An audio archive of radical and creative Kenyans disentangling the myth of development

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This archive is rooted in discourse by African scholars from Africa and the diaspora who aim to show that contrary to popular belief, modernization and colonialism did not boost economic development in Africa but rather interrupted it. They highlight the specific complexities and knowledge systems of pre-colonial Africa that point to the fact that underdevelopment is indeed a myth, or rather, a lasting symptom of an exploitative global economic system.

“Obviously, underdevelopment is not the absence of development, because every people have developed in one way or another and to a greater or lesser extent. Underdevelopment makes sense only as a means of comparing levels of development...A second and even more indispensable component of modern underdevelopment is that it expresses a particular relationship of exploitation: namely, the exploitation of one country by another.”

- Walter Rodney
Introduction

ABOUT THE ARCHIVE

50 years since the publication of Walter Rodney’s critical work How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, African Digital Heritage together with Savvy Contemporary, bring you an audio archive of radical and creative Kenyans disentangling the myth of development “The Development Myth” - a project curated by Chao Tayiana Maina, Muthoni Mwangi and Mumbi Kanyogo.

“The Development Myth” consists of four podcast episodes developed by four different script writers who each critique development using different lenses and styles and in some cases they think beyond development towards alternatives.
This archive is curated by Chao Tayiana, Muthoni Mwangi and Mumbi Kanyogo.

Research by Tamara Kahai and Mumbua Musembi.

Produced by Sounds Good Studios.

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Maureen Kasuku offers episode one in this series as a homage to Walter Rodney’s theorization of underdevelopment as a concept to explain the relationship of exploitation and extraction between colonised and coloniser countries, the result being a Europe that is technologically advanced with higher standards of living, and an African continent that is heavily disenfranchised.

Maureen builds on Rodney’s analysis to demonstrate how underdevelopment is also the product of the dominance of western gender systems that displace modes of indigenous relationalities.

The episode also consists of several recorded conversations with her friends, Philo and Mwatha, as well as other people she encounters on her journey to the recording studio. Together they use what they’ve learned through the theorists Maureen introduces them to, to reflect on their material conditions and those of other Kenyans, the popular definitions of development they’ve grown up with, and the histories they have learned over the years. The result is a more radical understanding of how underdevelopment manifests in their everyday lives and the beginnings of a commitment to thinking of development as necessarily people-centered against colonial visions of extraction as a pathway to development.

Written by: Maureen Kasuku
Performed by: Maureen Kasuku, Philo & Mwatha
In this episode educators and community organizers Felix Omondi and Stoneface Bomba trace the ways in which settler colonial land tenure systems and their continuation in post-colonial Kenya through conservation have alienated Masaai communities in Kenya and Tanzania from their ancestral lands, culture and heritage for over a hundred years. They do this by exploring the 1904 and 1911 Anglo-Maasai “Treaties” that facilitated the mass displacement and transfer of Maasai people initially from Ngong to Laikipia and Loita and then eventually to Kajiado and Narok to make way for white settlement in Laikipia where there was extremely fertile land.

Importantly, Stoneface and Felix show us that in order to do this, settlers used the argument that Africans were incapable of using the land effectively to facilitate development - an argument that privileges commercial agriculture, private land ownership and capitalist wage labor over African conceptions of land as a communal resource that has the capacity to sustain everyone’s needs.

For Felix and Stoneface, these are the conditions and histories that make possible a present in which Masaai communities across Tanzania and Kenya continue to be dispossessed and deprived of self-determination. For them, the system of inequality that conservancies continue to benefit from has emerged from a history of land evictions, wage exploitation and repression of radical, militant struggle that continues today in order to enable settlers and their junior partners to continue to accumulate by using the stolen land to profit from tourism and hunting industries.

By thinking with critical thinkers such as Mordecai Ogada and John Mbaria, the authors of the important book The Big Conservation Lie, Felix and Stoneface show us that conservation has “never been about putting the land into better use or protecting nature and wildlife”, instead it continues to facilitate underdevelopment today.
Episode 3, “Ornamental Flowers”, written by Anne Moraa and narrated by Laura Ekumbo (both of the LAM Sisterhood), the audience is treated to a soulful monologue that reframes colonial education systems as forms of miseducation that disinherit Africans of our heritages, languages, knowledge systems and our relationships with each other.

By tracing the lived experiences of both writer and narrator, Moraa and Laura explore the ways in which colonial education facilitates neocolonialism by creating a class of civilized elite who continue to govern the country, how Africans are alienated from their own knowledge systems and the effects on our collective psyche. For them underdevelopment is also alienation from indigenous cultures, languages, education and art.

Moraa and Laura end the episode by weaving together a genealogy of cultural workers across the continent who produce important work that uses “unlearning” as a pedagogical model for scrambling the colonial logics undergirding our collective miseducation and familiarizing ourselves with ourselves.

Written by: Anne Moraa of LAM Sisterhood
Performed by: Laura Ekumbo of LAM Sisterhood
In the final episode of this series, “Community Is All We Have”, Karwitha Kirimi writes and speaks a poem that rethinks community making and building as a pathway for making resources more accessible and shareable - as a counter to underdevelopment.

The poem begins with a call for the audience to participate in a circle/a portal/a ceremony - a call to pray, think, recall, sing, and learn together. Karwitha asks those who receive this call to gather together in resistance to state oppression in the form of land and house evictions, rising costs of living and ongoing coloniality. She then invites the spirits and legacies of movements from across the third world that have modeled what it looks like to improve marginalized people’s lives by resisting underdevelopment.

She invites the Maragua Women Farmers who militantly resisted the commercialisation of land and farming in Murang’a in the wake of Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1990s; who instead planted and grew food to sustain their families and communities. She also invites us to learn about the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement in South Africa, that continues to fight for the right to land and dignified housing for the unemployed, unhoused and the poor masses in South Africa. Through the eKhenana land occupation/commune they work towards food sovereignty and creating housing for poor South Africans. She also teaches about the Chipco movement against deforestation in India, as well as the revolutionary spirits of Walter Rodney and Amilcar Carbral.

We learn that the wellbeing of the oppressed will never be secured through the professionalisation and ngo-ization of struggle, instead it will be improved and strengthened by “by our own commitment to dealing with each other” and “how we care for those disinherit from the fruits of the land: the landless, stateless, poor, queer, trans, disabled, the othered”

Written and Performed by: Karwitha Kirimi