
 The Creative Genius of Urban Africa


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Africa: Colonialism No Longer Has A Hold On Me

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In the 19th century, numerous European countries colonized Africa in the time that became known as the “Scramble for Africa.” Since then, African people have been victims of humiliation, oppression, and abuse, along with an endless list of other forms of mistreatment. Sadly, often times when people think about Africa and its history they think of colonized Africa, oppressed Africa, and abused Africa. Therefore, it is important to understand that Africa is more than its history under colonial rule and that there have been and still are efforts to show Africa’s other side. In this piece, I will be arguing that African people, during and after colonialism, have found ways to show both show resistance and their freedom of expression. African people have worked hard throughout the years to show resistance against oppression

and colonialism, as well as demonstrating that during dark times there was freedom, specifically freedom of expression. Therefore to illustrate said efforts, I will first examine African people's resistance efforts by looking at their actions specifically African female domestic workers in Johannesburg. Secondly, I will examine African people's efforts to exercise their freedom of expression through written work looking specifically at newspapers. Lastly, there is one key component in African cities that allows for the people to both show their resistance efforts and their self-expression, and that is through the built environment, for our purposes, we will consider spaces and buildings in Accra.

By looking at the resistance and self-expression efforts made by African people to put Africa's history with colonialism in the past, we can learn that colonialism no longer has a hold on Africa's past, present, or future. It is indeed important to acknowledge Africa's past to understand its present, but it is even more important to recognize that African people were and still are fighting to present a new Africa. An independent Africa that represents them and fills their hearts with pride. These efforts are meant to help us see beyond Africa's terrible past, appreciate Africa's present, and hope for a brighter future.

Resistance Through Actions

In the book *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg*, Rebecca Ginsburg exposes a sort of roadmap that illustrates from beginning to end the journey of African female domestic workers mainly focusing on the abuse, dehumanization, and mistreatment that these women had to endure while working in white middle-class households in Johannesburg. In her book, Ginsburg proves that even after all the awful treatment, limitations, and regulations that these women faced, in the end, they always found ways to resist and defy the household rules. It is important to acknowledge that the Apartheid era was a system of institutionalized racism established after the colonial rule period. These white middle-class households then represented a version of the Apartheid system and ideals but at a more intimate level.

Domestic workers had a long list of rules and restrictions that varied on the house's madam. Interestingly, one rule that was very common in these households had to do with visitors. Most domestic workers were allowed to have four types of visitors only one of them being “male lovers” under certain conditions of course. It is important to note that for many domestic workers, the only way to have a male partner over was by sneaking him into her room. Ginsburg points out that “Once she [domestic worker] chose to break her employer’s rules and civil trespass laws and, possibly, to abet the

violation of the government's influx-control regulations, a domestic worker faced a host of practical challenges.”¹ It is important to recognize that sneaking someone in was not an easy task due to the many practical challenges, the risks, and their environment. Therefore, domestic workers breaking the rules and deceiving their white employers can be seen as a form of resistance on their part. Domestic workers were resisting to comply with set rules, opposing to letting other people decide who they could see or sleep with, they were in simple words resisting apartheid rules. These sorts of actions were not the only ones that challenged household rules for domestic workers would a variety of stuff around the house or in their rooms that fall under the category of efforts towards resistance.

Expression Through Newspapers

The pieces, *Articulating Empire: newspaper readerships in Colonial West Africa* by Stephanie Newell, and *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* by Derek R. Peterson, Emma Hunter, and Stephanie Newell, will help us illustrate how African people were able to express themselves even during colonial rule.

For decades, written work especially newspapers has served as a method of

communication, a presenter of information, but most importantly, as a provider of an opportunity for expression, as was the case for many African people during colonial times.

Newspapers were really important during this period of time in Africa because they gave a voice to a wide range of African people from all socio-economic statuses. As Stephanie Newell explains, “Newspapers provided vibrant discursive spaces in which people of different social ranks and literacies could offer commentaries on culture, colonialism, and current affairs.”² Interestingly, most newspapers were owned by elite people but the commentaries, stories, columns, and much more were written by African people who were at the bottom of the hierarchy, and who might have been oppressed, abused, and silenced for long, but who received an opportunity to express themselves through writing. Additionally, newspapers back that time were not extremely regulated allowing for “readers of all social ranks [to] become writers with great rapidity, helping to break down colonial division between literary consumption and production.”³

Allowing people from all socioeconomic statuses and diverse educational backgrounds to share their side of the story gives them a sense of power, agency, and a great opportunity for self-expression that has not been seen before.

Furthermore, one of the pieces explains that “memorial columns [...] flourished in 1925 as a

vehicle for expression of grief in the newspapers”⁴ which proves that newspapers went beyond the sharing of information, and they served as the community-level method of self-expression. It is important to understand that as easy as allowing anyone to write a piece for the newspaper sounds—it was not. African people were still under colonial rule during this time. Many pieces written against colonialism were reviewed by editors and not published, fearing that colonial authorities would terminate newspapers. For that reason, people were cautious of what they would write, but at the same time, they would write in a way where they were pushing, slowly but surely, for an independent Africa.

Resistance and Expression Through the Built Environment

In Africa, there has been a long history of changes, modifications, a new uses that were given to the already-existent built environments during the colonial period. The colonial authorities attempt to modify and reorganized buildings in order to make African cities look more European. By rearranging the city to their liking, Europeans were attempting to make African culture, agency, and value disappear. Given the unfair circumstances that African people were facing during the colonial period, the built environment could not be changed to make it look like theirs again. It is key to

acknowledge how the built environment can be a symbol of resistance and expression which is what happened later on in Africa's history.

Ghana gained its independence from colonial rule on March 6th, 1957, and its first president, Kwame Nkrumah, wanted to make sure that Ghana was going to set itself apart and leave behind traces of colonialism. To do so, the "Nkrumah administration [...] [promoted] advanced modernity [in their new architectural projects] as a sign of national and political achievement." ⁵



"The Independence Square" Accra, Ghana. Picture from Adobe Stock

In Accra, there is a space called the *Independence Square* which also has an arch called the *Independence Arch*, this place was built to represent and symbolize the newly independent Ghana. A Ghana that is trying to get back its identity, agency, and its culture after the Ghanaian architectural essence was destroyed by the Europeans. The *Independence Square* was built to bring people together, to hold activities, and to give people the space and the opportunity to express themselves, speak up, and show their

new Ghanaian identity. In this same space, the *Independence Arch* was built. This arch also symbolizes independence and was meant to be a symbol of invitation. The placement of the arch was well-thought-out because it is by the shore looking right at the ocean implying that any ships or merchants can come into Ghana because it is now independent and willing to trade. This space and the arch in Accra are great examples of the power that built environments can have on a city, its people, and on its history. African people have used their built environment for decades to tell their story and show their current situation, their politics, show their aspirations, therefore making it a great way for them to both express themselves and still fight the battle against that colonial shadow that follows them everywhere.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at examples from an individual, community, and state level, as well as touched on three major parts of Africa's history which are: the period under colonial rule, the apartheid era, and after independence. This paper aimed to prove that Africa's colonial history is not their only history and that African people have worked hard to prove that they are so much more than just "Africa the colonized." This paper illustrated that in every major part of Africa's history, there have been instances where people have tried to show resistance and express

themselves. It is important to keep in mind that both resistance and expression go hand and hand and have helped African people, for decades, to leave their colonial history behind and have enabled them to write their own story, where the colonial rule or the apartheid era are not the authors, but the remainder to keep pushing through and to be the authors of their own story.

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