African Intellectuals and Decolonization

Edited by
Nicholas M. Creary

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In his 1952 study, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, Frantz Fanon pointedly asked: “Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*?” Asking this question on the eve of much of Africa’s independence from European colonial occupation, Fanon displayed his typical prescience, foreseeing a nominally postcolonial Africa in which the continent would remain largely subjugated within a neocolonial world order. Moreover, Fanon foresaw a neocolonial world in which the process to liberation would be ongoing long after Africa’s formal independence from European colonialism. Cape Verdean/Guinean nationalist leader Amílcar Cabral summed up this idea in the Portuguese language slogan “A luta continua” (The struggle continues).

Sixty years later, Africans continue to struggle to “decolonize the mind,” that is, “to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space.” With regard to the production of knowledge of Africa and its representation, the incompleteness of the decolonization struggle is evident in the fact that Africa today remains widely associated with chaos, illness, and disorder—a range of colonial stereotypes that say more about the seer (the West) than the seen (Africa). That is, Africa remains largely known as the Other of a colonial, Western “*You*.”

As such, Africa is cast as a sociopolitical morass, a dead weight upon an outside (read white and Western) world presumably burdened with Africa’s lack of development. This prevalent (mis)conception is nothing if not a latter-day invocation of the idea of “the white man’s burden,” so central in providing moral-evolutionary trappings to the brute violence of Europe’s military conquest and colonial occupation of Africa, and endurably instrumental in contemporary geopolitics.
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To recognize the weight of this tremendously powerful association of Africa with inferiority upon intellectual work is to address the fact that, as Tsenay Serequeberhan argues herein, “behind the many and varied perspectives that constitute the philosophical tradition of the West, one finds the singular view—a core grounding axiom—that European modernity is, properly speaking, isomorphic with the humanity of the human per se.” Thus, if Europe is the epitome of humanity in this dispensation, Africa is conceptually its inhuman counterpart. Or, put another way, the term “Black Human” is an oxymoron.

Decolonizing the mind is thus the dual task of first, placing African discourses at the center of scholarship on Africa; and second, of dislocating African humanity from this human-inhuman binary. Africa cannot escape its subjugation within modernity simply by attempting to climb up through “development,” as development does not disperse the antiblackness and anti-Africanness of Western modernity. As Emmanuel Eze pointedly observed: “We do not . . . have enough reasons to expect that once everyone is rich and educated, antiblack racism will disappear.” Although these days few contemporary scholars producing Western narrative discourses on Africa would refer to Africans as “primitive,” current discourses frequently oppose Western “modernity” with “traditional” African cultures or practices—where “traditional” is a more acceptable euphemism for “primitive.” In short, the binary opposition of a primitive or traditional Africa to a modern or enlightened West continues to pervade academic discourses, contemporary journalistic accounts of Africa and its peoples, and the perspectives of international development and aid organizations.

Thus, the challenge for African and non-African scholars alike is to establish the substantial and valid fact of African humanity, in all its diversity, and to enable the representation of Africa beyond its historical role as the foil to Western humanity. And so the quest for African subjectivity continues.

We take up this challenge in this volume, as the mandate within intellectual work, to continue to strive for the decolonization of the academy and its production of knowledge of Africa. Indeed, in the spirit of Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Cabral, Lewis Gordon, and other revolutionary thinkers, we follow Oyèrónkéé Oyèwùmí’s dicta that

the foundations of African thought cannot rest on Western intellectual traditions that have as one of their enduring fea-
tures the projection of Africans as Other and our consequent domination. . . . As long as the “ancestor worship” of academic practice is not questioned, scholars in African Studies are bound to produce scholarship that does not focus primarily on Africa—for those “ancestors” not only were non-Africans but were hostile to African interests. The foundational questions of research in many disciplines are generated in the West.

In this spirit, we present a collection of essays that address the struggle to decolonize African knowledge and the roles that African and Africanist intellectuals play in this broader struggle.

In an effort to encourage the development of greater African knowledge and more accurate knowledge of Africa, the essays in this collection call on African scholars and scholars of Africa to formulate and apply intellectual theories and categories based on the concrete experiences of African historical agents. Presuming an equality of subjective voices within the academy, that is, if scholars can no longer privilege Western perspectives and practices over “non-Western” ones, then African voices have a right to be heard within intellectual discourses and a responsibility to represent themselves within intellectual discourses. Consequently, they must develop distinctively and explicitly African categories of intellectual inquiry. Subaltern Studies was a South Asian effort to that end. Thus, African scholars and scholars of Africa need to take advantage of academic and intellectual spaces opened by postmodern, postcolonial, and cultural studies theorists to rationalize African intellectual developments as explicitly African reflections upon the specific experiences of African historical agents. This is vital because African historical agents have made and continue to make their own histories; these histories do not portray Africans only as “primitive” conquered subjects, resisters, and/or collaborators.

Curiously, African philosophers and Africanist theorists and scholars have not inquired how Africans, in their own respective languages and systems of thought, conceptualized and expressed their individual understandings of the human “subject” and how each person relates to the broader cultural group. In a South African context, for example, would it be possible to explicate “human subjectivity” in terms of ubuntu, or the idea that “I am because we are”; that is, that one’s human identity (or subjectivity) is radically bound to one’s existence.
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as part of a larger group? Or further still, is it possible to explicate ubuntu in its own right as a humanistic or philosophical concept? Even though some African philosophers such as Mogobe B. Ramose have made preliminary attempts to do so, the fact that others, including V. Y. Mudimbe, do not consider “African traditional [sic] systems of thought” as either African philosophy, or science, or “general intellectual configuration,” begs the question.7

Moreover, the decolonization of Africa within fields of knowledge (epistemology), and especially the roles of intellectuals within this process, has been a central, if unresolved, question within this strain of anticolonial discourse. Consider, for instance, Aimé Césaire’s excoriation of intellectuals within his seminal text, Discourse on Colonialism, for their roles in maintaining systems of oppression rooted in colonialist capitalism:

Therefore, comrade, you will hold as enemies—loftily, lucidly, consistently—not only sadistic governors and greedy bankers, not only prefects who torture and colonists who flog, not only corrupt, check-licking politicians and subservient judges, but likewise and for the same reason, venomous journalists, goitrous academics, wreathed in dollars and stupidity, ethnographers who go in for metaphysics, presumptuous Belgian theologians, chattering intellectuals born stinking out of the thigh of Nietzsche, the paternalists, the embracers, the corrupters, the back-slappers, the lovers of exoticism, the dividers, the agrarian sociologists . . . and in general, all those who, performing their functions in the sordid division of labor for the defense of Western bourgeois society, try in diverse ways and by infamous diversions to split up the forces of Progress—even if it means denying the very possibility of Progress—all of them tools of capitalism, all of them, openly or secretly, supporters of plundering colonialism, all of them responsible, all hateful, all slave-traders, all henceforth answerable for the violence of revolutionary action. . . .

And do not seek to know whether personally these gentlemen are in good or bad faith, whether personally they have good or bad intentions. Whether personally—that is, in the private conscience of Peter or Paul—they are or are not colonialists, because the essential thing is that their highly problematical subjective good faith is entirely irrelevant to the
objective social implications of the evil work they perform as watchdogs of colonialism.8

Thus, intellectuals—African and Africanist alike—have significant roles to play in decolonizing the knowledge of Africa that the academy, the media, and the arts produce.

Sixty years after Césaire leveled his critique, scholarship on Africa in North America and Europe has advanced significantly: African intellectuals have taken up positions at some of the most prestigious centers of research and education in the world, and frequently have their works published by internationally recognized journals and presses. African Studies centers and programs have proliferated across university campuses throughout North America and Europe. And yet, in many ways, these scholars, centers, and programs are marginalized in their institutions. Frequently an African or Africanist scholar is the only person in her or his department (or institution) with any significant or specialized knowledge of the continent and spends more time teaching general surveys instead of courses in her or his areas of expertise, or conducting research, while colleagues who specialize in American or European Studies are privileged to offer more, and more specialized, courses in their areas of expertise. Compare, for example, the number of Americanists or Europeanists (classical, medieval, or modern) in a history department versus the number of historians who teach African, Asian, or Latin American histories, and the number and nature of the courses taught by each respective group. The scholars of the so-called “non-Western world”—including historians of Africa—frequently comprise the minority of the departments that teach about the majority of the world.

In the United States, scholars of Africa are often housed in “Africana” departments or programs that are principally staffed by specialists in African American or African diaspora (read “Afro-Caribbean”) studies, and are thus token intellectual representatives of the African continent. Or the positions to which they have been hired will require them to teach African American topics in addition to their fields of expertise in African Studies. Institutionally, very few departments are dedicated to African Studies (e.g., the Department of African Studies at Howard University in Washington, D.C.; or the Department of African Languages and Literatures at the University of Wisconsin-Madison), and interdisciplinary programs in African Studies
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frequently remain underfunded and understaffed, oftentimes having to share faculty lines with disciplinary departments. Or worse, the scholar is based in a disciplinary department and must volunteer her or his time and efforts to the African Studies program over and above departmental requirements for scholarship, teaching, and service. Thus, African and Africanist scholars are frequently hamstrung in their efforts to establish African subjectivity and combat the barrage of distorted and distorting images of Africa produced for popular consumption by various media in Europe and North America.

Sadly, African scholars who remain at institutions of higher education in the African continent face even greater challenges resulting from the ongoing neocolonial exploitation of African states. Economic structural-adjustment programs imposed on African states by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have resulted in African governments’ drastically reducing funding for tertiary education. Consequently, African scholars spend more time teaching instead of conducting research, and frequently teaching overcrowded classes in dilapidated infrastructures with outdated technologies. Furthermore, many African scholars and intellectuals, such as Ngũgĩ and Ken Saro-Wiwa, who criticize their governments are sent to prison or into exile. Thus, conditions in African universities contribute to the “brain drain” of African intellectuals to Europe and North America, which is yet another facet of the neocolonial exploitation of African (intellectual) resources for the benefit of the West at Africa’s expense.

In his many speeches and writings, Amílcar Cabral frequently reminded his audiences that “the struggle continues” (A luta continua), or that political independence was merely “the end of the beginning.” Colonialism was not a single moment or process. Rather, it was series of multiple, overlapping processes of attempted domination that were simultaneously mutually reinforcing and disintegrative. Just as Africans chose from a variety of options to respond to colonial processes, including physical resistance (armed and nonviolent), organized and/or spontaneous rebellion or strike, negotiation, or collaboration with and support of various elements of colonial policies (e.g., African Christianities), the actions of colonialists—both in African territories and in European metropoles—often subverted colonial processes and inadvertently supported nationalist aims, for example, by teaching Africans literacy and numeracy in European languages. While their objective may have been to develop a Europeanized petty bureaucracy of African clerks who could help make colonialism cost-
effective for the metropoles, one of the unintended consequences was to give emergent African nationalists powerful tools for communication and organization.

Similarly, decolonization must necessarily be a series of overlapping processes that were neither uniform in objectives, beyond expulsion of the colonizers, nor uniform in the tactics to be used to achieve those objectives. The essays in this collection interrogate the contributions of African, diasporic, and Africanist intellectuals to the struggle to decolonize the academy as part of the broader project to constitute and liberate African humanity and subjectivity.

This book is motivated by two beliefs: first, that Africa’s decolonization is an ongoing process of struggle across a range of fronts; and second, that intellectuals—African and non-African alike—have significant roles to play in the processes of decolonization. We offer a collection of essays that address the central questions: How can intellectual work realize Africa in a manner that embodies value? What is the role of intellectual work in relation to contemporary Africa? What is the state of the struggle to decolonize African knowledges?

The significant contribution of this volume is to move the discussion of decolonization in Africa, whether as a single moment, a single process, or a series of processes, to the postcolonial period, and hopefully to begin a post-neocolonial phase in the academy. All of the essays address topics and themes present in African states and societies since those states achieved putative political independence. The essays in this collection thus not only address the enduring intellectual legacies of European colonialism in Africa, but also provide scholarly tools to assist more broadly in the ongoing processes of decolonizing the academy and the African continent.

We begin with the issues of representation and retrospection. The first section offers three essays that question the ways in which Africa’s decolonization is commonly portrayed as a completed and failed (Hess; Hartley) or totalizing (De La Cruz-Guzmán) event, rather than an ongoing process of intellectual and epistemological contestation in African and (more broadly) Africana contexts. This sets the stage for deeper reflections on the process of decolonizing knowledge of Africa and the roles of intellectuals in this process in the rest of the volume.

The second section, “Decolonizing Public Spheres: Conflicts and Negotiations,” presents different perspectives on the struggle to decolonize African publics. These different views draw out salient points of tension, such as the competing roles of intellectuals and
governments, self-determination versus liberal nonracialism, and media reform.

In the final section of this volume, “Decolonizing Knowledge: Intellectual Imperatives and Epistemic Dialogues,” essays by Serequeberhan and Oyewumi examine the fundamental questions of epistemic decolonization and/or the decolonization of knowledge, especially by intellectuals (Africans and non-Africans) engaged in the study of Africa. This section stresses the imperative of reflexivity by examining the roles of African and Africanist intellectuals in decolonization, as well as putting the question of decolonizing knowledge in deep philosophic terms. This ordering allows us to pose questions that cut across modes of inquiry (the arts, media, philosophy), rather than isolating them.

By offering a collection of essays that foregrounds this struggle across many disciplines, we outline some of the ways in which intellectual practice can serve to de-link Africa from its global representation as a debased, subordinated, deviant, and thus inferior entity. It is in this sense that George Hartley strongly links post–World War II American imperialism with this ongoing colonial history in his discussion of Malcolm X’s attempts to conscientize African Americans to the links between their oppression and the colonization of the African continent. Similar to Malcolm X’s warning against the attempts of the popular media to “psycho” African Americans into unconsciousness about post–World War II imperialism in Africa, T. Spreelin MacDonald shows in his chapter the intellectual legacy of the South African Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, and how Biko’s legacy has been passed down within literary discourse as the imperative to continually assert intellectual independence from psychic domination by prevailing public discourses.

Lest we assume that Africa has escaped this human-inhuman dichotomy that European colonization ushered in during the intervening decades, as Steve Odero Ouma and Adebisi Olawuyi argue in their respective chapters, the popular media are saturated with images of Africa as a failed, debauched, and consummately unmodern place. In Ouma’s terms, the West is prevalently cast as “Dr. West,” attending to a chronically, perhaps terminally ill Africa, thus reinforcing the conception of Africa as inherently inferior and dependent upon the West. Ouma argues that through this and similar stereotypes, media representations serve to elide critical engagement with African realities, stating: “Generalizations and stereotypes, once deeply entrenched in
the minds of persons, invariably create conditions that engender explanatory constructs . . . rather than inquisitorial constructs seeking to investigate the reasons behind events or certain behaviors.”

Janet Hess further argues in her chapter that this trope of African illness and deficiency filters into common representations of African liberation movements and their leaders, such as Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah and the Congo’s Patrice Lumumba, as “failures.” As Hess shows, this “failure” is largely the product of a hierarchy in which African liberation leaders are judged against a Western masculine norm predicated upon the essential ability to “triumph.” In contexts in which the utopian goals articulated during the struggle for independence were compromised, this norm has served to cast such leaders and their nations as failures.

Hess’s chapter suggests that colonial tropes of African sickness and failure are instrumental in the continual subjugation of African liberation to the conceptual apparatus of colonialism. Similarly, Western gender norms imported through colonialism continue to abort such independence. Chapters by Oyèrónkéé Oyèwùmí and Marlene De La Cruz-Guzmán, respectively, forcefully make this point. Through a critique of Western scholarship on Africa, and especially Yoruba visual arts, Oyèwùmí’s chapter demonstrates the manners in which Western gender constructs have been naturalized within scholarship of African arts, locking their interpretation into a Western gaze that functions to produce its own obscuring myths about African aesthetics and artistic practices, and eliding the crucial observation that “gender dichotomies are not inherent in any art form; rather, gender models are part of the critical apparatus that they have inherited from the European and American intellectual tradition, and they must be recognized as such.”

De La Cruz-Guzmán’s chapter dis-covers, in Enrique Dussel’s term, the disconnect between nationalist rhetoric about women in Zimbabwe before, during, and after the independence struggle, and it highlights the betrayal of women in the context of liberation rhetoric and discourse. She uses Yvonne Vera’s novels Nehanda and The Stone Virgins to dis-cover the postcolonial mythology and lack of decolonization for the average Zimbabwean woman, while also providing a link for potential cooperation and solidarity with other women across the continent and the world. Like De La Cruz-Guzmán’s discussion of the fractures between decolonization and elite nationalist rhetoric, Lesley Cowling and Carolyn Hamilton further draw out the
contradictions and struggles within contemporary South African public discourse, in which public intellectuals and the postapartheid government have waged running battles over the meaning and practice of South Africa’s political decolonization.

In sum, all of the chapters presented here speak to the friction between intellectual practice and received (colonial) notions of Africa, be they mainstream images of debauchery and destruction presented by popular media, or still-existent colonially derived constructions of gender, race, and postcoloniality underpinning much of the academic discourse on Africa. Thus, in modeling emancipatory readings of African cultural and philosophical practices, these chapters map out a range of ways forward in so decolonizing Africa. As Serqueberhan asserts: “Just as the political and armed struggle ended the de facto actuality of colonialism, the critical-negative project of African philosophy has to challenge and undo the de jure philosophic underpinnings that justified this now defunct actuality and still today sanction Western hegemony. And this, by extension, is applicable *grosso modo,* to all intellectual work on Africa.” Thus decolonization must be further understood as the struggle to realize African humanity on its own terms, realizable, fundamentally, in the realm of intellectual practice.

*A luta continua!*

**Notes**


