

Reviews of books

Archie Mafeje, *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations: The Case of the Interlacustrine Kingdoms*. London: CODESRIA (pb US\$13 – 978 1 8707 8408 5). 1991, v + 149 pp.

Olúfémí O. Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*. London: Hurst (pb £14.99 – 978 1 7873 8692 1). 2022, v + 222 pp.

This review looks at Archie Mafeje's *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations*, published a little over three decades ago, in light of some major themes in Olúfémí O. Táíwò's more recent, nuanced and updated analyses in *Against Decolonisation*. Mafeje's book emphasizes an epistemological move away from Eurocentric knowledge systems in understanding agrarian African societies. His quest was to overturn Eurocentric theories and definitions about modes of production and political and economic power in Africa. To achieve this, he rejected classical anthropological theories within the context of the interlacustrine kingdoms in East Africa. He presented a critical evaluation of precolonial African agrarian societies and the impact of colonization on them. Táíwò, on the other hand, critically analyses contemporary conceptualizations of decolonization. It is thus productive to read Táíwò's critique of the 'decolonial turn' against Mafeje's early efforts to overturn Eurocentric anthropological concepts in African studies. This review explores Mafeje's positionality and examines how his critical approaches fit within Táíwò's critique of decolonization.

In *Against Decolonisation*, Táíwò argues for both the expansion of African philosophy and the indigenization of non-African philosophical paradigms and expressions. These are demonstrated as preference for an 'inclusive world' and wide spectrums of 'human possibilities' that are 'other than African' (p. 126). This open-ended philosophical position is evident in both his regard for unadulterated African historical realities and his fierce criticism of definitions of decolonization, which misplace historical and present relations between Africa and the global North and give Europe exclusive claim over modernity. Many of his thought-provoking critiques of the scope of contemporary decolonization discourse begin with his distinction between 'decolonisation₁' and 'decolonisation₂' (p. 3). For Táíwò, decolonization connotes the political and economic end of colonialism (specified as 'decolonisation₁'). Any conceptualization that links post-independence challenges to colonial roots is inherently beyond the scope of what he defines as decolonization. He uses the term 'decolonisation₂' to describe contemporary decolonial approaches to theorizing knowledge, which he believes are misplaced and ill-defined (p. 3). Mafeje's critical approach may be perceived by theorists today as a decolonial effort. With Táíwò's paradigms in mind,

readers can decipher whether Mafeje effectively works towards the decolonization of classical anthropological theorizations of African agrarian contexts.

While critically identifying and addressing gaps within contemporary academic interest in decolonization, Táíwò emphasizes African agency as a key hinge within the decolonization project. Do African polities have economic and political sovereignty? If so, Táíwò asserts, then the boundaries of decolonization, although 'fuzzy' (p. 21), do not hold purchase for politically and economically sovereign African contexts. Where there is no 'colonial presence', there are no 'colonial problems' (p. 47). According to the author, decolonization has been fully attained in African states and the failure of postcolonial regimes cannot be linked exclusively to colonial legacies; instead, it should be called something else (p. 57). Táíwò points out that postcolonial African states have themselves found it a daunting task to serve their citizens with the 'promise of modernity' (p. 181).

Contemporary decolonization discourses emphasize postcolonial political and economic challenges as rooted in systemic residuals entrenched from colonial rule. Through the concept of 'decolonisation₂', Táíwò shows that conventional decolonization frameworks barely identify, address or critically analyse flaws in African 'original societies' and 'endogenous practices and ideas' or take seriously the role of 'uncoerced' African leaders in making political and economic decisions that fail (pp. 32, 42).

Critical examples are referenced in the quest to unveil gaps in decolonial discourses. For instance, he notes that neoliberalism is a 'global phenomenon' and not a colonial residue in African states: 'it affects colonisers and colonised alike' (p. 52). Táíwò also points to the problems with calls to 'decolonize' language, which leads to a downplaying of the influence of colonially derived languages in contextually African discourses (p. 68). Resonant with his inclination towards an 'inclusive world' that may be 'other than African' (p. 126), he asserts the possibility for Africans to linguistically 'domesticate borrowings' (p. 125). As a sign of agency, Africans can borrow language, religion or political frameworks by creatively producing distinctive end products beyond 'mere mimicry' (p. 125). The implications are that African states can choose non-African official languages and that choice should not be reduced to a matter of colonization of the mind.

Táíwò specifies that there is a 'second struggle for freedom'; however, the discourse of decolonization has 'no place' in this challenge (p. 222). Through nuanced criticism of the trope of decolonization, Táíwò provokes deeper thoughts about postcolonial African agency and the creative domestication of the 'other than African' (p. 126) in language, politics and culture. This book awakens thoughts on the role of African states and leaders in hindering the second struggle for freedom – a step that debunks the popular blame on colonial rule. What is the role of Africans and African leaders who were not coerced into political and economic agreements with the West/global North in the postcolonial era? What is the role of borrowed non-African ideas in African societies? Can Africans creatively domesticate these ideas beyond mere mimicry? Does decolonization conceptually and practically hold a place in the second fight for freedom in postcolonial African states?

These questions are critical for contextualizing Mafeje's work, which in many respects anticipated the 'decolonial turn'. The countries within the interlacustrine region of East and Central Africa gained independence in the 1960s. Although *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations* was not published until 1991, Mafeje conducted his research during the period of decolonization. These economic and political contexts shaped the major themes of Mafeje's book, which was researched and written in the midst of what Táíwò would label decolonisation. Mafeje's analyses were used to debunk dominant Western concepts and theories in anthropology, which were used to build an understanding of African ethnography. The author's quest, however, was for new definitions of African social formations.

While the field of anthropology was dominated by the study of race and ethnic origin, Mafeje adopted a definition of ethnography that he believed fit the interlacustrine people. Mafeje believed that anthropology should not be overly occupied by the study of race and ethnic origin but should instead be devoted to 'learned habits' (p. 14). He also redefined the concept of social formation as the dynamics between 'economic instance' and the 'instances of power' (pp. 16, 37) as opposed to its conventional definition as 'concrete structures' (p. 16). Further, political authority was made distinct from ethnicity and described as a matter of 'class' phenomena (p. 47). For example, he argued that, despite Bunyoro being a prototype for the 'centralization of political authority' (p. 47), the term did not refer to a people (in terms of ethnicity) but rather to a 'political rank' (p. 47). In fact, not all Bunyoro pastoralists had political authority; it was only a few with large pastoral numbers that held such power. According to Mafeje, political organization and rank were based on non-ethnic factors such as 'military organization' (p. 50). Ethnic distinctions, for instance, were irrelevant for status justifications (p. 57) in the precolonial era. Using examples from Bunyoro and Bahima (two differentially advanced polities), Mafeje established that the state did not belong to a people but rather to a 'socially determined category of rulers' (p. 51).

Mafeje further points out how the dynamics of the African tenure system were neglected in previous studies. Earlier ethnographers transmitted European ideologies onto African understandings of 'land tenure' (p. 67). The author debunks the description of tenure in the interlacustrine kingdoms as 'feudal' (p. 66). As opposed to European practices, land tenure in Africa is described by Mafeje as a non-individual, non-exploitative and a non-inheritable (p. 68) 'natural process' (p. 75). In the interlacustrine region, the object of control was not land but rather cattle – this explains his preference for the term 'pastoral aristocracy' and the need for a different outlook on African land systems (p. 74).

In critiquing Eurocentric approaches to African anthropology and their links to colonialism, Mafeje can be described as engaged in 'decolonizing' knowledge. While Mafeje did not mention outright decolonization in his work, readers will likely see resonances between his fierce critique of Eurocentric anthropological epistemology and contemporary decolonizing discourses. One might also ask whether Mafeje – by creatively redefining ethnographic concepts to better suit the interlacustrine context – is not engaged in the very kinds of creative domestication that Táíwò celebrates. Writing at a time before 'decoloniality' became faddish, Mafeje creatively took ownership of dominant ethnographic ideas of social formation and, in so doing, exercised agency. Mafeje's legacy is under-appreciated and deserving

of a broader readership. The linkages between his thought and Táíwò's critique also speak to his contemporary relevance.

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Judith A. Byfield, *The Great Upheaval: Women and Nation in Postwar Nigeria*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press (pb US\$36.95 – 978 0 8214 2398 1). 2021, v + 320 pp.

Judith Byfield's *The Great Upheaval* is a multilayered endeavour. It is at once the history of a city, a history of colonial rule, a history of African women and gender, and a local history of nationalist activism. These threads are skilfully woven together, presenting a new and richly documented history of Abeokuta as well as an impressive revision of how we should understand the complex relationship between anti-colonial protest and the emergence of nationalism in Nigeria. Byfield deploys a neat narrative technique by beginning at the end in July 1948, when the paramount chief of the Egba, *Alake Ademola II*, abdicated as a result of a tax revolt led by the Abeokuta Women's Union. Readers soon learn that this event was the tip of the iceberg, and the book uncovers a much deeper history in painstaking detail. Women are located at the heart of the story, and we hear their voices loud and clear. We also witness their innovative forms of political action, and indeed their effectiveness, which powerfully and usefully decentres the role of better-known male Nigerian nationalists. Further, Byfield also decentres the 1929 Women's War from narratives about women, tax and protest in Nigeria, precisely by constructing a history that is similar and different in important ways.

The book's subtitle – *Women and Nation in Postwar Nigeria* – is something of a misnomer, since two-thirds of the text focuses on the period up to the end of World War Two. Nevertheless, this emphasis on historical background is a strength. Fundamentally, what Byfield achieves is to help us see the post-war moment in Nigeria through fresh eyes, while keeping our feet firmly planted on the ground in the shadow of Olumo Rock, Abeokuta's well-known natural landmark. She embraces rather than flattens the contradictions that such a project entails, and her commitment to and deep care for the people who have made the history of Abeokuta leap off almost every page.

Two themes frame my response to the book. The first of these is how we conceptualize the boundaries of the nation, since part of what Byfield reveals is how and why the boundaries of Abeokuta were pushed outwards and ultimately into Nigeria. In the first two chapters we learn about the making and assertion of a civic identity alongside a local sense of belonging, as well as about how these ideas intersected with notions of 'the nation', which was at that time conceived as 'Egba' – more so than Nigerian.