

‘Sitting with the Discomfort of Decolonisation’

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Introduction

It is tiring to sit through another conversation on the legacies of slavery and colonialism while we continue to see injustices around us on a daily basis. But this is an important conversation for several reasons and so we have to continue to find energy to keep going, with the hope that this conversation will cause something to change or shift; that we can agree on some actions to take; that it will not be just another conversation.

In order to take some action, we will have to engage the conversations on decolonisation to hear others, and to understand how slavery and colonialism continue to affect them. It is important to sit long enough in order to act. Such sitting and intentional listening is uncomfortable but critical to changing the system in which we live.

The problem

When we fail to sit long enough, we tend to make ill-informed observations such as: “well colonialism brought ‘civilisation’ to the colonies”. At what/whose expense? Or “Africans were accomplices in colonialism, they did not put up any resistance”. Have we sat long enough to hear the deliberately omitted narratives, and to understand the skewed power dynamics of those times, a power imbalance that continues till this day?

Or we say “they (those colonised) have had the opportunity to (re)build their countries post-independence”. Some may even say: “they are lazy” or “there they go again, complaining”. Harm that was caused over centuries is not easily rectified over a few decades, not with the external influence that is still exerted on former colonies. Yes, they, the ‘independent nations’ have a lot to do themselves, to tackle issues like corruption and poverty, but we cannot overlook the enormity of the disruption to their nations, cultures and governance structures. We cannot continue to say people in the global south and former colonies are not interested in decolonisation, simply because they do not relate to the word or because a few people from among millions on a continent said so. We have not sat long enough to understand how ‘bread and butter’ issues, and the fear of losing support, dictate responses from the underprivilege. We have not listened closely enough to understand that some of these responses mirror the legacy of colonisation we are discussing including disruption in world views, faith matters and the quest to belong and be aligned with the global majority. A re-framing of the terminologies reveals that people do care about these issues even if they do not name them as such. In matters of (in)justice, we do not need permission to act, we do right by others while working through the cultural sensitivities required. These comments are discouraging and exhausting, but these are precisely why we need to continue showing up to have these conversations.

The Discomfort

The conversations on decolonisation will be uncomfortable for various factors. Here are just three interlinked reasons why the conversation makes us uncomfortable:

1. Decolonisation requires a different mindset, a different skillset and a different knowledge base. The reality is that most of us, including persons from the global south, developed our trades within dominant world views, colonial educational systems and professional structures. It will take courage to do things differently through a decolonial lens, and courage to admit that we do not have the 'know-how' for this line of action. A new mindset will challenge educational institutions and their curricula. It will raise questions such as who is the curricula for? Who should teach? How is research conducted and whose research methodology is applicable?
2. Decolonisation triggers the fear of what might be discovered in our 'closets'- in our family lines and our institutions in both the global south and north. There are many who would like to right (write) the wrongs of the past, yet they have fear of getting it wrong. The sensitivities and polarisation of our times create a fear of saying things inappropriately and a fear of being branded racist. And so many of us simply sound politically correct without a change in attitudes. These fears and discomfort are legitimate. We all need some grace for these conversations to occur.
3. Decolonisation calls for a shift in power. This expectedly creates apprehension and the discomfort of losing relevance or support, should the power centre of the world shift. Some may not take this lying down. There is likely to be some push back on the needed reforms and we see this in the international development spaces.

The Justification

While acknowledging the discomfort, it is important to underscore the fact that efforts towards decolonising the system and tackling the legacies of slavery are worth it. I would focus on just one area of the justifications for this needed work, and that is the '**Justice Justification**'. Here are three thoughts:

1. There is something wrong with a society that is still saying 'first black or brown person to ...'. This is the 21st century! That reveals how unrepresented and how unjustly, we have treated a large proportion of humanity for a very long time. That must change.
2. There is something wrong with a world where some group of people have to live with a baggage of suspicion and discrimination all the time and remain on the margins of the global development system. We must act.
3. There is something wrong with a world that fails to fully acknowledge the hurt, disruption and theft caused by slavery and colonialism, but sits with flippant excuses, leaving in its track, images and symbols that continue to torment victims and survivors of slavery and colonialism. That is disrespectful and unjust.

Could we sit long enough with this conversation to understand what we can do in our spheres of influence?

The Action

In these conversations on slavery, colonialism and decolonisation, the hope is that we will learn more about what has gone wrong. When we know a little more than we knew yesterday, we should have some ideas on how we might act to cause a shift in the system. Here are a few thoughts for consideration at the a) individual level, b) institutional level and c) state/national level.

At the level of the individual, we all need honest conversations that enable us to sit with the discomfort. We ought to reflect on the legacies from which we come, not to generate guilt, but to find responsibility in addressing the skewed system. Such reflections invite us to observe our 'dinner table' conversations, our everyday utterances, our usage of words about 'the other' and how that plays into the perpetuation of the injustices we see today.

At the institutional level, our conversations need to help us realise that some groups of people have been unfairly and systematically excluded from accessing the common good, which includes public resources, and meaningful participation in decisions that affect their own lives. But that recognition is not enough. Given that these elements of imbalance have been deeply institutionalised over time, there is no existing organisation or institution that does not have a role to play in changing the system. This includes the church and religious bodies generally, educational institutions and academia, local and international NGOs. The conversation ought to help us realise the power *we have* to effect change and to identify others in our circles who also have the means to effect change, or to lobby and advocate for change. Institutions ought to see how their programmes, curricula, knowledge systems and choice of epistemology, the language used, lifestyle and culture they promote can perpetuate colonial power structures.

At the state level, the conversation should lead us to understand citizenship differently. This will inform issues like immigration and the opportunities it offers the world. Those nations fed and nourished the world in the colonial past and they continue to do so in many ways today. This uncomfortable conversation must help us to realise that supporting development in the so-called global south is not a favour; it is a duty and a responsibility towards rectifying the injustices of the past and the present for our collective good. This conversation should drive state institutions, officials and intergovernmental bodies to work towards addressing the power imbalance that continues to undermine the global south.

Conclusion

Decolonisation will be uncomfortable, but our reasons for not having the conversation and taking action will soon become excuses. We need to recognise the history; stop denying it, stop justifying it, stop deepening wounds.

It is important to open up spaces for new conversations and new actions;

It is important that we open up our minds for new possibilities;

It is important that we open up institutional opportunities for those who have been persistently marginalised;

It is important to change the historically skewed criteria that automatically favour some and instantly disqualify others.

The legacies of slavery and colonialism are structural and systemic racism, and unless we name the problem this way, we will be tinkering and not really addressing the issues. The Trans-Atlantic Slavery was/is the most systematic, syndicated yet barbaric and violent forms of trade the world has ever seen. It disrupted family systems and cultures and deprived many of their lands and identity. It created unhealthy class systems, inequities and a power imbalance. Our thoughts, words, actions and inactions continue to render those places and their peoples inferior. To address these require a systems change.