



REVIEW ESSAY

Against Decolonization: taking African agency seriously

by **Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò**

London: Hurst & Company, 2022. Pp368; ISBN: 9781787386921; £14.99 (Pb)

Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: turning over a new leaf

by **Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni**

London: Routledge, 2020. Pp202; ISBN: 9780367505950; £38.99 (Pb)

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In the post-colonial period, African studies has often been a site of ethical deliberation. From ideologically inflected standpoints like feminism, Marxism, nationalism and Pan-Africanism, African intellectuals have often pursued an anti-imperialist emancipatory ethic informed by a consciousness of colonialism, its afterlives and an over-riding social responsibility to serve the wretched of the earth left in its wake (Mama 2007).

This liberatory orientation regularly foregrounds the ethical question of what it means to be intellectually African. Through considerations of identity, social responsibility, methodology and epistemology, scholars invariably erect boundaries around ‘African’ as an intellectual identity, subjecting knowledge production to a politics of belonging in which many are called but few are chosen. There are several ideologically laden formulas stipulating conditions that bestow Africanity against the backdrop of this liberatory ethic. One’s African-ness, for example, can be at stake in the questions they research, the audiences they address, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks they draw on and languages they use. Such stipulations involve dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, confinement and permeability, and invariably constitute the boundaries of an African intellectual community.

The politics of belonging offers a framework for analysing the contestations shaping the ethics of being intellectually African. It describes how in discussions around identity, we often generate norms and values through which we judge not only our membership to certain communities (e.g. Africa), but also the membership of others as well (Yuval-Davis 2006). It is the (sometimes dirty) work of boundary maintenance, capturing the ways in which we articulate, revise and contest belonging. It is in this specific sense, of ethics as the boundary work through which the contours of Africanity as an intellectual identity are sculpted, that I discuss Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa* and Olúfẹmi Táíwò's *Against Decolonization*. Both authors think about the significance of decolonisation, as a knowledge project, in informing what it means to be intellectually African. While Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that epistemic decolonisation is vital for Africa's political, economic and intellectual future, Olúfẹmi Táíwò contends that it harms scholarship in and on Africa, motivating for its discursive expulsion.

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni is one of the most eminent contemporary scholars of intellectual decolonisation from the African continent. On this topic, he has contributed significantly to the translation of Latin American decoloniality theory in African discursive contexts, in addition to providing impressive compendiums and syntheses of struggles for epistemic decolonisation in African intellectual history.

Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa demonstrates these powers of compilation and synthesis. It defiantly calls for Africa to turn over a new leaf, and rebelliously asserts the possibility of another world governed by a different ethics of living together. This fresh start involves a recommitment to the historical project of re-humanising the dehumanised. Long-standing anti-colonial, anti-imperial and decolonial struggles across several domains which have historically informed this project of re-humanisation form the background to the story the book tells. The book's central problem is the observation that this re-humanisation remains an unfinished project, because of Africa's continued entrapment in a colonial capitalist world order that is racist and patriarchal, curtails epistemic freedom in its Eurocentrism, hollows out political sovereignty and proliferates poverty, underdevelopment and ecocide. Decolonisation is put forth as the solution to this polycrisis and is notably framed as a distinctly epistemological project. If Kwame Nkrumah emphasised the primacy of political decolonisation (of nation-states) in the fresh start of Africa's post-colonial future, Ndlovu-Gatsheni gives primacy to epistemic decolonisation (of knowledge). This task of epistemic decolonisation demands the assertion of African-ness by foregrounding Africa and Africans as a legitimate base to produce authoritative knowledge in the construction of alternative futures.

Against Decolonization, on the other hand, argues against the very concept of epistemic decolonisation. For Táíwò, decolonisation should be limited to its original and clearer delineation, namely self-government in politics and economics, which he indexes *Decolonisation*₁. When decolonisation is extended to the realm of culture and ideas, it breaks down because it fails to take African

agency seriously. He calls this extension *Decolonisation₂*, which he defines as requiring the ex-colonised to 'forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonization, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past' (p. 3).

Táíwò's argument takes on greater intensity and significance, I think, if we see it as a response to a slight and the outcome of a provocation. In *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa*, Ndlovu-Gatsheni surreptitiously lampoons Táíwò as an example of African scholars 'enchanted by Euro-modernity' (p. 3). Táíwò (2014) has previously argued that turning over a new leaf in Africa would require embracing modernity. However, for Ndlovu-Gatsheni, modernity is tainted as a distinctly European discourse whose seductiveness lies in concealing its dark and violent underbelly (slavery, colonialism, etc.). If decolonisation is the radical call of our time, scholars enchanted by Euro-modernity fail to heed the call to be truly intellectually African as they are yet to shake off a colonial mentality, perceiving the world in a manner that is self-deceiving.

Táíwò counters that concepts like 'Euro-modernity' concede too much ground by conferring parochial ownership to otherwise global processes like modernity. Even if it is granted that the constellation of ideas associated with modernity emerged in Europe, there is a separate issue of whether such ideas were ever fully constituted there. In fact, he argues, European colonialism often interrupted and stifled the development of modernity in Africa.

The charge of enchantment is precisely where the ethics slugfest begins because such accusations, when juxtaposed next to calls for Africa-centredness, invariably raise questions of authenticity and identity policing in circuits of knowledge production.

For Táíwò, epistemic decolonisation (*Decolonisation₂*) is condescending because it fails to take African agency seriously by trapping intellectuals in unhelpful attachments to authenticity, nativism and atavism. He associates with it a project of decontamination on account of the foreign provenance of ideas. '[A]nything that is present while colonialism lasted is irremediably sullied by the colonial imprint, and, therefore, can have no place in the world beyond colonialism' (p. 64). Such a project, he argues, places colonialism on a cognitive pedestal, rendering it a master-signifier that is all too powerful and all too determining in plotting the trajectories of post-colonial life in Africa. Táíwò is probably right here, though saying that a decolonial theorist reduces everything to colonialism is like noting the centrality of class analysis in Marxism. Nonetheless, the core point is that this inflation of colonialism undermines African agency by denigrating the human capacity to domesticate and appropriate ideas. Placing restrictions on where the ex-colonised get their ideas narrows the contours of African intellection by walling off significant contributions to African scholarship through exclusionary configurations of Africanity (p. 140).

When Africans embrace foreign ideation, Táíwò asks, can it be of their own accord or is it always an instance of a colonial mentality (enchantment)? This question and its offshoots are part of the fabric of an African intellectual

history pre-occupied with the kinds of ethical subjectivities that should or could be cultivated in response to colonial inheritances. In this sense, I would situate Táíwò within a camp of African scholars who insist that the reconstruction of an African ethical subjectivity ought to resist intellectual insularity in re-fashioning the human. Requiring substantive pre-requisites for African-ness as part of decolonisation flirts with intellectual enclosure and essentialism by suggesting that only certain topics, tones and forms of expression are available to Africans.

This disapproval of essentialist enclosure, for example, is visible in Paulin Hountondji's pre-efforts at demystifying Africanity to open up '...the possibility for a plurality of philosophical traditions and objects of inquiry that the African philosopher might turn to, by not making him or her the prisoner of any identity-based prescriptions of what "authentically" African approaches and themes have to look like' (Dübgen & Skupien 2019: 38). For Hountondji, being Africa-centred does not preclude the cultivation of an ethical sensibility that transcends the continent's real and imagined borders in its openness to diverse intellectual genealogies. Similarly, Souleymane Diagne (2002) and Diagne & Amselle (2020) have argued for the treatment of Africanity as an open question, developing this through the notion of a 'lateral universalism' cultivated through a continuous process of translation.

Ultimately, we get two different pictures of epistemic decolonisation. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, it is the cultivation of a critical Africa-centredness that enriches a global discourse of humanity. By contrast, Táíwò connects decolonisation to an intellectual politics that narrows the canvass on which African ideas are painted. Much of his frustration stems from the way in which certain narratives of decolonisation turn Africans into 'permanent subalterns' prohibited from appropriating and domesticating ideas from those in other parts of the world, which is otherwise taken as evidence of a colonised mind.

Together the exchange between both authors show how decolonisation (more specifically what Táíwò calls Decolonisation₂) can harbour a politics of belonging where the boundaries of Africanity are policed and contested. In this case, this boundary work relies on the distinction between decolonised and enchanted minds. Such distinctions are contestations over the meaning of being intellectually African and who can successfully legitimate claims to Africanity. Those in the critical universalist tradition, like Táíwò, Diagne and Hountondji, are effectively arguing against *decolonisation-as-confinement* as one outcome of such questions.

The main flaw, though, in the development of Táíwò's argument is the mystification of its targets through concealment and misattribution. The book is more appropriately titled *Against Decolonisation₂*, because its true targets – Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and the Latin American decoloniality school – are concealed in a fortress of footnotes. Let me explain why.

Intellectual decolonisation is a house of many mansions. *Against Decolonization* ends up proving this point because the avatars of epistemic decolonisation it discusses in the open – Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Kwasi Wiredu – do not represent the intellectual enclosure and hermetically sealed Africanity condemned by Decolonisation₂. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o does not

argue for linguistic nativism and Táíwò often agrees with the critical universalism espoused in Wiredu's conceptual decolonisation. And yet there is merit to his argument, because *Decolonisation*₂ is no strawman. It is an actually existing phenomenon routinely chastised as nativism in African studies and which Hull (2022) has recently dubbed 'epistemic ethnonationalism' in describing the Latin American decoloniality tradition. Nonetheless, the misalignment between *Decolonisation*₂ and its putative African representatives, who end up constituting more moderate voices in Táíwò's own analysis, suggests that *Decolonisation*₂ does not exhaust expressions of intellectual decolonisation.

So ultimately, we are left with a vibrant debate culminating in a series of cascading confinements. *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa* kicks off, critiquing how Eurocentrism and colonial entrapment encloses thought and forecloses alternative visions of the future from the ex-colonised. In response, *Against Decolonization* laments how African agency risks being sacrificed at the altar of a decolonisation that confines and narrows what it means to be intellectually African. At the same time, Táíwò can only be against epistemic decolonisation, because he confines it to its xenophobic intellectual expressions and forecloses alternatives which are desirable, and which also exist because he identifies them.

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