

THE EFFECTS AND IMPACTS OF WESTERN IMPERIALISM ON CHINA & NIGERIA

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Abstract

In the history of any developing country, there is an element of foreign imperialism. Imperialism according to the western ideas is a modernizing instrument of history which helps culturally-bound societies to adopt western civilization and move into modernity. Imperialism is only felt by people who are invaded or colonized. It has both economic and socio-economic effect on the Chinese and Nigerian societies. Also, it affects both societies culturally and psychologically as a result of changes and quest for modernity. This paper explores western imperialism in China and Nigeria as well as its impacts in these two societies. It also discusses the cultural and psychological impacts of imperialism, consequences and effects in the social, political and economic lives of these societies.

Introduction

Karl Marx defines imperialism as the unconscious tool of history and also a necessary historical force in breaking apart stagnant and tradition-bound societies seemingly incapable of moving into modern history on their own (Meisner, 1977).

In the history of the world, China has been perceived as a land of strong cultural values because of its strong resistance to western invasion. Many scholars believe that China's refusal of the west is as a result of its conservative attachment to the traditional Confucian, social and cultural values. However, the Chinese people's strong attachment to their traditional values made China's path to modernization very slow and tortuous (Nathan, 1972).

The surprising thing about the effect of imperialism on China is that modern Chinese society is not transformed into the form of the western political world and civilization but still retains its traditional values. The refusal of Chinese conservative officials in accepting any form of minor reforms prevented the old imperial order from attaining modernization. Also, there was no centralized state that would have helped China from the conservative route to modernization, because the leaders were not ready for any alteration of their Confucian beliefs or tradition.

Foreign imperialism in Nigeria was quite different from that of the Chinese society. Nigeria has a very unique and painful colonial history; the missionaries were the colonial tools that were used effectively to penetrate into the social circles, regions and tribes of Nigeria. Many Nigerian scholars believe that the role played by western missionaries in the pre-colonial days of Nigeria is very explicit and must be a major concern to those who are colonized. It is a wide spread belief that the missionaries' penetration into the Nigerian soil is instrumental in setting the scene for the colonialist invasion of Nigeria. They were the first Europeans that the Nigerians came in contact with; this is also the experience of many regions and countries in Africa.

The missionaries' goal or mission in Nigeria was simply to change Nigerian natives from their barbaric ways of life and culture into a westernized culture or Christian belief system. They completely overlooked the cultural richness that existed in Nigeria and through converting more

people to Christianity; they also imposed their western culture and religion on Nigerian people. One humiliating thing about the western influence on Nigeria is that they placed the western culture to be superior to the Nigerian culture thereby leaving the Nigerians with a feeling that their culture is inferior, barbaric, dirty and that of savagery.

Many missionaries dedicated their lives in trying to change and influence Nigeria; some even died in order to achieve these goals. It would be unrealistic to assume that the missionaries were not aware of the drastic consequences of their exploration and opening up of Nigeria would bring. Many scholars believe that they heavily contributed to the colonial problems, experiences and power struggles in Nigeria. And as a result of this the political future of Nigeria has been affected and will be greatly affected because of the 1914 amalgamation of people with different languages, culture and traditional backgrounds; giving them a common name "Nigeria." After the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates, there had been conflicts and struggles about the tribe and region that would rule Nigeria.

Psychological Effects of Western Imperialism on Chinese people

China was never colonized by the British; the name China was not coined by any colonial master and also there were not much differences between western complexion and that of the Chinese people. Many Chinese citizens believed that, the Christian missionaries were an ideological arm of foreign aggression and that was why they called the Europeans "barbarians" who had come to destroy their rich traditional culture. However, the missionaries and the Chinese traditional gentry-elite were rivals; the missionaries believed that the Chinese gentry-elite were cunning, ignorant, rude and full of hatred for everything foreign. While the Chinese elite believed that the missionaries were foreign subversives whose immoral conduct and teaching were supported by gunboats (Fairbank et'al, 2001).

Hence, Chinese Confucian conservatives hated and feared the westerners (intruders) but unfortunately during the modern period, the conservative officials lost out. In 1894, the Protestants mission supported British, Americans and Canadians missionaries; they built churches, street chapels, small schools and hospital in different cities and towns. Yet they only converted a few number of Chinese citizens; this made so many western scholars to believe that China was not destined to be a Christian country.

The Effects and Impacts of Foreign Imperialism on China

In the 18th century of China, there was a loss of influence by the British traders on the Chinese population. The British demand for tea was very high and the average London worker spent more of his income to purchase Chinese tea. The British was finding it very difficult to balance their trade with China and to avoid that, they decided to sell more of their products to the Chinese citizens especially at Guangzhou. The only option they had was to increase the size and amount of goods brought in India in order to get more teas.

The British provided Bengal opium to the Chinese market; the opium imports from India to China caused a great crisis and destruction. The Chinese traders and others demanded for increase in the supply of opium in spite of so many bans from the Chinese government. Also the British helped in ensuring that opium trade continued in China; they bribed Chinese officials and helped them to smuggle opium in the Chinese markets. The drug actually weakened and affected so many Chinese people; many Chinese used silver to pay for the opium and this began to alarm the Qing administrators. The Chinese leaders had the problem of how to deal with opium trade and the British officials. Again silver became treasured in China than copper and this actually threatened the government's revenues and daily living. Many of the economic problems that China had had

been traced to the opium trade. Opium destroyed many families and industries which lead to violence and corruption between the smugglers and officials.

There were so many unequal treaties in China; in 1958, United States, Russia and France demanded for Britain's Nanjing treaty which also included extra territoriality whereby foreigners were not punishable or affected by the Chinese law. Again, a second war was fought in China from 1858-60 ; the opening of more ports that were open to foreign resistance, trade and westerners especially the missionaries compelled the tradition –bound China to change its traditional tribute based foreign relations to the signing of treaties with foreigners. There was free movement and trade by the foreigner in China; also they were immune from Chinese laws.

Many Chinese citizens believed that the Taiping Rebellion happened as a result of the missionaries influence over Hong Xiuquan, the founder of the Taiping movement. Though the movement had some elements of Christianity but it was not the European type but adapted Chinese form.

However, the Qing dynasty had survived rebellions by the Chinese citizens but its foreign relations were very difficult for the government to control. Japan's victory over China in 1895 threw the Chinese society into a decade of imperialist conflicts. Also, in 1898, Russia, Britain, Germany, Japan and France claimed influence over China and they all looked for major areas of development; like in the mines, naval ports and railway. There was no doubt that western influence and trade actually affected the Chinese culture and society which brought a lot of positive and negative changes both in technology and way of life in China.

Psychological Effects of Western Imperialism on Nigerian people

The psychological effects of western imperialism could only be felt by those who were colonized or invaded. Also, the social effects and consequences of colonial education, religion and political administration (control) could only be expressed by the formerly colonized people. African countries like Nigeria could not easily break away from the continuous mental and psychological struggle created by western imperialism since their historical past was hinged on colonialism, slavery and the name "Nigeria" which was coined by the colonial masters.

Many African novelists and poets like, Chinua Achebe, Dennis Brutus, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Linda Tuhiwai Smith had written to find solutions to this psychological effects but there was no easy way out. They wrote many poems and novels to re-define, re-interpret and project the unique features of African culture; while at the same time pointing out that African culture was very superior and not inferior to the western culture. It was widely acknowledged that imperialism labeled many Nigerian indigenous cultures and people inhuman or sub-human which left the Africans with a sense of inferiority toward the white people (Europeans).

The British used education as a tool to cultivate their religion and cultural hegemony in Nigerians. They oppressed the indigenous natives by subjecting them to western values. This was why Ernest Gellner stated that education was a means of subjugating people to a cultural hegemony, such subjugation leads to the domination of a people.

Chinua Achebe also pointed out in his famous novel **Things Fall Apart** (1958) about the coming of the white men (Europeans) and their influence in the cultural lives of the pre-colonial Igbo society. Achebe stated in his novel that:

“the white man was also their brother because they were all sons of God. And he told them about this new God, the Creator of all the world and all the men and women. He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone. A deep murmur went through the crowd when he said this. He told them that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went before Him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in His happy kingdom.” (Achebe’s **Things Fall Apart** (1958))

All these left the Nigerian society with a psychological feeling of inferiority toward their culture and origin. The first western culture and education was led by the missionaries; they opened and used schools as a means of converting local natives to Christianity. The C.M.S (Church Missionary Society and Methodist Missionaries Society) were the first Christian organizations that were founded by the missionaries in Nigeria. However, most of these schools were set up in the southeastern regions of Nigeria where there was less strict Islamic influence and control. One of the worst effects of imperialism is that Nigerian natives are made to believe that their colour, traditional cultures, and beliefs are dirty and barbaric; they are taught, controlled and directed according to British codes and principles. Fafunwa also mentioned that “the black Christian was made civilized when he or she isolated him or herself from the evil influences of his pagan past and present” (Fafunwa, 1974)

The Effects and Impacts of Foreign Imperialism on Nigeria

Many Nigerians felt that British colonization caused a lot of problems to the political culture and economy of the Nigerian society. The imperialism of 18th and 19th centuries was different from the 15th and 16th centuries European explorations; in these centuries, the Europeans did not penetrate into Asian and African societies to conquer them nor had influence over the people. But during the 18th and 19th centuries’ imperialism, they influenced the economic, cultural, political and social lives of the Nigerian and Chinese societies. And their major interest was to control and force the colonized countries to adopt their western cultures and traditions.

The years 1900 – 1960 marked the years of British colonial rule in Nigeria. The name Nigeria was never in existence before because the regions were different both in language and culture. They had their own defined and distinguished territories that were marked by their different cultures, unique languages, kingdoms and system of rural leadership. However, the intrusion of the British (European) as a result of their interest in slave trade and palm oil, made them to bring these regions with no common features together as a single country.

The British administration in Nigeria had been seen by so many Nigerian citizens as the real cause of the political, religious cultural and tribal conflicts in the contemporary Nigeria. Although the British colonized Nigeria for sixty years, there had been series of blame on the British government for exploiting the Nigeria’s natural resources. Many Nigerians think that they left Nigeria in poverty by stripping her of her raw materials. The British influence has both positive and negative effect to the Nigerian society; they positively helped in introducing infrastructure like railways, advanced communication technology, access to western education, and democracy. Also there are some negative effects such as forced acquisition of land for British use, discrimination against indigenous inhabitants of Nigeria and the merging or grouping of colonial borders.

The missionaries’ positive influence to the Nigerian culture are many ; they helped in the abolition of many humiliating customs like killing of twins, the use of human beings for sacrifice,

the slave trade and others. Bleakley (2006) stated in his project that the missionaries first made their presence felt through their works in abolishing of the slave trade. As Crowder noted, they took the emphasis away from 'human products' of Africa in a bid to use more fully abundant natural resources.

Conclusion

Imperialism refers to periods during the 18th and 19th centuries after industrial revolution when industrialized and European nations like America, Britain and France took control of some non-industrialized countries in many parts of the world. Imperialism had different motives and goals such as political, economic, social, religious and ideological. The Europeans actually took advantage of the countries they explored and they also exerted control using force in getting what they wanted.

There are positive and negative impacts of imperialism to Chinese and Nigerian societies. The Europeans brought modernization, western education and infrastructural development to their colonies which at the same time were at the expense of the cultural traditions of these societies. In the case of China, they obstructed their political culture and Confucian codes in the late 18th century by introducing western education, technology and culture in the Chinese traditional society. As a result of these influences and failures in the leadership system of the Qing dynasty, many rebellions erupted against the Chinese leadership system from its citizens.

Nigeria got independence from Britain in the year 1960; yet she is still struggling to achieve political stability and self sufficiency in her leadership system. Nigeria is a vast country blessed with many natural resources. It also has the unique potentials of being a powerful nation, but there are many obstacles toward achieving this. Some of these problems come from the British colonization of Nigeria; their influence in the political, social and economic lives of the Nigerians really affected the social and political circles of the Nigerian society. This problem of colonization is deeply rooted in the way they ruled and colonized Nigeria.

There is no doubt that Nigeria is still affected by imperialism but this does not mean that the contemporary and future leaders of Nigeria should fold their hands and allow the problems caused by western imperialism to ruin the peace of the country. Nigerian leaders should put aside all their tribal, ethnic religious and regional differences and put their resources together in order to build a better Nigeria. However, Nigeria has a lot to emulate from China in ensuring that there is fast growth, development, stability and good foreign relations. One good thing about foreign imperialism in China is that modern Chinese society is not transformed into the form or nature of western political leadership, but still maintains her traditional values.

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