

Colonialism Revisited

by Michael Curtis



In comments made in 2018, but leaked in September 2021, Kemi Badenoch, now British Minister for Equalities remarked “I don’t care about colonialism because I know what we were doing before colonialism got there. They came in and just made a different bunch of winners and losers.” It is not exactly clear how to interpret this message by a politician, born in 1980 in London of Nigerian parents, who grew up in Nigeria and has been a Conservative member of the British parliament since 2017. However, it suggests a view of “colonialism” different from the woke version or that of those who have criticized her.

Badenoch had already entered the partisan controversy over the report of the British Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, BCRED, published on March 31, 2021. She defended the report and pointed out the complex picture it presented which differed from the way that issues of race in Britain as in the U.S. are often presented. The report indicated that racism and discrimination remain a factor in Britain and that abhorrent racist attitudes continue. But the report also held that factors other than racism may account for disparities between ethnic groups. These factors include geography, deprivation, and family structure. What is important in this analysis is that it does not deny that institutional racism exists in the UK, but holds that definition of the term should be used more carefully and always based on evidence.

Conclusions of the BCRED report challenge general views, and imply there is room for legitimate disagreement and debate on issues of racism and discrimination. Badenoch’s remark also suggests that the same is true of the realities of

“colonialism,” equally like racism and imperialism the subject of general condemnation of European empires and aggression, established across the world since the 15th century. Colonialism has taken various forms, extending control over adjacent or non-contiguous territories, establishing settlements as self-supporting entities, using plantations to grow single crops, cotton, tobacco sugar, exploiting raw materials and labor of enslaved indigenous people.

The remark of Badenoch implies that colonialism was not confined to Europeans and even with them lasted only a relatively short time. Colonialism was not invented as a result of the consequences of voyages of Columbus to the Americas, which involved Portugal, Spain, Britain and the Dutch. Long before Europeans arrived in areas outside Europe, Africans were enslaving other Africans, capturing them by war and raids, and selling them to Rome and Arab markets or using them for human sacrifices, for funeral ceremonies or displays of wealth.

Colonization, and racism, which is associated with it in a logical way, goes back at least 2000 years and was present with different peoples. The Passover service commemorates the biblical story of Exodus which related the freeing of Israelites from colonialism and slavery in Egypt. Greece colonized Cyrenaica and part of Egypt. Phoenicians established colonies along the coast of North Africa. Carthaginians set up colonies along the Atlantic coast of Africa. Goths, perhaps from Scandinavia, Vandals, Romans, Byzantines, the Ottomans were also involved in colonial activities, some in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf Coast areas. Muhammad, the self-proclaimed “messenger of god “conquered the Arabism peninsula, that led to the invasion of Africa and the Levant, creating a dominant colonial power that extended from the Iberian Peninsula to Pakistan, until the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258.

Aztecs conquered and exploited others, and war

captives. Ottoman Turks used forced conscription of the areas they conquered in southeast Europe. Aztecs organized an empire of three states, in central Mexico including different ethnic groups, that lasted from 1300 for centuries, expanded its political control conquering some states and trading with others. The conquered and political stability. Slaves who wore special garments were used for a variety of work, sold or sacrificed at religious ceremonies or festivals.

Bernard Lewis in his 1994 book, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, makes clear that in the ancient Middle East, slavery was present amongst the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians and other ancient peoples. The Koran assumed the existence of slavery, and Arabs practiced a form of slavery similar to that in other parts of the world. Lewis points out that slaves under Islamic rule could rise, gaining places in the military and even government.

African societies had forms of government that kept and sold slaves. For example, in early 18th century, Dahomey, on the west coast of Africa now called Benin, was a colonial power, in the 18th and 19th centuries, grew rich by conquest, war, trade, trading prisoners for goods, and slave labor. In the Islamic world, most slaves came from lands close to that world, whites from Europe and the Eurasian steppes, and blacks from Sub-Saharan Africa. The Ottoman Empire obtained its slaves by conquest and capture, mainly from Africa. Slavery existed for centuries in Ethiopia where even the rulers were large slave owners. The abolition of slavery was only put into law in 1935-6 by the Italian occupiers of the country.

On this controversial and emotional subject of colonialism three things may be said, perhaps to lower the temperature.

First, the European colonial ventures varied considerably. Probably the worst was Leopold II of Belgium who ruled the Belgian Congo as his personal property 1885-1908, and used

forced labor resulting in 8 million of the 16 million population killed,

One can be amused but reject the jibe of Sir John Seeley said, the British Empire was acquired in a fit of absence of mind. The Crusaders sought to reclaim Christian lands. The Conquistadors set up commercial colonies in Mexico and Peru and trade routes but also wanted to implant religion, Iberian Catholicism to convert the natives. Spanish colonization was motivated by a mixture of reasons, profit and the pressure of Catholicism. Reformers and those with a "civilizing mission" wanted to bring progress and economic modernization to backward people. Profits were sought. Portugal created trading posts that lasted as in Macau, in the south coast of China, the Las Vegas of Asia, until 1999 when the area was transferred to China. A number of European countries sought land not only to settle, but to produce single crop products by using slaves or to obtain raw materials. Sugar was a major part of the economy of Caribbean islands and the plantations produced about 90% of the sugar consumed in Western Europe.

Secondly, Western European countries, if some belatedly, did abolish slavery and the slave trade, or argue against it as in Britain from the late 18th century, starting with the Dissenters, the Quakers, John Wesley, the evangelist wing of the Church of England: "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground." Britain, particularly the Royal Navy was active around the world from 1807 in suppressing the slave trade.

Thirdly, it is disquieting that non-European colonialism and slavery is rarely mentioned or subject of criticism. The reality is that Africans were involved in slavery, centuries before Europeans were present in Africa. Africans conquered other Africans in wars and raids, and used them for different purposes: victims of human sacrifices, for conspicuous

display, and sales to Rome and to Asia.

The Barbary Coast slave trade, on the coast of north Africa, was associated with slave markets in Ottoman states, Algeria, Tunisia, Tripolitania, and Morocco. The most well known person captured by the pirates was Miguel Cervantes, captures 1575, who was a slave in Algiers for five years. His interest in the question of madness in his Don Quixote probably stems from his experiences as a captive.

The pirates obtained the slaves by raids in ships and on coastal towns, including the Canary Islands and in 1631 Baltimore, Ireland, the southernmost place in the country. This was the largest raid by Barbary pirates.

The pirate slave traders enslaved more than one million Europeans in North Africa in 16th to 18th centuries. The U.S. and other countries paid tribute to prevent raids. Until President Thomas Jefferson refused to do so. It is memorable and symbolic for American foreign policy today that the U.S. navy expedition fought gunboats and fortifications in the Tripolitan War 1801-1805 and ended the tribute payment.