What Is Colonialism?

Colonialism is the subjugation by physical and psychological force of one culture by another—a colonizing power—through military conquest of territory and reconstructing the relation between the two cultures. It predates the era of European expansion (15th – 20th centuries) and extends to Japanese colonialism in the twentieth century and, most recently Chinese colonization of Tibet.

Colonialism has two forms: colonies of settlement, which often eliminate indigenous people (such as the Spanish destruction of the Aztec and Inca civilizations in the Americas); and colonies of rule, where colonial administrators reorganize existing cultures by imposing new inequalities to facilitate their exploitation. Examples of this are the British creation of local landlords, zamindars, to rule parts of India; the confiscation of personal and common land for cash cropping; depriving women of their customary resources; and the elevation of ethno-racial differences, such as privileging certain castes or tribes in the exercise of colonial rule.

Outcomes are, first, the cultural genocide or marginalization of indigenous people; second, the introduction of new tensions around class, gender, race, and caste that continue to disrupt postcolonial societies; third, the extraction of labor, cultural treasures, and resources to enrich the colonial power, its private interests, and public museums; fourth, the elaboration of ideologies justifying colonial rule, including racism and notions of backwardness, and fifth, various responses by colonial subjects, ranging from death to submission and internalization of inferiority to a variety of resistances---from everyday forms to sporadic uprisings to mass political mobilization.