

META COLONIALISM IN GHANA'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

This paper seeks to map out and dissect manifestations of meta-colonialism in Ghana's educational system.

Acclaimed Somali psychologist, Dr. Hussein A. Bulhan, in analyzing contemporary manifestations of colonization in Africa, introduces the concept of meta-colonialism. He defines this as, "a socio-political, economic, cultural, and psychological system that comes after, along with, or among the earlier stages of colonialism" (Bulhan, 2015), with these earlier stages referring to classical colonialism and neo-colonialism. Dr. Bulhan further describes meta-colonialism as, "a successor and culmination of earlier forms of colonialism, serving Euro-American material exploitation, cultural domination, and psychological self-aggrandizement." (Bulhan, 2015). Meta colonialism carefully accounts for the colonizer's violent assault on more abstract aspects of the lives of the oppressed which Bulhan describes as their 'world of meaning'. This encompasses the eradication of their socio-cultural environments and the implications of that on today's world. Bulhan goes on to explain how liberation efforts by the forefathers of these colonized countries were primarily focused on liberation from the exploitation of material wealth (the 'world of things') and exploitation of human resources (the 'world of people') at the expense of liberation of the world of meaning. He asserts that this set the foundation for the growth of meta-colonialism. There are several traces of meta-colonialism in the operational frameworks of many African countries. This paper seeks to shed some light on the manifestations of meta-colonialism in Ghana's education system.

To begin, in order to fully grasp the various expressions of meta-colonialism in Ghana's education system, it is imperative that one has some understanding of the context surrounding the establishment of formal Western educational structures in Ghana. Western powers escalated their attack on the world of meaning of the colonized through deculturalization. Indigenous people were forced to repudiate their own culture and strive towards assimilation into Western culture as it was set as the standard for civilization. As part of this assimilation, Africans were expected to blindly accept and adhere to the teachings and directives of Western concepts of Christianity among other Western values. This agenda was fervently supported by Christian missionaries seeking to expand their evangelical missions across the globe. In their missions, they heavily propagated the message of denunciation of one's indigenous culture and assimilation into Western culture as a requirement for complete acceptance of the Christian faith which implied the acceptance of civilization.

They strongly believed that one of the strongest arsenals towards a quick execution of this cultural genocide was education. These missionaries arrived in Ghana in the early 19th century and began expanding their ministries. Upon their arrival, they wasted no time establishing educational institutions across colonized territories in the southern regions of Ghana. They mirrored oppressive educational models that were already in use in other regions of the world such as North America for boarding schools established to decolonize Native Americans. This colonial ideology informed the establishment of an educational curriculum for these institutions.

Aside from this, colonial governments also set up schools for the purpose of educating the elite in society such as sons of chiefs and other esteemed cultural leaders in order to have them work in administrative roles serving these governments. They found that having these people serve as middlemen made relations with the locals easier and was beneficial towards

pushing their colonial agenda further along. Similar to the missionary schools, the framework informing the establishment of a curriculum for these institutions was also heavily tainted with colonial ideals. Despite superficial reforms to Ghana's educational system, some traces of meta-colonialism can still be found in the framework.

One of the ways in which this manifests is the isolation of students from tangible aspects of their culture (world of things). One prime example of this is mandating students entering secondary schools to shave off their hair. In most secondary schools, all students are forced to shave off their hair as a condition for enrollment, regardless of their gender. Students are also required to regularly trim their hair to keep it a designated length throughout their stay in school. Figures of authority in my secondary school would conduct regular checks to ensure that students were adhering to this mandate. They would pass pens through the center of each student's hair, and if the pen did not fall through without resistance, they would run a pair of scissors through the victim's hair and humiliate them in front of an assembly. Students were continually told that this practice was for their own good because their hair was a 'distraction from our books', or 'too much to handle' or in the blunt words of my former headmistress, 'nappy and ugly'.

It is widely known that hair is central to one's cultural identity, especially in a lot of African cultures. Therefore, going above and beyond to separate young girls from this important part of their identities can be damaging. Dr. Bulhan talks briefly about the concept of colonization of beauty. He claims that meta-colonialism affirms European beauty standards and leaves people of color with internalized self-deprecating concepts about their physical appearance which then leads them to indulge in all kinds of practices such as bleaching and straightening out their hair to be closer to European standards of beauty (Bulhan, 2015). Schools in Ghana reinforce these ideas by constantly surrounding students with self-deprecating negative connotations of their hair. This then feeds into the cycle of girls striving to be closer to Eurocentric beauty standards as most girls end up straightening their hair after we pass through this stage.

Secondly, another contributing factor towards the growth of meta colonialism is efforts to isolate students from the intangible aspects of their culture as well (world of meaning). The most common example of this is prohibiting students from speaking vernacular on the campuses of most schools. In my secondary school, students who are found speaking any language other than English anywhere on campus, even in dormitories, are subject to harsh forms of punishments such as flogging, public shaming, or manual labor. As a result of this, local languages are stigmatized and a student's proficiency in English has evolved into a socially constructed measure of their intellectual capabilities. This earns them respect from their colleagues and members of staff alike. These students are seen as 'promising' students and are given extra assistance by teachers. They are also more likely to be considered for respectable positions in school such as head prefect or president of the Student Representative Council which then sets them on a track to be accepted into esteemed universities in the country. This harsh denunciation of our local languages yielded a noticeable lack of proficiency by the end of our time in school. As a result of these social dynamics, students look down on their beautiful indigenous languages and pride themselves in their levels of fluency in English. This further feeds into meta-colonialist ideas of Europeans being seen as the standard for intelligence. Dr. Bulhan refers to this as colonization of language and identity. (Bulhan, 2015)

In addition to this, most missionary schools seek to assimilate students into Western concepts of Christianity while eroding their indigenous religions and customs. Speaking from my

experience in a catholic secondary school, most students are denied their right to practice any other religion but catholicism. Even other sects of Christianity were prohibited from forming affiliation groups and organizing meetings. All other forms of worship that were not in line with catholicism were strictly disallowed. We were made to attend catholic mass every day of the week in addition to Sundays. Indigenous religions were heavily regarded as barbaric and shamed by catholic priests and nuns. Students were forcibly denied the opportunity to choose their religious paths.

Another trace of meta colonialism in Ghana's education system is the emphasis on isolation from the community. This was a strategy employed by settler colonial Americans towards the goal of deculturalization of Native Americans through boarding schools. They were taken away from their families and communities at young ages in order to detach them from their indigenous cultures and fully submerge them into Western culture. Although not to such extreme levels, similar rules are put in place in boarding schools in Ghana. Most reputable public schools in Ghana are boarding schools established by missionaries and once students go in for the beginning of the semester, aside from two-hour visits once a month, they are cut off from the outside world until the semester ends. Students are not allowed to bring in technological devices to these schools so their only informants on matters outside of the walls of their schools are teachers and administrators. This leaves room for students to be heavily influenced by authority figures and for meta-colonial values to be inculcated into them without hindrance from external influences. Most students leave school converted to catholicism or removed from their indigenous culture in some way.

Lastly, our curricula are heavily laced with meta-colonial ideals, further glorifying our colonizers. Right from kindergarten, we are taught European nursery rhymes such as 'Ring around the Rosie' and 'Baah baah black sheep' instead of our melodious indigenous lullabies. In English literature, we spend a substantial amount of time discussing European literature such as plays by Shakespeare and books by Charles Dickens, and not as much time patronizing the great work of our local playwrights and authors. In Geography, we are taught how to draw maps of America and not other African countries. In Religious and Moral Education, indigenous religions are condemned as savage and barbaric, and Western Christianity is praised. In Social Studies, we learn about the benefits of colonization for Ghanaians, including the establishment of infrastructure, education, economic development, and so on, with no mention of how these 'benefits' paved the way for the continual exploitation of our continent.

In recent years, there have been efforts to ameliorate Ghana's education system. However, these efforts are focused on superficial improvements thus rendering them inconsequential. They fail to account for the structural roots of this ailment. Little has been done to restructure the foundations and broader structures of the system to eradicate all colonial traces. Dr Bulhan proposes a bottom-up approach towards long-term change. He asserts that "The bottom-up approach forces the self-declared helper to examine motives, question dominant theories, and be open to learn the experiences, thoughts, and traditions of those one seeks to help." (Bulhan, 2015). Our education system is established on a faulty foundation and until this foundation is completely subverted, there can be no real path towards change.

REFERENCES

- Bulhan, H. A. (2015). Stages of colonialism in Africa: From occupation of land to occupation of being. *Journal of Social and Political psychology*, 3(1).

