

The Cost of Colonialism: A Rear View Glance into the Kingdom of Dahomey

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In the discussion of Africa, what might come to mind could be something light and fun, like safaris with elephants, lions, and giraffes or music and dancing. Alternatively, it can be dark and heavy, like civil fighting, child soldiers, famine, land mines, or slavery. If you thought of the latter, ask yourself how these images, stereotypes and connotations came to be. These atrocities directly result from something darker and far more significant, an issue that needs to be discussed. What led to militias staging coups against their governments? Why are young boys used as weapons? Why are children skinny with bulging, hungry bellies? Why are people used as a commodity rather than the human beings that they are? What led to this? Africa is so much more than its stereotypical labels. This paper will begin to trace some of these atrocities back to colonialism and the attempt of settler societies to impose their views, ideas, norms, and cultures on African people. Very few African countries have been unaffected by cultural imposition and rule. These realities are seen daily on tv, the internet, and even through podcasts. This paper will examine where it started and get to the root of it, using the Kingdom of Dahomey and the Atlantic Slave Trade as a case study to dive into the cost of colonialism in this part of the world.

The Woman King, directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood and starring Viola Davis as Nanisca, the leader of the Agojie, the Dahomean female army, takes place in 1823 and shows the relationships of the Agojie with their king and their enemies, the Oyo army and European slave traders. *The Woman King* is an excellent introduction to the beautiful Kingdom of Dahomey, now known as Benin. It paints a magnificent picture of Dahomey and portrays the strength and beauty of the Agojie Warriors and Fon people (Prince-Bythewood, 2022). However, there needs to be an understanding that this specific story is not an absolute truth. It is difficult not to entirely fall in love with the culture of Dahomey and those that live there. However, there will also be darkness where light and beauty are found. This darkness is linked directly with colonial powers in the Western world and their influence.

Before venturing to Africa in search of the truth of what happened in Dahomey so many years ago, one needs to understand what colonialism means. Colonialism is an ethnocentric, racist, and powerful conquest by Western countries to destabilize established societies in countries across all continents. Colonialism, as defined by Erin Blakemore (a writer for National Geographic), is the control by one power (in this case, European nations such as Britain, France, and Spain) over another country or people (2021). Along with colonialism, imperialism is the “formal or informal economic and political dominations of one country over the other” (Differences between colonialism and imperialism, 2022). Imperialism is the driving force behind colonialism. Africa suffered these cruelties through this imperial ideology and an ethnocentric view of Western superiority. In this specific case, the people of Dahomey wanted to be left alone to live their lives as they had for generations prior, in their societies, with their own culture and language as they had for time immemorially. Settlers would travel from their country of origin in search of resources such as wood, gold, and produce, and they found people. These unrestrained powers took over foreign lands for selfish reasons that did not benefit the African people and their societies. These colonial nations, such as France, were all driven by a need for resource appropriation, extending their religions by importing missionaries to proselytize, to take over the economic and political aspects of the countries they wanted, and to create wardship over the people in the countries that they have conquered.

This happened in Canada, Belize, India, Australia, and almost every African country. As previously stated, almost all African countries were conquered and colonized by a European power, except Liberia and Ethiopia, which have been largely unaffected by cultural imposition and rule (World History Edu, 2022). Although Ethiopia and Liberia were not officially under colonial rule, both countries built societies with a strong Western influence. Nevertheless, it was not colonialism.

Now let us begin the journey to Africa and uncover what led to colonialism. This winding road will describe where the Kingdom of Dahomey was located, who the people of Dahomey were, what this society of light and darkness was made of, and the history of this beautiful country. What we now call Benin is where the dynamic Kingdom of Dahomey began and remained until colonization in 1894. In 1900 it became known as French Dahomey. Dahomey was located in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa, with its southern coast along the Atlantic Ocean. Dahomey has a rich royal history that dates back to the 13th century, with the migration of the ancestors of the Fon

people to this area (Pique & Rainer, 1999). The Fon people made up the largest ethnic portion of the Kingdom of Dahomey, and this is how it remains today. They have a beautiful and vibrant culture that is celebrated through ceremony. They shared the language of Fon and believed in polytheistic religions like Vodun. They continued their history through oral traditions and lived in farmer/hunter communities. Above all else, the Fon people could fight for what they needed and wanted.

To have a rear-view glance into Dahomey, its history needs to be investigated. In 1426, Portuguese settlers descended upon the Atlantic coast of Africa, where Dahomey was located, searching for resources. This was the beginning of the slave trade in Dahomey. This coast was known as the Slave Coast due to the tendency of slave traders to use this area. Thus began the relationship between European nations and the Dahomey people in all its tarnished glory. This process of colonization would take centuries to come to full fruition. It all started with the acceleration of the commodity of enslaved people and the creation of the institution of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the 15th century. This trade institution involved selling people to slave traders who would transport them from Africa across the Atlantic. In trade for these people, acquired resources from South and Central America were sent to Europe for manufacturing into tradeable goods, such as furniture. Those goods were then transported around the world for gold or further trading. The Atlantic Slave Trade was a relatively simple process with complicated consequences, resulting in significant financial gain and even more loss. African kingdoms, such as Dahomey, did not have abundant natural resources, so one was created for them (Lewis, 2022).

Until King Agaja, the slave trade was something that the Kingdom of Dahomey participated in for their purposes, but it was not a huge economic venture. It was not until later that Dahomey began to profit from slavery. In 1708, Queen Hangbe took over the kingdom when her twin brother, King Akaba, died. Her younger brother, Agaja, stole the throne from her and ordered the removal of any records that stated that she had been Queen as punishment for her betrayal. King Agaja felt that she had been disloyal to him because she supported their nephew Agbo, the rightful heir, rather than supporting him. This showed Agaja's ruthlessness and that he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. Moreover, this ruthlessness would serve him well as he grew the kingdom of Dahomey on the world stage through slavery. What started as his army raiding enemy camps to free his people grew to an uptake in the slave trade. The slave trade largely impacted the Fon people of Dahomey as their people were sent to Haiti and Trinidad to be enslaved by the

colonizing powers there. This was when the slave trade began to prosper in Dahomey (Alpern, 2012).

Sometime after Queen Hangbe was dethroned, a specialized army was formed. This army was created from women in the Fon community who were often thrown away by their families as they did not follow the social norms for women in Dahomean society and were often perceived as being no good and with no purpose. Many of these women became the Agojie Warriors (Alpern, 2012). Recruiting other members was not an issue, as women often lived in drudgery. As an Agojie, they were allowed to live quite luxuriously within the palace walls; there was never a shortage of tobacco or alcohol and slaves. It is reported that up to 50 enslaved people could be allotted to each Agojie (Dash, 2011). It has been reported that the Agojie was formed in the shadow of Queen Hangbe, as she is often touted as the original woman warrior. The Agojie were held to a high standard and can be described as fearless, strong, united, powerful, elegant, relentless, and fierce. These mighty women warriors were trained to embrace their differences. The Kings were very proud of their fierce warriors and had zero qualms about showing the Agojie's strength, whether exhibiting them in a ceremonial show where the Agojie's abilities were displayed or in direct military conflict. No matter which King we speak of, they did not shy away from conflict and used the Agojie for his agenda (Alpern, 2012). Whether that be against the Oyo people from Yorumba (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023) or European colonizers or slave traders, the kings were ruthless and led by the desire to profit financially as well as protect the Kingdom of Dahomey at any cost.

The kings even used these mighty warriors in human trafficking and would stop at nothing to procure the human capital needed to participate in the slave trade. It has been reported that the Agojie would raid villages and steal people to be sold into the slave trade (HomeTeam History, 2018). Even though they were very active participants in the slave trade, the Kings of Dahomey were not responsible for it. That responsibility would lie at the feet of colonizing nations who perpetuated it. Dahomey was forced to participate and then became reliant on it to survive.

To paint a picture of the greed that spurred the Atlantic Slave Trade, we can look briefly at the circumstances that led to the final shipment of enslaved people from Dahomey. In 1860, the *Clotilda* was the last ship to import enslaved people to the U. S., following the Atlantic Slave Trade routes. The *Clotilda* was one of the most talked about ships transporting slaves as cargo. Timothy Meaher, an Alabama businessman, wagered that he could get a ship full of enslaved people from

the slave coast to the American coast, even though it had been illegal for over 50 years. Meaher's profit for these 110 men, women and children who travelled for six weeks was \$9000 in gold. The sickening part is how much they were worth, which was reported to be \$180,000 in 1860, translating to approximately \$6.5 million today. These 110 lives were set to make Meaher a considerable sum of money, so he was willing to take the risk regardless of the consequences (Bourne, 2021). He was just one person, but it goes to show the extent to which slave traders would go to cash in on this human commodity.

In 1890, King Behanzin agreed to a treaty with France that would allow France to operate commercially on Dahomean land. However, this treaty did not guarantee peace. When France protected the small kingdom of Porto-Novo, Dahomey was infuriated, leading to conflict between Dahomey and France. This may have been the reason for the First Franco-Dahomean War from February until October 1890. In that war, an Agojie warrior beheaded the King of Porto-Novo to show their displeasure toward France's protection. The Agojie were fierce and never backed down from a conflict, and France combatted this threat by increasing its military presence, primarily with Senegalese and Gabonese-trained soldiers. Rather than use their people and lose them in the fight, they manipulated other nations and used their men. It did not cost France much in their fight against Dahomey. The identity and culture were not at stake for France. The loss was left to every African involved in the war (Alpern, 2012).

The end of the first war resulted in France giving up, as they were outnumbered and outpowered. The Agojie prevailed. This time. That peace ended in 1892 when France had had enough, and with a regrouped and recharged military, they attacked. The Kingdom of Dahomey did not see it coming. Although the Agojie were strong, France was even stronger. The Second Dahomean War was a brutal ambush of French soldiers that annihilated Dahomey. Thousands of Agojie were slaughtered. Many of the Senegalese and Gabonese soldiers, who fought for France, were also lost. This was a war of swords and guns. Unfortunately, the guns won.

This second war lasted until 1894, when the King sent a truce missive to the French, marking the end of an era in Dahomey. King Behanzin was eventually exiled to Martinique with his five wives, and the Kingdom of Dahomey was lost (Solly, 2022). After the war ended, only about 60 Agojie remained (Alpern, 2012). There was no longer a place for them in this French Dahomean society that was being created. They were no longer these fierce and powerful warriors. That identity was lost. They were merely women with no status or authority. Women were

transported back to a time in their lives before they became Agojie. Moreover, they were not the only casualties. All of Dahomey lost their identity and self-governance. They became a people that belonged to France. France's purpose in Dahomey was to appropriate resources and tame the savages. Dahomeans were no longer allowed to speak Fon or practise Vodun; forced assimilation required them to learn French and practise Catholicism. There were even instances where children were taken from their families to live in missionary schools (Alpern, 2012), similar to Canada with Indigenous people and residential schools. This was all in the name of teaching these Africans to be more French, worship their God, and be more human. When Dahomey became French Dahomey, life as they knew it had changed entirely.

The cloud of colonialism creates darkness in the history of Dahomey and its history of significant loss. The Dahomean people lost everything, including their language, religion, economy, government, and as a result, their entire cultural identity. They were not the only people who lost everything to colonialism. Around the same time, this happened worldwide by the same colonial powers:

Before colonialism, the tribes functioned as distinct nationalities. They sometimes warred with one another but were rarely locked in the day-to-day friction that began when they were lumped together by Europeans who drew the borders of their possessions without regard for these peoples, languages, and cultures within them. (Crary, 1986)

Unfortunately, what happened in Dahomey was not unique in that area or even Africa. This happened in almost every country, on every continent. This paper is titled "The Cost of Colonialism," so what is that cost? We can look at refugees and the need for people to pack up their lives to escape conflicts and traumas. They have to leave everything behind due to the ideologies left behind by colonialism. Recent ongoing conflicts in Africa, such as the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Sudanese wars, unrest and conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, all show that these are not modern issues, as their basis rests in colonialism. There were small-scale conflicts and feuds in Africa, but those were not cultural genocide that we see with colonial occupation. What colonialism did in Africa is not a history lesson. We need to look beyond Africa and realize that this happens everywhere. These communities fight to heal from generations of trauma caused solely by colonialism. Losing an identity, a culture, a language, a voice, and freedom is rooted in the colonial ideologies that have plagued the entire world for centuries. Every continent has felt the fingers of colonialism, and unless you turn a blind eye, it is all around to see.

That is the cost of colonialism. Furthermore, speaking and learning about it is the only way to move forward. Maybe someone will read this and learn about the truth of colonialism. Is it overwhelming? Absolutely! It is not up to one person to fix it; it is everyone's responsibility to learn. If we can understand past events, then we can do better. We can be better.

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