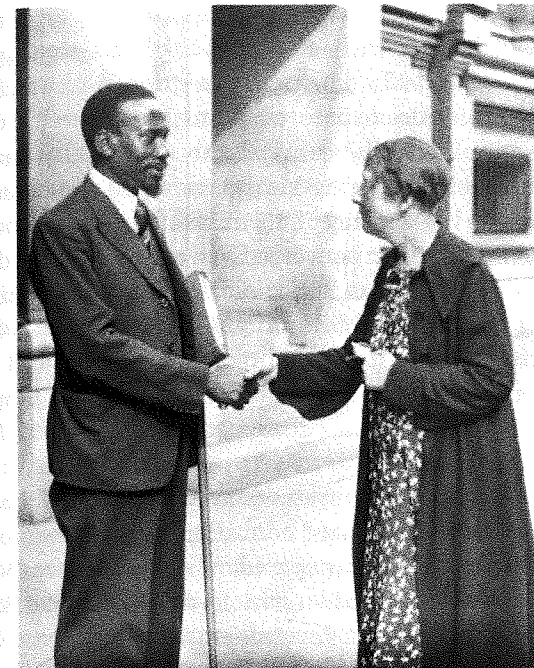
<sup>1</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (East African Educational Publishers, 1981). Ngũgĩ's argument paralleled Frantz Fanon's earlier call to physically and intellectually decolonize Africa. Ngũgĩ made the case that even after colonization ended, elite Africans remained confined by their western educations and framed their power structures on western models that perpetuated the disenfranchisement of most Africans.



1929 Jomo Kenyatta (known at the time as Johnstone Kenyatta) arrived in England for the first time as a representative of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) of Kenya. He came to petition the secretary of state for the colonies to address the land issue in the Kikuyu territory. Kenyatta's requests to meet with the secretary of state were repeatedly denied. Officials in England were reluctant to publicly acknowledge the KCA's grievances over land, but in private conversations they considered meeting with Kenyatta. The British hoped to capitalize on his influence among the Kikuyu to deal with what they viewed as a pending crisis over female circumcision.<sup>2</sup> Kenyatta went back to Kenya in September 1930 but returned to England within a year. Between 1931 and 1946 Kenyatta remained in Europe (mostly England) where he worked on a farm, took courses at several universities, completed a social anthropology degree at the London School of Economics, and published his ethnographic book *Facing Mount Kenya*. During his time in England Kenyatta associated with whites whom the British government viewed as radical, such as Sylvia Pankhurst (see Figure 4.1), further arousing government officials' suspicions of him. After Kenyatta returned to Kenya he became a leader in the Kenya African Union, a nationalist political party, until his arrest and imprisonment by the colonial government in October 1952. As colonialism ended in the early 1960s across much of West and East Africa, Kenyatta was one of several political leaders on the continent who went from being a colonial prisoner to serving as the head of the country's government; he was elected Kenya's first prime minister in 1961 and the president of independent Kenya in 1963, a position he held until his death in 1978. Kenyatta's varied experiences – from education in western schools to election as an African nationalist leader – illustrate the complicated loyalties African elites held during the colonial and postcolonial eras.

Ashis Nandy noted in *The Intimate Enemy* that “[m]odern colonialism won its great victories not so much through its military and technological prowess as through its ability to create secular hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order. These hierarchies opened up new vistas for many, particularly for those exploited or cornered

<sup>2</sup> UKNA CO 533/384 Johnstone Kenyatta. In order to maintain historical accuracy, we use the term “female circumcision” in reference to the period before 1970, and “female genital cutting (FGC)” in reference to the period since 1970. See Box 4.2 for a discussion of the term “female genital cutting.”



**FIGURE 4.1** Jomo Kenyatta shakes hands with Sylvia Pankhurst at the “Abyssinia and Justice” conference, September 9, 1937. Pankhurst was an anticolonial activist and a supporter of Emperor Haile Selassie and Ethiopian independence in Ethiopia’s conflict with Italy.

within the traditional order. To them the new order looked like the first step towards a more just and equal world.”<sup>3</sup> Nandy recognized the ways in which the colonial social and economic systems encouraged Africans to prioritize western cultures over indigenous cultures as the means for social mobility. Consequently, that some Africans appeared to move up the social ladder by embracing western cultures furthered the illusion that such cultures were more useful than African systems of social status. By privileging western cultures as “superior” the civilizing mission undergirded the development episteme, a racialized framework that shaped colonial policies.<sup>4</sup> Those who felt they had less power in local hierarchies, often women, young people, and formerly

<sup>3</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 1983), ix.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Reid argues that racism was central to European colonialism in Africa and it is “dangerous to overlook the subject, because in many ways it goes to the very heart



enslaved people, sought out these new opportunities for social mobility. Jomo Kenyatta was a classic example of this strategy. He was orphaned young and held a subservient position in his uncle's household. He eventually decided to move to the Church of Scotland Mission in Kenya. There he converted to Christianity and received a western education, preparing him to move up the colonial social ladder. Yet he also broke many of the missionaries' rules about appropriate conduct for Christian converts. Even as he worked within British colonial structures, he began anticolonial political organizing among the Kikuyu ethnic group. Kenyatta quickly discovered, as did other African leaders, that even if they embraced Christianity and the civilizing mission Africans were never included on the higher rungs of colonial hierarchies. Their disillusionment became the platform for various nationalist movements.

Nationalists like Jomo Kenyatta who fought for independence in Africa drew on their westernized education to combat colonial arguments that Africans were not prepared for independence. Most of the leaders in the newly independent nations of postcolonial Africa were products of missionary and government schools. Some like Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Hastings Banda of Malawi were also products of educational institutions in the global north. Westernized education in the postcolonial era in Africa represented both modernity and development but continued to tie African educational systems to the colonial past. Ngũgĩ's call to "decolonize the mind" was as much about decolonizing power structures created during the colonial period as it was about reforming individual Africans. In the twenty-first century, the call to decolonize African education systems and power structures has expanded. The South African #RhodesMustFall protest movement (depicted in the cover image for this book) began in 2015 as an effort both to remove a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town campus and to decolonize the educational system in South Africa and across the continent. The call for the decolonization of power structures in Africa has also moved into the realm of international development. In November 2017 the University of Sussex held a workshop to explore the influence of colonial power constructions in its international development studies program. The workshop considered

of the historical relationship between Africa and Europe." Richard Reid, *A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present*. Second edition (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 143.

the epistemological and racial legacies of colonialism in how western institutions teach about development. The Rhodes Must Fall campaign and the University of Sussex workshop reconfigure Ngũgĩ's call. No longer is the call to decolonize the minds of Africans; rather these efforts demand that we decolonize the whiteness of the power structures based in white supremacy that shape relationships between the global north and south.

## ASSIMILATION AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

The expansion of colonial rule into the interior of the continent introduced Africans to the civilizing mission through the policy of assimilation. Assimilation arose out of the colonial powers' ethnocentric assumption that Africans would want to become more like their European colonizers once introduced to European cultures. Assimilation, the stated colonial policy for French, Portuguese, and Italian colonies, pressured Africans to attend western-style schools, wear European clothing, learn western languages, and adopt the cultural norms of their European overseers. In essence, assimilation was cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism had a dramatic impact on Africans across the continent because it encouraged Africans to devalue their own cultures in order to embrace westernization, even as most Africans did not perceive such a clear distinction or conflict between African and western cultural practices.

Assimilation came in different forms and had its advantages and disadvantages. In francophone Africa, Africans who spoke the French language, attended French schools, wore European clothes, and demonstrated fluency in French culture – those who identified themselves as Frenchmen – were promised French citizenship. An 1848 law recognized the residents of the four "communes" or settlements in Senegal (Gorée, Saint-Louis, Rufisque, and Dakar) as French citizens. However, this law did not extend into the other regions of French West Africa, neither did it give them full protection of the law if they chose to remain within African and/or Islamic legal systems. Another law passed in 1848 gave the *originaires*, as the original inhabitants of the communes were called, the right to elect a representative to the French Assembly in Paris. Elected representatives included those of mixed African and French heritage, and in 1914 Blaise Diagne became the first black African to occupy the position. Diagne fought for expanded

rights for Africans, encouraged Africans to embrace French colonialism, and urged the French to recognize them as full citizens.

Blaise Diagne's vision of expanded citizenship did not come to fruition. French assimilation policies distinguished between the *évolué* (the "evolved" or "civilized") and those governed by the Code de l'indigénat, the set of rules that applied to colonial subjects but not to citizens. The vast majority of Africans under French rule were denied the rights of citizenship until 1946 when France overhauled its colonial policy and declared all of its African subjects "citizens" of the French government. While these new "citizens" could no longer be forced to labor for the government, Africans still did not share the same rights as Frenchmen. French colonial policy never fulfilled the promise of equality in the original conception of the civilizing mission.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, attempts to assimilate Africans into French culture permeated colonial societies. Assimilation was in the French cuisine served to soldiers, workers, and students; the French language examinations required for government jobs; the French films, magazines, and music available for consumption; and even in the French-style streets, public squares, and homes people encountered in their daily lives.<sup>6</sup> French urban planners sought to assimilate Africans through the reinforcement of western spatial ideas. For example, in the early nineteenth century French colonizers took over the villages of Ndakaru in present-day Senegal and made them into the city of Dakar, the headquarters of French West Africa. Maps of Dakar from 1862 show only the "French" quarters of the city, which were designed by Jean Marie Émilie Pinet-Laprade, and ignored non-French sections of the city such as the Medina where the indigenous Senegalese were forced to live. The names of the streets were French, and only those spaces drawn into "the city" were given modern amenities like electricity. Defining Dakar as a French city equated Frenchness with modernity and urbanity. The many Senegalese who did not live in the French part of the city but passed through this space daily were constantly reminded of the modernity of European cultures. Likewise, the Senegalese children who grew up within the assimilated city spaces

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa 1880–1995* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Ambe J. Njoh, "The Experience and Legacy of French Colonial Urban Planning in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Planning Perspectives* 19 (2004) 435–454.

eating baguettes and speaking French learned to see Frenchness as their culture.<sup>7</sup>

Although very few Africans in French colonies actually achieved the legal assimilation that gave them the benefits of French citizenship, in all colonies Africans had to assimilate to colonial cultures in order to attain the highest forms of education and government employment. The French viewed assimilation as their "gift" to Africans. In his satirical novel *L'étrange destin du Wangrin* (*The Strange Destiny of Wangrin*) Amadou Hampâté Bâ recounts this idea through the words of the French colonial commandant who informed his new African clerk:

You must pay the debt you owe France by ensuring that she is loved and that her language and civilization are spread far and wide. In the whole history of mankind, these are the two most beautiful gifts ever bestowed on African Blacks. Yes, it is our mission to bring happiness to the Black peoples, if need be against their own wishes.<sup>8</sup>

Bâ understood well the contradictions of the French civilizing mission, being himself a product of African and western schools. An intellectual, Bâ spent twenty years working in the colonial government across the French Empire before joining the IFAN research institute (for more information, see Chapter 5). Bâ saw clearly the mechanics of French colonization of Africans and ridiculed this process in his post-colonial writing. His novels and memoirs emphasized the equipoise many Africans sought between honoring their own cultures and acquiring western languages and cultural accoutrements.

In the late colonial era, the most well-known and powerful critiques of assimilation came from Frantz Fanon, a man from the French Caribbean island of Martinique who worked as a psychologist in the French colony of Algeria during the 1950s. One of his books, entitled *Black Skin, White Masks*, recounts how colonized people were forced to don figurative white masks in order to survive in a European-made world. He argued that colonization deformed all members of a colonized society, both white and black. Fanon wrote that language shapes our understanding of culture; thus, one who is forced to learn the language of another group (that is, a colonizer) is more likely to come to

<sup>7</sup> Liora Bigon, "Urban Planning, Colonial Doctrines and Street Naming in French Dakar and British Lagos, c. 1850–1930," *Urban History* 36:3 (2009) 426–448.

<sup>8</sup> Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *The Fortunes of Wangrin*, transl. by Aina Pavolini Taylor (Indiana University Press, 1987), 17.

value aspects of that culture above his or her own. "Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country."<sup>9</sup> In particular, western languages such as French and English assign values to the colors that symbolize racial difference; white/White is associated with purity and black/Black is associated with evil. For assimilated Africans, learning these languages helped them to understand European cultures, but it also threatened to alienate them from their own societies.

#### 4.1 Frantz Fanon

Frantz Fanon was born in the French Caribbean colony of Martinique in 1925 to a middle-class black family. Several formative events occurred in his teenage years that led him to question the value of assimilation. Perhaps the most important was his good fortune to have Aimé Césaire, one of the leading proponents of the African cultural revivalist movement called Négritude and an ardent critic of colonialism, as his high school teacher. Césaire's teaching encouraged Fanon to question the racialized aspects of colonialism. In 1940, when Fanon was fifteen years old, Martinique became the Caribbean stronghold of the Vichy government, the French fascist government that collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. The colonial administration instituted an oppressive regime on the island. Three years later Fanon fled to Dominica, a nearby island, and joined the Free French army stationed there. He was sent to North Africa and eventually fought in Europe toward the end of the war. After World War II Fanon decided to study medicine in France, receiving his degree in psychiatry in 1951. His first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, was published in 1952. Based on the work he did for his dissertation, his book looked at the psychological effects of colonialism on black people. Fanon worked in France until 1953 when he moved to Algeria to become the chief of a hospital psychiatry ward. Within a year of

his arrival in Algeria, the Algerian war for independence broke out and Fanon found himself increasingly on the side of the resistance group, the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN). In his psychiatric treatment of soldiers fighting for the French and the tortured Algerian prisoners of war, he came to see colonialism as the root of the violence. Fanon secretly joined the FLN and in 1956 quit his job to spend his time working for the FLN. He published a group of essays in 1959 titled *A Dying Colonialism*, but his most famous book came out shortly before his death from leukemia in 1961. *The Wretched of the Earth* was a foundational text for resistance movements in Africa seeking their independence from European colonizers. In this book Fanon argued that the colonized had to violently resist their subjugation by European colonizers in order to free themselves psychologically from the effects of colonialism. After treatment in both the Soviet Union and the United States, Fanon died in December 1961 in Maryland.

#### INDIRECT RULE AND THE INVENTION OF "TRIBES"

Whereas assimilation was the stated policy in francophone and lusophone Africa, Britain imposed a policy of indirect rule in its African territories. Frederick Lugard laid out the formal policy of indirect rule in his *Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa*, published in 1922. Lugard stated that the primary mission of the British Empire was to secure "liberty and self-development" to all of those under the British flag. These ideals "can be best secured to the native population," he explained, "by leaving them free to manage their own affairs through their own rulers, proportionately to their degree of advancement, under the guidance of the British staff, and subject to the laws and policy of the administration." Lugard qualified his statement by urging that colonial administrations must be able to "preserve law and order."<sup>10</sup>

Although Lugard was the first to articulate indirect rule in detail, the policy had been standard practice in most of Britain's African colonies

<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical British Africa* (Frank Cass, 1922), 94.



since their establishment. Lugard designed the policy based on his experience as the governor of Northern Nigeria, where the Sokoto Empire, founded in 1804 by Usman dan Fodio, had been incorporated into the Nigerian colonial administration. Rather than assimilation through complete adoption of European political, social, and cultural practices, the primary goal of indirect rule was to "teach" Africans about self-government by preserving, wherever possible, indigenous political and social structures. Indirect rule was also a convenient way to offset the overhead costs of colonial administration.

Indirect rule policies recognized two types of African societies: centralized states and decentralized "tribes." The administration of centralized states was modeled after Frederick Lugard's experience in Northern Nigeria (the Sokoto Empire). This was also the policy for the kingdom of Swaziland (present-day Eswatini) and the Buganda kingdom in Uganda since the late nineteenth century. Where they found no centralized state, the British sought out allies among local chiefs or other African men (indeed, leaders were always male from the patriarchal perspective of British colonizers) who laid claim to political authority in a particular region. Often conflict arose over who could claim to rule over a territory or group of people, and the British usually did not know enough about local culture and politics to interpret such conflicts. They resolved these issues simply by naming the most loyal African leaders as "paramount chiefs" regardless of their status in their communities. Other "chiefs" or local leaders had to answer to the paramount chief, who, in turn, answered to the colonial administration. Everywhere in colonial Africa, African kings, sultans, and other rulers who were disloyal or who otherwise disobeyed colonial officials were replaced with loyal ones. The French government eventually adopted similar policies to British indirect rule around the turn of the century as it moved toward a system of colonial rule known as association.

One outcome of indirect rule policies was the solidification of the concept of the "tribe" as the primary social unit in Africa. Historically, in Africa as elsewhere, ethnic identities were formed out of particular social or political circumstances and their meanings and associations shifted over time. Ignorant of these historical forces, European travelers, colonial officials, and ethnographers assumed that the "tribe" represented Africans' primary means of connecting to the world around them. In European discourses the "tribe" represented a lower stage of development than the nation-state or empire. For instance English traveler

Nathaniel Isaacs described the Zulu as one of the many "uncivilised tribes" of southern Africa in his 1836 book *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*.<sup>11</sup> In fact, at the time of Isaacs' visit, the "Zulu" had only recently come into existence out of an amalgamation of many different ethnolinguistic communities. The "Zulu tribe," as it came to be known, gradually emerged after Shaka founded the Zulu kingdom in the 1820s. To nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europeans, all African societies, even centralized states, were made up of "tribes." Isaacs wrote that Africa was a place where "civilisation has not yet made any strides; — where rational man has not yet trodden to shed the light of truth among the ignorant, nor to inculcate a knowledge of religion."<sup>12</sup> Imperial discourses fixated on "tribes" as shorthand for Africans' lack of civilization.

The organization of Africans into "tribes" was also part of the divide-and-rule approach of indirect rule. Colonial officials often privileged some ethnic groups over others. In British colonial Kenya, educated Kikuyu men (and some women) had greater access to colonial education and thus occupied many of the intermediary positions, or government jobs, in greater proportion than other Kenyans, the effect of which is still perceptible in Kenya today. Similarly, Belgian colonial discourses about the distinction between Hutus and Tutsis helped to fuel the conflict that led to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The Belgians incorporated Tutsis into the colonial administration based on their claim that the "racial stock" of Tutsis was more evolved than that of neighboring Hutus.<sup>13</sup>

During the twentieth century British indirect rule solidified the notion that African ethnicities were static, unchanging, and bounded by particular geographies. Today the term "ethnic group" is often preferred to "tribe," yet the notion that African societies can and should be identified primarily by ethnicity rather than other markers of identity remains common in development work. When development organizations use ethnicity as a defining characteristic for their work they reinforce colonial constructs about Africa's lack of modernity.

<sup>11</sup> Nathaniel Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa, Descriptive of the Zoolus, Their Manners, Customs, Etc. Etc. with a Sketch of Natal* (Bradbury & Evans Printers, 1836).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>13</sup> Catharine Newbury and David Newbury, "A Catholic Mass in Kigali: Contested Views of the Genocide and Ethnicity in Rwanda," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 33:2/3 (1999) 292–328.



## RESISTING CULTURAL IMPERIALISM IN COLONIAL KENYA

While British indirect rule policies upheld certain African customs in an effort to secure loyalty from African patriarchs, officials were expected to outlaw customs they considered "repugnant to justice, equity, and good conscience."<sup>14</sup> Missionaries often pressured the colonial government to do so when they strongly disagreed with specific traditions. In late 1920s Kenya dissent erupted among the Kikuyu, Kamba, and Meru communities when first Christian missionaries and then the colonial government attempted to change the practice of female circumcision. In these regions of Kenya and in other regions of Africa both girls and boys went through circumcision as part of their transition to adulthood. Circumcision made one eligible for marriage because, as many people argued, it prepared young bodies for sex and reproduction. Uncircumcised persons, regardless of their biological age, could not marry, start their own household, or participate in the decision-making of their community. Circumcision practices and the rites of passage of which they were a part formed a crucial component of the age-grade systems that determined acquisition of status over a lifetime. While missionaries and the colonial state strongly supported male circumcision, some missionaries and medical officers argued that female circumcision was dangerous and oppressive to girls and women.<sup>15</sup> When the missionaries and colonial officials attacked the practice of female circumcision, they challenged the foundation of the communities' social and cultural systems.<sup>16</sup>

Missionaries and colonial officials were not entirely coordinated in their plans to challenge what today is generally called "clitoridectomy" or "female genital cutting" (FGC). Missionaries wanted to phase out the practice because they believed it was savage. From a Victorian perspective, clitoridectomy represented the atavistic element in African societies as a holdover of "primordial" culture. Colonial officials had other concerns related to the production of

<sup>14</sup> See Kristin Mann and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Law in Colonial Africa* (Heinemann Educational Books, 1991), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Ocobock, *An Uncertain Age: The Politics of Manhood in Kenya* (Ohio University Press, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Lynn M. Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (University of California Press, 2003).

labor; they believed that health issues associated with clitoridectomy could limit procreation. Officials also feared an increase in abortions if girls waited until their late teens or twenties to be circumcised because this was a common response to pregnancies that occurred before the girl's circumcision. Officials were anxious not to limit the number of children, the future laborers for the colonial state.<sup>17</sup>

The response of the Kikuyu to British efforts to change their cultural norms demonstrates some of the tactics of resistance Africans used to combat colonialism. Kikuyu Christians did not challenge their religious conversion, though many did refuse to participate in schools and churches run by missionaries who banned these practices. A group of Kikuyu Christians initiated the "Kikuyu Independent Schools Association" in the 1930s. Jomo Kenyatta himself was an active advocate for the Kikuyu resistance to interventions on this issue. His 1938 book *Facing Mount Kenya* devoted a significant portion of a chapter on boys' and girls' initiation to a defense of female circumcision.<sup>18</sup> Yet Kenyatta was the same person who, as the first president of Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o accused of acquiescing to western neocolonialism. The line between embracing westernization and fighting cultural imperialism was not always clear and the meaning of particular actions changed over time. Historian Lynn Thomas argues that when the Meru Local Native Council attempted to ban female circumcision during Kenya's Mau Mau anticolonial war of the 1950s, a group of girls "circumcised themselves" as a statement of both their rejection of Meru elders' authority and their solidarity with the Mau Mau warriors.<sup>19</sup> In the past and today, the battle over FGC in Kenya and elsewhere has been so heated because it has represented resistance to cultural imperialism to some, and the fight for protection of girls and women to others.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (Vintage Books, 1965 [1938]).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Politics of the Womb*, 79–102.

#### 4.2 Female genital cutting

The issue of female genital cutting (FGC), sometimes referred to as female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM), has been fiercely debated across Africa and has become a cause célèbre of western feminists. Female genital cutting entails the piercing, cutting, or removal of part or all of the external genitalia of females for cultural purposes. Male and female circumcision is found among a number of African societies that include Christians, Muslims, and other faith communities. The majority of African communities do not practice FGC.<sup>1</sup>

Clitoridectomy and infibulation are two of the more invasive forms of female genital cutting. Clitoridectomy refers to the partial or complete removal of the clitoris; in extreme versions the labia are also removed. Infibulation is when the labia are sewn together to make the vaginal opening smaller, and in some cases the labia are sewn completely shut until marriage. In African societies that practice FGC generally an uncut woman cannot marry or become a full social adult within the community. In most cases women manage girls' rites of passage and perform the genital cutting itself. However, many activists in Africa (as well as in the west) are working to change these practices because of the health implications for African women, and many African nations have passed laws banning the practice. Furthermore, where they continue to exist, the form and meaning of FGC practices have adapted to meet new health requirements or cultural demands.

In 2004 Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène made the fictional film *Moolaadé* about a woman in a village in Burkina Faso who refuses to allow her daughter to be circumcised. Throughout the film villagers debate arguments for and against ending the practice of female circumcision. Eventually, the women of the community collectively refuse to continue the practice and protect their daughters from it. The film was a joint production sponsored by the governments of Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Morocco, Tunisia, and France in an effort to end the practice in their countries.

The debates around female genital cutting center around medical, cultural, and linguistic issues. Medical debates argue that most often FGC is practiced on children, without

anesthetic, and often in unsanitary situations that allow for significant blood loss, infection, and at times death. However, medical objections rarely consider the cultural framework of FGC and the role it fulfills socially and culturally. African scholars, even those who oppose the practice, note that objections to the practice from westerners are often framed in terms reminiscent of colonialism and redolent with racism. The linguistic distinction between the terms "female genital cutting" versus "female genital mutilation" is a case in point – activists who use the word "mutilation" evoke an image of barbarism and demonize Africans as atavistic and in need of western intervention. Some African activists and scholars argue that western societies impose similar medical procedures on women's bodies, such as breast enhancement and vaginal "tightening," that encourage women to reshape their bodies for male pleasure.

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent book with many perspectives from African activists trying to end female genital cutting, see Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

#### DECOLONIZING THE MIND

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o described culture as the "spiritual eyeglasses through which people come to view themselves and their place in the universe."<sup>20</sup> From the moment Europeans stepped onto the continent of Africa as "explorers" they began the process of delegitimizing and decentering African knowledge. Efforts to indoctrinate Africans into European languages and cultures sought to destroy the essence of African identity by replacing African religious beliefs, morality, clothing, and languages with foreign ones. In *Decolonising the Mind* Ngũgĩ argued that because most African literature was still written in western languages "African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experiencing the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world, even the world of the immediate environment, was Eurocentric."<sup>21</sup> For instance French

<sup>20</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (James Currey, 1993), 14.

<sup>21</sup> Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 93.

colonial history lessons for African schoolchildren in francophone regions of the continent, even those taught by Africans, began with "our ancestors the Gauls."<sup>22</sup> Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, recalled how the Catholic school she attended in the 1950s punished girls who spoke their native languages by making them wear a sign that shamed them.<sup>23</sup> The influences of the civilizing mission in African schools remained strong into the postcolonial era.

The first step to "decolonising the mind" was to dismantle the legacies of colonialism in African education systems. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, turned his attention to university education in 1963 when he created the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana.<sup>24</sup> Nkrumah recognized that education in and about Africa had been centered on European models. He argued for an Africa-centered model of higher education that taught about Africa outside the colonial framework. The first director of this new Institute of African Studies argued that knowledge about Africa needed to be researched, written, and taught on the continent rather than in the west. As historian Jean Allman points out, "In the history of knowledge production about Africa, this constituted an extraordinary moment . . . a moment bursting with possibilities, in which engaged and rigorous debate, African-centered and Africa-based, was the prerequisite, no epistemic paradigm was hegemonic, and 'African Studies' was envisioned as the site for a full re-imagining of higher education in an African postcolonial world."<sup>25</sup> Nkrumah saw the development of a vibrant intellectual and African knowledge base as central to overthrowing colonial epistemological domination.

On the other side of the continent and influenced by thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o became a vocal critic of the continued influence of European culture in African schools and universities after the end of colonialism. As a faculty member in the English department at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s, he, along with several African colleagues, questioned the Eurocentric approach to teaching literature. In 1969 this group of faculty circulated a proposal, *On the Abolition of the*

<sup>22</sup> Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo, "Rethinking Educational Paradigms in Africa: Imperatives for Social Progress in the New Millennium," in Philip Higgs, Ntombizolile Vakalisa, Thobeka Mda, and N'Dri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba, eds., *African Voices in Education* (Juta, 2000), 143.

<sup>23</sup> Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed* (Anchor Books, 2007), 59–60.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Allman, "Kwame Nkrumah, African Studies, and the Politics of Knowledge Production in the Black Star of Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 46:2 (2013) 181–203 at 183.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 193.

*English Department*, to fundamentally transform the British-centered English department into one focused on African literature and its engagement with the rest of the world. According to Ngũgĩ, Africans needed an epistemological revolution in order to liberate their minds from the effects of colonialism. Fanon, Ngũgĩ, and others calling for cultural and psychological decolonization in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s argued that, as long as Africans learned through institutions that prioritized western cultures over African ones, Africans could gain political freedom but could never achieve true liberation from the west.

Education and cultural reform was also a major factor in the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, where activist and writer Steve Biko led the Black Consciousness Movement during the 1960s and 1970s. Biko's call for Black Consciousness was a response to the student antiapartheid activism led mostly by whites. Biko urged black students to take charge of their own causes, not only to obtain freedom from political oppression from the apartheid South African government but also to reclaim their identities and rebuild their sense of self-respect.<sup>26</sup> Black Consciousness had its precedents in the Harlem Renaissance in America, Négritude in francophone West Africa, and cultural nationalism across the continent. Steve Biko's tragic death at the hands of the police in 1977 made him a legend and a martyr for the antiapartheid struggle.

In the 1980s and 1990s a debate developed between those who favored Ngũgĩ's argument against writing in European languages and the position of Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who argued for the value of using a widely known language as a lingua franca to reach a broader audience. Achebe acknowledged the problem that "the telling of the story of black people in our time . . . has been the self-appointed responsibility of white people, and they have mostly done it to suit a white purpose."<sup>27</sup> He agreed with Ngũgĩ that western narratives about African societies have sought to devalue African cultures and epistemologies and Africans must fight to tell their own stories, in their own words, even if those words are in a European language.

All of these movements and debates aimed to repair the cultural and psychological damage of colonialism. They coalesced around one point: as long as Africans were taught that western values were better than African values, Africans could never fully be independent socially,

<sup>26</sup> Steven Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Harper & Row, 1979).

<sup>27</sup> Chinua Achebe, *The Education of a British-Protected Child: Essays* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 61.



economically, or culturally. This concept has resurfaced more recently in criticisms of postcolonial international development. The notion that expertise in healthcare, education, agriculture, and other areas of development originates from outside the continent devalues African knowledge systems and dismisses local, homegrown initiatives. Moreover, by handing ownership of African civil society over to international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), a theme explored further in Chapter 8, African leaders are beholden to westerners rather than to their own constituents.

## DECOLONIZING DEVELOPMENT

The problem of a colonized mindset is not only for Africans but for citizens of the global north as well. Many people who came to Africa from western countries over the past two centuries have viewed the differences between Africa and the west not as cultural differences but as problems that should be fixed. While this mindset might seem well-meaning, it perpetuates a sense of African inferiority among people from the west.<sup>28</sup> The notion that westerners need to bring development to Africa reinforces the ethnocentrism that drove Europeans to attempt colonization of the minds and bodies of Africans in the first place. Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole noted the powerful drive for Americans to do good.

[The American's] good heart does not always allow him to think constellationally. He does not connect the dots or see the patterns of power behind the isolated "disasters." All he sees are hungry mouths, and he . . . is putting food in those mouths as fast as he can. All he sees is need, and he sees no need to reason out the need for the need.

Cole makes the case that white Americans respond to the problems without understanding the historical, political, economic, and racialized causes.<sup>29</sup>

In March 2015 South African students began the Rhodes Must Fall movement, in order to challenge the hegemony of western education

<sup>28</sup> Kathryn Mathers, *Travel, Humanitarianism, and Becoming American in Africa* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 21, 2012, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/), accessed February 4, 2020.

systems and their dominance by a culture of whiteness. Removing a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the front of the University of Cape Town's campus represented the broader movement to decolonize education and dismantle the legacies of white supremacy in South Africa. In the twenty-first century university education has come to represent the key to success, modernity, and development, yet globally universities remain bastions of hegemonic power. As South African scholar Sebeka Richard Plaatjie has noted, development must first "decolonize the white man" before change can truly come to the field of international development studies. "No matter how much we try to decolonize the racialized peoples of the world," he argues, "without decolonizing the white man, the gaze of supremacy of a heterosexual patriarchal white male will forever hang above radicalized peoples . . . reminding them of their inferiority and where they belong in the hierarchy of the world system."<sup>30</sup>

Over the past decade, scholars across the global south have argued that the call for Africans to "decolonize the mind" is problematic because it suggests that decolonization must happen on the individual level rather than on a systemic level.<sup>31</sup> Given the association of development and its many facets (multilateral organizations, international NGOs, etc.) with the global north and westernization, development institutions have become ground zero for decolonizing efforts. One approach to decolonizing development has included embracing China as a development partner. Chinese investment in Africa has expanded rapidly over the past two decades. Many believe this offers an alternative to the pitfalls of western morality and western ideas of modernity that have permeated International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank interventions in Africa. Another approach has been to create alternatives to the IMF and the World Bank. In 2014 the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) founded the New Development Bank (NDB). The core purpose of this multilateral organization was "to mobilize resources for infrastructure and sustainable development in BRICS countries." A fundamental piece of the NDB was to create an equal playing field for all members of the institution. Each member of the organization has an equal vote, and

<sup>30</sup> Sebeka Richard Plaatjie, "Beyond Western-Centric and Eurocentric Development: A Case for Decolonizing Development," *Africanus* 43:2 (2013) 118–130 at 128.

<sup>31</sup> Sara Estrade-Villalta and Glenn Adams, "Decolonizing Development: A Decolonial Approach to the Psychology of Economic Inequality," *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 4:2 (2018) 198–209.



none holds a veto power over the other members. These policies contrast sharply with other multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank (AfDB). In the AfDB, voting power is based on the number of shares held by individual countries. African countries own 60 percent of the voting shares in total; however, among the top ten share owners, African countries only constitute 50 percent. For example, Nigeria is the largest share owner, while the United States is second, Japan is fourth, and Germany, Canada, and France are seventh, eighth, and ninth, respectively.<sup>32</sup> While African countries hold the majority of the votes in the AfDB, non-African countries play a significant role in the decision-making of the institution. Likewise, the United States holds veto power in the World Bank over all other members, giving the United States extraordinary power to steer loans and to decide the direction of the organization. The intention of the BRICS in creating the NDB is to break the power of western banks and offer a new balance of power in the realm of international development. However, some theorists argue that the NDB still reinforces capitalist exploitation of underdeveloped economies.

International nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) remain some of the most important development institutions globally. While decision-making in most INGOs based in Europe and the United States remains primarily in the hands of its global north leadership, recent efforts to decentralize decision-making demonstrates a first step toward decolonizing these organizations. By decentralizing, institutions such as CARE and Save the Children are beginning the process of power-sharing. Organizations like Oxfam and ActionAid have gone further by diversifying their leadership and moving their headquarters to the global south. ActionAid hired Salil Shetty in 1998, its first CEO from the global south. He spearheaded the move of the international headquarters from London, England to Johannesburg, South Africa in 2003. Since then, ActionAid has had several CEOs from both the global south and the global north. The organization has also continued to further decentralize their structures with an emphasis on south-south partnerships.<sup>33</sup> Likewise,

<sup>32</sup> African Development Bank, *Board Documents*, "Statement of Voting Powers As at 28 February 2019," [www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/afdb-statement-of-voting-powers-as-at-28-february-2019-108964](http://www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/afdb-statement-of-voting-powers-as-at-28-february-2019-108964), accessed February 4, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Kirsten C. Williams, "INGOS Relocating to the Global South," *K4D Helpdesk Report*. UK Department for International Development, September 10, 2018, <https://assets>

Oxfam set about building more legitimacy in the global south through its Oxfam 2020 campaign. It hired a Ugandan engineer, Winnie Byanyima, in 2013 as its executive director. Byanyima led Oxfam's move to Nairobi, Kenya in 2019.

These efforts to decolonize the structures of international development, such as the NDB or ActionAid and Oxfam's moves to Africa, seek to transform the development episteme by placing African leaders at the helm of development policy making. Yet these efforts to decolonize development will remain piecemeal as long as assumptions about backwardness based on race or culture remain central to the development episteme. Under African leadership a new episteme may emerge, but it will have to be one that values African cultures and knowledge as modern and relevant to development.

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Decolonizing the idea of development entails much more than pointing out the legacies of the civilizing mission or colonialism in contemporary development discourses on Africa. While colonial discourses often pit westernization against African cultures, people like Jomo Kenyatta did not fit so easily into one camp or the other. Colonial experiences reflect multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory forces of change. Both western and African cultures have transformed over time, but what has not changed is the perception that the former is "modern" and the latter "traditional." The false dichotomy between the "developed" west (or "the global north") and the "less developed" or "developing" countries of Africa (as part of "the global south") reifies colonial-era stereotypes and continues to fuel the development industry.

This chapter has outlined the connections between resistance to cultural imperialism during the colonial era, the call to "decolonize the mind" in the 1970s and 1980s, and, finally, debates about decolonizing development today. All of these movements have challenged the racial and cultural inequalities built into the development episteme. Whether seeking to transform a "backward" custom or making decisions about expenditure, hierarchies of power are foundational to the development episteme. As long as Africans remain the targets of intervention rather than the policy makers or drivers of development, and as long as

[publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bb226d9e5274a3e10bd9394/438\\_INGOs\\_relocating\\_to\\_the\\_South.pdf](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bb226d9e5274a3e10bd9394/438_INGOs_relocating_to_the_South.pdf), accessed February 4, 2020.

development remains an industry whose power base remains in the global north, efforts to decolonize development will fail to restructure the development episteme.

### Further Reading

On the civilizing mission and colonial policies, see Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford University Press, 1997); Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom, and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Heinemann, 1998); Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); and Lynn Thomas, *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (University of California Press, 2003).

On the creation of “tribes” in the context of imperialism and colonialism, see Mary French-Sheldon, *Sultan to Sultan: Adventures among the Masai and Other Tribes of East Africa* (Arena Publishing Company, 1892); Nathaniel Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa, Descriptive of the Zoolus, Their Manners, Customs, Etc., Etc., with a Sketch of Natal* (Edward Churton, 1836); Frederick D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Frank Cass, 1922); Leroy Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (James Currey, 1989).

On the psychology of colonialism and decolonizing the mind, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014 [1970]); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Orion Press, 1965); Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 1983); and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (East African Educational Publishers, 1981).

## Part II

### Implementation of the Development Episteme

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