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**Making Sense of Place:  
The Tangled Web of Colonialism and National Culture in Kenya**

There is a feeling when living in a country like Kenya that everything is connected in a way that is both dynamic and illusory; historically rooted, yet absolutely current. Forms of oppression proceed unimpeded, betraying the continued repression of the colonized; race relations and ethnic antagonisms linger from colonialism and are inflamed by supposed religious and civilizational clashes; western structures persist from decolonization while personal identities remain influenced by western hegemony through cultural colonialism; Kenyan dependency deepens with economic neocolonialism while the subaltern struggle to gain their voice against their new, national colonizers; everything exacerbated—both broadened and deepened—by this phenomenon of globalization. These historical realities of oppression, however, exist alongside a burgeoning national and cultural identity which winds its way from the past to the present,

How does one make sense of a place such as Kenya, a dynamic environment full of human and ecological complexities, influenced by local, national, regional and international agendas? In this paper I will begin to explore this question—which arose from my three years living in Isiolo, Kenya— using theoretical approaches and frameworks from our readings and class discussions. In doing so, I will attempt to build a more systematic approach to understanding Kenya through a historical and global lens. I will also examine whether this approach is applicable to other nations which have experienced similar processes.

There are, however, underlying theoretical questions which guide this paper. Specifically, what do the authors posit about the historical roots of cultural values and identities that both underpin

every day interactions and, as Gunn points out, also frequently determine the way that economics and politics are “interpreted, evaluated, and even actualized”? Also, what does Global Studies ultimately have to say about these relationships? One challenge that Gunn points out is that we must abandon our “tendency to conceive of cultures, like identities, as homogenous, monolithic, and easily discriminable”. Indeed he argues that not only are cultures “merely unstable, but also mixed, hybrid, complex, diverse and deterritorialized.”

The natural starting place for the exploration of Kenyan culture begins before colonization, in the migrations of peoples into Kenya, in the interactions of the Arabic, Portuguese and Swahili tribes along the coast, with the slave trade and tribal wars. In this paper, however, we begin with the process of colonization/decolonization, for if the traditional cultures of Kenya continue to exist, they exist within a decolonized, post-colonial framework, merged, changed, adapted into something new, no culture completely immune (though a wide spectrum of tribes, from traditional to modern, are extant within the country). Even when an issue such as Female Genital Mutilation persists in its traditional form, it is couched in the language of the West, in the discourse of human rights or cultural imperialism.

I am sitting in the shade of a tree at the market beside a group of young Kenyan men. Over the course of three hours several people approach me asking for money, or food, or to sponsor their children’s education. I tell them no politely in Kiswahili. I turn to my friend Fred and ask him why everyone thinks I can solve all their problems. He shakes his head at me, wondering why I don’t understand the obvious. “It is because you are a *mzungu*.”

To understand post-colonial countries we first turn to Fanon and Memmi and the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized, for it is the effects of this relationship that most continue to shape relationships in post-colonial countries. It begins with race, understanding what it means to be a *mzungu*, a white person, or to be a black person, though the effects are, as Fanon and

Memmi argue, much more pervasive and tragic, shades of black skin or traditional ways of life soon used to justify continued oppression of the subaltern. There is always a dividing line constructed, Fanon argues, the creation of a dichotomous relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. The colonizers are white and foreign. They are well fed, clean, and powerful. The colonized are black. They are starving, filthy, and bitter or envious. Memmi further asserts that the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized involves the inevitable attempt at assimilation by the colonized. "Rejection of self and love of another are common to all candidates for assimilation." However, assimilation is impossible; rejection a strategy of colonialism to further degrade the spirit of the colonized.

In Kenya during the Mau Mau rebellion the perpetrators of violence were often the black colonized soldiers and police officers who, no matter how many people they arrested, or beat, or tortured to prove their worth, could ever achieve the same status as their white superiors. Over sixty years later, no matter how hard I tried to assimilate into Kenyan culture, I was always rebuffed because of my race. The relationship, the dividing line, goes both ways. Even for white citizens born in Kenya they are the Kenyan-British or Kenyan-Americans, hyphenated, not fully Kenyan. Many people told me: you can't be fully Kenyan and be white. The dichotomous relationship between whites and blacks continues in Kenya. Of course this binary way of thinking is an oversimplification, is speaking of Kenya's people as a whole, a homogenous culture that does not, cannot, exist; over forty tribes, great disparities between the rich and poor, educated and uneducated.

As Amartya Sen argues, identities are hybrid, involving three basic categories: a shared identity of humanity, a dynamic, personal identity, and a static, labeled identity. It is the third

category that is most destructive; the labeled identity which constrains the choices that people can make, by not allowing them to be different than how we label them. Sen uses the example of a Jewish person in Nazi Germany, who “could not easily choose a different identity from the one with which others marked him or her.” The identity of individuals in Kenya is, indeed, dynamic, yet the labeled identity persists. In the new imagination of a sovereign Kenya, one part of the national identity has become, as Raymond Williams remarked, “Our land...the land of our ancestors.” Even though the ancestors came from disparate traditions and areas, all migrants into what would become Kenya—they were never white.

“Eh, they are very sly. You know they have been practicing since independence, *etti*, so how can they be caught?” Response from a fellow teacher when I told her that I had never seen a bribe being paid to the traffic police.

How does one begin to explain the pervasive effects of corruption: the bribes for services; the large financial scandals? Decolonization, the supposed process of emancipation, of handing over the right to self determination to the sovereign nation of Kenya, kept structures in place which have continued the systems of oppression instituted during colonization. As Fanon writes, “At whatever level we study it—relationships between individuals, new names for sports clubs, the human admixture at cocktail parties in the police, on the directing boards of national or private banks—decolonization is quite simply the replacement of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men. Without any period of transition, there is a total, complete, and absolute substitution.” The question becomes, who was this new species of men?

The answer, and the root to understanding much of what continues to plague Kenya: it was often those who tried to assimilate most, the police and soldiers who brutalized their fellow colonized, or the intellectuals who were educated in Western schools and studied at the best Universities in England—such as Kenya’s first President Jomo Kenyatta— these were the “new”

species of men. Held describes this process as the establishment of “inter-elite cultural connections”, thin connections between countries which furthered cultural globalization. More important than a globalized culture, however, was the perpetuation of the colonial mentality; the ways of the foreigners were, once again, superior over the traditional ways of indigenous Kenyans. As Michael Craton once wrote about the British in the Caribbean, "Formal Emancipation was little more than a hegemonic trick."

What was the colonial mentality if not the misappropriation (if not downright stealing) of vast areas of land; of the suppression of those who spoke out in opposition, people so easily arrested or murdered; the population accepting that being in a position of power gave one the right to abuse that power? Corruption, it seems clear, is a remnant of colonial mentality.

To accept the colonial mentality is to remain colonized. Indeed the perpetuation of the colonial mentality necessarily meant the subjugation of ‘others’, the reestablishment of the colonizer/colonized relationship. In Kenya the subjugation of the Kikuyu tribe by the British resulted in violent revolt as Fanon argued it must, the Mau Mau war fought against the white colonizers. After independence the mainly Kikuyu government, the new species of men, declared a state of emergency in Northern Kenya which lasted until the 1990s, rounded up and massacred pastoralist citizens, denying them the very rights the Kikuyu had fought for. Jacques Derrida says that repression always fails, in both its “psychoanalytical sense and its political sense...Repression ends up producing, reproducing, and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm.” Mahaweti Devi’s story, *Draupadi*, effectively highlights both the cyclical nature of the colonial mentality and the emancipatory struggle of the subaltern, searching for a way to give voice to the voiceless while trying to answer the question—can the cycle be broken by fully rejecting the colonizer?

We must also question the validity of Fanon's argument for violent revolt. Indeed Memmi's assertion that the colonized must reject their situation "with the whole force of [their] oppressed personality", is more salient to a broader understanding of decolonization, inclusive of both violent and non-violent forms of rejection. No simple explanation can exist for why different forms of rejection of the colonizer arose; why certain communities or nations turned to violence or non-violence. Only by taking a global perspective, of exploring historical incidents of violence and non-violence during colonization and decolonization, of searching for elements—such as the vastness of space in a country—can we begin to imagine both the role and the effect of rejection and revolt. Perhaps the most interesting aspect is that in only rare cases did violent revolt lead directly to independence; the vast majority of violent revolts were overwhelmed or annihilated by Western forces which were well versed in the tactics of fighting guerrilla warfare. It was, however, the effects of rejection and revolt which were so vital in creating the environment for decolonization to occur.

A business man tells a high school student: "You shouldn't study Kiswahili in school. You learn it well enough on the street, why should you learn how to write it? There are only two government forms that can be filled out in Kiswahili. Two forms, so what's the point? But you need to learn English to be successful in this world."

The new species of men became the voice of Kenya, though speaking on behalf of whom? There is always a dominant narrative; a telling of the story which cannot include everything, indeed must be filtered. In the dominant narrative, it is important to know who does the filtering, and what are the effects of this filtering? In Kenya, Kiswahili is the national language while English is the official language (the language of government). The question is, therefore, why was English instituted as the official language of Kenya when very few people actually spoke English? What is the answer if not the continuation of cultural colonialism? Derrida speaks of

the importance of language and the naming of things; of giving meaning, thus offering the possibility of also limiting meaning by the very act of naming. Kenyans speak of the Mau Mau rebellion, though this was never what the Kikuyu called it, an English misrepresentation which has stuck and persists. Why should Kenyans speak about their fight for independence in the terms of the colonizers? For it is a language that appropriates and recontextualizes events, a language that remains, as Raymond Williams notes, a unidirectional language from above.

Pervasive in exploring the historical roots of Kenya is the concept of the subaltern; those communities who are active against forms of colonialism, fighting to disprove colonial assumptions; they are emancipatory communities. Their stories are told, however, almost exclusively in the dominant Western narrative, by researchers and journalists who have pored over British colonial documents, supplemented by interviews with Kenyans or ethnographies of local tribes. It is how we know the structures which the British put in place and which populations were devastated by colonial brutality (work camps, forced migrations). It is how we know about the Mau Mau rebellion, or about the pastoral tribes of Kenya. However, many stories, like the war for secession in northern Kenya, have still never been fully told; remain broken fragments of history. This is how the West knows the history of Kenya. It is how Kenya knows its own history.

Is it possible for the history of Kenya to be recontextualized to give a more Kenyan perspective? What can we learn by listening to the languages from below? Can we recognize and understand the voice of the subaltern? There are over forty spoken tribal languages in Kenya as well as Kenyan Sign Language. Must the subaltern gain their voice only by joining in the dominant narrative? Ultimately, what are the effects of joining in the dominant narrative for subaltern communities?

... The human rights movement is marked by a damning metaphor. ... While the movement has today constructed the savage and the victim as non-European, Adolf Hitler was the quintessential savage. ... As a consequence, the predominant image of the savage in the human rights discourse today is that of a Third World, non-European person, cultural practice, or state. ... It is in this sense that the "other" culture, that which is non-European, is the savage in the human rights corpus and its discourse. ...

-Makau Mutua

In many traditional, African cultures, children born with disabilities are considered a curse and bring shame to a family. In traditional Samburu nomadic culture children born with physical deformities were thrown out to the animals, a hindrance that families could not deal with as they constantly moved. Today in Kenya, however, there are over forty Deaf<sup>1</sup> schools and nearly a hundred Deaf organizations and associations; a large number for a developing country. What has changed in Kenya?

Globally, the rights of Deaf people (and other persons with disabilities) have been rooted in a broad framework based on the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international conventions on human rights. This framework, though guided by the human rights discourse, was largely based on a medical model of disability. A phrase I constantly heard in Kenya was, "disability is not inability". This model, coupled with Article 26 of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Rights, which provides for the right to education; free and compulsory at least for elementary school, laid the foundation for the rise of the Deaf community in Kenya. Sign language in Kenya began by borrowing the skeleton of American Sign Language, then slowly building, layer by layer, the heart and muscle of Kenyan Sign Language, a language which includes signs that are local (indeed that can vary by location within Kenya)

<sup>1</sup>—I have chosen to capitalize the word Deaf to represent and respect the identity of the Deaf community, i.e., those who use sign language to communicate.

and which fits more closely with the grammatical structure of the Kiswahili language. It has become a truly Kenyan language, a way to express the problems and oppressions that the Deaf face, and the opportunities and desires which they pursue. As Fanon writes, "...the existence of a nation is not proved by culture, but in the people's struggle against the forces of occupation [oppression]." Therefore, "national consciousness is the highest form of culture." Deaf people in Kenya, in their fight for equality, have thus contributed greatly to Kenya's cultural *mélange*.

In 2007 the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) was signed and has since been ratified by Kenya's Parliament. According to the World Federation for the Deaf, the UN CRPD is a tremendous shift from the medical to a human rights model of disability. The UN CRPD recognizes and encourages the linguistic and cultural identities of Deaf people. It is the first international treaty that recognizes the linguistic human rights of Deaf people, e.g., their right to be taught in school using sign language.

Human rights discourse is oft criticized as just another discourse of western hegemony; a discourse which highlights the individualistic nature of Western society; which promotes a post-colonial imperialism over developing countries; a hypocritical paternalism that continues, as Kenyan Makau Mutua points out, in the continued identification of the non-European savage. Do human rights, however, work in ways which are always identified or understood? Does the language of human rights vary by location and language, transmitted in ways which the West does not recognize? Do we need to train ourselves to recognize organic adaptations of human rights which arise from movements from below?

Chatterjee points out that identities begin to form during periods of oppression, when people are pushed into an 'us' versus 'them' mentality. However, the Deaf organizations I

worked with were socially progressive and extremely inclusive; were empowered by both the conceptualization and application of human rights. Empowered by human rights thus empowers them to fight for human rights. They fought not only for the rights of the Deaf, but for all those with disabilities; for women's right; for the rights to education for all; for the right to employment for all. There was, of course, a 'them', a government that needed to be pushed to be more inclusive, yet their adaptation of human rights was a universal human rights which empowered everyone. In Kenyan Sign Language, however, there is no direct sign for human rights, the Deaf usually speaking of Deaf rights or perhaps translated in as: people's rights, or, all people have rights. Usually they speak of empowering people, or fighting against oppression. They are working to give voice to the subaltern, using a language from below.

There is so much more to try and understand: The effects on Kenya of Pan-Africanism and the Negritude movement; the search for authentic African culture and cross cultural adaptations which persist in esthetics such as Kiswahili rap. Patricia Collin's idea of Intersectionality and the Matrix of Domination; Turkana women falling into the inferior half of dichotomous relationships: women, poor, uneducated, dark skinned (vs. light skinned or white), traditional (vs modern), pastoral (vs agro-business), living in a patriarchal culture (vs a culture of equality). Chaterjee's assertion that new forms of nationalism (of new imagined communities) were made nearly impossible by colonization. Issues of land which persist; International Conservancies owning large tracts of land to protect wildlife, giving more value to the animals than to the people. Questions of the normative influence of the United Nations, which has their Africa headquarters in the capitol of Nairobi. Taken together, all of this *begins* to explain the world Kenyans live in.

As Ainslee Embree points out, the decolonization process varied from country to country, region to region, depending on the area's history, its indigenous communities and the nature of the nationalist movements that arose against colonization. Yet Fanon and Memmi add much to explaining the system of domination that the colonizers employed, the together, yet forever apart aspect of the relationship, which bred not only envy and jealousy, but also the degrading of the self by the colonized. They point out that the actions of the colonizers forced—allowed no other option—the colonized to revolt, to reject the colonizers.

Although our readings provide deep insight into the processes from colonization to post- and neocolonialism, can any single theory capture the dynamic nature of post-colonial countries? Can Aranju Appadurai's idea of the five scapes begin to take into account, and account for, the complex web of information? I would like to explore more of these broad, global perspectives in trying to understand the interdependent, dynamic environment of Kenya, slowly coming to understand more fully the question I set out to answer.

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