GLOBAL SCIENCE AND COLONIAL CONTEXTS: PUBLIC HEALTH, MICROBIOLOGY AND DISEASE CONTROL IN FORMER PORTUGUESE AFRICA

Abstract

From the last quarter of the 1800s the microbiological revolution changed the way disease was understood in empires and their colonies. Its inroads in sub-Saharan Africa were associated with the intense scientific debate on the methods of prevention and eradication of certain endemic diseases such as malaria, yellow fever, cholera, yaws and sleeping sickness. The collaboration between microbiologists and epidemiologists in the discovery of causes and effective treatments for endemic pathologies was aided by the emergence of international organizations from the 1920s such as the Health Bureau. Commissions created for that purpose would lead to a progressive standardization of procedures regarding campaigns, while research results were publicized in scientific forums on and in the African continent. The disease ecology in former Portuguese colonies such as Angola, Guinea and Mozambique differed little from that of other, neighbouring colonies; nevertheless claims were made to sustain the idea of a ‘colonial science’ imbued with a mix of nationalist pride and a pioneering scientific spirit. While the rapid globalization of preventive medicine and disease control appeared to reduce the margins for colonial specificities, these trans-national dynamics did have a crucial role in advancing the notion of public health in colonial contexts. Given the specificities of Portuguese colonial rule, the inputs of commissions for disease control and eradication showed to what extent microbiology affected existing colonial health services. At the same time, these commissions also impacted upon the provision of inclusive health care to both settlers and indigenous communities thereby directly intervening in the complex relations between colonial overlords and their subjects. The present paper (oral presentation with PP) intends to demonstrate the way in which these commissions and particularly those regarding sleeping sickness brought about a shift in perceptions of public health in former Portuguese colonies such as Angola, Guinea and Mozambique.

Keywords: Microbiology, public health, disease control, Portuguese Africa

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