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# Briefing

## ***Decolonising African Studies?\****

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### ABSTRACT

Insistent calls to ‘decolonise’ African studies beg the question of what this quest actually involves. If it refers to an attempt to understand the continent’s diverse and complex societies that builds on their indigenous structures and values, this was a task initiated during the decolonisation era of the 1950s and early 1960s. Led by historians and drawing heavily on insights from anthropology, it led to a revolution in the understanding of Africa, which nonetheless failed to maintain its impetus as a result of the political authoritarianism and economic decay of the post-independence period, which had a particularly damaging impact on Africa’s universities. Of late, however, the phrase has come to refer to developments notably in North America and Europe, which in subordinating the study of Africa to agendas in the global North may appropriately be described not as decolonisation but as recolonisation. A genuine decolonisation of knowledge production for Africa must rest on a return to its roots within the continent itself.

### INTRODUCTION

Insistent calls to ‘decolonise’ African studies, and indeed the construction of knowledge about non-Northern peoples and societies generally,<sup>1</sup> raise important and legitimate issues about how we seek to understand the world around us, and the ways in which these understandings reflect the power structures through which the ‘modern’ world has historically been created, and the assumptions built into its creation. It is indeed beyond question that what we regard as ‘knowledge’ derives overwhelmingly from the experience initially of Europe from the Graeco-Roman period onwards, and subsequently from

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offshoots of European societies, notably in North America. With what used to be known (in embarrassingly ethnocentric terms) as ‘the expansion of Europe’ from the late 15th through to the early 20th centuries of the Christian era, this resulted in the establishment of a global system marked not only by Eurocentred military, administrative and economic power, but by structures of knowledge production including written languages (of almost invariably European origin), educational systems, and conceptual apparatuses such as the infrastructure of modern science, which themselves derive overwhelmingly from Europe. It does not follow that these structures of knowledge are themselves inherently European, and incapable of being accessed on an equal footing by people of different ethnic origins, or reared in other cultural settings. Written languages or the laws of gravity can be adopted by non-Europeans, every bit as readily as Arabic numerals (to take a rare example of Northern borrowing from a non-Northern culture) have been adopted by Europeans. But it does at least impose on us an obligation to ensure that what passes for knowledge especially in non-Northern contexts is not evidently moulded by its Northern origins, resulting in the neglect or gross distortion of experiences and modes of thought derived from those on whom Northern conceptions of knowledge have historically been imposed.

When we come to examine the search for ways to ‘decolonise’ knowledge production, however – and from here onwards I will be specifically concerned with Sub-Saharan Africa – we find ourselves confronted by such a diverse and confusing range of claims that it becomes difficult to disentangle what ‘decolonising African studies’ actually means, and what it is expected to achieve. As Adam Branch (2018: 74) reminds us, “Given African Studies’ many histories and geographies, what decolonization means will also differ, entailing different temporalities, transformations and dilemmas.” There must nonetheless be some core understanding of the term, capable of encompassing its applications to a vast and varied continent, and this paper starts by attempting a definition of what can (and cannot) legitimately be regarded as constituting ‘decolonisation’ in this context, before going on to discuss, in necessarily very broad-brush terms, its relation to the study of Africa over a period now extending to some 60 or 70 years. The key to resolving these confusions, it appears to me, lies in the distinction between ‘African studies’ as the attempt to understand Africa, in all its often bewildering diversity, and ‘African Studies’ as a form of organised intellectual enquiry established either in universities and other institutions in the global North, or in equivalent institutions of invariably Northern origin within Africa itself. The first of these takes as its primary point of reference the African peoples and societies whose features we seek to elucidate, whereas the second is primarily concerned with the sociology of knowledge within the institutions involved. As we will see, this variation in approach makes a considerable difference.

#### DECOLONISING THE STUDY OF AFRICA

‘Decolonising’ the study of Africa, in my view, most basically entails a shift in perspective from looking at Africa through a lens defined by the institutions of

colonial power, and the intellectual apparatus carried over from the global North and applied to other parts of the world, to looking instead at the indigenous origins of African societies and the patterns of thought that these embodied, and the ways in which these have in turn been influenced by the impact of colonial rule and incorporation into a global system – political, economic, intellectual and indeed spiritual – derived from Northern dominance. An intellectually decolonised Africa can only be one in which the continent holds a central place, and which defines the questions to be asked and the answers to be sought in terms that are clearly rooted in Africa itself. I entirely agree with Achille Mbembe's (2001) critique of the ways in which external forms of governance and indeed thought have been carried over into post-colonial Africa, and in which the intellectual construction of Africa has been created in opposition to a generally grotesquely idealised 'West'.

The first point to be made, however, is that decolonising this structure is not a new quest devised in the 21st century. It is one that originated in a conscious search for *intellectual* decolonisation that accompanied (and even anticipated) political decolonisation in the later 1950s and early 1960s, centred in the newly established universities of Africa, and designed to provide the empirical and conceptual underpinnings on which the independent states of Africa would need to rely, and which in turn would shape the formation of indigenous elites, by far the larger number of whom were destined for employment within these 'new states' themselves. The first answer to the question mark over 'decolonising African studies?' is that this has already taken place, or rather *was* in the process of taking place, as an integral part of 'knowledge production' *within* Africa, and destined for the service of Africans. Those who were engaged in this process, as teachers and researchers, were initially and inevitably very largely of European origin, simply because appropriately qualified Africans did not yet exist, and it was indeed one of the first responsibilities of the newly established universities of Africa to produce them. This was an enormously exciting time to be in universities in Africa, when institutions such as IFAN in Senegal, Ibadan in Nigeria, Legon in Ghana, Makerere in Uganda and Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania were – and recognised themselves to be – at the cutting edge of a new adventure in non-colonial learning, and which generated an enthusiasm and commitment on the part not only of African but also of expatriate staff that is now difficult to recapture. The founding mothers and fathers of modern African studies very definitely did *not* feel themselves to be part of some 'post-colonial' venture, carrying over into independent Africa the structures and assumptions of the preceding era. They were done with all that stuff, felt themselves to be emphatically on the side of new African states and their liberation movements, and were eager to make their own intellectual contribution to the work in progress.

This was most visible, obviously enough, in the social science disciplines that were most directly in contact with developments on the ground, among which the leaders were undoubtedly the historians. Colonial history was set aside, except as a largely unfortunate interlude in the imposition of external rule,

and the search was on for a genuinely *African* history, which grew out of the development of African societies over time, and recaptured, with independence, long-term processes of change in which the driving force was very largely indigenous. Pride of place here has to go to the British scholars, Thomas Hodgkin (1956), Roland Oliver and John Fage (1962), together with the Belgian Jan Vansina (1966), who played a key role in establishing a distinct discipline of African history in the period after the Second World War. Given the paucity of indigenous written records for most African societies outside Ethiopia and Islamic societies versed in Arabic, this pioneered the use of alternative historiographical sources with applications well beyond Africa, including notably anthropology and oral tradition. Political scientists likewise found that heavily institutionalised approaches to the discipline founded on the study of developed industrial states had little to offer, and were drawn into the study of indigenous political traditions, together with the nationalist movements that established the existence of an authentically African politics, far removed from the study of colonial administration, which led to the production of foundational studies of the political systems of the principal African states, led by Dennis Austin's (1964) seminal *Politics in Ghana*. Although 'politics' is a universal social activity, amply documented in both precolonial and colonial Africa, politics in the sense of contestation for control of a state did not come into existence until Africans through their own efforts created it, and the task facing political scientists was to discern its origins, and the varying forms that it took in different African states. The study of African economies likewise had to be distanced from a 'classical economics' derived heavily from the experience of industrial states, and directed towards a 'development economics' that could be made relevant to the needs of Africa. In the social sciences, at least, African studies had more to teach the conventional study of the disciplines concerned than the other way round.

This decolonisation of African studies also helped to revive the role of anthropology, which despite its origins (especially in British colonial Africa) as a guide for the government of indigenous societies under the mantra of indirect rule, rapidly emerged as the foundational discipline for any Africa-based scholarship. Pre-colonial African history, to take the most obvious example, involving as it did very largely pre-literate societies, necessarily had to draw on the same folk memories and myths of origin as the anthropologists, as well as on the accessible archaeological material and accounts by external visitors. The study of African politics derived from the same base, both explicitly in such cases as Ghana and Uganda, where the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism also prompted the revival (or at times invention) of pre-colonial polities such as Ashanti and Buganda, but also to the exploration of the origins of nationalism in 'stateless' societies such as Somalia. If you wanted to know anything about the social structures and values that guided the history and underlay the politics of newly independent African states, then anthropology was where you had to look for it. Both historians and political scientists thus rapidly discovered that the pursuit of their trade under African conditions was of necessity interdisciplinary. For

anyone studying politics in Africa, established (and especially US) ‘political science’ turned out to be so rigidly rooted in the constitutional structures and cultural assumptions of Western states as to be virtually useless in an African context, with the result that any explanation of why African politics worked in the way that it did had to be sought in indigenous social structures and value systems, as well as in approaches to social analysis (notably Marxism) that sought to integrate rather than separate different aspects of social life. Even economists had to look to anthropology for an understanding of the ‘informal economies’ in which much of Africa’s economic activity actually consisted.

In African universities, the original expatriate staff inevitably departed – as had always been the intention – and in bringing their enthusiasm and expertise back to their countries of origin, made a massive contribution to the understanding of Africa in Europe and North America. Only partially was this due to the establishment of dedicated African studies centres, which were always few in number and often to some extent isolated within their own institutions. Every bit as important was the recruitment of individual Africanists to ordinary disciplinary departments of history, political science and even economics, with lone anthropologists marooned within departments of sociology, and obliged by their institutional settings to combine their area interests with exposure to the broader discipline, to the mutual advantage of both. The African Studies Association of the United Kingdom (in the UK) and dedicated Africanist journals – *Africa*, *African Affairs*,<sup>2</sup> *The Journal of African History*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, *The Review of African Political Economy* – played a key role in maintaining an Africanist academic community. In the USA, a high proportion of the new generation of Africanists gained their first experience of the continent as Peace Corps volunteers, a programme initiated by President John F. Kennedy shortly after taking office in January 1961, who served largely as secondary school teachers.

So, if the origins of the ‘decolonisation’ of knowledge production about Africa are to be found in the independence era, why should it apparently be necessary to revive a decolonisation agenda at the present time? Much, certainly, has been achieved, to the extent that it can be taken for granted. No one would now claim that Africa had no discoverable ‘history’ because of the gaps in the documentary record, or pursue the study of African politics through the rigidly constitutionalist approaches that are no longer applied even to the USA or UK. Development economics has evolved into a discipline of its own, drawing on comparative analysis of economies across the world and notably eastern Asia, but with important applications to Africa. Anthropology provides a vital element in the study of issues ranging from female genital mutilation to the impact of climate change. But at the same time, it is sadly the case that the dynamism and enthusiasm that characterised the quest for new approaches to the study of Africa, notably in Africa itself, have rarely been maintained, and this adds weight to the search for alternatives.

The answers need to be sought in two different places: in the problems of maintaining scholarship in post-colonial Africa, and in the creation of a very different setting for a ‘decolonisation’ agenda in present-day ‘African Studies’ in

the global North. The failure to maintain an active research community where it was most important and should have been most exciting, in the universities of independent Africa, should in my view be ascribed not to their newly recruited African staff, who were in many cases excellent,<sup>3</sup> but to the wider problems of post-colonial Africa. First and most obvious of these were the financial crises that afflicted African governments as a whole, for familiar reasons ranging from the collapse of primary produce prices to the corruption of governing elites, but which universities were particularly ill-equipped to resist.<sup>4</sup> Among the most important effects was the impact on morale, not just in the continent's universities but in its states themselves: whereas in the heady days of the later 1950s and early 1960s, academics were seeking to map out the way ahead for newly independent and self-confident African nations, from the mid-1960s (and coinciding with the first round of military *coups d'état*), they were confronted instead by the dispiriting task of seeking to account for failure.

At a more practical level, the rapid post-independence expansion of state bureaucracies provided more attractive and often much better remunerated opportunities to a still small cadre of qualified graduates, while the intellectual independence essential to a functioning university became a source of suspicion to increasingly authoritarian regimes. Academic staff who showed disturbing signs of dissent were dismissed or in some cases even murdered, or at best had to keep their heads down and avoid engagement in potentially dangerous subjects of study. Sheer survival became the first priority. On a visit to the University of Ghana at Legon in the very late 1960s, I discovered that the large gardens with which staff houses on the campus had been endowed at the time of the university's colonial foundation had in many cases been turned over to growing subsistence crops for feeding the occupants and their families: highly qualified academics had effectively reverted to the status of peasant farmers. At Makerere the vice-chancellor was murdered, undoubtedly at the instigation of Idi Amin. Even in Dar-es-Salaam, where the *ujamaa* socialism of President Julius Nyerere initially offered a welcoming environment to an overwhelmingly left-leaning university faculty, the restriction of intellectual as well as financial space became increasingly constraining as *ujamaa* failed to deliver its promised political and economic benefits. In short, although African universities were 'decolonised' in the sense that their staff became overwhelmingly African, there was little sign of the changed modes of thinking that this might have been expected to bring with it, and that the decolonisation of African studies, as defined above, would have involved.

Also lost in the process was access to opportunities for fieldwork (always the key to innovative research in the social sciences in Africa, and one from which locally based African academics should have been perfectly placed to benefit), to academic literature (in a still pre-internet age), and to a stimulating and supportive intellectual community. Paradoxically, institutions which should have been at the very front of the intellectual revival of an independent Africa often found themselves forced back on their colonial origins. As external examiner in political science at the University of Sierra Leone in the 1980s, I found

that the scripts in the history of political thought generally matched those that I was examining in my home university in the UK at the same time: the key texts – Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx – were the same, and were all in the university library. The scripts for the courses on modern African politics, on the other hand, were tragically inadequate: the accession of new books to the library had stopped, the students (and presumably their teachers) appeared to be unfamiliar with recent developments even in countries immediately adjacent to their own, and with the intellectual equipment needed to make sense of what was happening to themselves and those around them.

As a result, African scholarship in the post-independence era all too often found itself stuck in the tropes established during the struggle against colonialism, and did not ask the new questions, or seek the new answers, called for by the very different experience of independent statehood. In contrast to the literary output, especially of West African novelists, which showed a sharp awareness of the changing scene, it remained essentially backward-looking, with a tendency to cling to assumptions derived from the colonial period, long after these had ceased to have much relevance to the challenges that post-colonial states now faced. Central to this process was a compulsion to look to the outside world, rather than to the domestic setting, as the source of all problems. In the nationalist era, when the ‘other’ was readily identifiable in the form of an alien colonial regime and the linkages that bound the colony to its European metropole, this was eminently justified. But the rapidly changing circumstances of post-colonial Africa did not generate the questions that they should have aroused in an engaged and intellectually inquisitive academic community, except insofar as they could be related back – in the form of ‘neo-colonialism’, for example – to the familiar world of the anti-colonial struggle. In politics, I can find no attempt to think through the origins and consequences of the personalist dictatorships and military regimes that rapidly demonstrated a level of murderous brutality and corruption that often exceeded those of the former colonisers. In economics, it was perfectly understandable that newly independent governments and their intellectual peers should look to some form of ‘socialism’ to bring the economy under the control of indigenous regimes with agendas for rapid transformation; but when the failure of such projects to achieve their intended aims became apparent, the instinctive response was to cast the blame back on continued external domination, rather than rethinking the socialist agenda itself, and seeking to work out any alternative approach to economic management that would draw on the work ethic and entrepreneurial flair of Africa’s peoples, exemplified by the burgeoning ‘informal economy’ that took over where the lumbering and corrupt state-centred economy had obviously failed. Dependency theory certainly had much to contribute to an understanding of the problems facing African economies, but this came at the heavy cost of diverting attention from those things that Africans *could* do to seek advantage from their insertion, no matter how unequal, into the global economy. The constant emphasis on neo-colonialism and dependency was itself a reflection of the compulsion to look for external points of reference

that Mbembe (2001) identifies as a critical feature of the post-colony. The differences in development performance between Africa and eastern Asia are differences not only of government policy and underlying social structures, but also of intellectual imagination.

Recent years have seen an improvement in the status and quality of African universities, much of which can best be ascribed to the lightening of the political constraints under which academics had to work, notably with the end of the Cold War and the re-emergence of more democratic forms of governance at least in significant parts of the continent. The academy now shelters a high proportion of would-be opposition politicians, who – even if their prospects of attaining state power are usually slight – can articulate alternative visions and policies in a way that was not previously possible. The internet has made a considerable difference to the availability of the literature, and to empirical material in at least some areas, while a new source of research funding has emerged through studies commissioned largely by external aid agencies. Quite a number of leading African social scientists of my acquaintance have left positions in the formal university structure, and established research consultancies geared essentially to external funding. This has certainly helped to liberate African researchers from the overwhelming burdens of day-to-day teaching and university administration, and provided opportunities for fieldwork in critical areas that would otherwise be neglected. The resulting research, however, is inevitably guided by the priorities of those who pay for it, and may well be seen as replicating the role of the ‘research assistants’ working with expatriate staff in the late colonial and early independence eras. In particular, it tends to be heavily policy-oriented, and correspondingly weak in its broader conceptual construction and critique.

Academic decolonisation has been particularly uncertain in the field of international relations, unsurprisingly the most externally dominated of social science disciplines in Africa (see Capan 2017). African states came to independence within a global order shaped by the Cold War, in which the primary concern of major external powers was whether these states would line up on one side or the other, and issues of economic policy and domestic political structure, quite as much as foreign policy, were viewed through the prism of external alignment, rather than that of indigenous rulers seeking to navigate their way through an often unstable domestic as well as foreign policy environment. Barely a decade elapsed after the end of the Cold War, moreover, before the ‘global war on terror’ displaced it as a yardstick by which the fidelity of African regimes was liable to be assessed by external powers, and this in turn now appears to be in the process of further displacement by Sino-Western rivalries. In a much broader context, the study of international relations has been so heavily shaped by its origins in the European state system that its application to the very different context of African statehood has always been deeply problematic. Nor has the counter-narrative of ‘African unity’, directly derived from the rhetoric of anti-colonial nationalism, had much to offer to the complex and fractured politics of the continent. Yet there is a place for the exploration of African agency in the global system, often very skilfully pursued under conditions of



great difficulty, that belies the all-too-common view of the continent as the mere recipient of policies generated elsewhere, which I have attempted to explore in Clapham (1996).

Within Africa, this phenomenon is most strikingly illustrated by the paucity of original thinking among African intellectuals about the place and potential of the continent in the emerging global order. It is abundantly clear that this place can no longer be explained simply by reference to a colonial heritage that now lies over half a century into the past, but must instead be sought, partly in the example of those states – notably in eastern Asia – that have emerged on the whole as quite extraordinarily successful examples of development within the capitalist world economy, but to a very large extent also in domestic social structures, values, and forms of governance within Africa itself. The conviction that the roots of African underdevelopment are to be found only in ‘dependency’ or ‘neo-colonialism’ should by now be dead and buried, and yet it continues to struggle on in the imaginations of a very large section of the African intelligentsia. One of its most debilitating effects is the way in which an ideology of victimhood too often consigns Africans to a form of ‘learned helplessness’, in which no way out of the continent’s dilemmas need be sought, because these dilemmas originate from outside it. This provides both a comforting explanation for failure in the first place – ‘BSE’, or ‘Blame Someone Else’ – and an excuse for intellectual disengagement in the second.<sup>5</sup> A sense of agency is a two-edged sword: it confers power on the one hand, but imposes accountability on the other, and their preoccupation with external constraints – all too understandable in a continent obsessed by a sense of failure – has denied African intellectuals the conceptual space within which to devise genuinely decolonised approaches to the problems of the continent.

Though a ‘decolonised’ approach to African development emerged in the immediate post-independence era, in the form of models of almost invariably socialist orientation, this was often naïve (as well as self-serving), and crumbled in the face of the economic disasters that followed, which in turn were in some degree (though certainly not entirely) the result of the practical as well as conceptual weaknesses of ‘African socialism’. The failure to develop alternatives, rooted in the domestic social environment which indigenous researchers should have been far better placed to evaluate than external ones, coincided with the collapse of the universities within which such revised approaches should have been articulated, and has been reflected in turn in dependence on imported Northern theorisations. As the long-time editor of *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, I became dispiritingly accustomed to receiving papers from Africa-based academics which, though very short on fieldwork, were eager to cite material evidently drawn from the literature review section of their PhD theses at Northern institutions, and overwhelmingly produced by Northern scholars. Rare indeed were the papers whose authors drew on personal observation of the fascinating and important developments occurring all around them.<sup>6</sup> These problems have been accompanied by issues in the global North that also require attention.

Of late, the debate over the 'decolonisation' of African studies has moved to the global North, prompted in large measure by developments in the USA. Critical here is that whereas in Europe, the unavoidable historical background to engagement with Africa has been provided by colonialism – and especially so in those European states, notably France, the UK, Belgium and Portugal, which had the most important colonial presence – in the USA it has derived overwhelmingly from slavery. And while the colonial era has at the level of public perception long faded in Europe into the distant past, slavery continues to provide an intense and ongoing backdrop in its very visible relevance to everything connected to the issue of race in modern American society and politics. It was correspondingly inevitable that any concern for Africa within the USA would come to be connected to the continuing role of people of African descent within the domestic setting. In academic life, this connection has been expressed first in the existence of historically African-American institutions, and subsequently in the incorporation of Africa into departments of African and African-American studies across the university system as a whole. It has also resulted in extensive intellectual capital flight from Africa, as universities in the global North have recruited a large number of Africa's most stimulating and productive academics, in order to teach the more specifically African elements in such departments.

I remain deeply sceptical as to whether there is any significant connection at an *intellectual* level between the study of Africa on the one hand, and that of peoples of African origin within the USA (and other areas of large-scale historical African slavery such as Brazil and the Caribbean) on the other. The sheer brutality of the dislocation that slavery imposed, and the massive differences between the societies from which Africans had been wrenched, and those into which they were then forcibly incorporated, were such as to destroy any meaningful connections between the two that could then be resuscitated at an academic level in the modern era. Nor are there significant similarities between the ways in which politics or the economy operate in independent African states, and the politics and economics of race in the USA, or in other states outside the continent with large African diasporas. Instead, the powerful historical legacies that shape African-American societies derive overwhelmingly from the experience of slavery. At the same time, it is perfectly understandable that there should be very strong emotional links, especially on the part of African-Americans towards their continent of origin, and towards the peoples with whom they share a genetic background inevitably expressed in terms of race. It was equally understandable that Africans recruited into American institutions, and in many cases acquiring US citizenship and looking with their families to become permanent residents of the USA, should associate themselves especially with those Americans with whom they had most in common, and who identified most closely with them.

A partially analogous process can be identified in Europe, as immigration from Africa rapidly increases the number of people of African origin within European states, to a level vastly exceeding the very limited numbers who were present at the time of independence from colonial rule. These immigrants, moreover, like those of recent African origin within North America, retain linkages with their homelands that place them in a very different relationship with Africa from that of the descendants of slavery. In some cases, such as Somalis and Eritreans, these linkages have been strong enough to constitute an important element in the politics and economies of the homelands themselves, creating transnational spaces that demonstrated the incorporation of Africa into the modern global order, and provided a fresh and important slant on the historically deeply problematic relationships between the continent and the world beyond it.

Africans have every right to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the global mobility of labour to improve their own condition and that of their families. They equally have every right to concern themselves with racism and inequality within the societies in which they have established themselves, and to engage both politically and analytically in the issues aroused by the role of race in such societies. When these eminently legitimate enterprises become associated with the ‘decolonisation of African Studies’, however, the study of Africa risks being subsumed in an inevitably subordinate position into the very different issue of the status of diasporas within the global North. Culturally as well as economically, the pull of the North is overwhelming. Strikingly absent from the literature on the ‘decolonisation’ of African Studies (for which Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013 may serve as a representative text) is any reference to actual African societies, or any recognition of the deeply rooted environments, cultures and histories from which these derive. Nor is there any indication, beyond highly idealised generalisations, of what a ‘decolonised’ Africa, drawing on the continent’s own intellectual resources, might look like. In the USA especially, the narrative of race and slavery is so powerful and so entrenched as to overwhelm the complex and diverse experiences of Africans within the continent, both historically in the form of colonialism and in the varied record of post-colonial African states.<sup>7</sup> Equally, the financial resources available in Northern institutions massively outweigh those in African universities, while the security of a Northern lifestyle, with its residential neighbourhoods, schools and health facilities, provides—even when Africans are discriminated against within these societies—a very powerful incentive for Africans to embed themselves within the societies to which they have moved, rather than those from which they originated.

In this context, the demand to ‘decolonise’ African Studies readily chimes with the politics of race to provide an effective mechanism through which to make claims on Northern constituencies, rather than to re-connect with Africa. Such claims have taken various forms, including demands for the employment of individuals of African origin in Africa-related positions in Northern academe, the increased citation of works by African authors on the

teaching syllabus, symbolic campaigns (such as ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, for which see Chantiluke *et al.* 2018) designed to mobilise a sense of post-colonial guilt within Northern intelligentsias, and an emphasis on race as a marker to enhance both solidarities among individuals of African descent, and an awareness of difference from those of European origin. What these claims have in common, however, is a central concern for those societies to which their proponents have moved, rather than those from which they originate. Africa provides little more than a legitimating theme for a debate within Northern academe.

At this point, it becomes relevant to ask to what extent the idea of ‘decolonisation’ is even appropriate, once the geographic focus of the term is shifted away from Africa. At the most basic level, the Northern societies concerned were never ‘colonised’ at all, save for the ruthless extermination of the indigenous peoples of the Americas by settlers of European origin, and could not therefore plausibly be ‘decolonised’. And while the situation of peoples of African origin in the global North is an important issue in its own right, whether these derived from forced immigration in the form of slavery, or more recent and voluntary arrivals, the issues faced by diasporas of peoples of African origin are very different from those of Africans within Africa – whether under colonial rule or subsequently – and call for correspondingly different solutions. At a conceptual level, moreover, these issues have little if any resonance with the criteria that I have identified above as central to the idea of ‘decolonisation’. Indeed, the export to Africa of approaches to the subject devised in and for the global North amounts not to ‘decolonisation’ at all, but rather to the *recolonisation* of Africa through the subordination of knowledge production within the continent to modes of thought that have been devised outside it, and directed to very different purposes from the understanding of African peoples within their own geographic and social setting that forms the subject matter for the study of Africa itself. While at one level, demands for the ‘decolonisation’ of African Studies may amount to little more than the appropriation of a term with positive connotations, in order to apply it to a milieu very different from that from which it originally derived, at another level they illustrate the threats to scholarship both *in* Africa and *for* Africa that are presented by the continuing economic and ideological dominance of the global North.

In this context, it is important to remember that ‘decolonisation’ in its original sense of the transfer of formal political power from colonial to indigenous elites was itself a deeply ambiguous process, and led to a contestation of the term that derives especially from the work of Fanon (1961). The assumption of power by the ‘nationalist’ leaders of ‘anti-colonial’ or ‘liberation’ movements within colonial territories – themselves almost invariably those Africans who had been most deeply affected by the colonial experience – was combined with the acceptance (and often enthusiastic adoption) of important elements inherited from colonial rule. There was virtually no attempt, for example, to challenge either the territorial construction of the colonial order, or the hierarchical structures of colonial governance – *commandement*, in Mbembe’s (2001) terms – through which these territories had been controlled by their

alien rulers (see, notably, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Any such quest, indeed, lay beyond the capabilities of the incoming African regimes, which had little option but to accept—with varying degrees of rhetorical commitment to radical transformation—the political and economic dispensation that they had inherited. The quest to ‘decolonise’ the academy likewise derives from individuals of African origin who have gone through the processes of intellectual formation required to attain positions in Northern institutions, whose structure is equally established and barely open to significant change. This is essentially concerned with rhetorical changes, coupled with enhanced opportunities for recruitment into an existing structural order. The arena in which ‘decolonising African Studies’ is most closely akin to the original process of decolonisation from alien rule is precisely that which involves the appropriation by African elites of a dispensation derived from the north.

It is even possible to discern a process of academic inversion, by which African academics become oriented towards Northern models, and Northern researchers towards African ones. This can partly be attributed to a straightforward and eminently understandable experience of intellectual discovery. On each side, what you know already figures in your understanding as ‘normal’, and therefore of relatively little interest, whereas new ideas and information acquire a converse fascination and importance: Africans learn from their exposure to the north, Northerners from their exposure to Africa. Africans may therefore ‘miss’ the distinctive features of their own societies, while becoming enthused by the hitherto unknown world of Northern social theory, while Northern Africanists are fascinated by their immersion into societies often markedly different from those to which they are accustomed, and bored by the pretensions of a (to them) over-theorised Northern social science. The eminently valid quest to ‘decolonise’ the ways in which we seek to understand Africa is both analytically and practically distinct from the race of the individuals engaged in the enterprise.

A useful analogy or comparison may be made here with one of the areas in which Africans have most visibly acquired status and resources within European (though, in this case, not North American) societies: that of professional football. Of all the ways in which young African men (though not women) can escape from Africa, football is far and away the most glamorous, the most open to talent, and the most highly paid. In every respect except longevity, being a Premier League footballer beats being a university professor every time, and it must be rare indeed for any top-level team anywhere in Europe (or at any rate Western Europe) not to have some Africans among its members. This is probably the one quite exceptional arena in which the proportion of Africans increases as one goes up the social scale, and diminishes as one goes down it. Altogether more problematic is the impact of this—in many ways admirable—example of the ability of Africans to market their talents on the global stage, back in Africa itself. There is no doubting the recognition that the success of African footballers in Europe receives in Africa, where it combines with a continental passion for the game to provide ‘role models’ to which young African men can aspire. I have only to identify myself as English to a taxi-driver anywhere in the continent to prompt an

impassioned and well-informed discussion of the current state-of-play in the Premier League, and an evident pride in the achievements of individual African players.<sup>8</sup> It figures, however, as a way to get out of Africa, rather than as anything that might contribute to welfare within it. When the phenomenon first started to attract attention, there was speculation that it might not be long before an African team – its players trained to the highest standards in Europe – was able to win the quadrennial World Cup.<sup>9</sup> Not only has this failed to happen, but we are now lucky if any of the participating African teams manage to make it through the preliminary group stages. This is partly because some leading African players acquire the citizenship of the country to which they have emigrated, and join European national teams instead. Partly, too, it may be because they join their European clubs as individuals, whereas reaching the highest levels in a global competition calls for teams to get extensive experience in playing together and building a common understanding and style of play, rather than putting together a collection of players from different European countries, used to playing in different ways. In either case, the Northern environment comes to prevail at the expense of an African one – and an equivalent dynamic, I suspect, may be found among African academics who join the exodus to Northern seats of learning.

For an example of how a ‘decolonised’ and Africanised approach to a key area in African Studies would differ from a ‘Northern’ one, we need only look to the invariably revealing subject of gender. The social construction of gender roles is both highly variable and deeply entrenched, not only in reproductive issues but in moral values, social economies and spiritualities, such that it is scarcely possible to study any society without taking gender into account. The current orthodoxies of Northern societies (which, at a personal level, I share) are heavily dominated by an insistence on gender equality which in operational terms requires treating women and men, wherever possible, as exactly the same. These priorities in turn guide the aid policies of major Northern donor states, and the research programmes that donors fund in pursuit of their objectives. And however admirable these objectives may be, they inevitably skew the resulting studies towards the end-point that donors are looking to reach, and correspondingly view the often heavily gendered (though also very varied) structures of African societies as obstacles or deficiencies to be overcome, rather than as critical features of African societies that need to be explored in their own right. Nor is this an area in which the role of gender in African-American societies can be of much help in understanding equivalent issues in Africa, deeply affected as this is by the extraordinarily entrenched (and exhaustively researched) impact of slavery on African-American family structures and the gender differentiation that has resulted from it. A decolonised approach to gender in Africa would by contrast look to explore the origins of gender roles in precolonial African societies, and the conceptions of gender that these have created, starting inevitably from anthropology, and then seek to understand the ways in which these roles and conceptions have or have not been affected by the subsequent impact of externally induced change.<sup>10</sup>

To conclude, a decolonised African Studies can only emerge where it belongs, in Africa itself, led by the efforts of African academics to re-engage with their own societies, seek to understand where their problems lie, and develop theoretical as well as practical ways to deal with them. It involves a return to the original concern for the decolonisation of knowledge outlined in the first part of this paper, though with the vastly greater level of African participation that is now possible, at the expense of projects geared to agendas in the global North that have little to do with Africa at all. It is futile to expect any authentic attempt to 'decolonise' knowledge production about and for Africa to emerge from Northern institutions, whose massively greater level of intellectual as well as financial power must inevitably skew their relations with weaker and poorer African counterparts, however well-intentioned they may be. Academics based in Northern universities, regardless of their personal origins, find themselves in much the same position as international financial institutions seeking to transform African economies through structural adjustment programmes that derive from assumptions carried over from developed Northern market economies, or attempts to promote human rights and democratic accountability in Africa that are funded by Northern aid programmes, and likewise take for granted the experience entrenched in the histories of Western Europe or North America. Africans must be left to decolonise themselves.

Africa, to be sure, is so closely enmeshed in global societies and economies that this process cannot simply be a domestic pre-occupation: it must also encompass an awareness of the numerous ways in which the rest of the planet continues to affect Africa, as well as the means through which other societies have faced issues that resemble those in Africa. The key to the process must however be Africa-centred, and calls for the creation within Africa of centres of knowledge-production staffed overwhelmingly by Africans, concerned to address those issues that are of greatest concern within the continent, and possessing the intellectual as well as material resources necessary to resist the allure of Northern centres of learning. This is an extremely ambitious agenda, and may well be an unrealisable one. But the decolonisation of the understanding of Africa itself is an important objective in its own right, and one that can only lose out if it comes to be confused with demands to integrate people of African origin into Northern structures of knowledge creation. The attempt to promote the 'decolonisation' of African Studies in (and for) Northern institutions leaves us in danger of finding ourselves with a deeply Northern conception of 'African Studies' that has lost touch with Africa itself.

#### NOTES

1. In this paper, I use 'Northern' (rather than 'western') to refer to the historically dominant states and societies of Europe and North America, leaving open the question of whether this usage can legitimately be extended to include the states of Northern Asia (and notably China and Japan), which have acquired or are in the process of acquiring levels of economic development equivalent to those of the historically Northern states, and (arguably at least) corresponding forms of global behaviour.

2. *African Affairs* was founded in 1901 as the journal of the Royal African Society, a thoroughly colonial outfit whose assumptions it continued to reflect until the RAS was merged with (or, effectively, taken over by) the ASAUK in the 1970s, and it was transformed into the leading academic journal that it is today. *Africa*, now an eminently reputable scholarly publication, had even more problematic origins, as the journal of the International African Institute, founded under the auspices of King Leopold II of the Belgians following the 1885 Congress of Berlin.

3. A rollcall of distinguished African academics from the independence era would have to include such notable names as Jacob Ajayi, Claude Ake, Kenneth Dike, Ali Mazrui, Thandika Mkandawire, V.Y. Mudimbe, Ernest Wamba dia Wamba and many more.

4. The impact of financial crisis and pressures for market-oriented reforms on one leading African university, Makerere in Uganda, has been perceptively examined by Mamdani (2007).

5. A rare exception among African leaders must be the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, a man of exceptional intelligence who sought answers to the developmental problems of one of the poorest countries in Africa, and arrived at solutions that have helped to turn it into one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Though there is much in Meles' analysis with which I disagree, arising in particular from his unshakeable commitment to Marxist modes of thought, it remains an example unequalled not only by the continent's leaders, but also to the best of my knowledge by its intellectuals.

6. But there were some, so let me cite Abdullah (1998) and Setargew Kenaw (2012), two papers derived from original observation in Africa that gave me particular pleasure.

7. Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva (2008), to take a salient example, is almost entirely concerned with issues of race in Northern societies, notably the USA, with one chapter concerned with Apartheid South Africa.

8. Sadly, a request to identify the club that I support – Newcastle United – evinces only pitying responses, eminently justified though these are. Africans identify overwhelmingly with the 'top six' Premier League teams – Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspur – and occasionally with other teams that include particularly prominent Africans. Football remains a badly under-researched subject in African studies, and in 15 years editing *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, I was able to publish only a single article on it, Fridy & Brobby (2009).

9. George Weah, now President of Liberia and to date the only African to win the FIFA World Player of the Year award, is exceptional as an African footballer who has used his sporting prowess as a springboard for engagement in the public life of his country of origin.

10. For a superb example of such a study, see O'Neill (2012), which deservedly won the 2014 Audrey Richards Prize for the best thesis in African studies presented at a UK university in the preceding two years.

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