

# The Problem of Health: Evaluating the Legacy of Western Biomedicine on Kenyan Health

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Increasing life expectancy and declining infant mortality are often held up as proxies of development. In the same way, Western biomedicine in Africa is popularly imagined as a “European gift” (Baronov, 2008) or else an indisputably fortuitous accident. This poses a problem for narratives emphasising the inherent malice of colonialism. To resolve this inconsistency, this essay interrogates the legacy of Western biomedicine in Kenya using a combination of colonial administration records from the Kenya National Archives and secondary literature. First, it explores British profit- and power-related motives for exporting Western biomedicine to Kenya, thereby undermining any assumption of European benevolence. Second, it complicates the idea of improved living standards by highlighting the catastrophic impacts of deforestation, forced

labour and migration that accompanied colonialism. Finally, it relates these histories to the privatised, pharmaceutical form of Western biomedicine in Kenya today, drawing attention to both its inaccessibility due to prohibitive costliness and its inability to solve low-hanging fruits such as improved drinking water. The essay argues that colonialism presented at least as many problems to Kenyan health as it did solutions, and that the challenges of the Kenyan health care system today cannot be understood in isolation from the history of profit- and power-seeking inherent in Western medical expansion. This historically sensitive evaluation delegitimises benevolent interpretations of the impact of colonialism on Kenyan health and casts doubts on the ability of foreign actors to deliver positive health outcomes in former colonies.