



Report on the seminar How Historians Address the Legacy of Colonialism, organised at the University of Johannesburg on 5 March 2018

# ADDRESSING THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM

Seminar report

HWB Report 2, 4/2018



HISTORIANS  
WITHOUT  
BORDERS



# **ADDRESSING THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM**

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ISBN 978-952-94-0456-8

Historians without Borders in Finland

Helsinki, 2018

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Colonialism may sometimes be seen as a thing of the past, but in reality its traces have yet to fade away. It so profoundly changed the communities that were within its reach that the consequences are still visible in everyday life through social, political and economic structures. Beyond these societal marks, there remains an intangible historical trauma that lives on in memories, remembrances, images and impressions. As an essentially global system, colonialism touched almost all corners of the world, leaving its historical trail to stretch across continents.

In March 2018, Historians without Borders in Finland (HWB) joined forces with The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) in South Africa to organise a seminar “How historians address the legacy of colonialism”. The event aimed to bring together diverse insights into colonial history and to contribute to a discussion about coming to terms with the more difficult legacies of the past. Held at the University of Johannesburg, the seminar was also open to the students and general public and attracted an active audience with good questions to spare.

The cooperation on colonial history between the Finnish HWB and a South African ACCORD did not come together merely by coincidence. HWB specifically aims to raise into discussion historical topics that have been inadequately addressed but in one way or another still play a role in the society. One such occasion was a seminar that HWB organised on the role of colonial legacies in development cooperation. As the theme attracted a large audience and prompted calls for further work, HWB saw a need to continue the discussion both in Finland and internationally. ACCORD, on the other hand, has a long experience of conflict resolution projects focusing on Africa and has come across questions of colonial history in its own work. It therefore provided an ideal partner for HWB to help look at the issue from the point of view of the Global South.

Indeed, colonial historiography remains to some degree tied to its geographic and cultural context. This may set limitations to interpretations of the past and to the ways in which these are discussed. In some cases, it may also mean that colonialism is not recognised as an element in the history of a specific country or community, simply because it is not as obviously visible as elsewhere. In many ways, Finland is a good example of this: it has not been considered an actor for example in the slave trade between 16th and 19th centuries, but its development has been greatly influenced by global trade and conflicts during that time. In addition, there may be other implicit colonial and post-colonial patterns worldwide that can be traced from the past to the present.

Meanwhile, there still is a great need to allow a voice to the histories of those who were colonised. Far too often colonialism is still discussed and interpreted from the point of view of the colonial powers, leaving the peoples and regions that came under their rule merely as passive subjects. This

obviously does not mean that these indigenous histories should only be considered through the single prism of colonialism, either – it should only be one approach among many.

Efforts to identify and address blind spots of colonial historiography require recognising uncomfortable events and patterns of the past. It may also be necessary to dismiss some previous narratives as erroneous or counter-productive. As a whole, historians from various backgrounds – whether in terms of geography or scholarly approach – will have to come together and exchange ideas in an open and inclusive way. Such a dialogue already exists, so it is also important to build upon previous insights. HWB aims to contribute to the discussion by providing spaces for dialogue and conveying its results to the general public.

## 2. WRITING COLONIAL HISTORY: BRINGING TOGETHER VIEWS FROM THE NORTH AND SOUTH

In his opening remarks, Vasu Gounden, Executive Director and Founder of ACCORD pointed out that competing narratives of history may show up as cause of conflict in current discussion. As an example, he mentioned the heated debate going on about land distribution, which in South Africa is deeply rooted in the difficulties of the apartheid past. He also brought up the issue of winners' history by referring to the story of a hunter and a lion, where the hunter is always the hero simply because he is the one writing the story.

Such problems were echoed by the keynote speakers Professor Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Head of Archie Mafeje Research Institute (AMRI) in the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Doctor Olivette Otele from Bath Spa University. In different ways, both speakers approached colonial historiography from the point of view of location and place. As Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni argued, location influences knowledge production and therefore our interpretations of history. On the other hand, specific places of memory may considerably affect the choices of events and narratives that are pursued, as Doctor Otele pointed out.

### 2.1. Locals of Enunciation

Competing and conflicting views of history are products not only of different scholarly tendencies but also of locations. In the case of colonialism, historians from the Global North might have fundamentally different grounds for their views than their counterparts from the South. According to Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni, any attempt to decipher specific interpretations or epistemic perspectives should take into account “where we think from” in terms of geopolitics and the body politic. He proposed the concept of locals of enunciation as a key understanding different world views and means of knowledge production. By extension, it helps to analyse the role of the colonial difference – and the ensuing colonial wound and guilt.

Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni anchored his approach into three units of analysis. The first of these is power, particularly relevant for tracing the asymmetrical way in which the current global world order was constituted and configured. The second unit of analysis is knowledge, which is key to the politicized knowledge formation used to legitimize the colonial difference and to dismantle local languages, traditions and even cultures. Finally, the analytical unit of being refers to the invented racial characterisations and social classifications contribute to the colonialization of being itself.

The units of analysis enable us to understand how the colonial wound continues to be reproduced and play a role even today. Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni cited the words of the author and scholar Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who has compared the impact colonialism to an act of removing the hard disk of African memory and replacing it with the software of European memory.

In terms of the analytical approaches to colonialism, Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni made a distinction between the episodic and epic schools of colonialism. The episodic school sees colonialism as merely an era in the long history of Africa, presenting it as an individual period of time. It thus challenges the Euro-centric idea that African history only began with the arrival of the colonial powers, but may inadvertently also subject colonialism to moral judgements and evaluations as to its presumable pros and cons. Meanwhile, the epic school sees colonialism as a system of power that irreversibly transformed the society, knowledge and self-awareness of the colonized. It therefore is primarily concerned with coloniality, or the way in which colonialism has lingered beyond the dismantling of the administrations that were maintaining it.

In order to enable discussion about the legacies and lasting impact of colonialism, Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni went on to propose a new way of thinking. Rather than focus on the end of physical empire as a marking the end of colonialism, there is a need to address the political, commercial and metaphysical empires that still remain. Decolonisation therefore needs to go beyond merely replacing one system by another and has to take place on the political, economic and epistemological levels as well.

For Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the African point of view to the history of colonialism is one of an uninvited arrival. It thus often forms a narrative of an invasion and the destruction that it left behind. This is in contrast to analyses from the point of view of the North, or the departing point of the empire. They tend to neglect the experience of the colonised and focus on issues like voyages of discovery and spreading of modernity. It is here that the locals of enunciation become visible. The differences of position are so fundamental that the ensuing interpretations of history appear thoroughly at odds.

This raises the question whether it is possible overall to reach an understanding on colonialism between the views from the Global South and North. Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni concluded by

referring to the work of Kuan-Hsing Chen, who has argued that two related processes need to take place in order for the discussion to move on. On the one hand, critical scholars from the North must take on the task of deimperialisation by examining harmful impacts throughout imperial histories. On the other hand, historians from the South need to take responsibility for decolonialisation. An interaction between these processes is a precondition to the reconciliation between the colonisers and the colonised, which in turn is necessary for taking steps towards democracy at the global level.

## 2.2.Sites of Memory

In addition to location at the global scale, the historiography of colonialism is influenced by sites in a more local sense. The French scholar Pierre Nora first introduced the concept of lieux de mémoire, or sites of memory, referring to a place, monument or other entity that echo the demands, aspirations and hopes of communities. In her speech, Doctor Olivette Otele built on this broad conceptualisation to illustrate how knowledge production about historical events is a locus for power struggle and may itself become site of memory.

The question is not only about what kind of knowledge is produced, but also about the way in which it is produced. These processes reveal the mechanisms through which the history of colonial subjects are erased from memory. In other words, they provide one clue to addressing the removal of the African memory pointed out by Professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni.

In the Global North, current debate about colonialism appears to easily get stuck to controversial questions such as the potential pros and cons of the system. According to Doctor Otele, this, in fact, is a symptom of disturbed societies that refuse to come to terms with legacies of the past. The pain of such deterred memories leaves us to repeat certain patterns over and over. On the other hand, the refusal to deal with the past implies some degree of its acknowledgement. Forgetting and remembering are as though two sides of the same coin.

At the same time, these processes also play a role in national identity building. They are revealed in contexts such as school curricula, which reflect notions about what is accepted as a part of an identity. The omission of the fates of Caribbean workers who were invited to the Great Britain to build the “mother country” thus shows that their contribution still was not considered a part of the narrative of the imperial identity. Similarly, in the French curriculum the reduction of African history merely into the history of slavery reveals an utter disregard for the past before the colonial invasion, again rendering insignificant the narratives of the colonial subjects themselves.

At least equally important medium for communicating identity is popular fiction. In fact, for the general public, it often is the main source of historical narratives. It therefore matters a great deal if the film industry continues to produce stories celebrating Sir Winston Churchill for heroically ending the

Second World War, and if there is not a single character in these narratives that children whose roots are in former colonies could identify with. Policies for social cohesion will not be able to succeed if integration falls short of extending to historical memory.

The significance of school curricula and popular fiction show, historical memory is deeply tied to perceptions, emotions and lived experiences. It thus is a big leap to move from historical facts to memory – both are important, but they are not the same. As Doctor Otele argued, balanced value judgements about historical issues like the pros and cons of empire are therefore not only impossible but also unconstructive.

Beyond the often simplified debate, there lies a deeper question about the role of historians. Especially in the present time, which is marked by the ubiquitous presence of social media and allegations about fake news, it becomes clear that history is strongly linked to ideology and political agenda. Doctor Otele pointed out that historians are by no means the guardians of the past as they are equally influenced by their own background and ideas as anyone else. Although they need to strive to teach and write about all aspects of history, it is also necessary to recognise that it is not possible to fully overcome personal bias.

This paradox of history becomes evident also in the Southern and Northern perspectives to colonial history. The current controversies have largely been caused by the dominant narratives of the imperial past and the lack of integration of the stories of those who contributed to making those empires. In one way or another, these influence the scholars and their interpretations.

Rather than aim to give conclusions or answers as to how the situation could be overcome, Doctor Otele suggested asking further questions. Without taking any stand concerning the answers, she first asked whether it is necessary, especially in the French and British context, to remove statues of colonial figures in order to decolonise. This is a question that often still puzzles the majority group – or the perspective of the Global North – and its closer examination may therefore help to illustrate why it is difficult for this point of view to fully understand the legacy of colonialism.

Secondly, how is it possible to decolonise old mentalities? The discussion often mentions white and brown privilege, but it is also important to consider what happens when black people reach access to privilege and accept it? Thirdly, given that it often matters as much who is telling a story as what is being told, how will we be able to integrate multi-directional and multi-dimensional narratives of the past and make them acceptable in a multi-cultural society? Finally, how do we integrate narratives from the South to the North, especially in a way that will be helpful for people of Afro-European origin?

### 3. HOW TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY AND USE IT FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION?

One reason it is so important to find ways to deal with the past is that it often plays some role in conflict. Competing interpretations of history are drawn in to current debates and used to justify the positions of the conflicting parties. Doctor Erkki Tuomioja, Former Foreign Minister of Finland and Chairman of HWB, explored the potential to use historical knowledge for conflict resolution. Meanwhile, Executive Chair of Mandela Institute for Development Studies (MINDS) Doctor Nkosana Donald Moyo discussed linkages between history and conflict and also pointed out potential difficulties in attempting to use history for reconciliation.

#### 3.1. The Use and Abuse of History in Conflicts

Different views and interpretations of history continue to play a role in creating and stoking conflicts and to hamper efforts for conflict resolution. As Doctor Erkki Tuomioja pointed out, even when conflicts are resolved with peace agreements, unaddressed history can return like a haunting zombie and at worst lead to a renewal of the conflict.

However, it is not to be taken for given that this will always happen. As the example of some countries shows, there are ways to deal with the past and prevent conflicts from lingering on. Germany is known for its efforts in creating the concept of *vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The idea is not to manage history by manipulating it, but rather to address it with an open mind and with the aim of coming to terms with it, warts and all. According to Doctor Tuomioja, Germany provides a good model for dealing openly with the most challenging and awful periods of its own history.

Doctor Tuomioja acknowledged that the list of countries who have achieved such frankness with their own history is very short compared to the long list of countries where any attempts to do so have been rejected. This is especially problematic when the country in question is a Great Power which can allow its views of history to be directly reflected in its foreign policy.

Colonialism presents a particular problem here. Even countries usually regarded as liberal democracies, such as United Kingdom, have difficulties in openly addressing the dark corners of their colonial wars in Algeria, Kenya and elsewhere. In Germany, notwithstanding its *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, it took much longer to recognize the atrocities committed in its own colony in the country then known as South-West Africa (present Namibia).

Often the dividing lines of history run within countries, not between them. Doctor Tuomioja pointed out that his own country, Finland, experienced a violent civil war in 1918, which left deep wounds in the society. For decades, these were left unhealed due to the way the war was commemorated by the opposing sides. Instead of contributing to a healing process, even often

rather exacerbated the wounds. Yet in the beginning of the 1960s, new authors in literature and scholars in history started to promote understanding and reconciliation. Several research projects helped to find common ground on the interpretations of history. Today it is possible to view the events of the Civil War without linking them to issues concerning or dividing Finns today.

What happened in Finland in 1918 was not unique in the world, either at the time or now. Such events have different legacies, however. In his work both as an historian and as Minister for Foreign Affairs, Doctor Tuomioja said he had been frustrated by the all too frequent misuse of history. It led him to ask whether it would be possible to turn the issue around and ask what historians could do – not only to prevent the misuse of their work but also to actively engage in conflict prevention and resolution. After discussions with historians and diplomats, his idea eventually gave rise to *Historians without Borders*.

To assert that those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it may or may not be true, but ignorance will always increase the risk of being made an unconscious prisoner of history and prey to the machinations of politicians seeking to exploit history for their own ends. Doctor Tuomioja emphasised that historians must actively contribute to removing history as an instrument in fostering conflicts and hampering efforts at conflict resolution. Instead, historians should try and use it as a means for creating more common understanding and enhancing conflict prevention.

### 3.2. History, Conflict and Justification

History is entangled in current conflicts in several ways. It can feed and maintain conflicts and complicate their reconciliation. In his speech, Doctor Nkosana Donald Moyo was able to look beyond the perspective of an historian, as he is not one himself. Instead, he drew on his vast experience in policy-making and political life to reflect upon the ways in which history plays out in practice.

Doctor Moyo pointed out that history can be a cause of conflict itself, as it gives the justification that the parties of conflict need for their actions. Past events dating back before the conflict give rise to such opposing points of view that they cannot be reconciled peacefully. On the other hand, the parties have to hold on to those reasons also after the conflict in order to perpetually justify the actions they have taken.

The conflict parties will therefore have two opposing versions of history. According to Doctor Moyo, this does not mean that one side is right and one side is wrong. In this sense, objective facts do not exist – instead, there are different interpretations of events. Herein also lies the possibility of reconciliation after a conflict or any other kind of a historical trauma. Only through open dialogue

can opposing views be inched towards one another. This correlates with the core goal of Historians without Borders, based on using history to generate dialogue and reconciliation.

Still, for Doctor Moyo, the idea of using history as a positive force remains a tall order. When a conflict has taken place, it has essentially cemented the justifications of the opposing sides and tied them to certain interpretations of history. In such a situation, the probability is slim. For the victims of a war or their families, the idea of reconciling with the enemy may simply be unacceptable.

The same problem applies to historical wrongs like colonialism. The past atrocities have so profoundly shocked the societies that their legacy is impossible to undo either from everyday life or from memory. Doctor Moyo referred to a proverb in the Shona language, which suggests that when a tree is cut down, “the axe forgets, but the tree does not”.

Yet, as Doctor Moyo acknowledged, there still is a need to deal with even the most difficult historical memories in order to overcome their effect. He turned again to the example of Germany and its *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, pointing out that it was primarily motivated by national self-interest rather than any altruistic goal. For the German nation, it was imperative to discuss and surmount the catastrophic events of the past in order to move on. Doctor Moyo argued that the globally significant role that the country now has would not have been possible without its ability to candidly confront its history.

A similarly self-interested approach could be beneficial for discussions about history in the African context. The idea of dealing with difficult history can become more acceptable if it is done in order to reach a beneficial outcome. In fact, by avoiding confrontation with painful past the African societies may be depriving themselves from learning valuable lessons. In other words, it is not for the sake of anyone else but simply for their own benefit that they should confront their own histories.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The legacy of colonialism is still present and painful in both South and North, although in profoundly different ways. Both parties still need to continue their own processes of dealing with the past, but any effort to create wider understanding about the full picture of colonialism will require dialogue between them. The discussion in the seminar at the University of Johannesburg revealed that the goal still lies quite far off and the way towards it is riddled with difficulties. However, the speakers were able to propose certain steps to move forward, offering some hope along the way.

One of the outcomes of the discussion clearly is that facts alone cannot bring reconciliation with history. Although they help us to understand which specific events have taken place and how, they are still always seen in relation to some interpretative context. It is therefore virtually impossible for an historian to avoid history politics by sticking to facts, as some members of the audience suggested they

should do. Instead, responsible historiography should be aware of their own role as interpreters of the past.

The merits of calculating the pros and cons of colonialism were strongly questioned. As several speakers pointed out, even if some economic or infrastructure gains could be proved, they cannot reasonably be balanced against the loss of human lives and entire cultures. Past atrocities cannot be justified by consequences that have eventually given rise to something good. In Doctor Nkosana Moyo's strongly worded comparison, a rape cannot be justified by the birth of a child as a consequence.

Likewise, there are no easy solutions to dealing with colonialism, whether in history or otherwise. Yet the speakers were not pessimistic about continuing the discussion. They suggested asking new questions and reformulating old ones. In addition, both Southern and Northern perspectives should increasingly be brought to simultaneously consider these questions, rather than divide them into two separate discourses.

Meanwhile, there is a need to discuss histories of the Global South as independent from colonialism. The starting point should be on indigenous narratives, with the colonial time introduced as one period among others. Not only is this perspective important to employ in the South, it should also be taken on in the North.

Finally, the countries of the Global South could view discussions about their own histories from a self-interested point of view. Such an approach may make it more acceptable to address difficult topics and help to generate a constructive debate, allowing previously silenced voices to be heard. Likewise, in the North, a more candid confrontation with the colonial past would be beneficial in the long run.



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