

"The Colonizability of African and Asian Societies from the Perspective of Malek Bennabi (Historical Insights)"

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Received: 05/2023

Published: 09/2023

Abstract:

This study aims to attempt to formulate a conceptual understanding of the Islamic thinker Malek Bennabi's perspective on the colonial phenomenon, its dimensions in time and space, its consequences, and its effects on African and Asian countries and societies to this day, especially in the mental and behavioral aspects. It highlights the differences in the impact of colonialism between the African and Asian worlds and ways to overcome it. This is achieved by presenting some solutions and recommendations for addressing these consequences through a critical reading of some of Malek Bennabi's texts on the colonial phenomenon.

Keywords: Malek Bennabi, colonialism, Africa, Asia, the Islamic world.

Introduction:

Colonialism is an ancient and recurring phenomenon that has taken various forms and concepts, depending on the time period, the targeted region or class, and the means employed. Many historians and scholars have proposed theories and explanations for the concept of colonialism, some of which have been inaccurate or unconvincing, leading us to become captives of these interpretations. Whether it is an exaggeration of our failure and affliction with colonialism to this day or a nostalgic longing for its era and achievements, many believe that these interpretations have become outdated and lack understanding and persuasion in explaining the colonial phenomenon.

However, on the other hand, we find theories from some thinkers who have addressed the civilizational problems that hinder progress and development in the Islamic world, prominently the colonial phenomenon and its consequences on Islamic countries. It is only through careful examination, scrutiny, and embracing the legacy left by the thinker Malek Bennabi in this field, especially in the interpretation of the colonial phenomenon, which affected the peoples of Africa and Asia, that we can find solutions to the contemporary colonial reality that many oppressed and economically challenged countries endure, countries whose political and economic security is compromised, and whose political systems, media, and freedom of expression are undermined.

While Bennabi interpreted the phenomenon from his perspective during the period he lived (more than half a century ago), his theories still offer us solutions to a different colonial reality that many vulnerable nations are experiencing today. These nations struggle with their political, economic, and food security, while being undermined in the legitimacy of their political systems and their communication systems and means of expression.

Based on this, through this research paper, I aim to explore the concept of the colonial phenomenon from Malek Bennabi's perspective, its dimensions, extensions, and the interaction of colonized peoples with it, both in the past and the present. I will also examine the idea of Afro-Asian unity advocated by Bennabi and how we can benefit from Bennabi's theories in confronting colonialism in our contemporary world.

2-The concept of colonialism according to Malek Bennabi¹:

Colonialism and its concepts and forms have received various interpretations based on the roots of definition and backgrounds. Colonized countries view it as a blatant aggressive movement led by powerful nations

¹- Malek Bennabi (1905-1973 CE): A prominent figure in Islamic and Arab thought in the 20th century.

over weaker ones with no means or power to resist. The colonizing nations drained the wealth of the colonized countries, enslaved their people, distorted their identity, and eroded their foundations. Among those who adopted this definition, the Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah² stands out, stating that "colonialism is the extension of one state's influence over another, with this influence accompanied by the exploitation of land and people for the benefit of the dominating state" (Kwame, 1960). Meanwhile, Mohamed Awad defined colonialism as "a set of means and actions aimed at controlling or extending influence by a state or an organized group of people over a territory that was not originally theirs" (Awad, 1957).

Sa'id Rizk Haggag Al-Sa'id refers to colonialism as "political subjugation in which the will and life of the state become subservient to the will of the dominant people and the policies they want to pursue. The relationship between the two parties is characterized by exploitation and control, similar to the relationship between a master and his slaves. In the colonized areas, the people are directed but not given choices. They have no control over their affairs except to the extent permitted by their dominant master" (Hajjaj, 1987).

However, Malek Bennabi's perspective on colonialism is entirely different from his predecessors. He breaks down colonialism into two factors, one related to the colonizer and the other to the colonized. In the first case, which he called "colonial factors," he credits the colonized for awakening the Islamic nations, particularly from their slumber and inactivity. He states, "Indeed, colonialism, yes, it has stripped us of our sons, shaken our homes, taken precious things from us. It has taken our freedom, sovereignty, and forgotten writings, the jewels of our thrones and their soft

²- Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972 CE): One of the earliest African activists against colonialism, he served as the first President of Ghana and was among the leading advocates and supporters of the Organization of African Unity. He was born into a humble family in what is now known as the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana). He received his education in Catholic schools and later attended the Teacher Training College in Accra, from which he graduated in 1931. He worked as a teacher and then as a university lecturer in political and economic sciences. Nkrumah fought for Ghana's independence and served as the General Secretary of the Convention People's Party. He passed away in 1972.

sofas, which we wished we could remain asleep on" (Bennabi, 1986). Bennabi reinforces his view with historical examples of civilizations that experienced strength, prosperity, and dominance and then entered a phase of decline and deterioration. He argues that it was essential for these civilizations to have an external influence that would rejuvenate them. Among the examples he cites are Islamic civilization and Roman civilization. According to him, history has shown that when a people fall into slumber, God sends a scourge to awaken them (Bennabi, 1986).

The colonial factor, according to Bennabi, is an external factor imposed on the colonized, which he derogatorily refers to as "al-Ahli" or domestic. It represents a specific model of life, thought, and behavior that is enforced on the subjugated entity. When this model is fully established, a second factor emerges within the individual, which is the susceptibility to colonization (Shawish, 2008).

Bennabi believes that this susceptibility to colonization arises from within individuals who willingly accept the imposed framework and confine themselves within the narrow boundaries defined by colonialism for their movements, thoughts, and lives. The colonizer wants us to be unemployed, ignorant, and individuals engulfed in filth, displaying unpleasant behavior. Therefore, the problem is twofold: whenever we feel the external colonial factor affecting us, we simultaneously witness an internal factor responding to the external one, diminishing our dignity with our own hands. Thus, the issue, in Bennabi's view, primarily lies in liberating ourselves from the readiness to serve colonialism, whether we are aware of it or not (Bennabi, 1986).

Bennabi does not believe in the inevitability of the susceptibility to colonization in every colonial situation. He cites the cases of Germany and Japan, which fell under occupation and did not exhibit susceptibility to colonization like other colonized countries (Shawish, 2008). It's important to note that the concept of susceptibility to colonization was initially criticized but gradually regained significance later on as a historical concept representing a state of mental backwardness and dormancy in which societies remained for centuries before awakening to the colonial tragedy (Bennabi M. , Civilization Issues - Major Questions, 2020).

-The susceptibility to colonization in African and Asian countries:

according to Malek Bennabi's theories, is rooted in his firsthand experience and observation of colonization and the colonizer in various places, from Algeria to France, Beirut, and Cairo. These cities were all influenced by the phenomenon of colonization, and his description and presentation of this image were shaped by years of suffering from the woes of colonization and its consequences (Bennabi M. , 1969).

If we attempt to apply Bennabi's ideas to the peoples of the colonized countries in Africa and Asia, it's clear that these regions did not progress culturally and temporally in the same leaps that Europe experienced, starting with the European Renaissance and culminating in the Industrial Revolution. This revolution widened the gap and material disparity between European countries and the peoples of Africa and Asia. So, can we consider the delay in development in these regions as a motive for strong nations to colonize them?

We need to familiarize ourselves more with the concept of Malek Bennabi and his intention before discussing this application. In his explanation of the concept, he considers that the susceptibility to colonization was inherited by the elites and intellectuals of those countries after the process of penetration and seizure, not before it. In the case of Algeria, for example, which Bennabi frequently cites, the French themselves acknowledge that Algerians were more educated, and it was rare to find a household without literacy (Khawja, 2005). The same applies to Europeans when they overtook more advanced civilizations in America.

Therefore, the peoples of Africa and Asia acquired the internal factor (susceptibility to colonization) after the influence of the external factor (colonization). It is as if Bennabi projects his concept onto the period he lived in, not the period before the colonizers arrived in our land. These peoples suffered all forms of oppression and subjugation. They lost their freedom, their dignity was violated, and their lands were seized. They entered a phase of lethargy, submission, and laziness. Consequently, they became in dire need of an awakening force that would remind them of their identity (the susceptibility factor). The external factor of colonialism and its

practices on these peoples in Africa, from Algeria to Morocco, to West and East Africa, experienced the same colonization and the same practices, especially under French colonization. Here, we can present two examples of countries, one in Asia and the other in Africa, and to what extent susceptibility to colonization applies to them.

In Africa, we can examine the case of Algeria. After the French invasion and successive popular resistance, Algerians, for a certain period at the beginning of the 20th century, leaned towards accepting the colonial reality due to the absence of a unified military or political response encompassing all factions and covering all national territories. Algerians waited until the end of World War I and the emergence of the national movement and the crystallization of ideas of freedom and independence.

As for the colonized countries in Asia, we can derive insights from the situation of the Indian subcontinent. India experienced British colonialism, which turned it into the jewel of its Asian colonies. The British excelled in draining its wealth, impoverishing its people, and sowing sectarian, national, and religious divisions among its inhabitants. Undoubtedly, these practices served as a strong catalyst for the emergence of political and intellectual vigilance. The cornerstone of this vigilance was the Indian National Congress, which represented the national sentiment of the Indian subcontinent. This led to Mahatma Gandhi's policy of "non-violence and non-cooperation," which inspired Indians and instilled in them the spirit of liberation and independence. This was the result of the convergence of external factors, represented by British colonialism and its practices, and internal factors, manifested in the dire economic and social conditions of the Indian people at that time. The Indian was then considered one of the lowest individual incomes globally.

-Is Afro-Asianism an actual solution to overcome susceptibility to colonization?

Many thinkers and politicians from both continents held high hopes for the convening of the Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned Nations, hosted in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. The conference brought together twenty-nine countries from Africa and Asia, along with many heads of state and

leaders from those nations. Malik Bennabi took special note of this conference in his work "The Idea of Afro-Asianism in the Light of the Bandung Conference." He emphasized the significance of the conference, given that it united nations representing two continents with diverse populations and varying intellectual heritages. The conference brought together Islamic spirituality and Chinese Shia Marxism, transcending the geographical boundaries of Africa and Asia. This social convergence stretched from Tangier to Jakarta and, morally, from Washington to Moscow. It aimed for a dual integration that would elevate Asian individuals to the social level of civilization and raise cultured individuals to the moral level of humanity. In this dual integration (Bennabi M. , *The Idea of Afro-Asianism in the Light of the Bandung Conference*. (A. Shahin, Trans), 2001), Bennabi believed that progress contributed to creating a global model that fulfilled the very essence envisioned by Western genius in its material conditions. Moreover, despite the glaring contradictions and difficulties in reconciling these countries, given the presence of more than fourteen Islamic countries from Africa and Asia, they could potentially, through the religious bond of Islam, lead the two continents toward a new civilization that transcends the conflict between East and West. Bennabi wrote, "Thus, we can assess the importance of the Afro-Asian conference in this context. One of its primary objectives was to establish a 'zone of peace' on the map, providing humanity with a new Noah's Ark and a last refuge in times of any nuclear catastrophe" (Bennabi M. , *The Idea of Afro-Asianism in the Light of the Bandung Conference*. (A. Shahin, Trans), 2001)

An Islamic Commonwealth³ as a Potential Salvation:

Bennabi's approach to forming an Islamic Commonwealth draws from previous models, particularly the British model. The British model was built on connecting Asian and African nations that were once under British

³- Commonwealth Nations: This association is akin to a voluntary union, consisting of fifty-three countries, all of which were formerly part of the British Empire, except for two countries, Rwanda and Mozambique. It was established following the Singapore Declaration in 1971, which described the organization as a voluntary league that brings together independent nations to collaborate for the success of their common interests.

colonial rule to the United Kingdom through economic and linguistic ties. The positive impact of these connections would benefit both sides while preserving the complete independence of each unit within its geographical boundaries and sovereign institutions.

Ben Nabi believes that the idea of an Islamic Commonwealth arises as a necessity due to the nature of the same problems faced by the contemporary Islamic society⁴. He adds that this crisis is not in the nature of the problems of Islamic society as much as it is in the position of the Muslim individual regarding these problems.

Ben Nabi envisions the state of the Islamic world as being in dire need of a strong league that unites it like a closed vessel suffering from the influence of mysterious external forces within its surrounding circle. If internal forces are not allowed to balance the impact of external forces, then inevitably, the barriers of the vessel will shatter into new fragments in the air. These fragments represent the countries and entities of the Islamic world, and their fate could either be colonial tendencies, the embrace of the communist or capitalist camps.

This league is built upon the idea of "Islam" represented by a permanent body that embodies the collective will of the Islamic world and represents its common interests. The official headquarters of this body should also serve as the "uniting base" connecting the various parts of the Commonwealth to exchange matters related to their Islamic affairs.

In this regard, if the British Commonwealth can offer beneficial solutions to the Islamic Commonwealth, the latter, in addition to its qualitative issues that require specific solutions, must not forget that functionally, it should enable the Muslim population to fundamentally address its lag. (Bennabi M. , *The Idea of an Islamic Commonwealth*. (A.-T. Al-Sharif, Trans), 2000) .

Ben Nabi's grand optimistic vision for realizing an Islamic Commonwealth was very possible and achievable, despite his awareness of numerous

internal and external obstacles that stood in its way. He firmly believed that this idea could not be outrightly rejected by the peoples, and that the greater concern lay in the non-constitutional and monarchical political systems. These systems saw any form of union as the beginning of their downfall. In addition to this, the management of these systems by European and Western powers, which viewed Islam as a constant and looming threat to their interests in those countries, posed a persistent challenge to their global standing and dominance.

4- The susceptibility to colonization in our present world, the Islamic world.

The period in which Ben Nabi lived is not far from us, and his ideas have continued to inspire elites and thinkers in the Islamic world, both then and today. His perspectives on colonization transcended the boundaries of time and place. Although most countries in the world today enjoy political and regional geographical independence (territory and borders), many of these nations that gained independence still carry the susceptibility to colonization, especially when it comes to their food security, social character, and cultural identity.

With the exception of the enduring struggle of Palestine, most countries in the Islamic world gained their independence after World War II or shortly before it. Despite more than half a century having passed, the internal situations of most of these countries, particularly economically and culturally, and even their political decisions, have not changed significantly. Some countries in Southeast Asia, like Indonesia and Malaysia, have integrated into regional economic blocs, allowing them to achieve self-sufficiency and contribute to the regional and global economy.

In the political realm, many governing systems in Islamic countries lack political independence and do not represent the aspirations of their populations. Their ascent to power often occurred through unconstitutional means, such as military coups, political autocracy, or inherited obsolete regimes. Some of these systems still glorify the sanctity of individual leaders, perpetuating their rule and relying on past achievements and sometimes even fabricated history.

Economically, most of these countries are partially or entirely dependent on the advanced capitalist world. They are dependent on imported food, clothing, and beverages, and have suffered and continue to suffer from economic and international labor division. This has turned them into consumer nations for products from the colonizing countries. They rely on a single export resource, typically energy or minerals, depriving them of manufacturing and technological capabilities. As a result, their markets and populations remain captive to what those previously colonizing nations produce. This economic dependence is evident in their reliance on extractive or semi-processing industries, often dominated by multinational corporations. Even after some of these countries nationalized their resources and regained sovereignty over their wealth, they faced internal counter-revolutions and external pressures that thwarted attempts to achieve economic independence. The examples of Iran and Algeria serve as illustrations of this phenomenon.

Regarding the social, cultural, and behavioral aspects, the degree of colonial impact varies from one country to another depending on the type and form of colonization. Countries that experienced British colonization might not have been heavily influenced in their social customs and daily behaviors. This is also reflected in the cultural life of these countries, especially in aspects related to their identity. An exception to this is the adoption of the English language, often influenced or chosen voluntarily, given that English is considered a living and academic language in some of the world's top institutions and universities.

It remains that Britain, in this context, established a cultural and economic organization called "the Commonwealth" to connect the countries that were under its colonization and share the English language. This represents another form of colonization and dominance.

On the other hand, countries subjected to French, Portuguese, or Spanish colonization experienced even worse conditions. Colonialism in these regions brought about significant cultural estrangement. It aimed to transform these nations into alien countries without any social or cultural references. The colonial powers focused on religious and cultural assimilation while undermining national elements and erasing any

connection to their prosperous past. It's as if these countries had no history before colonization.

Even today, some of these nations are still searching for their cultural base and reference point. This isn't because it's absent or hard to achieve but rather due to the role colonialism played in these countries. Their pursuit of this goal faces numerous internal and external obstacles and challenges. Internally, it is related to the segment of the population that was deeply influenced by colonization, which led to a rejection of their language, ideas, behaviors, and ways of life, detaching them from their history and identity. Externally, there are official and unofficial external pressure groups striving to protect their economic and cultural interests, which can only be realized in a suitable climate created by internal factions advocating for their language and defending their interests.

In the case of French colonization, France took the initiative to create an organization called "La Francophonie"⁵ that includes countries where French is spoken. On the surface, it appears to have cultural aims, but beneath the surface, it serves to ensure the continuity of French interests in those countries, particularly in West Africa and Morocco. To this day, this organization continues its efforts to promote the spread of the French language.

"Returning to the economic, social, and cultural aspects mentioned earlier, which most Islamic countries are experiencing, and considering the

⁵ - La Francophonie is an institutional system that regulates relations between countries that share the use of the French language. The Francophonie Foundation was established in 1970 in Niamey, initiated by its founding fathers, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Habib Bourguiba, Hamani Diori, and Norodom Sihanouk. In parallel, the Agency for Cultural and Technical Cooperation was created, which later became the International Organization of La Francophonie in 2005. The organization's goal is to promote the French language and enhance cooperation among its 88 member countries and governments. This goal was officially formulated in the Francophonie Charter adopted at the Hanoi Summit in 1997 and revised by the Ministerial Conference in 2005 in Antananarivo. Currently, Francophonie serves as a framework for cooperation on global issues such as the digital field, gender equality, and economic matters. Many executive agencies and entities complement the work of the International Organization of La Francophonie.

external security and political circumstances surrounding these countries, it's evident that they undoubtedly need a new awakening phase. The reasons for this lie in their vulnerability to colonization due to the deteriorating situation they are experiencing socially, culturally, and economically. While the extent of this deterioration varies from one country to another materially in terms of wealth, it is unified in the sense of subjugation, submission, and lack of independence in terms of influence and opinions.

The conclusion:

"Ben Nabi's ideas and intellectual theories have been and continue to be a soothing balm that can be revisited to address many of our cultural and economic civilizational problems. They enable us to break free from retrogressive and colonial mentalities, especially since these ideas are not tied to a specific time frame, as long as the Islamic world continues to suffer from backwardness and underdevelopment on all fronts and fields. The susceptibility to colonization, especially in its economic and cultural aspects, remains a reality. Intra-Islamic and Arab bonds are still fragile and unsettled, and achieving food and industrial security is still distant. The value of things, materially speaking, remains much higher than their conceptual value. Escaping from these conditions requires a broad reform initiative that necessitates the use of all self-reliant means and ideas that stem from our identity and reality, including the profound thoughts and theories of Ben Nabi. These ideas resonate from the conscience of a knowledgeable thinker who is deeply pained by the plight of Muslims and their backwardness, as described by our great historian Abu al-Qasim Saadallah Malik: 'He was an independent thinker representing a school in his own right.

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