



## COLONIALITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT: EXAMINING COLONIAL LEGACIES ON ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS IN AFRICA

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### Abstract

This article explores the relationship between coloniality and environmental sustainability in Africa, focusing on how colonial structures of resource extraction and colonial governance system have shaped present-day environmental concerns. The researcher argues that colonial legacies have entrenched unsustainable practices and institutional frameworks that prioritize resource exploitation over environmental conservation leading to all manner of injustice. Using an analytical approach, the research highlights the enduring colonial legacies of extractive economies, violence and land dispossession that disenfranchise local populations in Africa. It also examines how these colonial structures continue to frustrate sustainable development efforts in post-colonial Africa, perpetuating cycles of environmental issues that further breeds social injustice. The research ultimately aims to contribute to the discourse on decolonial approaches to environmental governance by advocating for a re-imagination of policies and practices to reflect local needs and environmental justice.

**Keywords:** Coloniality, Environment, Sustainability, Africa, Resource Exploitation.

### Introduction

Coloniality and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked through historical practices that continue to shape contemporary ecological challenges in Africa. Colonial legacies have not only reshaped landscapes but also established regimes of resource management and extraction that prioritize profit over ecological balance and social justice. As Sultana (2023) explains, the concept of climate coloniality illustrates how historical and modern colonial policies exacerbate climate crises, and more precisely, their effects on marginalized populations in the Global South. This perspective is crucial to an understanding of how colonial pasts inform environmental governance and sustainability agendas today. Environmental colonialism, experienced with the thrusting of Western environmentalism upon indigenous communities and peoples, has had damaging impacts upon the native environment. Historically, ecological destruction is commonly associated with extractive activities. This is evident in Sub-Saharan Africa where years of colonial incursions disrupted and even decimated in some instances the indigenous ways of responding to environment. The introduction of foreign and invasive species in agricultural practices

through colonialism is an example of this incursion as it continues to have a persistent impact upon biodiversity and ecosystem stability and resilience (Crosby, 2004).

Recent scholarship places the imperative for decolonial practices in environmental management at the forefront of environmental debates. For instance, one decolonial model of environmental management is the call to stop considering indigenous societies as passive victims in the search for solutions to climate change, but rather to combine scientific principles with Indigenous knowledge/governance systems that can help deal with ecological crises and social injustice (Berkes and Armitage, 2010). The prevailing conservation discourses with a propensity to silence the historical oppressions of indigenous groups is challenged by this model, urging a paradigmatic turn to sustainable ecological relationships that are considerate of both humans and the environment as evident in indigenous knowledge systems (Young, 2021). The interplay between environmental sustainability and coloniality warrants a critical and nuanced analysis of the ways that power dynamics in the social and political sphere determines ecological outcomes. Banerjee (2003) posits that sustainable development discourses tend to reinforce colonial logics that favor economic expansion at the cost of environmental integrity and human rights. He calls for the need to confront the embedded structural inequities within existing environmental policies.

Understanding the intersection of environmental sustainability and coloniality is crucial to develop practicable solutions to current ecological problems. By critically examining the relationship between these two, academics, particularly in African studies can develop insightful, culturally sensitive approaches to enhance sustainability within postcolonial societies while protecting Indigenous knowledge systems. It is within ambit of this reasoning that the purpose of this paper is laid bare. The paper examines the interaction between environmental sustainability and coloniality within the African continent. It does this with specific reference to the ways that current ecological problems have been shaped by the patterns of exploitative extraction and the institution of colonial governance structures. It is argued that colonial legacies have deepened unsustainable practices that privilege resource extraction over ecological stewardship and social justice. By this, the author aims to contribute to discourses on decoloniality, environmental sustainability, and social justice.

### **Understanding Coloniality**

Coloniality is a concept that acknowledges the endurance of colonial practices beyond the historical period of colonialism, entrenching itself in the social, economic, and political structures of former colonies. Coloniality is the patterns of inequity and power relation that were established at the time of colonialism that continue to shape contemporary societies. Walter Mignolo defines coloniality as the underlying structure of power that emerged from the colonial experience and persists in various forms today, influencing global relations and local governance (Mignolo, 2007). Coloniality perpetuates its evil through the coloniality of being, knowledge and culture of the people it encounters. By this, it initiates an ontological categorisation and hierarchisation of people into inferior and superior beings, determining the nature and status of their social, epistemological and cultural systems. Through coloniality of being, a social and anthropological hierarchy that castigates humans as inferior or superior based on their racial constitution is created. This social hierarchies established during colonial rule persist today, affecting race relations and social interactions in the global arena. The classification of people based on racial hierarchies initiated during colonization continues to influence social dynamics, resulting in systemic inequalities that are deeply embedded in

societal structures. Those hierarchies often decide political representation, education access, and resource access, thus further entrenching inequality in marginalized populations.

The other key aspect of the coloniality is its influence on knowledge systems. It imposes a Eurocentric knowledge perspective that relegates indigenous epistemologies to the periphery. According to De Sousa Santos (2014), coloniality is about the power to define what counts as knowledge and who gets to produce it, leading to the exclusion of non-Western perspectives in academia and policy-making. This proceeds from the belief of the anthropological inferiority of the group being excluded, as from the reasoning of anthropological inferiority, it is easy to arrive at the view of inferior rationality; hence, inferior knowledge that should be disregarded, or at the very least, should not be prioritized. By this view, Western knowledge is prioritised over and above non-Western forms of knowing (Quijano, 2000). The dominance of Western epistemologies over indigenous knowledge systems results in a narrow understanding of global issues such as environmental sustainability and social justice. This exclusion limits the effectiveness of policies aimed at addressing these challenges because they often do not incorporate local knowledge or practices. From coloniality of being and the epistemological arguments derived therein, the cultural dimension of coloniality that justifies cultural erasure and to imperialism is derived. Cultural imperialism is the continuation of a state of affairs by which dominant societies impose their practice and value upon oppressed communities, often causing the erasure of indigenous traditions and identities. For Quijano (2000), "coloniality is the root of modern types of cultural domination," something that still shapes current cultural practices and policies globally. Imposing patterns of behavior of Western culture results in the loss of much of the culture of many indigenous societies. It is not merely the identities of the individuals that are lost due to this kind of cultural imperialism, but also the sense of communal belonging with traditional practice that sustains it (De Sousa Santos, 2014).

Imposing Western values and cultures was and still is the cornerstone of the colonial practices that calls for Western political and economic institutions for the rest of the world. Coloniality is manifested in political and economic structures that enrich ex-colonial powers while promoting dependency in the formerly colonized nations. As posited by Bernards (2022), colonial legacies have instituted financial systems that entrench existing inequalities, whereby postcolonial economies are struggling with structures that were designed for exploitation rather than equitable development. To this, the majority of post-colonial states have inherited political systems that reflect colonial models of governance, which in most instances are characterized by authoritarianism or weak democratic institutions. These hinder good governance and citizens' participation, as is evident in most African countries where political authority is still held by elites that emulate colonial behaviors (Mignolo, 2007). This colonial behavior also serves to entrench a position where economic structures created during colonization that favored resource extraction for the colonizers, continues to impact former colonies today. The majority of countries remain integrated into global markets in ways that reproduce their positions as suppliers of raw materials rather than centers of industrialization. Coloniality has a profound influence on environmental sustainability in Africa today because the previous trajectories of exploitation and extraction of natural resources established during colonial times continue to influence socio-political and economic structures.

### **Understanding Environmental Sustainability**

The importance of sustainability of the environment becomes even more critical with the looming environmental crisis of climate change, extinction of species, and pollution. Sustainability measures have to be applied in order to overcome the crisis the world currently

faces. Human activities, especially the burning of fossil fuels and the destruction of forests, have resulted in unprecedented levels of concentrated greenhouse gases which have significantly exposed the planet to high level of global warming and severe climatic events (IPCC, 2021). This crisis endangers the planet's ecosystem, food systems, and the well-being of humans by causing loss of not only biodiversity but also pollution. The World Wildlife Fund's Living Planet Report estimates the loss of about 68% of wildlife species since 1970 due to the loss of habitats, climate change events and pollution (WWF, 2020). The loss of biodiversity is also shown to compromise the strength of the ecosystem, impairing naturally occurring key functions like pollination of plants and the filtering of water. In addition to this loss of biodiversity, pollution is also another major issue that results from unsustainable living. It is estimated that pollution of the atmosphere causes about 7 million deaths per year (UNEP, 2019). Plastic pollution of the oceans also endangers marine animals and humans alike.

In light of the above, concerted effort at environmental sustainability becomes a no brainer as it is essential to our ability to satisfy our current needs without compromising the ability of coming generations to do the same. The Brundtland Commission defines sustainable development as a reconciliation of economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection by striking a balance between the three (WCED, 1987). Here, sustainable approach to life ensures ecological integrity which will in turn guarantee viability in the long-run. Sustainability is also argued to come with significant economic gains. For example, businesses that pursue sustainable practices have been shown to achieve efficiency and waste reduction, improving their financial performance while reducing their environmental impact. Environmental sustainability also ensures social justice by addressing the inequities that are triggered by environmental degradation. Environmental crises tend to significantly impact vulnerable groups, posing severe threats to their health, welfare and means of sustenance. Sustainable practice can empower vulnerable groups by way of equitable environmental management and participatory environmental governance. Sustainable practices also increase the resilience of communities to environmental shock like economic crises or natural disasters. For example, the inclusion of green infrastructure into urban planning can abate the threat of floods while it “sustain air and water resources and contribute to the health and quality of life for . . . communities and people” (Benedict and McMahon 2006:12). Such approaches not only conserve the ecosystem, they also conserve human lives.

### **Exploring Environmental Sustainability Strategies and Practices in Africa**

Contemporary environmentally sustainable interventions within Africa are increasingly resorting to innovative participatory strategies to deal with pressing environmental challenges. Of notable reference is the adoption of sustainable farming practices among smallholder farmers. For example, farmers within Kenya's Makueni County have introduced climate smart farming strategies that harmoniously combine traditional with modern strategies such as crop diversification and water conservation, improving food security and building resilience against the impact of climate change (Nyale, E. H., China, S. S and Nabiswa, F., 2019). In Ethiopia, similar sustainable land and water management projects have been ventured to improve the soil conservation and conservation of water strategies, resulting in increased farming output with less soil erosion (Tasew Tadesse, 2023). Another vital initiative is that of reforestation and conservation of biodiversity by the communities. In Uganda and a host of other sub-Saharan African countries, the "Trees for the Future" programme is initiated in communities to reclaim degraded lands by planting more valuable trees which have yielded fertile soils and greater biodiversity (UNEP, 2024). In Kenya, the Green Belt Movement also engages the local

communities, especially women, to plant more trees and advocate for sustainable management of the lands. This has improved support for reforestation and have also benefited the communities economically as they are able to sustainably harvest forest products (Obi, C. I., 2005). In Nigeria, government, Non-Governmental and individual effort, spearheads reforestation and nature-based solutions. The Great Green Wall initiative is a flagship project that aims to combat desertification in Northern Nigeria. It has established a 1,359 km shelterbelt, produced 7.6 million seedlings, reforested 2,801 hectares, and created multipurpose gardens, jobs, and training opportunities (Oyema-Aziken, 2024). There is also the Plastic Recycling Programme in Southern Nigeria, implemented by Technoserve and sponsored by The Coca-cola Foundation. This initiative is meant to strengthen the plastic recycling value chain in Nigeria, while significantly involved in rural and community level environmental awareness to help combat plastic waste and empower indigent members of the community.

The adoption of clean energy technologies like solar power is revolutionising access to energy in the rural parts of Africa, although it is still comparatively expensive. In South Africa, the Independent Power Producer Procurement Program of the government successfully incorporated the supply of renewable energy into the national grid, largely reducing the consumption of fossil fuels (Sultana, 2024). In off-grid communities, projects like Solar Sister is empowering women by giving them access to solutions of solar energy that enhance access to electricity at the household level while encouraging entrepreneurship (Solar Sisters, N.D.). Another sustainability practice in Africa is the collaborative governance model with the locals that have successfully aided implementation of sustainable management of land in some countries. In Tanzania, community-based forest conservation initiatives are implemented, giving the locals a means of sustenance while also protecting the land. To-date, Tanzania has one of the most advanced community forestry jurisdictions in Africa as reflected in policy, law and practice (Wily, 2000, MNRT, 2020: 20). In the case of Namibia, the program of the Community-Based Natural Resource Management has successfully granted the locals the means to manage the wildlife resources to conserve them while also providing economic gain through eco-tourism (Boudreaux, 2007).

Regional cooperation frameworks like the African Agenda 2063 that prioritize sustainable development and environmental protection are also helping to shape the efforts of the continent towards being sustainable. Agenda 2063 outlines strategies to develop climate resilience and sustainable management of resources among member states (African Union, 2015). All these efforts could be insignificant considering the magnitude of the environmental threats that the continent faces, but they signal a growing recognition of the imperative of taking a comprehensive participatory approach to environmental sustainability in Africa. Hopefully, with necessary understanding and resistance, this effort will be protected from the sullyng and morally bankrupt effect of coloniality and economic hitmen who has no regards for neither the environment nor the vulnerable members of the society that bear the social, political and economic brunt of environmental degradation.

### **Pattern of Colonial Practices and their Implications for Sustainability Strategies within Africa**

Colonialism had a long-term impact on the environment and the people it encountered, significantly changing the people of these societies, their relationship with themselves and their relationship with their environment. Here, the analysis explores how colonial practices led to the extensive exploitation of natural resources and indigenous lands, drawing on various scholarly sources to show the enduring consequences of these actions. Even though colonial powers disguised their plunder of the colonized as a civilizing mission, they viewed newly acquired



territories primarily as sources of raw materials and wealth, leading to systematic environmental degradation. According to Voskoboynik (2018: 38), colonialism facilitated large-scale exploitation of resources, with cash crops replacing subsistence agriculture and monoculture practices dominating landscapes that once supported diverse ecosystems. This change not only disrupted local food system but also contributed to tremendous ecological imbalance. The mining of minerals and timber extraction caused more havoc to the environment than the others. For instance, intensive mining of silver in the Andes resulted in irremediable loss to indigenous ecosystems, while forest clearance for the expansion of cultivation in regions like India led to soil erosion and the destruction of flora and fauna (Nishtha, 2023). The British colonial government's removal of forests in India's Malabar Coast is a classic case of this state of affairs, wherein vast areas were cleared of natural cover to provide for the export of resources (Ponting, 2007:189). In Africa, the colonial powers saw a land of unlimited resources to be exploited, with the resultant huge extraction of minerals, forests, and agricultural products. Europeans seized lands to undertake mining activities for resources like copper, diamond, and gold at the expense of the indigenous inhabitants and their traditional ecosystem and livelihood (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012: 49). Compulsory labor was introduced to provide a guaranteed workforce to the mines with coercive practices like the payment of the head tax, which forced the indigenous people to toil for the colonial enterprises.

The colonial era saw a dramatic decline in wildlife populations due to overhunting and habitat destruction. For instance, the ivory trade led to the slaughter of up to 12,000 elephants annually during the late 19th century (Bercovitch, 2015). The creation of game reserves usually kept out indigenous people from their ancestral lands but opened it up for European settlers to hunt at will. This reinforced a narrative of blaming Africans for environmental degradation without accounting for colonial exploitation that led to it. Export of cash crops like rubber, cotton, and cocoa saw extensive decimation of forests as millions of hectares was cut down within Sub-Saharan Africa to serve European industrial appetite during the colonial times. Not only was biodiversity disrupted by this activity, the indigenous ecosystem was also disrupted to the point of being exposed to erosion and degradation. Traditional sustainable farming was severely undermined by the introduction of monoculture farming by the colonialist to enhance their need for resource extraction (Kameri-Mbote and Cullet, 1997: 23). The intensive farming methods introduced by the colonizers also led to soil nutrient depletion and destabilized local ecosystems. Cash crops required heavy use of fertilizers and pesticides, which further worsened the quality of the soil in the long term. For example, French colonizers in Africa forcibly introduced the cultivation of cash crops at the expense of traditional subsistence farming, leading to desertification and soil infertility (Anuradha Varanasi, 2022). Not only did these actions harm local ecosystems, but they also destabilized social organizations that were reliant on these sustainable systems.

It was not just the environment that suffered from colonial policies and practices. Colonial policies had a tendency to displace persons from their lands, resulting in social fragmentation. The imposition of new legal frameworks that safeguarded European settlers had the effect of alienating the locals from their resources and way of life (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012: 49). This disruption has contributed towards the longstanding land and resource disputes in most African countries today. In addition, the economic structures established under colonialism have persisted following independence, perpetuating disparities between African countries and former colonial powers. The extractive approach has persisted into modern times, with multinational corporations regularly exploiting African resources with limited benefits to the

host indigenous communities. This has exacerbated poverty and environmental degradation and fostered dependence on foreign economies.

The legacy of colonialism is also felt in contemporary environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) acknowledges that the current environmental challenges have their roots in the colonialism that intensified the patterns of exploiting the environment. For instance, the destruction of the forests through the logging practices of the colonial era produced the carbon emissions and loss of habitats that are still experienced today. More so, the majority of African nations are still facing economic systems that are directed to immediate economic profits at the expense of ecological conservation. Current mining operations in Africa are still driven by global markets that benefit from historical patterns of extraction and economic exchange established during colonial times (Bhandikeri, 2020). This ongoing demand for minerals and resources from former colonies exacerbates existing inequalities and deepens the patterns of environmental destruction and poverty.

These colonial legacies persist in destabilising efforts towards environmental sustainability in the continent, propelling a string of exploitative activities that ultimately result in environmental and social crises. In Côte d'Ivoire, colonial practice had entrenched a cash crop economy based on cocoa and coffee cultivation. This monoculture of cash crops has resulted in massive deforestation to provide arable land. Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 2022) estimates that the country lost around 4 million hectares of forestland between 2015 and 2020, resulting in biodiversity loss and climate change impact. Also, the colonial-era historical practice of land appropriation that has been a source of persistent tension between the indigenous communities and agribusiness companies, frequently causing violence and the displacement of indigenous communities still persists and is carried on by the government. This can also be seen in Kenya where the colonial wildlife conservation policies that benefited Europeans at the cost of the native people is still being upheld. Only that this time, the practice is being upheld by the government and the country's elites who have the intention of forcefully acquiring these indigenous lands to develop the country's national parks without regards for the people whose life have depended on these lands for years. For example, the Maasai are to date being driven away from their grazing lands for conservation efforts that are seen as necessary for tourism revenue, at the cost of the indigenous community's traditional way of life (Goldman, 2011). In the process, this has not only diminished the Maasai's traditional livelihoods but also contributed to the decline of wildlife populations due to habitat loss and increased human-wildlife conflict.

Also, the looting of the Democratic Republic of Congo by the colonialists is continuing to shape its current environmental policy. The extraction of minerals like coltan and cobalt is followed by the deployment of forced labor with the locals being intimidated by the use of violence and coercion by mining groups. This leads to serious ecological devastation and social tension as the communities rebuff the occupation of their lands and the use of their labor (USDL, 2023). Similar experience in South Africa has been tagged 'green colonialism'. Reflected in current energy policies, it is the extraction of green energy resources without regard for the needs and the rights of the indigenous communities. The push for renewable energy projects often overlooks historical injustices related to land ownership and environmental management, resulting in conflicts over land use and resource allocation that echo colonial-era dispossessions. This situation perpetuates inequalities while failing to achieve true sustainability (Blanc, 2022). These enduring impact of colonialism in Africa which manifests through exploitative practices hinder environmental sustainability efforts across the continent. These legacies not only

exacerbate ecological degradation but also contribute to social injustices that affect local communities disproportionately. The interplay between colonial legacies and contemporary environmental challenges reveals the urgent need for policies that address historical injustices while promoting sustainable development across Africa.

## **Conclusion**

This paper reflects on the intricate nature of the relationship between environmental sustainability and coloniality in Africa. This relationship is one that reveals that while there have been pockets of efforts aimed at mitigating the effects of environmental challenges, major practices and policies are still limited by entrenching colonial thinking and practices, often exacerbating the situation. The colonial past of resource exploitation without regard for sustainability are not specters of a distant period; they remain embedded in contemporary structures, shaping how individuals interact with their environment and with each other. This state of affairs has not only determined bases of environmental sustainability policies and practices in the continent, but has also determined the outcome, leaving behind a situation of dispossession of not just the environment, but also indigenous peoples and knowledge. This notwithstanding, the indigenous peoples and young people have shown grit in fighting for alternative that can ensure a just and sustainable future, often advocating for a blend of technology and indigenous knowledge systems that have long prioritized balance and stewardship. That such alternative modes are increasingly being acknowledged, within both policy communities and social movements, suggests a gradual shift toward decoloniality. While a sustained transcendence of the hold of coloniality over the African environment has become more than necessary, it will require more than policy reform or technological solution. It calls for a basic reboot of relationships between humans and land, between knowledge systems, and between violent past and promising future. Only by centering justice and plurality in our responses can the continent envisage an environmental future that honors both its sustainable indigenous/traditional legacy and the rights of generations yet to come.

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