

The British Queen is 90. What did Britain ever do for Uganda? Everything

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By Sam Akaki

“Give the devil his due”, wrote William Shakespeare in Henry 1V. As Her Majesty the Queen, who also heads the Commonwealth who recently turned 90, you could be forgiven for thinking that William Shakespeare was appealing to the self-confessed British republican Labour party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and a host of African “freedom fighters” to be fair to British imperial history. Why?

The uncompromising anti-colonialists-anti-monarchists would have wished to use the Queen's birthday to remind us that all the British did in Uganda was to economically exploit the country and mentally and culturally colonise the people. Some Ugandans such as the Kyankwanzi National Leadership Institute lecturer, Kajabago-ka-Rusoke also seem to share that one-sided view of British imperial history. Where is the evidence?

In his New Vision article, “Why land is part of nature and a fundamental object of labour, (March 17, 2016), Kajabago-ka-Rusoke called for the total decolonisation of Uganda, economically and culturally, because “a number of (Ugandan) nationalities were amalgamated by colonialism...but colonialism was based on its own economic intentions of utilising that land in order to produce such items intended for their own use”.

Unfortunately, “the total decolonisation of Uganda” would necessitate turning the clock back to the pre-British, non-existent Uganda. Who would relish the prospect of living in that wilderness?

Before the British came, what is now Uganda was a borderless entity inhabited by warring tribes and clans, ravaged by diseases and enslaved by superstition. It was the British who united us into one nation, now a member of the United Nations and other international systems.

It was also the British government-funded Church Missionary Society (CMS), The Mill Hill Missionaries and the French White Fathers, who pioneered education and medical work in Uganda. Mulago, Nsambya and Namirembe hospitals still stand as monumental testaments to their work.

According John Gunther in ‘Inside Africa’, “by 1900 Uganda was ravaged by Bubonic plague, Malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, bilharzias, tropical ulcer and sleeping sickness, which were claiming thousands of lives every year....but in 1934, Uganda had hospitals in all major centres and 88 dispensaries in rural areas, which recorded 1378, 545 attendees during the year.”

The British also built, staffed and equipped a network of primary and secondary schools as well as Makerere College, which “started in 1922 when 14 day-boys began to study carpentry, building and mechanic. In 1949, the greatly developed college entered into a special relationship with the University of London and began to prepare students for degrees of that university” (They build for the future, the story of Makerere college’, by Margaret Macpherson).

They introduced cash crops such as coffee and cotton. Although President Milton Obote is often credited for setting up the Cooperative Union, it was actually the British Protectorate government, which launched the “Buganda Growers’ Society in 1922”, followed the Bugisu Coffee Cooperative Union in 1930, ‘The making of modern Uganda’, by Kenneth Ingham.

However, as former Makerere University deputy vice-Chancellor Professor Anthony Ginyere Pinyewa pointed out in his book, ‘Apolo Milton Obote and his times’, “Dr Obote did a great deal to expand the social and economic infrastructures, which the British protectorate had started”.

According ‘British policy in changing Africa’ by Sir Andrew Cohen, “industrialisation and training the people to run their own countries has, I believe, been the main distinguishing characteristic of British administration in

Africa”. To that end, the Protectorate government built the Uganda Railway, Owen Falls Dam, Kilembe Mines, Tororo Cement Factory and set up the Uganda Development Corporation.

The 1951 ‘Progress in Uganda Protectorate’ report is revealing. “The fifth year of the development decennium has been one of steady progress in all areas especially Education, Health, Agriculture, Rural water supplies, Housing programme, Electricity development, public works, railways and harbours and tsetse control.”

In July 1961, a year before independence, the protectorate chief minister informed the protectorate government, “it should be realised that the facilities we have to train people at Makerere are quite inadequate. This being the case, I have proposed to ask council to approve the plan to offer as many as 300 scholarships this year. These students are going to England and different other countries in order to prepare to take over the administration at independence”, ‘Administrators in East Africa’, by BL Jacobs).

Today, Britain remains a leading contributor to development and humanitarian work in Uganda, giving direct budget support and funding several NGOs that are providing vital basic health, education and clean water.

This raises one fundamental question. If exploitation was its sole motive, why should Britain continue spending its taxpayer’s money supporting poverty reduction work in Uganda half a century after independence?

The reality is, the British colonisers were demonstrably fulfilling their social responsibility to the colonised long before the term social responsibility was invented by contemporary human rights and development campaigners.

That is why we congratulated the Queen on her 90’s birthday and for her long reign during which her governments have given us virtually everything, from the common English language to schools, hospitals and legal and parliamentary systems, to sanctuary since the first political upheaval in 1966.

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