

Saving the Decolonized Subject from Neglected Tropical Diseases: Public Health Campaign and Household-Centred Sanitation in Colonial West Africa, 1900-1960

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Abstract : In pre-colonial West Africa, the deadliness of the climate vis-a-vis malaria and other tropical diseases to Europeans turned the region into the "white man's grave." Thus, immediately after the partition of Africa in 1885, civilisatrice and mise en valeur not only became a pretext for the establishment of colonial rule; from a medical point of view, the control and possible eradication of disease in the continent emerged as one of the first concerns of the European colonizers. Though geared toward making Africa exploitable, historical evidence suggests that some colonial Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) policies and projects reduced certain tropical diseases in some West African communities. Exploring some of these disease control interventions by way of historical revisionism, this paper challenges the orthodox interpretation of colonial sanitation and public health measures in West Africa. This paper critiques the deployment of race and class as analytical tools for the study of colonial WASH projects, an exercise which often reduces the complexity and ambiguity of colonialism to the binary of colonizer and the colonized. Since West Africa presently ranks high among regions with Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs), it is imperative to decentre colonial racism and economic exploitation in African history in order to give room for Africans to see themselves in other ways. Far from resolving the problem of NTDs by fiat in the region, this study seeks to highlight important blind spots in African colonial history in an attempt to prevent post-colonial African leaders from throwing away the baby with the bath water. As scholars researching colonial sanitation and public health in the continent rarely examine its complex meaning and content, this paper submits that the outright demonization of colonial rule across space and time continues to build ideological wall between the present and the past which not only inhibit fruitful borrowing from colonial administration of West Africa, but also prevents a wide understanding of the challenges of WASH policies and projects in most West African states.

Keywords : colonial rule, disease control, neglected tropical diseases, WASH

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