

# Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa



# **Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa**

Myths of Decolonization

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**CODESRIA**

Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa  
DAKAR

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## Preface

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This book has been written at a crucial time in global history in general and African history in particular. On the one hand, the history is dominated by a climate of interventionist global neoliberal imperialism which increasingly manifests its violent character through the military invasion of Iraq, bombardment of Libya, imposition of sanctions on Zimbabwe and military invasion of Afghanistan. Violent invasions of weaker countries by the United States of America (USA) and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners, are often justified as humanitarian interventions to introduce democracy and human rights, dethrone dictators, eradicate terrorism and restore order within those states characterized by United States as outposts of tyranny and part of 'the axis of evil'. But the military interventions, rhetorically premised on the noble 'right to protect', seem to be selective and guided by the West's permanent strategic interests rather than genuine global humanitarian concerns.

On the other hand, there was the unexpected outbreak of popular uprisings in North Africa that have resulted in the collapse of dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, and the aerial bombardment of Libya by NATO-led forces in support of an onslaught by disparate opposition groups that culminated in the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year iron rule and his death. These new developments in global history have provoked animated debates with some scholars like David Harvey (2003, 2007) and Ellen Meiksins Wood (2003) raising issues of the spectre of 'new imperialism' that is involving new players from East and South-East Asia. Some left-leaning scholars have concluded that we are living in a new world of 'universal capitalism in which capitalist imperatives are universal instruments of capitalist domination'. They see this development as a very recent phenomenon (Wood 2003: 127).

At another level, the popular uprisings that have rocked the North African region, spreading to the Middle-East and provoking panic responses among dictators in Sub-Saharan Africa, are interpreted as part of an indictment on Francis Fukuyama's (1993) end of history thesis and an indicator of ordinary people's agency to continue the project of making history as well as revolutions. But the military intervention by NATO in Libya is raising the danger of the mantra of humanitarian intervention being used as a fig-leaf covering the nakedness of violent global neoliberal imperialism that is quick to fish in troubled waters of those countries that are endowed with strategic resources such as oil, gas and diamonds. At the same time, the popular uprisings which are also referred to as 'facebook revolution' are being celebrated as the dawn of 'second independence' involving the people directly fighting to translate the myths of decolonization and illusions of freedom that resulted from the attainment of juridical freedom into popular freedom, including restructuring of colonially crafted postcolonial states into what Nzungu-Ntalaja (1987:75) termed 'a people's state' dedicated to serve popular interests and demands. This people's state is a result of a 'people's revolution' (Nzungu-Ntalaja 1987: 75).

Another global development worth noting is the financial crisis that has rocked the Northern industrialized countries since 2008 with ripple effects spilling over to other parts of the world, particularly those peripheral economies that are closely linked to the West. This recent capitalist crisis has provoked renewed debates on the viability of the modern capitalist system with scholars like Slavoj Žižek (2009b) vigorously arguing for a return to socialism as part of human salvation. Latin Americanists like Walter D. Mignolo (2007), Arturo Escobar (2007), Ramon Grosfoguel (2007), Anibal Quijano (2007) and others have for some time intensified their push for alternative knowledge as part of their revolt against the oppressive character of the racially-organized, hegemonic, patriarchal and capitalist world order alongside Euro-American epistemological fundamentalism that denies the existence of knowledge from the non-Western parts of the world.

Yet, at another level, African scholars and Africanists such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), Chinweizu (1987), Basil Davidson (1992), Crawford Young (1994), Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo (1994), Claude Ake (2000), Pita Ogaba Agbese and George Klay Kieh Jr. (2007), Mueni wa Muiu and Guy Martin (2009) and others, have also been frustrated by the continued use of imported Euro-American ideas and institutions in Africa. They have unanimously called for the reconstitution and reconstruction of African postcolonial states on the basis of African history, African knowledge and

African positive values if these states are to be considered legitimate and to serve their African constituency fully. They are responding vigorously to one of the long standing and difficult questions in any analysis of the national question in postcolonial Africa – a question that has revolved around which relevant socio-historical entity the African nation-state should be anchored on among three equally problematic alternatives, namely: the pre-colonial ethnic nation whose construction and full realization was disrupted by colonialism; the colonially-crafted territorial nation born out of the contradictions of the colonial situation; or the imagined pan-African nation that was envisaged by Kwame Nkrumah (Nzongola-Ntalaja 1987: 48).

What all these debates (some old and others new) reveal is that in the realm of ideas and knowledge production there is increasing concern over finding the correct choice of language and concepts that have the potential to capture well the complexities and the spirit of the current human age dominated by uncertainty without compromising on the analytical principles (Fine 2006: 135). This development is taking place within a context where there is gradual return of the relevance of historical materialism and the dual retreat of postcolonial and postmodernist theoretical interventions on the nature of the realities of current racially-organized, hegemonic, patriarchal and capitalist world order, which is trying to hide its exploitative and oppressive nature behind the post-Cold War normative concepts of liberal democracy, human rights and good governance.

These recent developments around the globe have ignited a new interest in history in general and the politics of empire in particular. As a historian, my thinking is informed by the view that the present and the future cannot be fully understood without a clear knowledge of the past. Also, I place much confidence in the intellectual value of taking a long historical view in order to see into the present and the future. I am interested in understanding the multifaceted manifestations of the present-day colonial matrix of power that is wrecking havoc on postcolonial Africa, compromising, diluting and truncating trajectories of liberation struggles, preventing economic development and unleashing epistemic violence. I fully subscribe to Mudimbe's Foucauldian ideas of 'history as both a discourse of knowledge and a discourse of power' (Mudimbe 1988: 188).

Nevertheless, this book does not fall within the purview of pervasive consultancy-type scholarship that is dominant in African universities where research is conceived in prescriptive terms rather than as diagnosis of issues. I am against the pervasive culture of consultancy that is threatening to destroy

serious academic research within African universities. Consultancy cultures have even blinded some policy makers to the extent that they question the value of social sciences and humanities market-driven, parastatalized and commercialized institutions of higher education. Hence, this book should not be approached simplistically as an 'answer-book' on particular African problems. The book is informed by the idea of research as diagnosis and formulation of a problem (Mamdani 2011).

The orization or conceptualization of issues is not considered an anathema as this approach helps in thinking through complex African socio-economic and political realities. I am also revolting against the tendency to reduce African intellectuals and academics into mere 'hunters and gatherers' of raw data and 'native informants' who collect and provide empirical data that is then processed in the West into theories and concepts that are consumed in Africa (Mamdani 2011). I see great value in theorizing about the African predicament as a form of production of knowledge by African intellectuals and academics for use by Africans in Africa. Theory, to me, is a light that assists in avoiding ill-focused, positivistic, shallow and prescriptive narratives divorced from complex historical, discursive and epistemological terrains that reproduce political and economic crises and problems that bedevil Africans today.

Therefore, this book seeks to understand the role of colonialism of power (a global neo-colonial hegemonic model of power that articulates race and labour, as well as space and people in accordance with the needs of capital and to the benefit of white European people) in shaping the complex history of the African postcolonial present. It is a 'present' which is 'absent' because what exists is not what Africans aspired for and struggled to achieve. Africans and other peoples of the Global South who experienced 'darker' manifestations of modernity which included such processes as the slave trade, mercantilism, imperialism, colonialism and apartheid, aspired for a new humanity in which species of the human race would coexist as equal and free beings. African nationalism and decolonization were thus ranged against all the dark aspects of modernity, including underdevelopment and epistemic violence. But what emerged from the decolonization process was not a new world dominated by new humanist values of freedom, equality, social justice and ethical coexistence. African people found themselves engulfed by a 'postcolonial neocolonized world' characterized by myths of decolonization and illusions of freedom.

The term 'postcolonial neocolonized world' best captures the difficulties and unlikelihood of a fully decolonized African world that is free from the

snarcs of the colonial matrix of power and the dictates of the rapacious global power. The current configuration of the world is symbolized by the figure of America at the apex and that of Africa at the bottom of the racialized and capitalist hierarchies, of a world order. Such dark aspects of European modernity as the slave trade, mercantilism, imperialism, colonialism and apartheid bequeathed to Africa a convoluted situation within which the 'postcolonial' became paradoxically entangled with the 'neocolonial', to the extent that the two cannot be intellectually approached as mutually exclusive states of being.

In short, the term 'postcolonial neocolonized world' captures a normalized abnormality whereby issues of African identity formation, nation-building and state-construction, knowledge production, economic development and democratization remained unfinished projects mainly because of their entrapment within colonial matrices of modern global power. African leaders are also entrapped within a disciplining colonial matrix of power and those who try to deviate and question the commandment from the powerful Euro-American world are subjected to severe punishments and in extreme cases even assassinations. Therefore, within the context of a 'postcolonial neocolonized world' such issues as identity formation, nationalism, decolonization, nation-building, liberal democracy, epistemology and economic development form a single part of a complex discursive formation whose genealogy is traceable to the underside of modernity and so cannot be treated separately if a clear and broader picture of the African postcolonial present is to be understood. As such, the book is basically concerned with the invisible entanglement and entrapment of the African continent within the complex colonial matrices of power in which full African decolonization remains a myth and African freedom is reduced to an illusion.

The second important theme explored in this book is that of a dominant Western power backed up by hegemonic Euro-American epistemologies which resulted not only in the colonization of African imagination and displacement of African knowledges, but continues to take a leading role in shaping what constitute progressive global values and imposing these on the African people. The book delineates the core foundations of a new colonialism of power rooted in the social classification of the world population by race as a mental construct that informed the making of Africa according to the dictates and imperatives of Eurocentrism. What is also subjected to systematic analysis is the evolving idea of Africa and the difficult question of colonization of African imaginations which is proving very hard to decolonize; epistemological

issues relating to the confinement of African knowledges to the barbarian margins of society and out of global intellectual and academic space; and how a combination of these developments has affected the African condition including issues of Africanism, liberation, economic and social development as well as ideology and consciousness.

In theoretical and conceptual terms, the book draws insights from Latin American theorists who have been active in reading and interpreting modernity from the margins and borders, and revealing in the process how the ex-colonies of the world experienced the darker aspects of modernity. Through their Latin American Modernity/Colonialism Research Programme, Latin American theorists such as Arturo Escobar, Walter D. Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado Torres, Anibal Quijano and Ramon Grosfoguel, have been able to re-interpret modernity since the conquest and control of the Atlantic in 1492. Such concepts as colonialism of power, of being and of knowledge have been very useful in unpacking the current position of Africa within the global matrices of power. This approach has enabled this book to venture into a comparative study linking Latin American colonial experiences and anti-colonial struggles to the African situation, despite the fact that the two spaces were not colonized at the same time.

African scholars such as Claude Ake, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, Ali Mazrui, Fantu Cheru, Valentin Mudimbe, Mueni wa Muiu, Achille Mbembe, Mahmood Mamdani and many others, as well as Africanists like Terence Ranger, Crawford Young and others, have dealt with some of the issues discussed in this book and I, therefore, build on where they left off by bringing insights from the perspective of Latin Americanists to reflect on the African condition from a colonialism with its emphasis on the importance of a new locus of enunciation of modernity. Concerned African scholars like Mueni wa Muiu, Pita Ogaba Agbese, George Klay Kieh, Jr, George B. N. Ayittey, Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo and others, emphasise the need for a new paradigm of the African state predicated on what Mueni wa Muiu and Guy Martin (2009) termed 'Fundu wa Afrika' theory. The theory locates the roots of the postcolonial African predicament on Africa's relationship with the Western countries and emphasizes reconstruction of the African postcolonial state by re-connecting it with the positive values from indigenous African political systems.

These African scholars emphasize the need for systematic analysis of the creation and evolution of the African state from the pre-colonial indigenous roots right to the present; explaining how internal and external events and

actors shaped the African state and its leadership; and prescription of what the ideal state and its leadership, as determined by Africans themselves, should be. Indeed, it is necessary to reconstitute the African state since the founding fathers of postcolonial Africa did not engage in radical transformation of the state but were content with inheriting the colonially-designed structures that did not serve African needs and demands very well. Hence, Muiu and Guy's (2009: 3) adoption of an interdisciplinary and long-term historical perspective as well as their definition of 'indigenous Africa' as referring to 'Africa from the ninth century BCE (before the Christian era) to AD 1500 (the onset of the trans-Atlantic slave trade)' is well-taken as an innovative contribution to global and African knowledge based on a period that is not often included in the curriculum on African history. They are also correct in saying that the period from AD1500 onwards is a story on colonial encounters that resulted in fragmentation, distortion and displacement of African value systems, worldviews, cultures and political systems.

But it is precisely because of the adverse and long-term impact of the post-1500 era, its meaning and implications for the African postcolonial present that it becomes necessary to try and understand the complex discursive, historical and epistemological interventions that created the present-day racialized, hegemonic, patriarchal and capitalist world order within which Africa occupies a subaltern position. In other words, the book reinforces 'Fundu wa Afrika' approach through systematic unpacking of the dark underside of modernity and how it resulted in subjugation of Africa without necessarily reducing Africans to a mute and passive subaltern group that could not speak and fight for itself. Colonial modernity was not a mere footnote in African history as it radically created a world informed by imperatives of capital and needs of white Westerners.

This thinking links well with the main Latin American perspective which emphasizes analyzing modernity from colonized and subaltern standpoint to reveal its enduring negative impact on the ex-colonized world. Furthermore, the Latin American perspective has already made impressive advances in unpacking complex epistemological and discursive issues that are very relevant for understanding the postcolonialism in Africa the last part of the world to fight and defeat direct colonialism. If the legacy of colonialism is still strongly felt in Latin America where political independence was achieved much earlier, then its impact on Africa would be much worse because the decolonization process only began in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The decolonization of Africa also coincided with the ascendance of two superpowers, American

and Soviet Union (now Commonwealth of Independent States) on the world stage, taking over the space opened by the strategic withdrawal of older world powers, including Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Portugal. As is well known, the arms race between America and the Soviet Union fuelled the Cold War which generated considerable heat and unease in Africa continent.

Having said all this, it must also be emphasized that an ambitious book such as this could not have been written without the help of some scholars who were kind enough to read the manuscript and to provide me some research material that I could not have accessed from my South African base. Also, the three anonymous reviewers who read the manuscript identified some gaps which I gratefully filled.

Professor Ramon Grosfoguel of the University of California (Berkeley) not only encouraged me to forge ahead with the project, but also generously sent me useful literature on coloniality as articulated from the Latin American perspective, including his own writings that enabled me to sharpen the conceptual/theoretical framework of this book. Professor Valentin Yves Mudimbe of Duke University also read the manuscript and provided very comprehensive and useful comments that helped me to strengthen and consolidate the central arguments and structural organization of the book. This resulted in its division into three broad parts with Part One dealing with the thematics of colonial matrices of power; Part Two with the discursive and historical constructions of Africa and African identities in the shadow of modernity; and, Part Three with case studies of South Africa and Zimbabwe and the conclusions.

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