

Colonization and Violence against Women

By Val Kalei Kanuha

Introduction

Hawaii is an island nation that was colonized by the United States in 1893. It was not until the very end of the 20th century that then President Bill Clinton apologized to the Hawaiian people, but given the damage that has been done, it was a little late. My comments are based on my understanding of the institution of colonization as it has occurred in the Hawaiian nation and in the Hawaiian Islands. Most of us, especially as Asians and Pacific Islanders, have experienced or know about the effects of colonization in our countries of origin. In this discussion of colonization, I would like us to think in terms of the domination of a particular nation, community, society or peoples by a foreign or outside nation, society, force or country. To have been colonized is to have been dominated, to have been taken over systematically, institutionally, historically, and politically as a nation of people by another nation of people, usually from the outside but not always.

Let us examine what happens culturally in a colonized nation. Local people are romanticized: this was especially true of Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, seen as inhabitants of a tropical “hula” nation. Women are exoticized: the colonizer’s gaze is directed at local women rendering them beautiful, sexual, etc. These constructions are applied then to the entire place, resulting in the feminization of a country. This is what happened to our people. Colonizers portrayed our entire country as a stereotypical Pacific Islander woman: bare breasted, feeding men, having sex with them, etc., and overlooking how everyday life was lived by men and women in order to privilege notions of native women acting in the service of foreign colonizing men.

In our own cultures, pre-colonial life is idealized, and its disruption blamed as a cause of violence against women. We cannot agree to the notion that our colonized countries were mythically ideal until the bad invaders came in from the outside. We, meaning the anti-domestic violence movement, have to reject the explanation of colonial history as the cause of violence against women. To accept it is to admit we have become part of the colonized mind. Furthermore, we cannot characterize all colonizers as “westerners”. I am part Japanese American and we know that the Japanese certainly have a history of colonization, reminding us that many of our own people, not just Westerners, or Europeans, or white people, are colonizers.

Myths about Asian and Pacific Cultures

We all know the myths and stories that are told about what our societies were like before the big bad colonizers came in. We need to challenge whether or not these claims are made to justify violence against women. Is it really true that we were all peaceful, loving people until the colonizers came upon us? I don't think so. Who then is going to take the lead in casting a serious critical gaze at this question and challenging the usual answers? It has to be done by us because we do not want people from the outside to come in and say to us: "You know what, you guys have just as many problems as the rest of us; so don't use this colonization excuse to say you were all perfect until we came along and colonized you". Let us then embark on our critique by examining myths that idealize our cultures.

The first myth is that many of our cultures were matrilineal and therefore, before colonization, all of us respected, loved and had a very important place for women in our society. There is a simple retort to that. Just because a society is matrilineal does not mean it is not patriarchal. Matrilineal structures decide only how inheritance rights, land and other forms of wealth are passed on within the family. They do not say anything about who really controls the status of those women's positions in inheritance, in history, and in politics. By saying we are matrilineal, we are somehow equating it with being a society that reveres women, and places them above men. If you really think about it, many of our societies are matrilineal; however, many of our societies are still very oppressive to women and have always been so. Hence, it is not a very good argument.

The second myth is that we did not have domestic violence, or violence against women, until we were colonized. If you listen to the stories that many advocates and others talk about today concerning the different forms of violence against women that occur in our society, my guess is you will find that many of these forms of violence against women existed before outsiders came into our societies. If we look at our old texts, our legends, our own myths, histories, our writings, our art forms, and music, you will find them filled with oppressive, denigrating images of violence against women—images that pre-date any kind of contact from the outside. It is hard to argue that most societies were just wonderful toward women before they were colonized.

The third myth is that colonization is at the root of violence against women and in a hierarchy of oppressions, colonization is the most important form of oppression. Furthermore, that sexism, classism, homophobia and other kinds of oppression are not as critical or as harmful as the oppression of colonization. This third myth claims that the most important kind of oppression is colonization for us as people of color. There is another simple retort to this point. If, in fact, we believe that colonization really is at the root of violence, how then

do we explain that colonized women are not violent against men since all of us were, after all, colonized together? Why are there still a disproportionate number of men of color—men in our communities—who are violent against our women? Hawaiian women were dragged to the docks to serve British soldiers and sailors and all the whaling ships that came into our ports. Women were victims of colonization. But, somehow, Hawaiian women do not abuse Hawaiian men at the same rate that they (Hawaiian men) abuse us. Perhaps we can say that colonization had different effects on women versus men but that is not an adequate explanation for men's violence against women.

Colonization and Patriarchy

Geraldine Moane, an Irish political scientist and sociologist who writes on gender and colonization³, points out that systems of oppression and domination that colonize states, nations and people are identical to the strategies men use to dominate women. Here are a few examples.

The first one is the strategy of claiming ethno-cultural superiority, historically used by colonizers to justify domination because their intelligence, their gods, their way of life and rationality was superior. This strategy has really done a good job of keeping us in our place. Male superiority is used in exactly the same way. Men's ways of thinking; men's ways of knowing; men's drive toward autonomy versus women's wimpy ways of wanting to be in relationships—these ways of 'superiority' are what men use to oppress women.

The second strategy of colonization is differentiating "the other." One of the ways colonizers keep us in our place is to say they are the center of the universe and all the rest of us as people of color are "the other". If you think about what happens with women and men, you will see that men use this very notion of women as "the other" to keep women marginalized and to keep themselves at the center.

A third strategy of colonization is the use of all forms of violence—physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual - by the colonizer against the colonized. Many of us were, and some still are, forbidden to use our native languages; told not to pray in a certain way; told not to study; and told not to be in families in a certain way. These are ways that colonizers kept families separated from themselves, from other families, and from their cultures. Here again, the parallels of male domination through multiple forms of violence against women obtain.

³ Moane, Geraldine (1966). *Gender and colonialism: A psychological analysis of oppression and liberation*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

A fourth strategy is the seizure and control of economic resources. The taking of land—a very important part of who we are as a people—the using of land, and the misuse of land and natural resources by the colonizers is one of the ways in which the colonizers remove our people from the things that are most sacred to them. So economic exploitation and capital accumulation go hand in hand. Historically, In Hawaii, we did not understand the notion of land ownership: we lived on the land but we did not own it; we did not think it should be owned. So Hawaiians, like other colonized peoples lost their lands. Similarly, abusive men control women's economic resources and constrain them from access to their social and familial resources. Women too, may unwittingly give up their wealth, or their familial and community ties because they miscalculate the importance of holding on to them.

A fifth strategy is the control of culture- it involves patrolling the boundaries of the colonialists' culture and defining what is acceptable/exotic about the invaded culture. The same thing happens for us as women. Men control almost all the images of women in the media, the ways that we learn about ourselves through education, culture or politics. Our culture is dominated by male images of women and male images of what a society is supposed to be.

The last strategy is the exclusion of native people from access to power. For many of us as Asians and Pacific Islanders and for many of us as people of color, we know who occupies the leadership and positions of power. It is usually not us. If you look at what happens in relationships between men and women and who is in power, it is mainly men and not women.

These notions and strategies of colonial domination are used by patriarchy to continue male dominance over women. We need to counter claims that colonization has led to violence against women, by pointing out that there is in fact a tight connection between colonization and patriarchy. Some would even say that you could not have colonization without patriarchy. Who after all were the colonizers? They were mostly men (that is not to say women cannot be colonizers). The institutions of colonization rely on political power, access to resources, strategies of oppression and mobility—all the things men seem to have. Therefore, we cannot say it is because of what white people have done to us that there is violence against women in our cultures. Patriarchy and colonization go hand in hand and it is this nexus that keeps the structures of gender violence so well entrenched.

Conclusion

As I look around at the audience, I see it is composed primarily of women and it occurs to me that most of us are not excusing male violence because of colonization. In fact, it is the men in our communities who use this argument in

their own defense: because they cannot, or will not, or feel threatened about, taking responsibility for their violence against women. So, they resort to blaming the white colonizers. We must take a strong and active position and not allow that analysis to dominate. We must resist the ways that our own communities—led largely by men—force us to silence, hurt, oppress, and disrespect the voices of women we live and work with; and all of our mothers who came before us; and all of our children who will come after us. It is up to us to push against the notion that colonization is at the root of violence against women, it is up to us to ensure that women's suffering, struggles and strengths are not dishonored.

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