

Land Dispossession as a Tool of Capitalism

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The Nyuki comic is an allegory for the violent process of colonisation that happened in many Indigenous communities across the world, from Africa to the Americas, Asia and Australia.

The story follows a hive of bees that hospitably receives a group of hive beetles into their colony, shows them the inner workings of the hive, and even shares some of their honey. The hive beetles later return and violently take over the hive in much the same way that Europeans, who were initially welcomed by indigenous Africans, took over indigenous lands and colonised them. This essay, in particular, will examine land dispossession on the African continent as an inextricable part of colonialism and ultimately as a tool of capitalism.

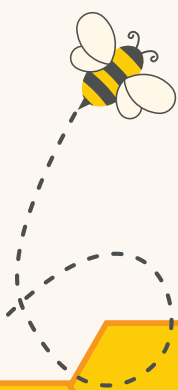
Colonialism is the act of attaining full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. Colonialism and Capitalism are inextricably linked because the biggest motivator for colonial expansion was the search for raw materials, markets, and labour to feed the growing industrial revolution in Europe.

Capitalism emerged as a modern world economic system in the 1400s with European colonial expansion. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English, and other nations invaded foreign territories and seized their land. Africa was and still is resource-rich, and European countries eyed the various resources on the continent, from gold and diamonds to copper, rubber, coffee, gum, and cotton.

In a historical event called the Berlin Conference, European countries scrambled for African territory. They partitioned it amongst themselves with no regard for the indigenous Africans who lived on the continent.

Dispossession is a common phenomenon where colonisation occurred in many parts of the world. This is because, by design, it entailed taking over land owned by natives and passing this over to the colonisers and their vassals.

Dispossession is central to settler colonialism's functioning. At the most basic level, in order to claim the land to settle on, settlers must first take control of it and declare it their own.





Capitalism is deeply tied to the ownership and control of land, as land is a primary means of production and a source of capital. Wealth is extracted and concentrated by exploiting natural resources such as minerals, cash crops, and livestock. Historically, capitalism emerged through the violent dispossession of the majority from their direct relationship with the land, transferring ownership to a privileged few and reshaping land into a commodity for profit.

In many parts of the African continent, especially where settler colonies were established, indigenous people were forced off the land, and it was placed in the ownership of European settlers to facilitate the extraction and exploitation of the natural resources.

They did so despite the fact that Africans owned the land individually or communally and derived their livelihood from it.

In order to justify what was, in effect, theft, European settlers had to undermine the social structures set up by the indigenous people they intended to rob by claiming that they were not legitimate or valid enough to warrant respect. The presumption was that the colonised had no rights to land, either as individuals or as groups.

This narrative was fuelled by racist ideas about the legitimacy of African civilisations, which underpinned colonialism and the concept of the 'white man's burden.' This idea suggested that white colonisers had a duty to 'civilise' the African continent and bring light to an otherwise dark continent.

Many proponents of this ideology operated under the assumption that Africans lived like savage brutes, with no form of social organisation or civilisation to speak of, and that, without the intervention of imperialist colonial Europeans, Africa would still be in the dark ages.

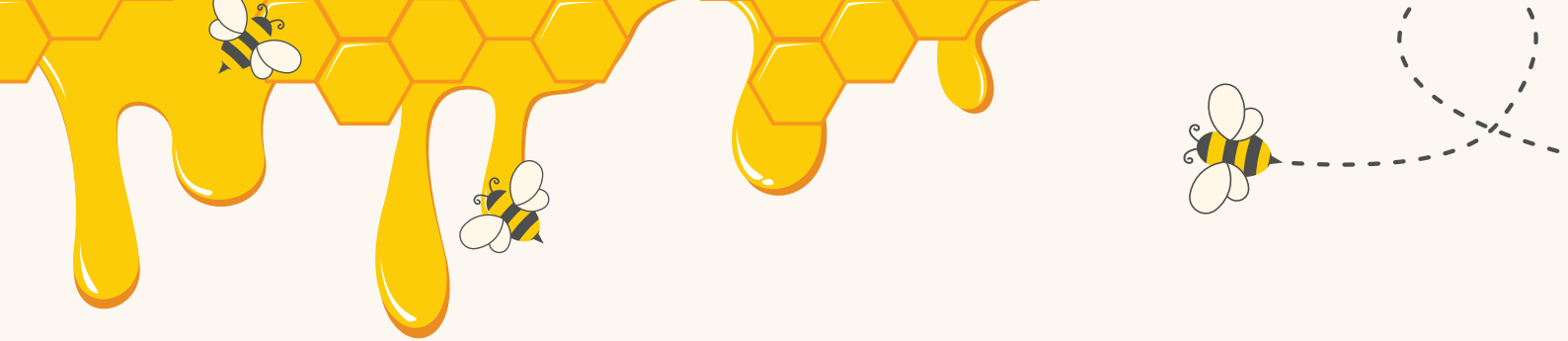
It is no surprise, then, that they believed that any claims to ownership by indigenous peoples were deemed subordinate to European claims. This is most clearly exemplified by the **Doctrine of Discovery.**

This was a principle used by European colonisers starting in the 1400s to stake a claim to lands beyond the European continent. The doctrine gave them the right to claim 'vacant' land for their nation.

The term for vacant land was 'Terra Nullius,' which means 'no body's land.' In a legal context, the term is often used to describe territory considered unoccupied or uninhabited and, therefore, available for acquisition by a state or individual.

Often, the land claimed as "terra nullius" had been inhabited for generations by indigenous people who had robust, albeit unwritten, systems of government, law and culture.





Regardless, the land was still said to have been 'discovered,' a word suggesting that Europeans were the first humans to become aware of its existence. The Spanish, Portuguese, English, and their European counterparts used this doctrine to justify the colonisation of Africa.

Because of racist ideas of African civilisation and social organisation as inferior, indigenous ownership and sovereignty over the land were deemed irrelevant because it did not conform to European legal systems of land ownership.

It was claimed that the presence of Indigenous Peoples on land did not prevent it from being terra nullius by arguing that the Indigenous communities occupied the lands. Still, they did not own them by European definitions of ownership.

These principles of terra nullius were adopted to varying degrees into the legal frameworks of colonised countries across the world and continue to impact the rights of Indigenous Peoples around the globe.

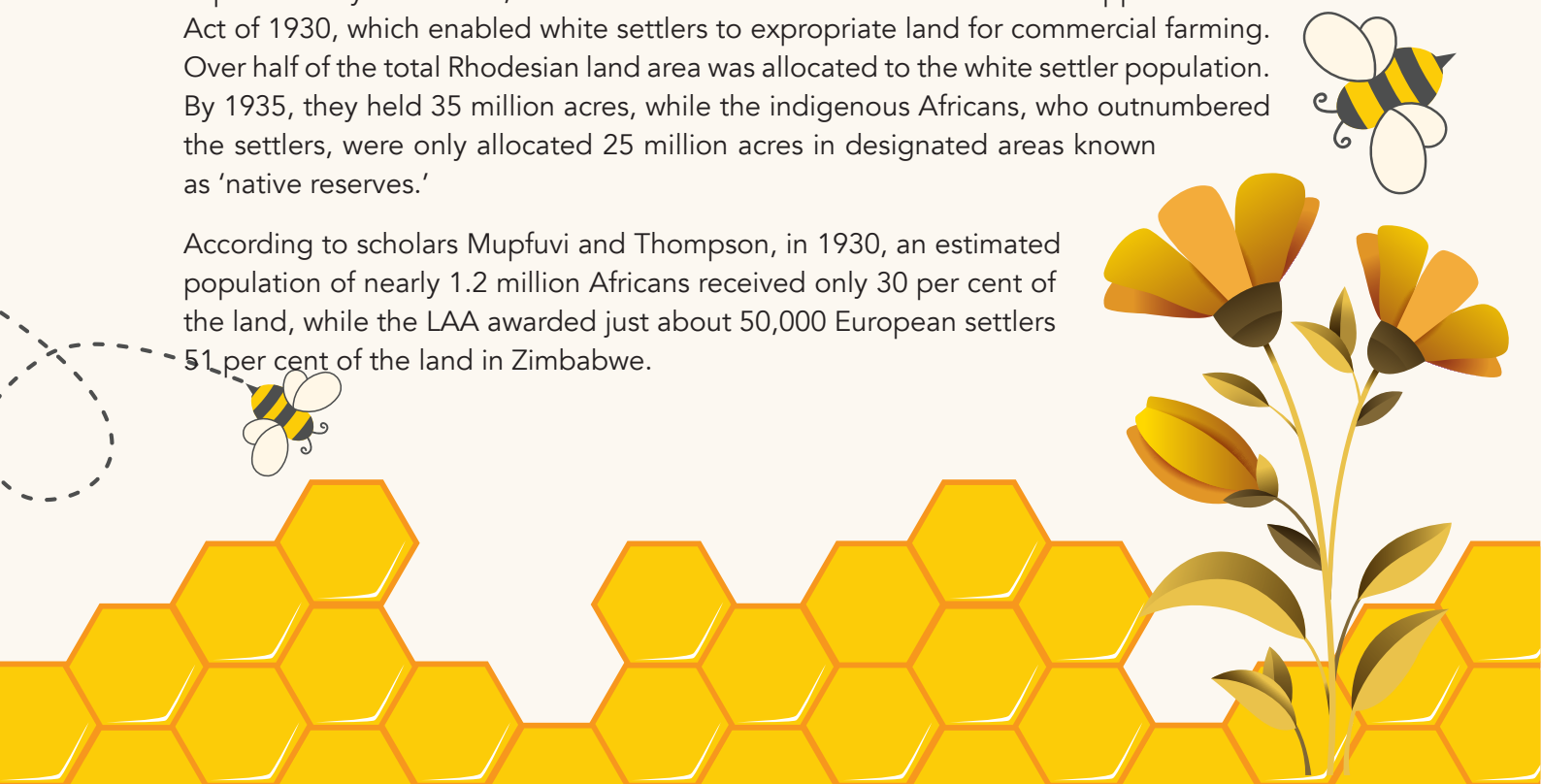
Across the continent, this cultural and legal imperialism abounded to the extent that colonial powers transplanted their legal systems into the territories which they governed and passed laws which legitimised what was essentially theft, looting and plunder of African land and resources.


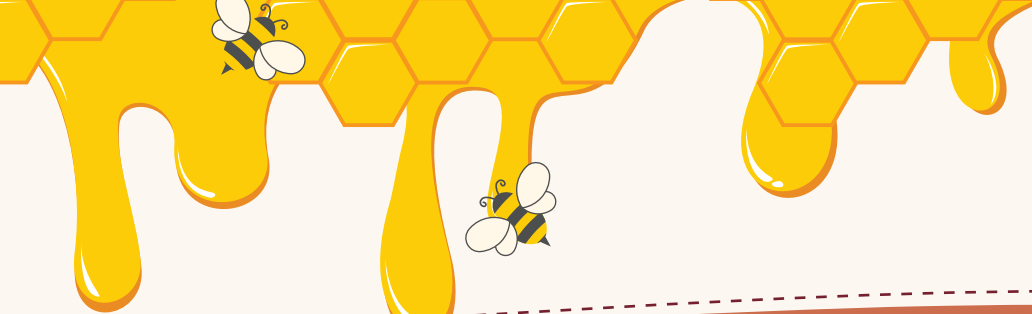
In Kenya, the Crown Land Ordinances of 1902, 1915, and 1926 brought all land under the authority of the colonial governor, institutionalising European land tenure systems.

Roughly 6 million hectares of land were taken from the Pastoralist Maasai people, but the post-independence Kenyan government did not return this land to them. Instead, it upheld colonial land legislation and enacted more laws prioritising individual land ownership, a system that could not support the Maasai's pastoralist lifestyle.


In present-day Zimbabwe, the colonial administration enacted the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, which enabled white settlers to expropriate land for commercial farming. Over half of the total Rhodesian land area was allocated to the white settler population. By 1935, they held 35 million acres, while the indigenous Africans, who outnumbered the settlers, were only allocated 25 million acres in designated areas known as 'native reserves.'

According to scholars Mupfuvi and Thompson, in 1930, an estimated population of nearly 1.2 million Africans received only 30 per cent of the land, while the LAA awarded just about 50,000 European settlers 51 per cent of the land in Zimbabwe.





It was common for choice swathes of land to be set aside for European settlers with allowances for potential expansion. At the same time, Africans were relegated to designated areas of land known as 'native reserves.' In the comic Nyuki, following the brutal takeover, we see that the bees were pushed into sticky swamps. These swamps are analogous to the ghettos and Bantustans where indigenous communities were placed after their land had been grabbed by settlers.



Many black farmers who had previously owned or rented land in what had been designated "white areas" were forced to become labourers on white-owned farms that had previously belonged to them. They had to move to "reserves" that the state had set aside.

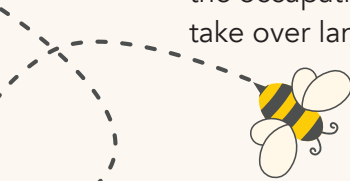
Indigenous Africans were pushed to stay in overcrowded areas unsuitable for human settlement or cultivation, while Europeans concentrated their settlements in places with fertile soil which received high rainfall.

Poor soils, tsetse fly, mosquito infestations, and natural disasters such as famine, droughts, and floods often characterised African reserves. To this day, many indigenous Africans still live in those same areas.

In South Africa, the Native Land Act of 1913 restricted Black land ownership to just 7.3% of the country's land area, reserving 93% of the land for white owners who made up a minority of the country's population. By 1925, about 90 per cent of present-day South Africa was owned and controlled by the settlers, leaving a mere 10 per cent to local populations who were not only the real owners of the land but also outnumbered the settlers.

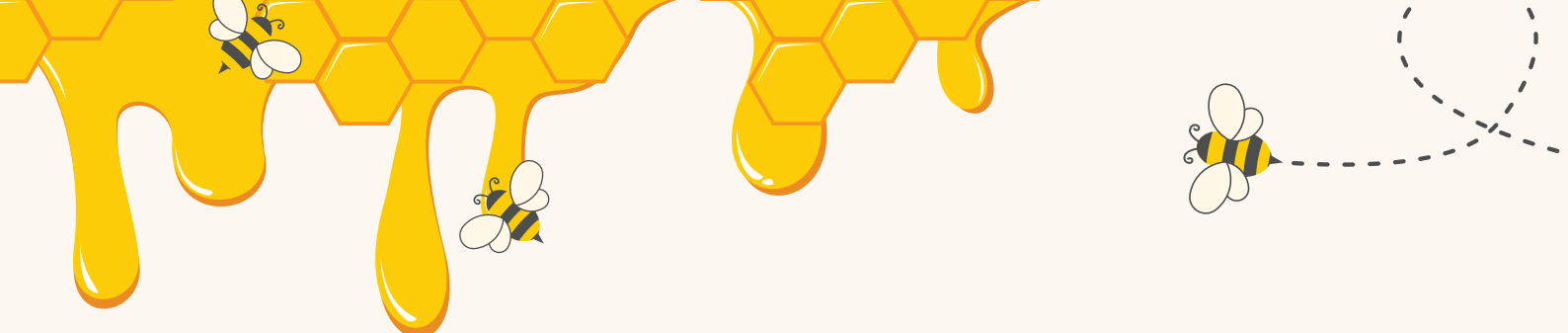
This theft and robbery of wealth was regularised through laws that conferred the loot on settlers. The land was even sold to new settlers as the European population increased and the demand for land rose.

Europeans claimed to have entered into agreements with illiterate chiefs and kings who could not read and write in English and likely did not fully understand the implications of what they were signing.



Treaties like the Lippert Concession, signed in present-day Zimbabwe, were used to justify the occupation of most of the Mashonaland areas in 1890, by granting the settlers the right to take over land rights from the indigenous people.





The injustice of dispossession goes beyond the material loss, which was undoubtedly significant. Still, it also touched on the very identity of African communities tied to the land through ancestral land ownership systems.

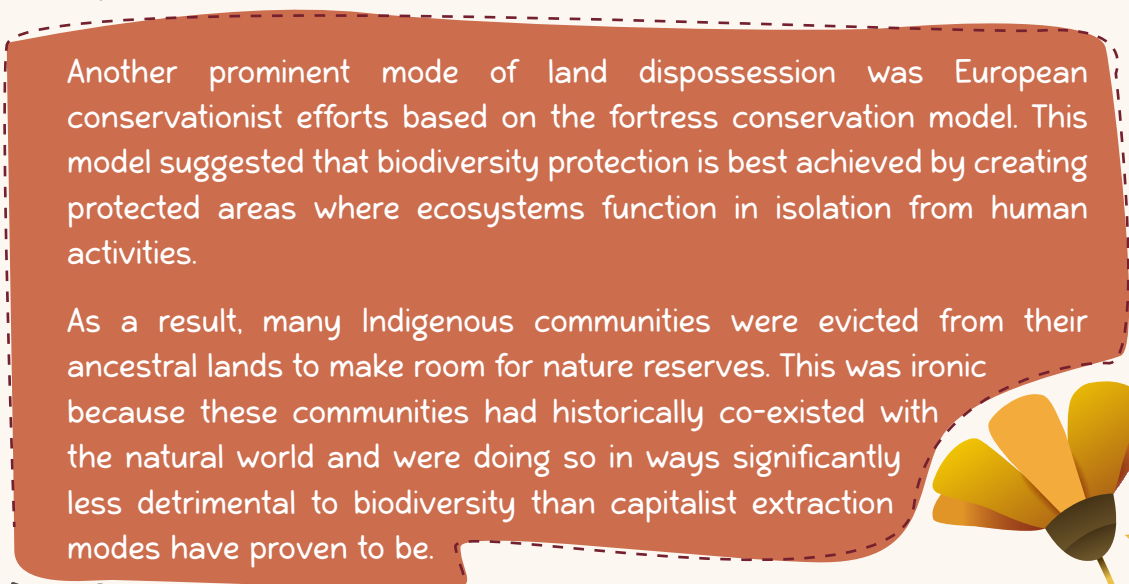
For many Africans, their culture, tradition and spirituality are tied to the land, so much so that specific communities bury a baby's umbilical cord in the soil.

Land is often a defining feature of their spiritual practices, which compelled these communities to preserve nature. They held beliefs that their gods resided in or were embodied by forests, lakes, and rivers. Consequently, their customs evolved to treat the natural world with reverence and respect, adopting eco-friendly modes of coexistence with it.

Pre-colonial African societies were knowledgeable about the nature that surrounded them. They knew the various types of vegetation and animals from which they would draw indigenous medicines and herbs to cure different diseases, wounds, snake or insect bites.

Different ecological zones have different types of vegetation, which implies that all this knowledge became much less useful once they were deprived of their land and sent to unfamiliar places.

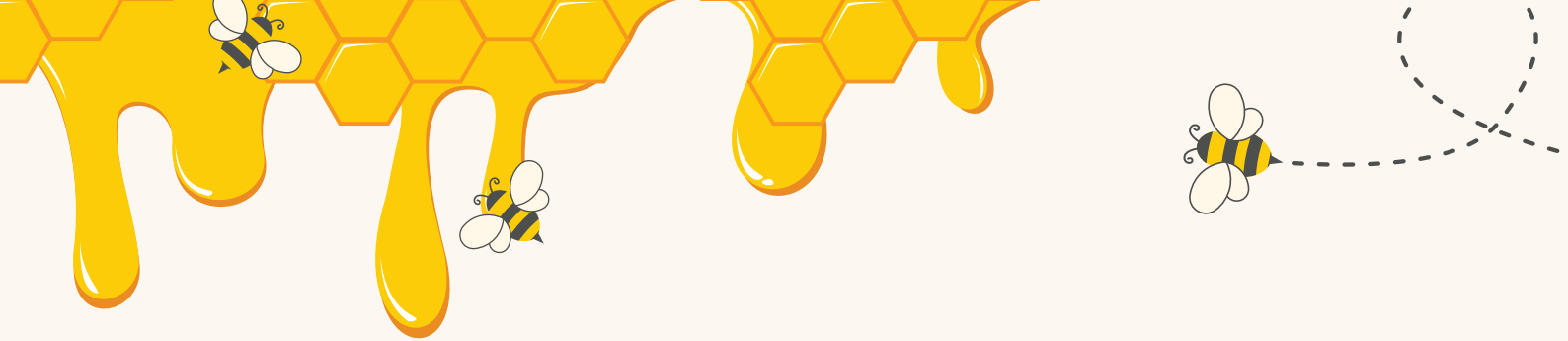
African practices of cropping and livestock rearing, steeped in indigenous knowledge, were destroyed and vanquished. As a result of overcrowding, overstocking, and land shortages, destructive farming methods were adopted, which further led to the deterioration of the soils and compounded the fate of Africans.



Another prominent mode of land dispossession was European conservationist efforts based on the fortress conservation model. This model suggested that biodiversity protection is best achieved by creating protected areas where ecosystems function in isolation from human activities.

As a result, many Indigenous communities were evicted from their ancestral lands to make room for nature reserves. This was ironic because these communities had historically co-existed with the natural world and were doing so in ways significantly less detrimental to biodiversity than capitalist extraction modes have proven to be.





Colonial conservation policies, touted to ensure efficient use of natural resources and prevent “abuse” or “misuse” by African communities, were instead used as tools to exert control over African communities and the resources on the land for the economic benefit of the state and its agencies.

Beyond merely aiding settler colonialism, land dispossession was also central to the development of capitalism within African societies. It fundamentally changed how African societies operated at a cultural and institutional level by creating a series of conditions which accelerated the shift from communal societies to capitalist ones.

Under colonialism, the Europeans transplanted European land tenure systems and implemented them in their colonies, which resulted in a transformation of land relations. The land tenure systems shifted to one where communally or customarily owned land was privatised and commercialised, and land ownership rights were bestowed on individuals at the expense of local communities.

Not only was the land taken, but it was parcelled up and sold to other settlers, further complicating matters for those Africans who hoped to return to the land that once belonged to them. As the value of land in the reserves appreciated, land became inaccessible to the poor.

Pre-colonial societies lived off the land because they grew their food and fed their animals off the land. This allowed them to live a lifestyle that was impervious to the demands of capitalist society. Land dispossession, therefore, represented a loss of resources that people depended on for their livelihoods.

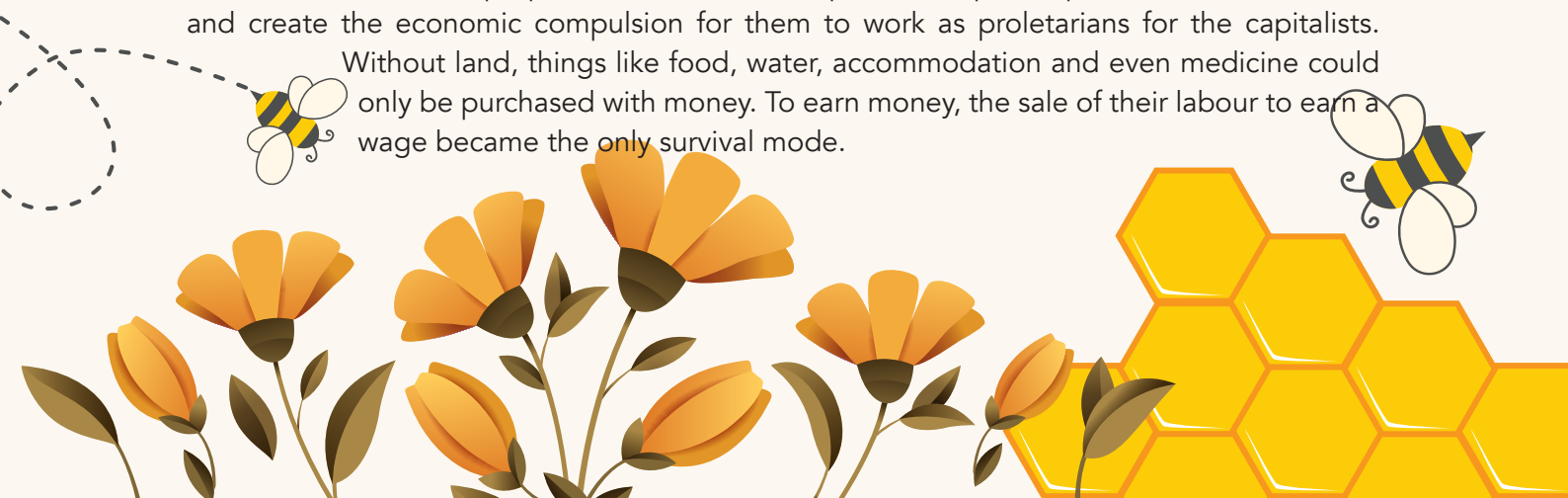
This transformation from landowner to labourer was a deliberate policy aimed at turning non-white landowners into a source of cheap labour in a process known as proletarianization.

Proletarianization is the process of separating people from the land and any other “means of production” so that they have to sell their labour power on the market for a wage to survive.

Marx argued that force and theft were necessary to establish the conditions for capital accumulation. When peasants had access to their means of production, there was little compulsion to work for wages for a capitalist, and the capitalists had little economic leverage to force them to do so.

Instead, the forceful expropriation of land was required to separate peasants from their land and create the economic compulsion for them to work as proletarians for the capitalists.

Without land, things like food, water, accommodation and even medicine could only be purchased with money. To earn money, the sale of their labour to earn a wage became the only survival mode.





Marx argued that proletarianization created a massive working class to exploit. This was key because wage labour is a key source of profits.

When the colonial government seized native lands, it satisfied its own citizens, who wanted mining concessions and farming land. It also created conditions whereby landless natives had to work not just to pay taxes but also to survive.

European colonisers were able to extract maximum profits from African workers because they paid them notoriously low wages, a mere fraction of the amount of money that would have been paid to European plantation workers, miners, or dock workers doing the same kind of work. In certain instances, European supervisors earned more than the wages of all 25 men under their supervision while doing a fraction of the work.

According to Walter Rodney in 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,' African labourers were paid so low wages and worked in conditions so dire that if European labourers had been made to work in similar conditions, they would have taken collective action against their employers by striking.

It is no wonder that Europeans subjected Africans to stringent regulations on their movements and gatherings within and between the native reserves. There were laws that restricted gatherings of Africans beyond certain numbers (five), and indigenous Africans were required to carry passbooks and seek permission before being allowed to move between the different settlement areas.

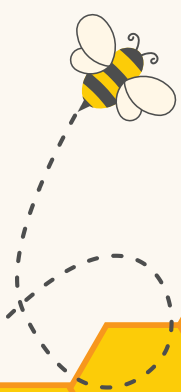
Land dispossession also played a crucial role in manufacturing desperation. Without land ownership's security, labourers could be compelled to accept poor working conditions and low wages. Workers with no other means of subsistence were "free to work or to starve."

The common law contract of employment, transplanted from colonial legal systems, carried with it notions of subordination and control derived from medieval master-servant relationships.

Legally, a control test would be used to determine whether or not a worker could be classified as an employee. This test stipulates that if a master has control over when, how, and with what tools a servant works, there is an employment relationship.

This relationship was typically governed by an employment contract, which provided a veneer of contractual equality to what was, in reality, a deeply unequal power dynamic in which the worker had limited power to bargain and often had to accept terms dictated by an employer.

The phenomenon of land dispossession also led to the creation of a class of people known as the unemployed, who had failed to be absorbed into the capitalist structure. They were left with no alternatives to fend for themselves, being forcibly transformed into beggars and relegated to a life of poverty.





The looming threat of unemployment also skewed the power dynamics in favour of employers because employees often did not have the leverage to bargain for better pay or working conditions.

The large mass of desperate unemployed meant that someone was always willing to work for less, and in more stringent conditions. As such, an employee who agitated for better conditions runs the risk of losing their employment entirely rather than seeing an improvement in working conditions. This continues to be the case in the present day.

REPARATIONS

Whenever talk of reparations is raised, the descendants of those who were dispossessed are often presented as lazy individuals who only want to take advantage of wealth they did not work for, without taking into account the continued effects that flow from those initial acts of dispossession.

The argument that so much time has passed, and therefore, Africans and other indigenous people should let go of the past so that society can move forward, is very common. However, the idea that the passage of time is sufficient to validate current ownership, obtained through dispossession, basically theft, is preposterous.

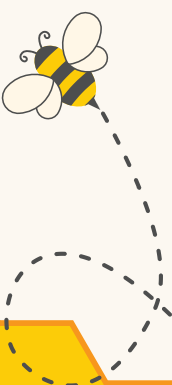
The legacy of land dispossession under colonialism has far-reaching consequences to this day. Land remains a crucial determinant of economic wealth in African countries; the availability of land is essential for both individual and national development. Poverty is inextricably linked with dispossession from past land injustices.

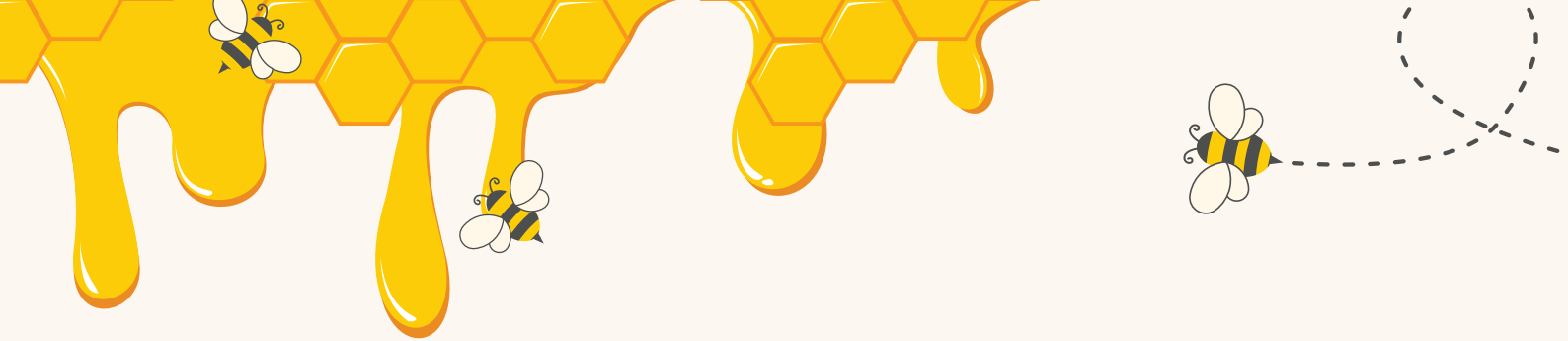
Dispossession is an ongoing process, not a thing of the past, and it is increasingly central to the functioning of capitalism under neoliberalism. Without the unjust extraction of resources from Africa, the capitalist machine cannot function.

Capitalism has facilitated the naked transfer of wealth from the global south to the global north through the conversion of collective property rights into exclusive private property rights, neo-colonial extraction of natural resources and the exploitation of workers for profit.

The nations of the Global South are rich in resources, but the poor do not control the wealth generated from those resources.

Just as Europeans have built generational wealth off land that their ancestors stole, many Africans have been saddled with generational poverty, which started from the loss of their land and livestock.





Poverty is responsible for the highest number of deaths on the African continent and around the world. It is also directly tied to the unjust system of capitalism, which prioritises profit over people in pursuing unbridled, eternal growth.

The descendants of indigenous landowners are still suffering the consequences of their land loss, whereas the descendants of Europeans who settled on land previously owned by disposing Africans are reaping the benefits to this day.

Many have inherited sprawling farms and large plantations on which they employ those whose very ancestors owned that land. At the same time, the descendants of Africans still live in the townships, slums and ghettos where their ancestors were sequestered after their land was stolen.

Present-day capitalist society relies on the lie that the land and wealth that certain capitalists possess are their birthright, borne of the hard work of their ancestors rather than being the fruits of theft, plunder, and systematic exploitation.

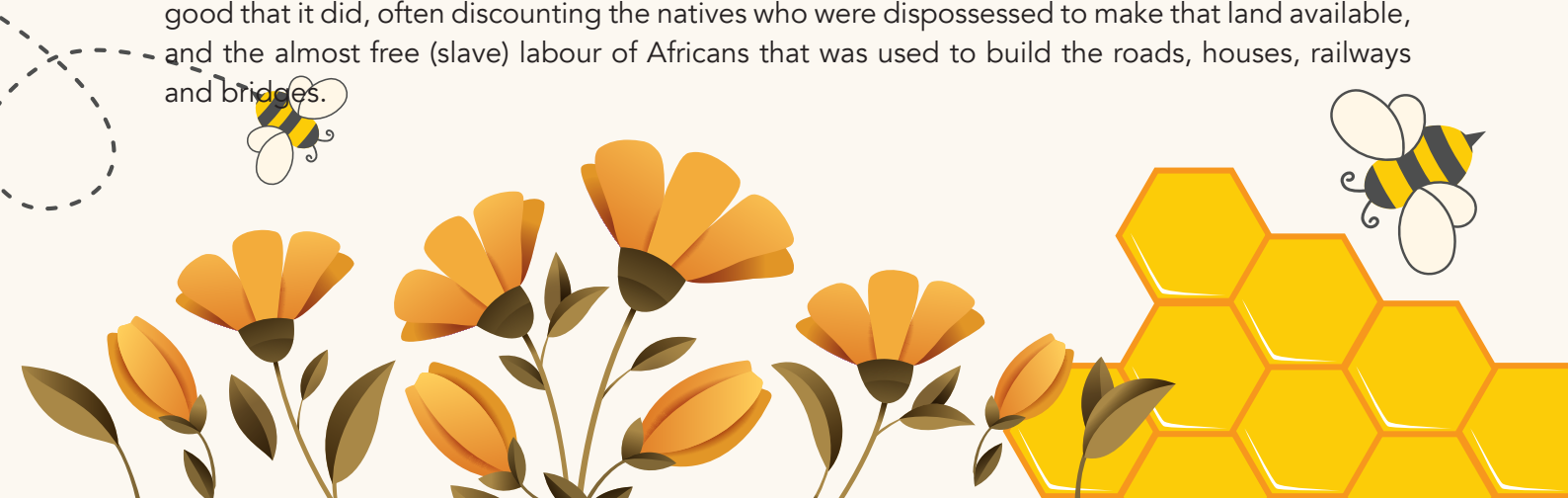
The opposition to 'land-back' movements across the globe requires the history of colonial violence and dispossession to be sanitised to retain legitimacy.


One such example is the narrative that Africa is better off for having been colonised and that without it, the continent would still be in the Dark Ages. This idea has its roots in the belief that pre-colonial African societies were not organised and had no culture to speak of.

This belief formed the basis of the idea that Europeans had a duty to colonise Africans and other indigenous people to bring the light of Christianity and European ways of life to an otherwise uncivilised continent. It was argued that these invasions were necessary to improve and 'tame' the wild, dangerous and diseased Africans and introduce modern methods of agriculture, infrastructure and education.

These arguments conveniently gloss over the fact that African societies had robust political, legal and social systems around which they structured their lives. These systems may have differed from European ones, but they were no less valid.

The infrastructure that was built during colonialism is also regularly highlighted as evidence of the good that it did, often discounting the natives who were dispossessed to make that land available, and the almost free (slave) labour of Africans that was used to build the roads, houses, railways and bridges.





The effects of historical injustices do not simply fade away with time. Land dispossession and the exploitation of labour were not isolated events, but part of a systematic process that reshaped African society. Undoing this legacy requires equally systematic and sustained efforts.

The failure to rectify these historical injustices is a ticking time bomb for racial and class relations in Africa. We must fundamentally re-examine the power structures that form the foundation of our societies and economic systems to foster justice and reconciliation.

This would entail establishing mutually respectful relationships between settlers and indigenous people. For this to occur, there must be awareness of the past, acknowledgement and atonement for the harm inflicted.

One of the most crucial steps would ensure this history is widely taught. Like the beetle princess Fara, many of the descendants of colonisers who stole land from indigenous communities are not aware of their ancestors' history.

Educational initiatives to raise awareness about the historical context of current socio-economic conditions would foster greater understanding and empathy across society. Next, those who have benefited from dispossession must acknowledge that the land on which they sit was taken from, and rightly belongs to indigenous African communities.


Following acknowledgement, apology is non-negotiable. Such an apology must go beyond mere lip service and land acknowledgements. Instead, it should entail restitution of the land to its rightful owners by restoring land rights where possible and supporting sustainable land use.

Where this restitution is not possible, it should result in financial compensation to those adversely impacted by this land dispossession. This would address both the economic and emotional aspects of historical dispossession.

And finally, there should be a commitment that dispossession will be a thing of the past; this must be accompanied by structural and institutional mechanisms to enforce those commitments and safeguard indigenous populations.

It will also be crucial to evaluate existing labour laws to ensure they promote genuine equality and fair labour practices, and address the precarious nature of work for many Africans, where the legacies of racial discrimination are still acutely felt.

In conclusion, the Nyuki comic clearly illustrates the colonial processes of land dispossession. In real life, the separation of indigenous Africans from their land accelerated the spread of capitalism on the African continent as people were forced to sell their labour to survive.





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The essay above is an analysis of Nyuki, a political comic published by Akina Mama wa Afrika. Nyuki—Swahili for “bee”—is a symbolic story that follows the journey of bees, creatures known for their collective labour and communal strength. Using this allegory, the comic unpacks the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy, revealing how these forces have shaped modern wealth inequality. Told from a Pan-African feminist perspective, Nyuki challenges dominant narratives and reimagines taxation as a tool for justice, equity, and Ubuntu. Read the Nyuki Comic here [The Bee Story: A Metaphorical Tale of Wealth Disparity and The Need to Tax the Rich](#).



About the Author



Freddie is a non-binary Ugandan writer and lawyer living and working in Kampala. They are interested in subversive storytelling and media that challenges dominant societal and cultural narratives.

