

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Francis B. Nyamnjoh**, *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa*, Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa, 2016. ISBN: 9789956763160 (paper)

## **From Conversations and Conviviality to Epistemologies of Converted Spaces**

With his valuable book *#RhodesMustFall*, Francis Nyamnjoh mobilizes many years of work on identity, mobility and epistemological transformation in situating Rhodes as a *makwerekwere* (“stranger”) and subsequently seeking to understand the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement in the context of resilient colonialism as well as the long and enduring presence of *amakwerekwere* (“strangers”) such as Nyamnjoh himself who make up the contested space that is South Africa, where people respond to one another according to whether or not “the other belongs” (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). When Nyamnjoh takes on the problematic of Rhodes’ defaced statue at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, he makes certain from the beginning that there is no doubt about what kind of colonizer Rhodes was. Rhodes and his associates “took over, ruled, developed and exploited for his personal profit and that of Britain the lands and bodies of those he conquered, turning them into *amakwerekwere* on their own native soil, their homeland” (p.28). These contests between “whitening-up” and “blackening-up”, inclusion and exclusion, have persisted to the present day not only with regard to European (Boer and British) residents but also Indians and black Africans such as himself from elsewhere in Africa.

Nyamnjoh’s concerns, however, go beyond identity and mobility to his more recent work calling for nothing less than fundamental epistemological, ontological and institutional transformation of a still highly segregated and exclusionary academy, as he points out in quoting Mahmood Mamdani’s comments about his 1997 appointment as Director of the UCT Centre for African Studies: “I spent my first year startled that I had only one colleague and no students in the social sciences. I wondered to whom I was to profess” (Mamdani 1998). The changes go

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much deeper than simply hiring and creating academic centres, however. Nyamnjoh instead promotes a wholesale re-thinking of colonial epistemologies:

Whole societies, countries and regions have been categorized, depending on how these “others” were perceived in relation to Cartesian rationalism and its empiricist, disembodied expectations of modernity ... As an epistemology that claims the status of a solution, there is little room for introspection or self-scrutiny. Countervailing forces are invariably to blame for “failure”. Such messianic qualities have imbued practitioners of this epistemology with an attitude of arrogance, superiority and intolerance towards creative difference and appropriation ...

Popular epistemologies in Africa are different ... [in that they] create room for *why* questions, and for “magical interpretations” where there are no obvious explanations to material predicaments ... The real is not only what is observable or what makes cognitive sense; it is also the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental, the intuitive and the inexplicable ... (Nyamnjoh 2012:131-132)

One of the key sources of Nyamnjoh’s reflections on “popular epistemologies in Africa” is Amos Tutuola and especially *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), which Nyamnjoh uses to form such radical notions within Western(ized) (or “whitened-up”) mindsets as to almost be inarticulate to them:

In Tutuola’s universe, being and becoming materialise through the consciousness that gives it meaning. Consciousness matters more than the containers that house it. Consciousness can inhabit any container—human and non-human, animate and inanimate,

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visible and invisible—regardless of the state of completeness or incompleteness of the container in question. Both reality and the universe are imbued with endless possibilities of being and becoming, thanks to the multiplicity of consciousness available to inhabit them ...

What seems more important than the forms bodies take is the consciousness which inhabits bodies and body parts. Even when a body is seemingly palpably the same and contiguous, the consciousness that inhabits it may be fluid and flexible, pointing to a reality that impoverishes fixations with permanence and stability. The human body can assume the consciousness of an ordinary human just as it can that of a god, a spirit, death, a curious creature from the wild bushes or the endless forests, as well as it can project its own consciousness onto a plant, an animal, air or whatever other element of nature is available and handy. (Nyamnjoh 2015b:4)

Such radical and flexible notions of reality and knowledge gathering seem on the surface to be singularly unsuited to engagement with questions of how to deal with entrenched inequality in South Africa, largely defined by apartheid history. Habermas (1981) called proponents of the similarly ambiguous discursive post-modernism “young conservatives” because, he argued, by deconstructing all texts and questioning their truth claims, postmodernist scholars by default supported the status quo (see also Jackson 2011). Michael Watts (1999: 22), in the context of petroleum exploitation in Nigeria, was much more graphic: “Nine Ogoni were hung not for connivance or play but for confronting state legitimacy on the most sensitive of terrains: the *geographical terrain*”. Watts directly critiqued Mbembe’s (1992) “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony”, not because Mbembe invoked “fluid identities” but because he invoked the kind of play that Ebert (1991) critiqued as “ludic postmodernism”. However, Nyamnjoh’s focus is not on

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deconstruction of texts, but rather on consciousness. While scholars such as Mouffe (1999) speak of incommensurability and perhaps of play, Nyamnjoh refers to “incompleteness”, of “being and becoming”. In this context, there is no stepping away from the inequality, de facto segregation, and destitution in South Africa that are as bad as, or worse than, they were under apartheid. In places such as Khayelitsha, for example, the faeces with which the student Maxwele covered Rhodes’ statue must still be flung away from the community in a ghastly “game” of “flying toilets” (p.76ff).

With consciousness being key, Nyamnjoh’s epistemological framework takes material realities seriously, arguably more seriously than empiricist frameworks in that, by breaking down constructed boundaries between human and non-human, mind and body, Nyamnjoh invites his readers to inquire whether and how consciousness transcends individual entities or essences. This makes ritual much more important than simply performance in memory. If consciousness is considered (intuited) to exist within, across and beyond individualized essences, then it behooves humans as curious beings to attempt connections, such as Argenti’s (2007) experiences of post-slavery in the Cameroon grassfields. This brings into sharp relief Nyamnjoh’s statement that “Maxwele was that ‘individual’ who refused to be treated simply as *an individual* ... It did not come naturally for someone who could neither find employment in Delft nor in next door Khayelitsha as a young man reduced to sharing intimacies with excrement, to see himself as self-made, and as schooled in rational choices with predictable outcomes ... In a context where and to people for whom excrement is a permanent blot on the landscape, it becomes pretentious to cultivate a sense of decency ... ” (p. 73-74).

As well as the public spaces where collective identities are formed, transformed and adjudicated, Nyamnjoh appropriately focuses his critique and advocacy on the academy as the central space where resources are mobilized in service of learning and “wisdom”. In doing so, he

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accepts the risks to his otherwise relatively secure and highly celebrated position by questioning fundamental assumptions about whose voices don't count and whose voices count too much, throwing himself open to potentially damning charges within the academy of threatening "collegiality," "civility" or even the "decency" which UCT administrators deemed that Maxwele transgressed (Niehaus 2013; Nyamnjoh 2013). Rather than "collegiality", however, Nyamnjoh advocates a more contentious but no less respectful "conviviality":

Considering and treating the everyday life of social spaces as bona fide research sites entails, inter alia, taking the popular, the historical, and the ethnographic seriously, and emphasizing interdependence and conviviality. It also means encouraging "a meaningful dialogue" between these epistemologies and "modern science", both in their old and new forms ... (Nyamnjoh 2015b: 146-147)

When the colonial application of "science as ideology and hegemony" (Nyamnjoh 2004) is supplemented and even superseded by local epistemologies where "existence and consciousness matter more than essence" (Nyamnjoh 2015b: 146-147), then "conversation is privileged over conversion, and ritual influences are more amenable to the logic of conviviality than is coercive violence to control others—mind, body and soul—and resources with reckless abandon in a delusory quest for completeness".

When applied directly to prescriptions for South African identity confrontations (#RhodesMustFall and the nibbling away at resilient colonialism), Nyamnjoh's incomplete, convivial and conversational orientation leads to questioning of all essentialized group identities. If we, like Maxwele, are not privileged enough to be treated "simply as an individual", we should at the same time question which groups belong (autochthons or natives) and who if any

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are outsiders that do not belong (allochthons or *amakwerekwere*) in an environment of uprisings not only against “white [English] or colored [Indian] colonizers”, but also against *amakwerekwere* such as Nyamnjoh and other “black Africans” not “native” to South Africa. These lead into problematic and ironic situations where the populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) leader Malema calls for the complete blackening of South Africa but does so from a position of conspicuous (“Western”) consumption, or where “colonial white” Afrikaans is replaced by “English, the ultimate global language of whitening up” (p.152).

In rejecting these essences in favor of convivial consciousness and incompleteness, Nyamnjoh argues that the “challenge of being or becoming African or anything else, is not so much identifying with people, places and spaces one is familiar with, but especially with spaces, places and people one is yet to encounter or to become familiar with” (p. 257):

There is need for pragmatic policies of reconciliation and justice, and of alleviating poverty through a carefully negotiated strategic programme of restitution, reparation and redistribution ... In this connection, the future of South Africa may well rest on how well the leadership harnesses the creative energies and resources of black and white *amakwerekwere* of yesteryear with those of today’s *amakwerekwere*, in the interest of Nelson Mandela’s cosmopolitan nation building [including the Mandela Rhodes Foundation] and Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance aspirations. (p.258)

Nyamnjoh’s specific proposals for reconstructing the academy and South African meaning-making are radical—even revolutionary. However, there are significant concerns relating his exemplars, the Mandela Rhodes Foundation and Mbeki’s African Renaissance, to prescriptions for restitution, reparation and redistribution. He notes critiques of Mandela-Rhodes, commenting

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that “Mandela has been criticised for not developing a strong social and economic transformation programme during his presidency. Reconciliation as the key trope of the era meant that dispossession and transformation were seldom envisaged” (p.190). However, Mbeki’s African Renaissance is much more problematic when the frame is expanded beyond “local” contestation to encompass broader geographies—representations, governance institutions and lived spaces (Lefebvre 1991)—of globalized corporate exploitation, resistance and corporate response (Jackson 2013). Global corporate entities (businesses, governments, churches, schools, NGOs, etc.) use identity as both a legitimizing narrative to mask ongoing exploitation and a governing framework through what I term (relying heavily on Nyamnjoh’s work) “fragmented stability” (see Jackson 2016). As Patrick Bond (2002) comments, Mbeki endowed his “‘African Renaissance’ branding exercise ... with poignant poetics but not much else”. Meanwhile, as Naomi Klein (2007) describes in *The Shock Doctrine*, “Mbeki convinced Mandela that what was needed was a definitive break with the past. The ANC needed a completely new economic plan ... something that would communicate, in the broad, dramatic strokes the market understood, that the ANC was ready to embrace the Washington Consensus”. While the African Renaissance promotes images of reconciliation, its leader Mbeki was clearly dedicated more than nearly any other South African leadership figure to maintaining the kinds of governance policies that support exploitation and in the process entrench further the kind of deprivation and marginalization that Maxwele has experienced throughout his life. As the militarized response to strikes against the British firm Lonmin in Marikana demonstrates (Davies 2015), the lived space of corporate exploitation has only changed incrementally at best from the days of the Soweto uprisings.

Might we imagine Mbeki and the global neoliberal elite playing out a form of Ubuntu-ism as Nyamnjoh (2015a) narrates in “*C’est l’homme qui fait l’homme*”: *Cul-de-Sac Ubuntu-*

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*ism in Côte d'Ivoire?* “C’est l’homme qui fait l’homme” is an Ivorian drama following the fictional stories of two individuals who travel to Europe seeking “greener pastures” where they can earn capital with which they can construct houses and therefore develop themselves in Côte d’Ivoire. Daou chooses his cousin Gohou to care for his affairs in Côte d’Ivoire, while Amélie procures the services of a good friend Nastou. In the end, the fortunes of both Daou and Amélie are undone by Gohou and Nastou respectively through fake building projects, conspicuous consumption, and urgent appeals in the name of Ubuntu (“people are people through other people”) for additional capital. In the end, Nastou kicks Amélie out of the house built with Amélie’s own money, while Daou discovers that Gohou has done almost nothing to build a house with Daou’s money.

Perhaps Mbeki is best thought of as the representative of the Paris Club of global creditors, earnestly and incessantly calling upon the working people of South Africa in the name of Ubuntu to send more fruits of their labor, their capital, in the form of structural adjustment debt service to the West so that the West can “build their house”. When Maxwele insists upon laying claim to the University of Cape Town by transforming Rhodes’ statue into a much-needed community toilet for Khayelitsha, he is called “indecent” by the administration of the campus that his community by dint of human effort should own. The conflation of “African Renaissance” and closet neoliberalism seems to fit well into the conundrum of Ubuntu-ism: “When are claims of *Ubuntu-ism* an opportunity for collective success and social inclusivity, and when are they a mere ploy for opportunism?” (Nyamnjoh 2015a). This question can be addressed by fundamentally transforming the feudal insularity of the academy through not only conversation, conviviality and “why” questions but also through epistemologies of contested space, recognizing that the exercise of power is mediated by social interaction (Allen 2011) and that the capability of shadow elites (Wedel 2009) to exercise power across great distances

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requires equally great formation of global solidarities (Featherstone 2012) among scholar-activists within and outside of the academy, where marginalized people hold the powerful accountable for matching their discourses of conviviality with their governance mechanisms. In this process, we owe a debt of gratitude to Nyamnjoh for refusing to be converted by the colonial academy or its remunerative accoutrements.

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