“Civilization” is a word with an abundance of historical, social, and cultural meaning, and can be both defined directly and explored as a more contrived concept. In some senses, “civilization” represents a community of shared beliefs, identity, or history, or “the culture characteristic of a particular time or place” (Merriam-Webster). Although this is the most general, most applicable definition of the word, due to a history of its use in relation to colonialism, civilization possesses double meaning: it can represent “the action or process of civilizing or becoming civilized; (also) the action or process of being made civilized by an external force;” or “the state or condition of being civilized; human cultural, social, and intellectual development when considered to be advanced and progressive in nature” (Oxford English Dictionary).

Both of the latter definitions were heavily influenced by the European colonial presence in the world from the 15th to 18th centuries, and it was often believed that the colonial forces gave the “gift” of civilization to the savages and barbarians that lived in the so-called “non-West.” The French and English began using the term “civilization” between the 1760s-1800, around the same time frame as the American Revolution, the French Revolution, during the European Enlightenment, and at the beginning of what is called modernity; a time associated with “technological innovation, governance...individual subjectivity, scientific expansion and rationalization...rapid urbanization,” and the idea of surpassing one’s predecessors
It is no coincidence that Europe’s launch into modernity coincided with a period of oppressive colonialism and imperialism in Africa, and it is also no coincidence that the definitions of civilization closely resemble the act of colonialism.

To speak of African civilizations today, given the complicated history of the term civilization, is to speak of the lasting, brutal impacts colonization, slavery, imperialism, and European influence had on Africa, and the long road to recovery, rehabilitation, and renaissance Africa has been taking and will continue to traverse in the future. In the words of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, slavery and colonization dismembered Africans’ personhood, their continent, and community, and their language and ownership of their production, halting the transition of African civilizations into modernity.

In the first chapter of his book *Something Torn and New*, Thiong’o explores the “dismembering practices” Europe inflicted upon Africa, writing that the process occurred “in two stages” (Thiong’o 5).

During the first of these, the African personhood was divided into two halves: the continent and its diaspora. African slaves, the central commodity in the mercantile phase of capitalism, formed the basis of the sugar, cotton, and tobacco plantations in the Caribbean and American mainland. If we accept that slave trade and plantation slavery provided the primary accumulation of capital that made Europe’s Industrial Revolution possible, we cannot escape the irony that the very needs of that Industrial Revolution...led inexorably to the second stage of the dismemberment of the continent (Thiong’o 5).

In separating Africans from the continent, slavery severed them from their home, community, and the part of their personhood tied to those places and groups. This situation is further complicated and twisted by the fact that these Africans were subsequently made to support European advancement and revolution through their stolen and forced labor, providing the
foundation for European development and change while their own civilizations were being stripped of people and resources alike. Thiong’o addresses this in his description of the second stage of dismemberment, which he writes occurs with the

division of the African from his land, body, and mind. The land is taken away from its owner, and the owner is turned into a worker on the same land, thus losing control of his natural and human resources. The colonial subject has no say over the colonial state; in effect he produces but has no say over the disposal of the product. Yet the state has power over every aspect of his being. Whereas before he was his own subject, now he is subject to another (6).

Not only is the African physically separated from a facet of their identity and forced to leave their homeland, but they also have their sense of humanity and autonomy stolen from them, because someone else owns them, owns their labor, and essentially owns their sense of self. Their personhood, or this dynamic process of being or becoming, is taken from them and suppressed so they can fit into the role of “slave” (Marsh, Comaroff). They can no longer adequately inhabit the sense of self so closely tied to community, family, and cultural philosophy, and instead have to take on a new identity, a different role in society, and often another name.

Thiong’o’s final point about dismemberment addresses how Europe did not just separate Africans from Africa or their bodies and selfhood, but how it also

planted its memory on the bodies of the colonized. The phenomenon is not peculiarly European but, rather, is in the nature of all colonial conquests and systems of foreign occupation. In his attempt to remake the land and its peoples in his image, the conqueror acquires and asserts the right to name the land and its subjects, demanding that the subjugated accept the names and culture of the conqueror (9).
European colonizers gave themselves the power to name. Language and naming, Thiong’o stresses, are incredibly important and intensely tied to a people’s senses of personhood and identity. In changing Africans’ names and the names of places, Europeans inserted their own historical memory on top of what Africa used to be, erasing major ties to African civilizations and cultures. By the time African countries began gaining independence in the late 19th century, so much of them had been taken over, renamed, shuffled around and changed that vast swaths of the communities and civilizations that existed pre-colonization were irrevocably altered (Boddy-Evans).

On the smallest scale, slavery and European colonization disrupted African civilizations through their attacks on Africans’ personhood, and their attempt to restructure the narrative to exclude African philosophies and thoughts and to “other” them. In their essay “On Personhood: an Anthropological Perspective from Africa,” John L. and Jean Comaroff directly ask the question: “Is the idea of ‘the autonomous person’ a European invention?” They challenge the idea that the absence of this specific perception of personhood implies a “deficit, a failure, a measure of incivility on the part of non-Europeans” and set out to examine - in a historical, “late colonial” context - the people of Southern Tswana in South Africa, and their conceptions of personhood (Comaroff 267-268). The Comaroffs determine that the production of personhood here...was an irreducibly social process...given the workings of the Southern Tswana social universe, initiative lay with individuals for ‘building themselves up.’ The emphasis on self-construction was embodied, metonymically and metapragmatically, in the idea of tiro, labour. Go dira, in the vernacular, meant ‘to make’, ‘to do’, or ‘to cause to happen’. It covered a wide spectrum of activities, from cultivation, cooking, and creating a family to pastoralism, politics, and the performance of ritual (273).
This definition of Southern Tswana personhood identifies how, counter to European perception, personhood is not necessarily static and, in this culture and period, is born from labor and action. Personhood, “however it may be culturally formulated, is always a social creation - just as it is always fashioned by the exigencies of history” (276). In the context of this South African group, personhood is not static, does not fit the European concept of “autonomy,” and can only be viewed through a lens of historical contextualization.

The idea that personhood is historical and contextual further proves how colonization dismembered and disrupted African civilizations and, unfortunately, shaped how they exist in the world today. After Europeans forced enslavement of millions of people and exerted immense effort to make individuals become something they were not, generations of African slaves developed a sense of personhood tied to the institution of slavery. For hundreds of years, they were slaves, and that was all they knew, and it would have been easy to lose sense of one’s home. If, for the people of the Southern Tswana, for example, their concept of personhood was defined by an evolution of actions, then the repetitive, endless labor they did under Colonial Rule changed their personhood. After African independence movements, these individuals who had been enslaved or ruled for generations no longer possessed an absolute sense of their personhood or culture. African civilizations and cultures today have been redeveloping their national identities independent of slavery and colonialism, and it would not be surprising if individuals struggle with situating themselves in this new global narrative in which they have the power and position to redefine themselves.

The belief that Africa did not have civilizations until European influence and that Africans needed to be civilized was widely spread because it was a useful tactic to rally
individuals to the colonial cause. What better reason to go to another continent and impose your will and strength on people you know nothing about than the prospect that they need to be saved and that they desire your “help?” That driving belief behind colonization played a significant role in the way Europeans regarded Africans and Africa as a whole; as a barbaric, uncivilized, monolithic people. This was utterly false, as Thiong’o asserts because, in order to enslave Africans, Europeans had to dismember their personhood, language, community, and very civilization. The civilizations that existed and were built before colonial influence were robust and wholly realized, as evidenced in Thomas Mofolo’s fictionalized telling of the story of Chaka.

Chaka was the founder of South Africa’s Zulu empire and ruled the civilization until he was killed in 1828. In Mofolo’s novel and in well-known history, Chaka built the Zulu from a small clan into a sizeable, formidable people. He created a large royal city called Umgungundlovu, which was shaped like a circle and had two main roads and a central town square. He instituted a system of sentinels to observe the goings on of who entered and exited the city, as well as runners and messengers with signals. He instituted royal greetings, built a personal dwelling for himself called Ntukulu, created military villages specifically for the army, and developed this place into a hub of activity. One of the things Chaka will always be remembered for is the changes he made to the Zulu military tactics. One common European marker of renaissance and civilization was the rationalization and increased efficiency of specific processes, and Chaka did precisely this with his transformation of the army (Marsh, Snyder). He forbade soldiers from using the traditional long throwing spears and instead engineered shorter spears, meant to stab close up. These spears were better because there was more accuracy in their
use, and they improved Shaka’s army. He also created several battle formations that revolutionized and advanced how the soldiers approached the enemy (Mofolo).

After years of working to build to Zulu empire to a place of power and glory, Chaka died, and fewer than 70 years after his death, the Zulu were defeated by the British. Much of the actual land of the Zulu people was stolen and transformed, and the British then took control of what was left of Zululand (Britannica). As Thiong’o describes in his text, the Zulu were dismembered from the very land they toiled to win, and whether or not one supports the actions of Chaka and the extensive lengths he went to to create his empire, it is clear that he built a civilization that was then stripped from his people. African civilizations existed, but the dismembering European colonists and imperialists executed to gain their power erased visible, physical evidence of these civilizations, and that erasure persists through all of Europe’s long, complicated history of influence in Africa.

The dismemberment of Africa through colonialism, slavery, and European intervention did not stop at the destruction of African senses of personhood and civilization construction but persisted in affecting the actual conception of the term “civilization.” In his text Discourse on Colonialism, Aimé Césaire interrogates the idea and definitions of “civilization” in relation to imperialism in Africa, and in doing so furthers Thiong’o’s claim that Africa experienced a dismemberment of civilization and society. Césaire writes, firstly, that “no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either, that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization - and therefore force - is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased…” (39). In transferring some of the emotional weight and pain that comes with colonization onto the oppressors, Césaire takes what Thiong’o calls
dismemberment and applies it to European colonizers. The colonized, he argues, are not the only ones who experience dismemberment of civilization. This statement broadens the issue and prevents people from claiming that imperialism only impacted the oppressed and that they are the only ones who need to be “fixed” and experience a renaissance or rebirth in contemporary times. The dismemberment of the colonizing civilizations was also prevalent, and they are not exempt from the same reexamination of societal values and cleaving from the impact of colonization that African civilizations are forced to confront.

Césaire then reinforces the contemporary belief that in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized “there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses” (42). The colonized are turned “into an instrument of production,” just as Thiong’o asserts in his text about the transformation of the colonized African from an individual with a sense of self to a tool for European advancement. “Colonization = ‘thingification,’” Césaire states boldly, illustrating that in Europe’s colonial dismemberment of Africans from their societies and civilizations, they are turned into things, devoid of personhood, context, and history. Once Africans are turned into things, Europeans adopt the power to name them, to place them, to own them. In reexamining the definition and victims of colonization and equating it to “thingification” and “objectification,” Césaire equates the validity of African civilizations to European civilizations and asserts that both parties have work to do in rebuilding themselves.

Césaire essentially addresses all of Thiong’o’s points about the various facets of dismemberment. He speaks of “societies drained of their essence...extraordinary possibilities
wiped out...millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life...from wisdom...millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex...natural *economies* that have been disrupted...the looting of products, the looting of raw materials…” (43). To speak of African civilizations today, Césaire professes, is that “no one knows at what stage of material development these same countries would have been if Europe had not intervened” (45).

It has been firmly established by Thiong’o, the Comaroffs, Mofolo, and Césaire that African civilizations, through slavery, imperialism, and colonialism, were methodically and horrifically stripped from African people, and that to say contemporary African civilizations are free of that horror is to deny hundreds of years of evidence. The future of this conversation, however, is to turn towards today’s proponents of African Renaissance, and those who see a path towards Africa’s complete independence from the handprints of European influence.

Césaire addresses this point in *Discourse on Colonialism*, writing that you cannot return to the “Negro civilizations” that once existed, or “make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past...It is a new society that we must create, with the help of all our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days” (52). This sentiment both encompasses the need to move away from the structures of civilizations past and create African societies that function in the cultural, political, economic, and social contexts of the world today, and to also not forget the “fraternity” of the past and maintain that sense of unity and African cohesion.

Nnamdi Azikiwe, in his book *Renascent Africa*, provides a more constructive framework for the modern African Renaissance and revitalization of African civilizations. He writes that
“New Africa refers to the Africa of to-morrow” and that it “must come to pass” in order to eradicate the “static conditions of Africans” (Azikiwe 7, 8). “The philosophy of the New Africa,” Azikiwe continues, “hinges itself on five bases,” including “Spiritual Balance...Social Regeneration...Economic Determinism...Mental Emancipation...and National Risorgimento” (8-10). These five categories address some of the major facets of growth Africa needs to experience both now and in the future to bring itself out of stagnancy. Spiritual Balance represents “respect for the views of others;” Social Regeneration is concerned with viewing an “African as a man, nothing more, nothing less,” without “vanity and superciliousness and disharmony;” Economic Determinism “must be the basis of African economic thought” and made “responsible for the formation of the social and political institutions of society;” Mental Emancipation “includes education of the sort which should teach African youth to have faith in his ability...to look at no man as his superior;” and lastly, National Risorgimento “is inevitable,” and stems from contemporary Africans having “cultivated spiritual balance...planned his society economically...experienced mental emancipation...” (8-10). In this delineation of the five major aspects of what Azikiwe considers African philosophy, he gives Africa his roadmap for present and future action. He sees New Africa, or a resurgence and regeneration of African civilizations, as the next step for the continent, and covers a variety of bases to provide a plan for healing many of the things taken from African civilizations; social unity, economy, self-confidence, and personhood.

To speak of African Civilizations today, taking into account the extensive knowledge and opinions of Thiong’o, the Comaroffs, Mofolo, Césaire, and Azikiwe, is to speak of a history of
pain, dismemberment, and struggle, but it is also to speak of a present and future of rebirth, unity, determination, and strength. It is to speak of a story that has not yet been completed.

Works Cited


