

Author's Note

In a strange way, this essay wrote itself. I never intended to examine colonialism but it somehow slipped into my paper and took hold of it (wry smile). I started out writing about humanitarian aid workers and the hypocrisy in them and examining how it was reflective of my own. As a result of this, while drawing parallels between the aid workers and myself, I found that I was constantly using the word “*we*”. Somewhere along the line however, I realized that this didn’t quite work because the “*we*” that was helping was coming into conflict with the “*we*” that was being helped, for wasn’t I after all a part of the third world that the aid was streaming into? The lines get blurred at this point and the murkiness becomes deeply unsettling and I realize that painful questions have to be looked into.

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The Faces of Colonialism and the Myth of Knowledge

1992. Somalia.

As television screens across the globe displayed horrifying pictures of helpless African children dying amidst destitution and squalor, the world gaped aghast. Humanitarian organizations rushed to the rescue, millions of dollars poured in and volunteers mobilized. The result: yet another addition to the growing list of humanitarian disasters taking place in the “desperate third world.” Despite my growing cynicism of the “save the world mentality,” I was aghast as I read Michael Maren’s diatribe of humanitarian aid in his book *The Road to Hell*. Reading it, I balked at the hypocrisy of the “impossible relationships” it showed me: humanitarian organizations harming the people they set out to help, journalists fabricating facts in their zeal to report the critical story, peacekeeping missions creating war...

I could go on. However, rather than present here the sequence of events that led to the aid disaster in Somalia, I shall highlight some of the passages that screamed out at me in Maren’s 280 paged debunking of the global “fixit” industry. Maren states:

With regard to the Humanitarian organizations,

These so-called development agencies kept right on financing the destruction of a country. Their actions were eroding Somalia’s economy, making people poor, and, in a bizarre way, **creating a need for more and more aid, more and more NGO’s**. It was a cycle that eventually would consume itself¹.

About the food aid,

Food aid, Raghe emphasized again, had turned Somalia from a self-sufficient exporter of food to **an aid-dependant “Kleptocracy.”**²

Concerning the peacekeeping mission that followed the aid,

¹ Michael Maren, (175), *Road to Hell*

² Michael Maren, (169), *Road to Hell*

The UN peacekeeping machine was cursed with a built-in flaw: ***It desperately needed to succeed***. When the only way to bring peace to Somalia might have been to walk away, the bureaucracy was compelled to stay and find a peace **for which it could take credit.**³

And finally, the role of the journalists in the creation of the famine,

Somalia was as much a story about the media as it was about the famine in that country. Specifically, it was a story about how ***journalists helped feed a famine and create a crisis*** demanding international attention.⁴

Echoing from these statements is the idea that the very desire to help generates the conditions for help to be needed. How did good intentions turn so terribly malicious? In order to explore this, I believe it is important to examine the relationship between those who provide the help and those who receive it. The imbalance of power that exists in this relationship often generates complexities that result in aid becoming destructive. Using my own experiences with aid work, I intend to delve into the psychology behind humanitarian aid work and explore the underlying forces of giving and receiving aid.

When there is a “helper” and someone “in need of help,” a hierarchy is immediately created. The helper contains the power and the strength while the one who is receiving the help stays helpless and disempowered. The relationship demands that the helper possesses the resources, the knowledge and the technology while the helped sits helplessly among the squalor, stench and sickness, gratefully awaiting the helper’s benevolence. As I write these lines, I find that they echo something all too familiar to me, making me pose the question: Is it possible that this relationship between helper and the helped is actually an older relationship re-inscribed? Could this be the master-slave colonial relationship rewritten? The idea that the West, with its superior knowledge can go forth and help the poor Africans

³ Michael Maren, (251), Road to Hell

⁴ Michael Maren, (204), Road to Hell

by teaching them to irrigate their fields, cure their diseases and live their lives, echoes the unsettling refrains of Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden:"

Take up the white man's burden
the savage wars of peace
fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease

The mark of the colonial rule was that it appeared in the guise of good intentions and transformed into the horrific need to control. The events that occurred in Somalia bear the markings of crossing the line between help and control. While in 1992 aid agencies swooped down on Somalia by the droves and the media sang the woeful tune of the Somali famine crisis, by 1993 this humanitarian mission had morphed into a military intervention.

Maren states,

One day we were looking at photos of beefy marines rescuing big eyed starving babies. The next day it was equally compelling images of Cobra attack helicopters strafing Mogadishu streets. Suddenly, the humanitarian intervention had become a military assault. The skinny Somalis who had so recently been seen as victims had become the enemy. (217)

He continues,

The violent events that occurred in 1993 were not an aberration; they were in fact foreign aid carried out to its logical extreme. The desire to help had - as it almost always does- become the desire to control (218).

The underlying idea: Let us help you. If you won't, we will do so by force. It is strikingly reminiscent of the intentions of the colonialist, demonstrated perfectly in that terrible yet incredibly illuminating document, the *Requerimiento*.

Said the Conquistador to the Indian;

Wherefore, as best we can, we ask and require you that you consider what we have said to you...and that you acknowledge the Church as the Ruler and Superior of the whole world...

If you do so, you will do well, and that which you are obliged to do to their Highnesses, and *we in their name shall receive you in all love and charity, and shall leave you, your*

wives, and your children, and your lands, free without servitude, that you may do with them and with yourselves freely that which you like and think best, and they shall *not compel you to turn Christians, unless you yourselves, when informed of the truth, should wish to be converted to our Holy Catholic Faith*, as almost all the inhabitants of the rest of the islands have done. And, besides this, their Highnesses award you many privileges and exemptions and will grant you many benefits.

But, if *you do not do* this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, *we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command*; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; *and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us.*⁵

What is most interesting about this document is that you can replace “Christianity” with a number of terms and this passage will have a familiar ring to it. Substitute “Christianity” with “Democracy,” “Modernity” or “Foreign Aid” and Indians will miraculously turn into Afghans, Iraqis or Somalis.

As demented as the conquistadors sound in the *Requerimiento*, there is a strong probability that they truly believed that they were saving the “savages.” Is it also possible that this need they had to save, to liberate by force, to murder in order to bring salvation, has persisted through the ages and reemerged, donning the attire of peace-keeping UN forces or zealous NGO’s? Could it be that the cross Columbus planted in the islands of the Caribbean has been slightly modified and transformed into the Red Cross branded on a Land Rover speeding through the streets of Somalia?

The need to save and the need to conquer lie close together, like twins in a womb. Nothing stays the same... and yet nothing changes. Bombs being dropped on Afghanistan sing songs of peace and liberation and Guantanamo Bay prisoners going on hunger strikes

⁵ Lewis Hanke (27), *Revista de Historia de Americana*

are force-fed in a “*humane and compassionate manner*,” by strapping them to chairs and inserting tubes through their noses.

As I write all this, I find myself asking, “How do I fit into this picture?” From a western perspective, coming from South Asia, I should be one among those hapless masses. Yet, I suspect that I am guilty of playing the same tune with a different flute. Perhaps if I look into myself, if I go back to my past, I will be able to understand better, this need of the western world to save.

I remember sitting in my garden as a miserable 14-year-old reading an article that changed my teenage years. My school life had not turned out the way I had envisioned and I was constantly flooded by a feeling of unworthiness. The article I read that day spoke of how a young boy with very little to be proud of began a food drive and miraculously collected a warehouse full of food to donate to the poor. He had transformed his life and the lives of those around him. My epiphany came that evening as I realized that I could do this too. *I* could help. *I* could actually do something significant. My “passion” for community service was born out of that tale. My family watched in amazement as I suddenly came out of my shell and began to collect money and mobilize my friends to fundraise for all sorts of causes, buying medical equipment for the military hospital, medicine for the cancer hospital, collecting food for “drought victims” in the south of Sri Lanka... I filled my teenage years by helping others. The more money I collected, the greater the sense of accomplishment. Looking back, I see that what I couldn’t get by receiving, I obtained by giving. This *need* for making a *significant difference* stemmed from a *fear* of being *insignificant*. In my teen years, I was trying to fix the problems inside by fixing the problems outside.

How easily the need to help supersedes the actual task of helping. On my trips to the many war-torn villages of Sri Lanka, I worked in a pharmacy of a medical camp distributing free medicine to villagers affected by the drought. These trips were strenuous as they involved waking up at 4am, traveling for 10 to 12 hours and then working till two or three in the morning without a break. Among the doctors, nurses and volunteers was a group of elderly ladies who would come on each trip. While I was working with these ladies, I noticed that they were always irritable and were constantly complaining. Often, they would be rude to the people waiting in line, shouting at them and bemoaning the fact that their hard work was never appreciated. I found this treatment dreadful as most of the people had traveled a long way and had been standing in the scorching heat for hours in order to obtain medicine. Sometimes we would run out of a certain type of medicine and these ladies would give them a supplement that they thought would work instead. They had absolutely no medical expertise. When midnight hit, the negligence heightened. We were all exhausted and were mechanically filling envelopes with pills and tablets. I know without doubt that there were times when the wrong medication went into those envelopes. Not much notice was given to this... We were so caught up in the act of helping that the right help didn't matter. All that mattered was that we had sacrificed a weekend to go to these war-ridden areas to help.

Reading Maren, I heard echoes of my past.

From the Somalis' perspective, however, the entire bureaucracy was an object of endless amusement. They saw foreigners, hundreds of them, darting about the streets of Mogadishu, risking their lives, occasionally getting killed or kidnapped, going from meeting to meeting, always busy...always in a hurry, **yet seemingly doing nothing.** (250)

We worked so hard at those medical camps, standing for hours with our clothes sticking to our bodies from the heat and humidity, working at a frantic pace, running up and down between the doctors' tables and the pharmacy. And yet, what were we there for? When I really think about it, we were more concerned with being there to help than actually helping. All that mattered was getting those lines to shorten. The ironic thing was that the longer the lines, the greater the sense of accomplishment. The hotter the environment, the tougher the trip was, the greater its appeal. The organization itself was incredibly meticulous about ensuring that all the medicines donated were delivered to the villages and the doctors were dedicated but the volunteers were more concerned about going about helping than giving the right help.

This need to fix or help contains at its heart, the idea that the "helper" knows or possesses something that the "helped" doesn't. Going back to colonial roots and looking around us in the present at their re-inscribed manifestations, I find myself getting drawn back to this hierarchy. I see now that colonialism has undergone a facelift and shows itself in the many forms of help that goes from the global north and west to the global south and east. The aid that pours into these countries, the technology that is passed on, the progress of "feminism" that is pitched against the backwardness of "repression of women," the ghastly soap operas, the Nike t-shirts (that can be found on the pavement for a hundred rupees, duplicated to perfection) are all faces of the old offender. The global capitalist economy uses to its benefit this idea that the "global north" possesses something that is so magnificent that it must be adopted by the "global south."

And yet, it is too simple to even create the labels "North" and "South". The life I lived in Sri Lanka, although shaped greatly by Sri Lankan culture, was not one that is often

ascribed to the “Global South” and “East.” I belonged to the anglicized, upper-class that often viewed the rest of the country with eyes similar to those of the western/colonial world. When I look back now, I see that this was most obvious when I joined yet another drought relief trip. Driving through the searing heat of the parched, drought-ridden Hambantota on a relief project to provide food and water to the affected villages, we passed people standing in the roadside asking for water, people carrying empty barrels... It looked like a BBC clip from “starving Africa.” As I passed many of these people, I looked at them through the eyes of a do-gooder Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia. There was such a gap between “us” and “them.” We were there to help. Like knights riding up to rescue, like U.S marines swooping down to liberate, *we* felt important, *we* had the superior know-how. Although I didn’t recognize it then, there was this voyeuristic, pitying look that I cast upon the villagers. My privilege was measured against their poverty and my comfort against their strife, when all the while I was convinced that I was there to help. Now, I find myself wondering in horror, what made me, coming from the so-called third world, look at my own people with the eyes of a colonialist/humanitarian?

It takes me to two murky and uncomfortable recognitions. The first is that I was never really Sri Lankan (whatever that entails). Although my family was never rich, I still came from the English speaking upper-crust that lives far removed from the rest of the country. We had adopted a westernized lifestyle and believed in “modernizing” Sri Lanka. It hurts to say this, but perhaps if I were living 200 years ago, I would have been among the hated elite that helped the British control my own people.

The second proposition is even more frightening and it concerns the “western progress” that is constantly sold to us. Does the West actually possess something greater?

After studying politics for three semesters it seemed to me that my illusions of this were shattered. Now, I find myself posing that question again, tremulously, because I am afraid of what the answers might mean.

As I was applying to college, my mother warned me that the America I saw on TV was not the America in reality. I shook my head stubbornly. What I had seen on HBO (yes, those of us who could afford it, bought it to gape at the west even more), spoke freedom, equality, opportunity, order, efficiency... My desperate need for this drew me despite all the obstacles, (financial, cultural, etc.), to IC where I became a politics major and found, to my dismay, that democracy favored the proponents of it, that equal rights left out those who are “too different,” and that free trade was sugar-coated exploitation. At this moment in time, I find myself sitting in the classroom, debunking American imperialism, ranting about racism, inequality and what not. And yet,

I am here. I came here. And here is the worst blow – I like being here.

I am struck with a painful contradiction. If I accept that the western way of life is greater, better etc, then I am essentially saying; “yes the west is superior, yes it is more advanced”. But saying that involves agreeing with Rudyard Kipling when he says ‘Take up the White man’s burden/ To seek another’s profit / to work another’s gain.’” In other words, by saying that the modernity of the west is “*progress*” aren’t I saying “come hither, conquer me?” As well as I have adjusted to the American education system, as much as I enjoy my life here, I still belong to “the other,” and this is the “other” that is exploited, time and time again by the West.

But if I say no, then I have to ask myself, what am I doing here? The freedom that my lifestyle grants me, the education and the comforts feel so good. The fact that I am here

and that I resist giving up this life makes it harder for me to negate the idea of western progress. This poses a huge blow to my ideals. The hypocrisies at home are found in abundance but the hypocrisies in America are more deadly because (a) they are concealed and gift-wrapped better and (b) their effects are far-reaching and much more devastating. Yet, it is easier for me to sit here and bemoan America's duplicity than to go home and let go of my life here.

I am afraid though, that it might be too late. I have already been bought. In fact, I was bought long before I came into this world. Speaking of capitalist imperialism Stavrianos states,

The immediate effect of capitalist intrusion was the absorption of the traditional agrarian societies into the new global market economy. This was a total and all encompassing process, for the cultures as well as the economies of those societies were profoundly distorted and remolded in order to satisfy the demands of the global market.⁶

He states elsewhere; "Whether the end result should be termed 'progress' depended upon whether it was the judgment of the conqueror or the conquered."⁷ The British departed from Sri Lanka in 1948, but they departed making sure that they left their ghosts behind. The ghosts comprised of the English speaking elites, hooked on the wine of the white lifestyle (not to mention white power) and were more than happy to step into the roles of the departed imperialists. I came two generations down the line. I attended a private school and grew up among students who, like me, came from English-speaking families. The culture created in these schools bred children who craved for western food, read the multitudes of tacky western novels, watched Hollywood movies and dreamt of going to the west. Little did we know then that all that filtered down to us was the worst of

⁶ L.S Stavrianos, (37) *Global Rift*

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American society, packaged in the promising images of freedom, democracy, and glamour. The frightening part about this is that “the white man’s burden” is no longer exclusively borne by the white man. The white man is being manufactured on brown skins and these brown skins in turn, carry out the necessary work. Yes, one generation of colonialists had left, but they had secured the markets for another generation of colonialists. I think back a year ago and I see how subtly the influences filter back. I went home last summer, and tried to “fix” Sri Lanka. My realization that there could be a different way of life, a way of life where I had enjoyed more freedom immediately created a belief that it had to be universal. I had to fix things. All my fixing would do however, is reinforce the idea that the west possesses the key to life and re-establish the market in my country for capitalist imperialism.

I do not know what to do with this. Had I not come here, I would still be gaping at America, seeing it as a utopia, the land of the free and equal. Now that I am here, I see the underlying hypocrisies and shudder at their implications. And yet, I cling on to being here and having my education.

The problem I face now is that although it is easy to debunk the colonialist, I can’t do that fully because I know that it is a part of me. I have, in the process of filling my void, gone looking for voids to fill. My humanitarian aid work stands as testimony to that, as did the need I had to set things straight in Sri Lanka. I do not want to claim to be a part of progressive western modernity because I see the glaring danger it contains and the devastation it creates. Yet, the process that brought me here, that led me to see all this, is the very process I am trying to resist.

On top of all this rides the question of knowledge and knowing. The conquistador managed to convince himself that if he ended up killing the Indians, it was their fault and their destruction was something that they brought upon themselves. The journalists who were reporting in Somalia craved being useful in a crisis so much so that they created it. The same goes for the humanitarian aid workers. I do not believe the UN, CARE and SAVE officials who worked in Somalia in 1992 were drawn into aid work simply because they realized that the profits were huge. Yes, there was usurping going on, yes they were getting paid exorbitant amounts, but is it too implausible to imagine that they thought that somehow the Somalis were benefiting from it? I am not claiming here that everyone does everything based on good intentions and thus should be absolved of any responsibility. Only that we manage to justify our actions to ourselves somehow. And if we can't justify them to ourselves, we justify them to others. Thus, the famine was escalated to make the fixers of the world feel that they were really fixing and the journalists were there to convince the world of it.

My question now is, how can I trust the knowledge I create for myself? Can I ever escape the trappings of my own “*good intentions?*” My horror at what I read in *Road To Hell* makes me swear to differ from the imperialists and the humanitarians and yet I cannot help but feel that each time I recoil from it, I am simply avoiding looking at a part of myself. I know I will find a way to justify my being here, despite what it implicates, because I cannot bear to let go of the “freedoms” that my life here contains. This education we get as international students stands in stark contrast to the one we get at home (at least it seems to). In order to validate to ourselves that the education is worth it, so many of us feel the need to go back home and “set things straight.” Each time something “catastrophic”

happens; when war breaks out, when the Tsunami hits, the harbingers of capitalist imperialism clothed in the shimmering garments of foreign aid and goodwill arrive by the droves. Yet, even more than I fear their “good intentions,” I fear mine, and those of my western educated friends from “third world countries.” I fear that the guilt of being here will need to be justified, just as the guilt of the wealth earned by the so-called first world attempts to justify itself by dropping bombs on Afghanistan with freedom cries of democracy. What misfortunes this justification will bring upon the people I am trying to help, I dread to imagine.

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