

SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM BY ANOTHER NAME

Years ago I read the Chika Onyeaki's book *Capitalist Nigger* after the title caught my attention on the book shelf. Judging by the title I expected to find inspiring stories and anecdotes about wealthy black people whose successes could be an inspiration to poor sods like me. Alas, it was not to be. The book was about how black people have become brand-obsessed consumers of products developed by other nations. Examples given in the book suggested that black people in the US (I guess that still applies in Africa) accounted for a substantial proportion of buyers of the biggest name brands in clothes, cars, jewelry, perfumes and so on. Around the same time I also read Michael Eric Dyson's *Is Bill Cosby Right: Or has the black middle class lost its mind?* This book's publication followed Bill Cosby's attack on poor black people in the US about their reckless when he used an example of how they would rather buy their children \$300 sneakers than teach them to speak proper English. Locally, a few years ago when the black diamond (young black people who have just made it into the middle class ranks) phenomenon was widely publicised in the media businessman Sakkie Mocozoma is said to have said something like: "...the so-called black middle class are one pay cheque away from poverty..."

I was reminded of these two books and Sakkie Macozoma's statement by a phenomenon I am starting to see increasingly with couples and individuals in my practice. The phenomenon is how the pursuit of bling (this is a South African colloquial term referring to exclusive brands) and the finer things in life has thrown a lot of couples and families into a miserable state of indebtedness and, as one of my patients put it, "*when these things happen, love just flies out of the window*". In short, money and the voracious acquisition of material things can create problems for love relationships. Usually these clients would present with symptoms of Anxiety (constant worrying, sleeplessness, irritability, shortness of breath, muscular tension, diminished concentration) and Depression (sad or irritable mood, low energy levels, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, diminished concentration, low libido, wishing they were dead). These problems inevitably interfere with a person's quality of personal and work life and result in problems in the couple and family relationships.

From what I observed the indebtedness cycle starts with our society's conflation of success with the acquisition of material things, a phenomenon rooted in our colonial past. In colonial times the colonial rulers conquered the lands of the colonised and took ownership of the land and every by-product of it. They became super wealthy while the colonised remained poor and deprived. This led the colonised to perceive "ownership" as an indicator of wealth and the desire to "own" became a major goal for the colonised to strive for. This explains why, at the end of colonial rule, the indigenous rulers became the new elite that owned all the "trappings of success" previously associated with their colonial masters (now you can see where the Nkandla blue print originates).

The colonial history of "ownership" has come to define our characterisation of success. That is, we judge people's success by the material things they own so that the line between success and material acquisition has become very fine. This culture of confusing success with materialism puts a lot of young people under pressure once they complete their studies and start to earn a living. Being products of this artificial and materialist culture these young people get into debt even before they see what their pay cheque looks like. The banks are not making it easier either. Once banks are satisfied that a professional

person has a “stable” income they start throwing all kinds of tempting incentives their way: credit card, overdraft, homeloan and other traps. In addition, the intoxication of “having arrived” makes people go for certain brands of cellular phones, tablets (I still find the good ol’ notebook and pen quicker and easier), clothing and other big brand names in order to “fit in”. Before they know it, a 30 year-old has debts equivalent to the GDP of a rural dorpie. Things get worse when there are student loans and other “African taxes” (i.e helping younger siblings through school, extending a mother’s township house, relatives needing financial support etc) to take care of. Unfortunately, a lot of them end up needing financial rescue through debt counselling.

When I deal with these issues in therapy I try to sensitise people to the distinction between needs and wants. Needs are what we require while wants are what we desire. For example, a car as a need would be anything that has wheels, a functioning engine, lights and brakes and will be able to ensure that a person is able to get by and survive. A car as a want, on the other hand, would be an exclusive brand with all the bells and whistles a person could do without. Similar examples could be made with houses, clothes, cell phones and other things. Believe me a lot of people only discover the difference when I talk to them about it and often wish they had known it when they started out.

This problem is an example of how – I think – materialism has become a new form of slavery and colonialism; other nations no longer need to conquer and subjugate – all they do is manufacture products and induce the rest of the world to buy. Banks are complicit in doling out money to acquire these material things, thereby keeping clients “enslaved” to them.

Bling has become a god to which people have pledged their undying loyalty even to the detriment of their emotional wellbeing. This is mainly because buying is not a rational process; it is an emotional process – if it were rational advertisers and marketers would be out of work. Marketers of goods are quite aware of how our egos compel us to be associated with brands that are synonymous with images of success that society has created in our minds.

As parents of growing children we could stem the tide of this slavery by, firstly leading by example and secondly, by instilling certain values in our children. These would be values that emphasise individuality and self-worth so that children grow up believing “*It is OK to be who I am and I do not need to fit in with the crowds*”. Perhaps if more children internalised self-messages like this one we could see fewer people succumbing to peer pressure later in life (By the way, peer pressure is not just a childhood and teenage phenomenon; it persists through our entire lives) Debt and bling enslavement can also be prevented by every person having clearly defined individual goals in life. In defining these goals money and material things should be conceptualised as the tools (means) required to assist a person in pursuit of their goals. Money and material things should not become the goals to strive for. Material things, in other words, should be a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Going through life pursuing material things as ends in themselves can only make psychologists and psychiatrists richer because more people would battle the stress of living.