

# Another missionary in Africa: the Bill Gates myth

by

**Clairmont Chung**

on

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## WHO IS THE MAN?

Bill Gates is a walking talking Bill Gates commercial. It matters not that he retired from Microsoft. The Bill Gates image is still very serious business. Arguably his most famous quote is "Be nice to nerds. Chances are you'll end up working for one." He dresses the part: very casual with the preppy uniform of khakis and blue. His preppiness and nerdiness follow from his prep school background. But not too many nerds drop out of college, as Gates did. College is the place to find nerds; that's where nerds get their revenge. Gates constructed the Microsoft company environment like a college campus. It's part of the myth of that gentle, coed, carefree, nurturing, professorial and now the giving, philanthropist Bill Gates. It's all very disarming.



The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) leads the push to bring nutrition and health to Africa. But this move requires some scrutiny and a determination as to whether this is another image builder or worse: an attack by a modern day missionary on another unsuspecting indigenous population. Yes, some Africans are an indigenous population too.

Gates' retirement from Microsoft allows him time to focus more intently on his image, his sales pitch and Africa. By contrast, the 'Red' campaign of Gap, Apple and a few other retailers, requires you buy the product to contribute to fighting AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis in Africa. The emphasis is always on buying and selling, not on the disease. So, if you buy a pair of Gap jeans with the red label, a portion of that money goes to the fund. The project, founded by U2's Bono, is intended to capitalize on what we do anyway – buy stuff. Generally, no one argues against helping Africa, right? But with all the riches these corporations and individuals earn, why do we still have to buy something before they give something? Much of these earnings were as a result of raw materials sourced in Africa: even its music. Unlike Red, Gates requires no purchase from Microsoft, at least not directly. But we can't separate Gates from Microsoft and its products. Moreover, Microsoft's operating system is still the most popular, and for good reason, so we don't have as much choice as we think. We are locked into buying MS DOS. It's like English in the business world: the official language. Bill Gates knows this. He 'engineered' it.

In Africa, there is no need to buy raw material. You simply dig it up, add value, and sell it. This was once done to its indigenous inhabitants. As Arundhati Roy assessed foundations,

*"Their enthralling history, which has faded from contemporary memory, began in the US in the early 20th century when, kitted out legally in the form of endowed foundations, corporate philanthropy began to replace missionary activity as Capitalism's (and Imperialism's) road opening and systems maintenance patrol."*

Of note, Gap, like Apple, has been under scrutiny for its use of sweatshop labour. However, it has been reported that the clothing used in Gap's Red promotion is now made in Lesotho (Africa) and not the cheaper China. Gates seems to want to distance his image from the carnage of capital greed by insightfully focusing on software. Perhaps his reasoning was that he would not be responsible for the slave-like exploitation of mostly women and sometimes children, who build hardware for Apple and others in China, or those children digging for gold and coltan in central Africa. The latter two are essential metals used in circuit boards for hardware. This is misguided. Neither a focus on software nor resignation from his baby, Microsoft, could cover the trail. Like banks and insurance companies that financed the flow of human cargo from Africa and claim they did nothing wrong, the builder of operating system software that drives the machines that use our exploited resources and now track our movements and speeches of dissent should not be allowed to claim innocence.

Bill Gates should not be allowed to say he only builds operating systems. In a racist criminal justice system, the legislators who passed the laws, the police who make the arrest, the prosecutors who make the charges stick and even the defense attorneys who seem not to care, need to acknowledge culpability in a system out of control. All actors mentioned purport to do good, as Bill Gates now promises. They all claim to fight evil: crime on one hand, starvation and disease on the other.

Africa does not need this kind of charity. It needs equality in trade and the exchange of leading technology. Instead, Gates, the world's foremost technologist, brings experts on seeds and vaccines.

Contrary to popular belief, Bill Gates never invented anything. The real invention is the public belief in Bill Gates as the self-made mogul. He started with a 'gift' from IBM of the DOS platform. For that platform he adapted the MS-DOS system that operates all personal computers (PCs). Even the term personal computer really means operated by Microsoft DOS. This is so even if your 'personal' computer happens to be an Apple or using another operating system like Linux. Unless it's Microsoft, it is not personal. To be a personal computer, a PC, it has to have a Microsoft DOS operating system. It's not only the most widely used system, its personal.

It's important to understand how these systems work before we look at what he is doing in Africa. Of course, Bill Gates is not alone. It's a scorched earth policy, from the business culture that



dominates the US landscape. It's like the use of napalm and Agent Orange in Vietnam, when the intent was mass defoliation of all flora, including food crops, Microsoft used all kinds of tactics, some unlawful, to grab its market share at the expense of any other competitor irrespective of any benefit to the consumer. In Vietnam, Agent Orange led to deforestation; the loss of crops led to losses in wildlife and livestock and an environmental disaster. Eventually, a literally scorched earth would result and starvation, death; victory would follow. Naturally, if you destroyed everything, survivors would need you to rebuild. This is the plan of an empire.

## **COMING TO A COURTROOM NEAR YOU, THE WAR FOR THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION**

Gates' victories were not a war of nerds but one of lawyers. Gates in a 1994 Playboy interview explained,

*"Our restricting IBM's ability to compete with us in licensing MS-DOS to other computer makers was the key point of the negotiation. We wanted to make sure only we could license it. We did the deal with them at a fairly low price, hoping that would help popularize it. Then we could make our move because we insisted that all other business stay with us. We knew that good IBM products are usually cloned, so it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that eventually we could license DOS to others. We knew that if we were ever going to make a lot of money on DOS it was going to come from the compatible guys, not from IBM. They paid us a fixed fee for DOS. We didn't get a royalty, even though we did make some money on the deal. Other people paid a royalty. So it was always advantageous to us, the market grew and other hardware guys were able to sell units."*

Part of this revelation is the importance of hardware 'guys' to the operation. It is not a separate exercise. What he neglected to explain was the enormous amount of litigation that accompanied and solidified this position and the almost continuous war that has followed this policy.

The Federal Trade Commission launched an investigation into Microsoft's antitrust violations, only to seemingly lose steam and give up. Antitrust claims are simply claims that one company is attempting to kill off the competition. The Department of Justice, no less, then took up the fight and eventually settled for several hundred million dollars in fines. All during this time there were numerous lawsuits from wronged developers to burned competitors and even employees. This was some potent napalm. In *Vizcaino v. Microsoft*, 97 F.3d 1187 (9th Cir.1996), the court ruled against Microsoft and ordered it to pay benefits to workers who were denied benefits on account of their incorrect classification as independent contractors as opposed to employees. Welcome to our world.

i4i, of all the names, a software developer, filed a patent infringement suit and won against Microsoft. Microsoft refused to pay. Meanwhile, based on the stolen patents, Microsoft developed a replacement. Microsoft appealed to the highest court in the land. The United States Supreme Court ruled against Microsoft and ordered it pay the developer. Uniloc, Alcatel, and The Commonwealth of Massachusetts are just some of winners against Microsoft and its intent on domination. But they are still too few. Meanwhile, numerous claims have been buried under the costs of litigation and never came to light. I could go on forever listing claims against Microsoft for patent and business infringement, but you can use its search engine to find more. Of note the European Union (EU) fined Microsoft \$1.4 billion for its anti-competitive practices. But these fines amounted to slaps on the wrist, as Microsoft continues in its scorched earth policy and more suits are being filed as well as patents being bought as we write.

In a practice known as defensive patenting, large companies like Microsoft are buying-up existing patents and seeking new ones to use as a basis to defend or attack in the event of war against their competitors. These patents serve no other useful purpose. The design is rarely manufactured. These patents, some ancient, are bought or brought with the idea that something in their intended use might resemble that of a new patent or one in the future and therefore form a basis to make a claim that it is stolen from Microsoft. If you develop a computer related patent, it is very likely that Microsoft owns one just like it, or partially like it, and can mount an attack against you based on that patent.



## COMING TO AFRICA IN A TEST TUBE

It is with this background to his rise in wealth that Bill Gates launched the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, with its focus on Africa. Like a good missionary, he does not come empty-handed. He has brought experts and seeds. It's worth noting that the man Gates hired to help oversee his Africa sojourn is former Monsanto Vice President, Robert Horsch. Gates has invested heavily in Monsanto. It would be an irony, except it is so serious that Monsanto was the company that developed Agent Orange. The effect of that deadly chemical is still affecting Vietnamese people and American soldiers forty years later. It is the progeny of that science that led to Roundup, Monsanto's world-renowned weed killer and killer of several other things. Horsch was a leading figure in developing Monsanto's genetically modified seeds that were resistant to its own herbicide and pesticides and are now earning Monsanto billions in royalties. They have patented these seeds, which can cross pollinate and colonize existing seed and farms. In America's Midwest, farmers find their fields filled with a corn they did not plant...

We know what happened in Vietnam. The people resisted imperialism and drove the French, first, and then the full might of the US military out of their country. So it is in this context that you must view Gates' approach to spreading his software and now his seed money in Africa. Like Monsanto's plan to use genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and pesticides to become the dominant if not the sole producer of seed and food, Gates routinely violated antitrust and patent and other laws to achieve the goal of destroying all weeds (all rival software). His new hire, Horsch, will serve as senior program officer and will apply the GMO technology toward improving crop yields in regions including sub-Saharan Africa, where the foundation recently launched a major drive in collaboration with the Rockefeller Foundation.

Equally misguided is the Foundation's approach to disease. Malaria and HIV appear to be its focus in the development of vaccines. A cursory look at the history of vaccines will reveal its inherent volatility and high rates of failure. Many of these health issues are really wealth issues. By wealth I mean the means to eat a balanced diet. I maintain that Africa's problem is one of poverty: its inability to provide regular balanced meals to all of its people. Its greatest epidemic is poverty. Find a vaccine for that. How is it that the near richest man, and the smartest nerd, on the planet cannot see the need for an infrastructure that would lead to adequate supplies of food and water? Instead, he focuses on experimenting with dangerous chemicals and more dangerous genes, purportedly to increase yield.

Out of the other side of his mouth he's decreasing population. F. William Engdahl quotes Gates' 2010 TED speech where Gates declares, "First we got population. The world today has 6.8 billion people. That's headed up to about 9 billion. Now if we do a really great job on new vaccines, health care, reproductive health services, we lower that by perhaps 10 or 15 percent". Engdahl asserts that studies show that the chemicals used in the plan reflect reduction birth rates and that the Rockefeller Foundation has been involved with eugenics for some time. Its partnership with Gates and AGRA is precisely for that stated purpose.

Gates sees the need, but the way he wants to fill it is in the mistaken belief that GMOs will provide the high yields to feed Africa and in the meantime he would vaccinate against diseases. Simultaneously, corporations like Monsanto and investors like Gates would reap billions in royalties from the use of its seed. The same GMOs banned by the European Union are acceptable in Africa. The result would be a monoculture that would eliminate centuries of farm practices and seed diversity that date back before the Bible and was partially disrupted by that other foreign intervention: the slave trade. Moreover, the colonialism that followed wanted cocoa, coffee, and cotton. These are not products that find their ways onto the plates of Africans. Stolen human resources along with forced agriculture for the European market set the stage for the shortages we find today.

Jonas Salk, credited with developing the Polio vaccine, when asked who owned the patent, is said to have responded, "There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?" Gates and Monsanto have succeeded where others have failed. If you agree that the seed requires light to grow, preferably sunlight, likewise GMO seed, requires Monsanto's permission and conditions for use; therefore, they





control seed. They are the sun. They may not have patented the sun, but they patented the next best thing: control of the rights to whom, and in what conditions, their seed will access the energy of sun in order to grow. Vandana Shiva refers to Monsanto's actions as the colonization of seed.

I am no defender of patents and copyright. It's just another tool to consolidate creativity in the hands of a few. But that is another blog. These empires, like Microsoft and Monsanto, are built on patents: on ownership, including ownership of the means of production. They no longer need to own factories. They only need to own the rights to what the factories produce. Observers like F. William Engdahl have noted that vaccinated children who drink water contaminated by feces are no healthier than they were before the vaccine. Providing that these untested vaccines are safe. Instead of cleaning up the water and sewage systems, they seek to compromise them even more by the use of pesticides and fertilizer needed for their push in agriculture.

"Life is not fair; get used to it." Bill Gates

As if Gates and Monsanto are not sufficient adversaries, President Obama recently appointed a former Monsanto CEO as senior advisor to the Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Michael Taylor's addition is in the context of the US governments plan Via AGRA (two words) to push its policies in Africa. Of course the FDA has refused to ban GMOs in the US and has refused to require foods be labeled, if containing GMOs. Gates is indeed visionary. He has singlehandedly determined the importance of food. It matters not that he could have asked any African child.

But this is a warning to the rest of us. The only other land and space available for full colonization is the Amazon rainforest. It won't be around for long. But that is another blog. There is the Canadian Tundra and Mars, but first things first. Given the bad press and attention directed at the Amazon, Africa seemed the place with the most land lying seemingly unused. Governments have launched a campaign of terror to remove residents from lands they have occupied since before Columbus was conceived, let alone Microsoft. Though I do not hold Gates responsible for every peasant chased off land farmed for countless moons, I do blame him for adding to the hysteria of the land grab. His mere presence forces up the price of land. What one once farmed for free, soon one will not be able to farm for any money. But if you desire, there will be jobs on the new farm.

## **AN ALTERNATE CHEMICAL SOLUTION**

Guyanese author Harry Narain wrote about high yield imported paddy rice in his collection of short stories, "Grass Roots People", set in 1970s Guyana. The yield was so high that it bent the stalks lower to the ground than normal and ripened faster. The paddy was too heavy. Any rain would mean the end. It ripened so fast that there was not enough time to wait for the government loaned combines to get to his farm. Without money to hire a private combine, the rice crop would die in the field along with the farmer's dreams of a pair of track shoes for his boy to play sports, earrings his little girl begged for, and a fridge for his wife. The yield was never so high again.

Despite and in spite of all the history and facts on Gates, there are still people who are going to say that Africa is in need and if Gates wants to contribute he should be allowed to do so. They will add that it's people like this writer who have no money to contribute who are always trying to stop well-meaning people; and finally, Africa is on the rise as a result and here comes another no gooder, a crab, to pull the beneficiaries back down. It's always the same arguments, on both sides. But facts are difficult to controvert. Denial is a sweet space to reside. No one comes to kick you out of there.

Under the cover of the foundation, Gates moved from paying little tax to paying no tax. That notwithstanding, there are a few things he can do for me. He must relinquish all his shares in Microsoft and donate half to Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement. He must remove his two executives from AGRA's board. He must distribute the rest of the shares among those families in China whose children jumped to their deaths from the Foxconn factory dorm while employed in making things for us that included his friend Steve Jobs', 'I' stuff. He must denounce child labour. He must lobby Microsoft to withhold software from companies who use slave-like and sweatshop labor for their products. He must divest from Monsanto. Oh! And endorse the Buffet Plan to pay more taxes for himself and Microsoft before he divests his shares and Buffet transfers all his shares to the



BMGF. Even Buffet has said that 30 percent is not enough. I'll stop there for now. I shouldn't have to tell him everything. He should be thinking for his damn self.

On Buffet, the New York Times recently reported Buffet's increased stake in Wal-Mart and that it came just before the same paper published detailed allegations that Wal-Mart executives bribed retailers in Mexico to facilitate its expansion there. Was this mission Wal-Mart's or Buffett's or Berkshire Hathaway's? In 2011, he gave \$1.5 billion of his BerkshireHathaway stock to the BMGF as part of a plan to transfer the majority his wealth to the foundation. This means little or no taxes.

Oh, Bill! When you talk to Buffet tell him that giving his wealth to your Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will not absolve him, either. Tell him he would not be able to hide behind Berkshire Hathaway, Inc., the hedge fund he presides over. Smaller investors pool resources in a hedge fund for larger and more lucrative investments. However, as its name suggest, the Hedge fund is simply a hedge, a fence, between the money and the exploitation. Capitalism has not yet found a way to increase earnings without exploiting free or near free labour. Wal-Mart's record on wages and union busting is notorious. It does not matter how prestigious sounding the name of the high and growing hedge between money and poverty. What Africa needs, finally, Brother Bill, is for you to get us some agent orange from your friends at Monsanto. So we can take care of the hedges ourselves.