

The Paradox of Plenty: A Legacy of Colonialism

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Introduction

Despite being known for poverty, civil wars, diseases, and ignorantly as the ‘dark continent’, it is also common knowledge among many that the plentiful wealth that comes from the continent of Africa is vital to the world’s economy. However, the continent’s resources that are so vital to global economy are gained from co-dependent relationships, through international relations that purport to benefit Africa. Importantly, and understandably so, African resources are vulnerable to global appropriation because of the mismanagement and corruption in many African countries, and this is detrimental to the citizen’s way of life (Smith, 2018). Yet, this challenge is lost to many because most people from developed nations are so far from the realities of other ways of life, such as in Africa, that it doesn’t really matter to them. This scenario of having wealth, yet developmental challenges in Africa is used to describe the theory of the Paradox of Plenty: a phrase describing why developing nations are not thriving economically, despite having a wealth of resources, but directly linked to the history of outsiders and foreigners seizing land, resources and power (Kende-Robb, 2013). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) - specifically, a country known for its mineral capital, armed conflict between militia and land - this country was historically on the receiving end of globalization and the race to consolidate power by outsourcing (Jameson, 2015).

Colonialization is often seen as a thing of the past but we fail to recognize how it fits into some aspects of globalization; conflict over natural resources is what keep the DRC from gaining real grounds in governance by stigmatizing them as poor and corrupt, thus, unfit to manage what is rightfully theirs. Simultaneously aiding these countries, foreign powers purposefully (and sometimes inadvertently) scout out resources to be used and exploited (Cumming, 2011). Thus, one of the prominent legacies of colonialism is the Paradox of Plenty, at least in well-resourced countries that remain poor. Confirming this, the militias and independent armies of the DRC are demonized for being greedy and power hungry, while more ‘reputable’ political machines are put in power to protect the country while unheeding the voices of the people. Yet, we must remember that the Paradox of Plenty is more than corruption and theories of international unhinged governments. Political nuances have developed and evolved into something far more complex than a simplified demonization of a certain governance; all parties have made choices that reflect what we see in historical context, what we are taught in institutions and how we perceive nations today. Shedding the light on this can bring about a more meaningful conversation on decolonization. Thus, to do a proper analysis, we need to understand the context of this demonization.

Following this introduction, the rest of the research paper explores the possible origins of the mindset regarding the paradox of plenty in the DRC. It does this by discussing different moments relating to the history of colonialism; covering colonialism, neocolonialism, otherwise known as the colonial present; pre-colonialism and post-colonialism. The last section of the paper is a discussion and conclusion, that aims to tie the story of the DRC and the broader argument about why the paradox of plenty continues to be a problem for poor nations in the Global South.

Colonialism in the DRC & Why is the DRC the target

The DRC today is known for its natural resources, including oil, gold, rubber, cobalt, copper, tantalite-columbite, cassiterite, wolframite, uranium, and diamonds and became a target for imperialism under Belgian King Leopold II's imperial rule. This can explain how this laid the groundwork of many more years of colonialism and "post-colonialism" (Jameson, 2015). The Belgian rule was between 1908 and 1960. The necessity during World War I for resources led to large plantations that grew cotton, oil palms, coffee, cacao and rubber. The development of mining, which seized gold, diamonds, copper, tin, cobalt and uranium in the midst of World War II also helped keep the economy in Belgium intact. "Africans worked the mines and plantations as indentured laborers on four- to seven-year contracts, in accordance with a law passed in Belgium in 1922. Roads, railroads, electric stations, and public buildings were constructed by forced labor" (EEB, 2020). The official reason for stepping into the former Congo Free State, and disrupting their previous economy and system of government, was seen as paternal; As if the Congolese were children (EEB, 2020). Because of this paternalistic relationship a lot of the culture and heritage was destroyed through the institutionalization that controlled the small country. Because of this control and infiltration into the inner workings of Congolese society, they rejected any other means of a living.

Thus, also introduced the stigma of rebellion in the DRC as terrorist and/or rebel status when most often the people who were rebelling were natural born Congolese people and the authority did not know the beauty and comfort of the Congo because they were from elsewhere. However, the power of rebellion soon rose in several eastern districts in 1919 and not suppressed until 1923. "Anti-European religious groups were active by the 1920s, including Kimbanguism and the Negro Mission in the west and Kitawala in the southeast. Unrest increased in the depression years (1931–36) and during World War II... In January 1959, riots broke out in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) after a rally was held calling for the independence of the Congo. Violent altercations between Belgian forces and the Congolese also occurred later that year, and, which previously maintained that independence for the Congo would not be possible in the immediate future, suddenly capitulated and began making arrangements for the Congo's independence. The Congo became an " – 'independent' - "republic on June 30, 1960" (EEB, 2020). Now, we see the start of the stigmatization in media and in historical representation, that the greed started with their resources and their corruption started with rebellion. Only when other countries achieve this, their stories are of "liberation" and "heroism". So, why is there a stigma only in countries like the DRC with its own culture, history and political system outside of European influence? Because they had no interest in liberating them.

Neocolonialism in the DRC

The act of neo-colonialism is forming a dependency under the guise of a service or partnership that would, theoretically, create a benefit economically, socially and politically between all parties involved, also known as the colonial present popularized by Derick Gregory (Kepe and Hall, 2018). Yet, this was far from true, as the act of liberating the DRC was not genuine. The neocolonial history of the DRC is one of the key reasons it is a developing country today. Soon, "aide" from Eurocentric powers became a standard to enhance the lives of developing nations after the consequences of colonialism. Both the United Kingdom (U.K.) and France pledged to reduce poverty and create peace in a nation overturn from the previous colonial ruling but, in fact, "From colonial times to the early post-Cold War era, the U.K. and France pursued rival agendas and were driven by divergent interests in the Congo" (Cumming,

2011). Essentially, the U.K. and the French created a divisiveness that influenced the political and economic agendas. This is because when the Congo was “freed”, neither Belgium nor the Congolese Government, made up of European ambassadors, had any intention of totally freeing Congolese people. They still were made to be in systematic oppression. And aware or unaware of that, France and the U.K. successfully took on the role of neo-colonialism from Belgium. Both countries made goals to reform the Congolese police, military and to tackle poverty but neglected to change the infrastructure laid down by Belgium and instead conflicted with each other trying to influence the new generation of politicians, who were trying to do better for the DRC. We can see this by going back to analyze the policy objectives instead of just their presents within the DRC. This rivalry between the French and the British “triggered an army mutiny, the secession of Katanga, the mounting of a UN operation, the assassination of the Congo’s Marxist-leaning Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, and, in 1965, a coup by the French/Belgian/US-backed general Joseph-Désiré Mobutu” (Cumming, 2011). Yet, behind the scenes, the French were helping Katangese secessionists, albeit towards different ends. The British Foreign Minister, Lord Home, and backbenchers in the ruling Conservative government favored UK-owned companies, which were calling for Katanga’s independence or its integration into the Central African Federation (CAF – a semi-independent entity grouping three former UK dependencies: present-day Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi). In this rivalry, the French government supplied weapons and mercenaries to the rebels. Its aim was to block the integration of Katanga into the Conservative African Federation (CAF), break up the Belgian Congo, and facilitate territorial gains by neighboring Congo-Brazzaville under its pro-French leader, Abbé Youlou (Cumming, 2011).

In those countries’ respective self-interests, they believed the right thing to do would be to split the duties of power between themselves, so, while they made an “effort” to reverse the poverty and economic dependency that was prevalent, they in fact had no desire to actually pursue it. In doing so, it would have probably looked like promoting the cultural identities that were native to the DRC, removing foreign powers and authorities out of power, helping to set up a new system of government that was made in the historical/regional/cultural context of the people and not what replicated their own countries.

In Favor of Development

Some cases for foreign aid may promote ideas such as development and economic stimulation when in reality, they wanted these countries to participate in the global market. “The case for using institutional international aid to help a country to develop originated at the Bretton Woods Conference at the end of World War II, with the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and The World Bank then the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development” (Smith, 2018). In this ideology, the World Bank provided long-term loans for indebted countries and/or developing countries to continue to develop and the IMF provided them with short term loans. And since these organizations were among the driving factors and influences in many of the developments of developing countries in the 80s, they were able to push the idea of neo-liberalism which promoted government deregulation, “privatization of government enterprises” and little government intervention over all (Smith, 2018). This in turn was able to create liberation in the DRC from hierarchy, low qualities of life, lower life expectancies and an access to education due to globalization. However, the DRC was able to gain it on the cost of conditional agreements and not purely out of goodness. “By forcing

countries to adopt neoliberal policies and opening up their markets” the IMF and World Bank are endangering growing economies in the international market where they typically do not have the highly technological capital or comparative advantage to compete. Rather the nations of the Global North profit off of liberalized economies in the Global South through foreign direct investment and by capitalizing on cheap labor and lax regulatory standard” (Smith, 2018).

There is a very strong parallel to this capitalist mentality and liberalization from globalization in the DRC, which also follows a pattern of demonizing “corrupt” influential political figures including a couple of figureheads who rose to power shortly after the “freeing” the DRC from under Belgium.

Consequently, because of limits to higher education during the Belgian rule, Congolese were not prepared to take over the duties that come with governing, at least according to European standards. Soon rebel groups in the south-eastern Katanga Province rebelled against the Lumumba leadership and, losing power, Lumumba asked for help from the United States and Belgium who declined. Thus, Lumumba was assassinated only a year after he first took office, and Joseph Mobutu took over the country in a military coup and became an extremely corrupt leader, appropriating government revenues to augment his and his people’s personal wealth. The economy slid further into its ultimate decline (Smith, 2018). Yet, the British and the French rivalry can be defined in this pivotal political moment, when the French government supplied weapons to mercenaries to block the integration of Katanga, allowing Lumumba into power just so there would be an established power of incompetence. After the assassination of Lumumba, a coup lead by Joseph Mobutu backed by the French, Belgium and the United States (U.S.) rose to power. Thus, the U.K. and France supported the goal of the United Nations, which was, at the time, to preserve Congolese territorial integrity (Cumming, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that there was corruption that did sprout from within the DRC in the year with the rise of Joseph Mobutu from the Popular Movement of the Revolution party (Smith, 2018). We will acknowledge this because it was an influential part of the DRC’s history that in return caused the appropriation of government revenues. Still, we fail to see that this cannot be used to purely dismiss the mismanagement of how the DRC structured and is currently still restructuring its government when there was a stigma of people who rose to power being chaotic and “greedy” when they are really being played for someone else’s greater good. And even with that, the stigma of greed in the country stems from a more ethnic ingrained culture that has seen the diversity between tribes and beliefs amongst the people of the Congo yielding a prosperous economic system.

Pre - Colonialism in the DRC

The Democratic Republic of the Congo thrived before the colonialism that argued for “organization” and against “corruption” by “managing the resources” of the Congolese. However, we fail to acknowledge that the history of the Congolese started before colonization. The region knew its wealth and used that to create a thriving economy and a socialized community. Iron was being mined and smelted to steel and other ferrous produces as early as the fifth century BCE” and iron mining has been prevalent along the south bank of the Congo River in the DRC since the sixth century (Thornton, 2020). As well as this, the West Central Africa region traded copper, which was one of the most important metal resource because it was the equivalent of gold and silver in other areas of the world, used for jewelry and other elite products (Thornton, 2020). The Congolese society was royal and emulated that of any other well

respected and innovative society, much like Greek and Roman. By the late fifteenth century, Kongo (The Kingdom of the Kongo that inhabited what is now the western province of the DRC) had grown to be larger than any of the preexisting polities in the region. It had also developed an administrative system that would increase its power and centralization. While earlier expansion had often been by co-optation and alliance with regional neighbors, once the new capital was established and the integration of the Vunda (province) accomplished, the later additions were all conquered... to become royal provinces” (Thornton, 2020). In addition to this, the economy was diverse and employed men and women in different roles that would produce even more wealth for the thriving state. One of the resources that provided them with wealth was their demography. Their demography suggests that they were as good as any other society of the time in feeding themselves, and the agriculture, entrusted mostly to women, provided the backbone of that livelihood. It was efficient in terms of labor input and product output when compared with other world regions of the time. However, when colonialization came about and threatened the Congolese’ way of life, all history can seem to remember is the start of that colonization, the corruption that followed and the poverty and war that encompasses this region today. The Congolese knew of its vast resources and continue to keep the wealth within their, now, country. But what is seen as a mean of stability and life is seen as greed and in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Postcolonialism in the DRC

Under the Alliances des Forces Democratique Pour la Liberation (AFDL), AFDL Hutu rebels were defeated, thus, enabling the AFDL leader, Laurent Kabila, to become president in 1997 and quickly began the first Congo War. By killing hundreds of thousands of Rwandan Refugees in an attempt to expel them from the country, the first Congo war took place from November 1996 to May 1997 and began when Kabila commissioned Local militias to protect precious natural Resources in the Kivu and Katanga Provinces. However, once the Rwandan Army was expelled” Congolese militias Turned on one another to gain control over the resources. The corrupt leader Kabila profited off of the war and therefore did not attempt to put an end to the violence. This ultimately led to the second Congo war which took place from August 1998 to July 2003 in which the Congolese revolted in order to oust their president. Kabila was then assassinated in 2001 by one of his own men (Smith, 2018).

Meanwhile the (mainly western) media was trying to make sense of this conflict and did so by focusing on the market for consumer electronics by making a connection between the skyrocketing price for tantalum, used in commercial electronics, and the explosion in commercial electronics (Jameson, 2015). Thus, creating an unhealthy obsession with war and greed in the DRC and further perpetuating that narrative. According to Jameson, “While it is true that many of the violent rebel groups derive economic benefits from mining activities, it is mostly false that the conflict is centered on control of the mines or the money that is produced from selling the minerals.” (Jameson, 2015). Correlation between conflict minerals and actual conflict is a common misconception and there have been numerous reports of this disproved correlation. For example, because the United Nations named them the “rape capital of the world” there were numerous efforts to implement policies that would restrict the import of conflict minerals (or all other minerals, and variations of minerals determined by the Secretary of State that has potential to finance or benefit armed groups) (Jameson, 2015). Also, advocacy group documents, including Enough Project’s *From Mine to Mobile Phone: The Conflict Minerals*

Supply Chain and Global Witness's Faced With a Gun, What Can You Do? War and the Militarisation of Mining in Eastern Congo shift the political ideology to treat this problem by calling for more legal framework prohibiting the import of conflict minerals (Jameson, 2015).

Nevertheless, perhaps a more efficient strategy must provide a means for the people of the DRC to earn a living and lift them out of poverty. If the goal is truly to affect positive change for the people of the DRC, then, an effort must be made to provide a path for the DRC to emerge from the violence associated with illegal mining and become a legal minerals provider (Jameson, 2015). This would do well not to punish that country for having high crime rates and poverty rates by stopping the flow commodities. If this were to happen, these “criminal entities”, or more often rebel groups, would still find means of transportation and profit and further stigmatize the entire country. The summary of this analysis definitely shows that if rebels don't have conflict minerals to fall back on, they will find financial security elsewhere. The symptoms of the low economic prosperity is illegal mineral trade and it must not be confused as the main cause of high poverty rates, high unemployment and underemployment. In fact, if there were to be an elimination of illegal mineral trade, there would be an exacerbation of these conditions (Jameson, 2015).

Discussion & Conclusion

As we can see, these external nations have been prevalent for hundreds of years claiming to want to help or promote globalization while naming themselves as key players but never giving credit to the actual source of prosperity or resources. Buzz words such as globalization and neocolonialism can be thrown around to explain why countries insert themselves into the DRC but this is the explanation of colonialism in the modern day. Globalization embraces the legacy of colonialism and the reason why so many countries can get away with it starts with the modernization of history. No doubt, the idea of paying dues or homage to land not inhabited by native people and raising up diverse voices is becoming more mainstream, and that's where we can also factor in media, however, modernization doesn't acknowledge its own history of homogenized systems that are supposed to unite our modern world.

As a society, we need to see that not everything is black and white while balancing giving reparations and credit where credit is due. There's no concrete solution to ending poverty, corruption, exploitation, human rights violations, and a long list of atrocities that, honestly, didn't start with colonialism. The main thing that should be acknowledged that the whole idea of poverty in a wealthy country is nothing but a legacy of colonialism. Just because a country isn't “developing” doesn't mean there shouldn't be initiatives for restructuring or re-planning, but, erasing a heritage and culture of a certain group of people causes a lot of unwanted hurt and pain regarding authority as a whole. These lessons can be seen everywhere, not just the DRC. Originally, this article was supposed to carry the tale of two countries, Sudan and the DRC. However, the pages of issues and writings found on the DRC were demanding attention and focusing on the negative publicity to the historical damage that was done. Instead of demonizing African countries as the primary source of all corruption – you know, by casually referencing starving kids in Africa, praising people who go there and invoke “real change”- we need to be seeing Africa represented as a thriving country that needs not to be outsourced or preyed on to thrive. The theory of countries rising above the Paradox of Plenty is failing to notice the holes of colonization and the idea of modernization that doesn't discriminate. However, it does. And only

when we recognize that, can we truly and effectively deal with the issue of the Paradox of Plenty.

Citations

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