**Film: This Magnificent African Cake**

Written and presented by historian Basil Davidson

1. Look for examples of European attitudes and assumptions about themselves and African peoples. For example, what did Europeans tell themselves to justify colonialism?
2. Keep track of the methods that were used to acquire African lands, resources, and labor. For example, what was the purpose of instituting taxation?
3. What did the French believe about the future for Africans under French rule compared with what the British believed about Africans under British rule?
4. How did colonialists maintain economic power over African workers, business owners, and government?

In Africa, as in other places of the world, colonialism was often brutal. Forces from European nations brought with them automatic guns. With these guns they often pushed Africans out of their homes, burned their homes, took over their lands, and put up fences to keep them out. When there was resistance, which occurred everywhere, people were slaughtered by the thousands. The Europeans then set up monoculture plantations to grow crops to feed the industrial complexes in their own countries. But they needed plantation workers, so they typically set up European legal systems that were primarily for organizing forced labor. In the beginning, the Europeans used taxation as a way to force colonized people into working for wages. People everywhere were taxed and since they did not have money economies, the only way indigenous peoples could raise money for taxes was to work for European plantation owners for the cash to pay for the taxes.

Often the lands people had for growing their own food were taken or colonial governments required indigenous people to grow cash crops such as peanuts and cotton, instead of food for themselves. People who participated in monoculture and grew cash crops were given very little in return for their crops, relative to what the European companies gained in profits from selling those crops. Often the crops, such as cotton, were used to make clothing which Africans were forced to buy at exorbitant prices. These kinds of practices destroyed land fertility and created a dependence on cash crops and processed goods. This was the beginning of a series of horrendous famines in many African regions.

**The following are pieces from a publication called *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, by Walter Rodney, 1973.**

‘The black man certainly has to pay dear for carrying the white man’s burden.’  
George Padmore,  
(West Indian) Pan-Africanist, 1936.

There was nothing ‘natural’ about monoculture. It was a consequence of imperialist requirements and machinations, extending into areas that were politically independent in name. Monoculture was a characteristic of regions falling under imperialist domination. Certain countries in Latin America such as Costa Rica and Guatemala were forced by United States capitalist firms to concentrate so heavily on growing bananas that they were contemptuously known as ‘banana republics’. In Africa, this concentration on one or two cash-crops for sale abroad had many harmful effects. Sometimes, cash-crops were grown to the exclusion of staple foods — thus causing famines. For instance, in Gambia rice farming was popular before the colonial era, but so much of the best land was transferred to groundnuts that rice had to be imported on a large scale to try and counter the fact that famine was becoming endemic. In Asante, concentration on cocoa raised fears of famine in a region previously famous for yams and other foodstuff.

Yet the threat of famine was a small disadvantage compared to the extreme vulnerability and insecurity of monoculture. When the crop was affected by internal factors such as disease, that amounted to an overwhelming disaster, as in the case of Gold Coast cocoa when it was hit by swollen-shoot disease in the 1940s. Besides, at all times, the price fluctuations (which were externally controlled) left the African producer helpless in the face of capitalist manoeuvres.

From a capitalist viewpoint, monocultures commended themselves most because they made colonial economies entirely dependent on the metropolitan buyers of their produce. At the end of the European slave trade, only a minority of Africans were sufficiently committed to capitalist exchange and sufficiently dependent upon European imports to wish to continue the relationship with Europe at all costs. Colonialism increased the dependence of Africa on Europe in terms of the numbers of persons brought into the money economy and in terms of the number of aspects of socio-economic life in Africa which derived their existence from the connection with the metropole. The ridiculous situation arose by, which European trading firms, mining companies, shipping lines, banks, insurance houses and plantations all exploited Africa and at the same time caused Africans to feel that without those capitalist services no money or European goods would be forthcoming, and therefore Africa was in debt to its exploiters!

The factor of dependency made its impact felt in every aspect of the life of the colonies, and it can be regarded as the crowning vice among the negative social, political and economic consequences of colonialism in Africa, being primarily responsible for the perpetuation of the colonial relationship into the epoch that is called neo-colonialism.

For the sake of the doubters, several of de Castro’s observations are listed below (occasionally supplemented by other data).

1. Investigators who have studied the nutritional conditions of ‘primitive’ Africans in tropical Africa are unanimous in stating that they show no clinical signs of dietary deficiency. One of the most striking indications of the superiority of indigenous African diet is the magnificent condition of the teeth. One researcher among six ethnic groups in Kenya could not find a single case of tooth decay, not a single deformation of the dental arch. But when those same people were transplanted and put on the ‘civilised’ diet available under colonialism, their teeth began to decay at once.
2. In Egypt, the peasants or fellahin had always suffered from periodic famines, but under colonialism this deteriorated to become chronic hunger. It was the intervention of the British which upset the balance of the peasants’ diet; and comparison with early accounts shows that there was once a much greater variety of legumes and fruits.
3. The kwashiorkor (of the Oxfam posters) is itself noticeable wherever the African’s contact with the European was prolonged. A Committee on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire found a noticeable absence of animal fat and protein in the Gambia. The absence of proteins of good quality is one of the principal contributors to kwashiorkor; and once again comparison with what Europeans saw in the Gambia ever since the 15th century would indicate that a change had come about after the coming of the whites. The Gambia not only grew a variety of food in the early period, but it was stock-raising country where meat was consumed in considerable quantity. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, cattle hides were sold by the thousands to European buyers every year, and the local population ate the meat. How then could they have suffered from an absence of animal fat!
4. Studies in Equatorial Africa have revealed frequent signs of dietary deficiencies caused by the absence of fresh foods among Africans entering the service of the colonisers. These include, beriberi, rickets and scurvy. Rickets is a typical temperate climate disease, to which lack of sun contributes. But after colonialism had so destroyed the pattern of judicious food consumption in tropical Africa, even the sun was not enough to keep children’s bones straight. As for scurvy, that is so closely identified with the English sailor that he was nicknamed ‘Limey’, from eating limes to prevent scurvy while lacking access to fresh food on long sea voyages. However, a scurvy epidemic broke out in the middle of Tanganyika in the colonial epoch-among workers in the goldfields, whose wages and conditions of work did not permit them to get fresh citrus and other nourishment.
5. In South Africa, white settlement and capitalism transformed African diet from meat and cereal to dependence on mealy-meal (maize). Pellagra or ‘rough skin’ was unknown in South Africa until about 1914. Subsequently, it became a scourge among Africans, because it derives from absence of milk and meat.
6. An official report on Basutoland (now Lesotho) had this to say: ‘According to residents of long-standing, the physique and health of the Basuto today is not what it used to be. Malnutrition is seen in every village, dispensary, school and recruiting office. Mild scurry and subscorbic conditions are not infrequent; pellagra is becoming more and more frequent and lower resistance to disease increasingly apparent. It is becoming generally accepted, too, that the occurrence of leprosy is associated with faulty diet.’