Twitter Thread by ■■ is a Country



■■ is a Country
@FutbolsaCountry

Here’s a short thread on the history and significance of the pith helmet (as worn by Melania Trump in Kenya today). Media correctly describes the pith helmet as a symbol of colonial rule. But why did colonizers start wearing them in the first place? 1/



White Europeans have long obsessed over the supposed relationship between race, culture & climate. 19th century colonists (supported by scientific & medical opinion) believed “tropical” solar radiation attacked white people’s nervous systems & rendered them infertile. 2/

Pith helmets were often worn by colonizers alongside other protective paraphernalia such as red vests & “spine pads” worn under the shirt to protect the nervous system from the feared “actinic ray.” Spine pads were standard issue in British Army

kit in early 20th century. 3/

Other convenient medical recommendations included no manual labour outdoors for whites, holidays to cooler climates & no white children in the colonies beyond age 5. The pith helmet was part of a pseudo-scientific discourse that enforced class as well as racial domination. 4/

The pith helmet is sometimes used to denote a “frontier” spirit of adventure & exploration. This is wrong. Their historical social role was to emblematize white fragility and anxieties, as well as blurring the distinction between white civilians & colonial police/army. 5/

Personally, I think the US First Lady's decision to wear a pith helmet is appropriate. The regime she's representing in Kenya is a white supremacist one whose policies & ideological grounding are a continuation of earlier forms of imperialism, represented by the pith helmet. 6/

I found out more about the social history of the pith helmet and white settler "climatic theories" in Dane Kennedy's book "Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939" (1987). Other recommendations welcome. 7/

This is the kind of thing I used to cover when I edited the "White History Month" series on Africa is a Country. I'm all for White History Month, because there's so much about the concrete history of white supremacism that is poorly remembered or conveniently forgotten. 8/