

Decolonizing the African University

By Hisham Aidi

Abstract

This Policy Brief looks at successive attempts to transform the African university, in initiatives that have alternately been termed part of a larger Africanization or decolonization project. We chart attempts at intellectual decolonization launched by African-born scholars such as Ali Mazrui and Samir Amin, as well as scholars from the African diaspora, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter Rodney. We will examine decolonization projects as launched in Makerere University and the University of Dar es Salaam in East Africa, and CODESRIA in Dakar, as well as more recent attempts by North African thinkers.

On March 9, 2015, a fourth-year student at the University of Cape Town in South Africa defiled the statue of Cecil Rhodes, the mining magnate who served as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896. The student, who claimed he was protesting against “colonial dominance” set off the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, which a month later would lead to the removal of the statue, and would soon spread to other universities in South Africa¹. The campaign

soon spread beyond Africa’s borders. At Oxford University, students called for the removal of the Rhodes statue from Oriel College, and for university officials to “decolonize” the campus and curriculum. At the University of Cambridge, students launched a similar campaign demanding that the bronze Okukor statue (taken during the Benin Expedition of 1897) be returned to Jones College in Nigeria². Comparable campaigns took place at Harvard and Berkeley.

1. “Rhodes rage: A row about a colonial legacy,” *The Economist* (April 4 2015) <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/04/04/rhodes-rage>

2. Njoki Wamai, “Decolonising the Academy? Towards A Global Movement,” (May 27 2016) <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20160524135416842>

In his classic *Decolonizing the Mind* (1981), the Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o stated that since colonial rule had "dis-membered" Africa, the continent would have to be "re-membered," and this re-building would be achieved to be through education³. This Policy Brief looks at successive attempts to transform the African university, in initiatives that have alternately been termed part of a larger Africanization or decolonization project. We chart attempts at intellectual decolonization launched by African-born scholars such as Ali Mazrui and Samir Amin, as well as scholars from the African diaspora, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter Rodney. We will examine decolonization projects as launched in Makerere University and the University of Dar es Salaam in East Africa, and CODESRIA in Dakar, as well as more recent attempts by North African thinkers. Specific attention will be paid to the relationship between disciplines and area studies, and attempts to rethink the role of the Sahara—as bridge or divide—as it has been institutionalized in different academic departments.

The University

The university, as we know it, was born in a specific European context. It would achieve its current institutional form in Berlin, when the University of Berlin was founded in 1810.[this is referring to rise of disciplines, but no need to go into more detail] The institutional design of the University of Berlin would henceforth spread across Europe, and through colonial expansion be exported to other parts of the world, as Europe sought to develop other regions in its own image. As liberalism formed as a philosophy, with attendant concepts of race and ethnicity, these ideas of difference and European superiority would be exported to newly-founded universities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Incidentally, it was the German philosopher Hegel, once based at the University of Berlin, who formulated one of the most politically consequential representations of Africa that is being contested by de-colonial efforts today. In *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel famously declared that "Africa...is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit...". The German philosopher would divide Africa into three regions: North Africa, which he called "European Africa"; northeast Africa, which he termed "the land of the Nile";

and then "Africa proper", the land to the south and the west. He considered North Africa ("European Africa") and "the land of the Nile" to be extensions of Europe and Asia respectively. On "Africa Proper", the land to the south and west, which provided slaves for the transatlantic trade, Hegel opined: "Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world—shut up". He concluded: "In the interior of Africa proper... the mind of the African remains shut up within itself, feels no urge to be free and endures without resistance universal slavery"⁴. Hegel's division of the world into "people with history" and those without history, his segmenting of Africa, and his separation of the northern tier from the rest the continent would shape generations of scholarship.

It is worth noting that one of the earliest critics of this Hegelian partition of Africa was the African American historian W.E.B. Du Bois, who had studied in Berlin and was steeped in German philosophy. Du Bois took on Hegelian historiography head-on. In 1947, he published *The World and Africa*, which opens with the following statement: "I am challenging Authority... the herd of writers of modern history who never heard of Africa or declare with Guernier 'Seule de tout les continents l'Afrique n'a pas d'histoire'" (Alone of all the continents, Africa has no history.)⁵. Du Bois's work took aim at the European historiographers who had racialized Africa and then enveloped 'black' Africa in a curtain of ignorance. To counter Hegel's depiction of the continent, Du Bois identified three historical moments to locate Africa's place in the world: ancient Greece, the European renaissance, and the Industrial Revolution. He highlighted the role of Egypt and Asia in influencing the rise of Greek civilization. He envisaged a coalition between the darker peoples of Africa and Asia, and to that end contested the idea of the Sahara as a civilizational divide.

It is worth recalling that decades before this intervention, Du Bois, in 1915, argued in an essay titled *African Roots of War* that racism and the scramble for Africa were at the root of the and World War I⁶. Before Lenin formulated his theory of imperialism, Du Bois argued that "in the Dark Continent are hidden the roots, not simply of war

3. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: J. Currey, 1986) p.18

4. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) p.173-175

5. W.E.B Du Bois, *The World and Africa and Color and Democracy* (The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois 2014) p. xxv

6. W.E.B. Du Bois, "African Roots of War" *The Monthly Atlantic* (May 2015)

today but of the menace of wars tomorrow”⁷. This insight would foreshadow dependency theory and the post-colonial analyses that would emerge in the decades after independence.

The Decolonial Turn

Scholars have long debated the impact of colonialism on the African continent. The Kenyan historian Ali Mazrui famously argued that colonialism set in motion a “revolution of epic proportions” with generational repercussions, inasmuch as colonial rule incorporated Africa into the world economy, starting with the transatlantic slave trade “which dragged African labor into the emerging international capitalist system”⁸. The subsequent carving up of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1885 would derail political development, rendering the continent subordinate to a Western-dominated international state system. In terms of knowledge production, colonialism’s impact would be pernicious: “What Africa knows about itself and what different parts of Africa know about each other have been profoundly influenced by the West”⁹.

Arguing against Mazrui was the Nigerian historian Jacob Ade Ajayi of the University of Ibadan, who took a nationalist position, claiming that colonialism lasted roughly 75 years (from 1885 to 1960), and was just “an episode in African history”¹⁰. Even under imperial rule, African people were able to shape history, albeit in structural conditions set by European rulers. Mazrui would retort that just because colonial occupation ended in 1960, it did not mean that African states had overcome colonialism’s effects. In recent years, scholars have revisited this debate on colonialism’s impact—initiated by scholars including Mazrui and Ajayi, and political stalwarts including Frantz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah.

The current decolonial scholars appreciate Kwame Nkrumah’s concept of neo-colonialism advanced shortly after independence, and build on the dependency framework developed by Egyptian economist Samir Amin. But they contend that the early anti-colonial theorizing

focused on conquest and economic exploitation, which is simply one strand of what they term “coloniality”. Thus, scholar Nelson Maldonado Torres defined decoloniality as the dismantling of the matrix of power that is coloniality, and conceptions of knowledge that reproduce racial, gender, economic and geo-political hierarchies¹¹. Although the first wave of anti-colonial theorists spoke of cultural liberation and “new consciousness”, the pioneers gave short shrift to “epistemic violence”, which critic Asish Nandy has termed the “second form of decolonization... [that] colonizes minds in addition to bodies, and releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all”¹². Decolonial theorists—many of whom hail from Latin America—also criticize the earlier post-colonial scholars for taking the conquest of Asia and Africa in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as their point of departure, neglecting the fact that colonization (and resistance) began in Latin America in the fifteenth century.

Kampala vs Dar Es Salaam

The earliest efforts to transform the universities of Africa, inherited from the colonialists, began in the 1960s in the non-settler (former) colonies of Uganda and Tanzania, specifically at Makerere University and the University of Dar-es-Salaam. The dispute over the purpose of the African university would be personified by the clash between two scholars—the aforementioned Mazrui, based at Makerere, and the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney, who had settled in the Tanzanian capital. The Kenyan scholar envisioned the university as a place for scholars “fascinated by ideas”¹³. Rodney, on the other hand, saw the university as the home of the public intellectual deeply engaged with society. One man stressed excellence, the other valued relevance.

Makerere was founded in 1922 as a vocational college, and shortly after Uganda’s independence began a process of Africanization as native scholars and administrators were appointed. In 1961, the influential magazine *Transition* was launched at Makerere, edited by Rajat Neogy, who published seminal essays by luminaries including the

7. W.E.B. Du Bois, “African Roots of War” *The Monthly Atlantic* (May 2015) p.2

8. Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Little Brown & Co, 1986) p.12

9. Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Little Brown & Co, 1986) p.15

10. Jacob F. Ade Ajayi, ‘Colonialism: An Episode in African History’, in L. Gann and P. Duignan (eds), *Colonialism in Africa Vol. 1* (Cambridge, 1969) p.164

11. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept” *Cultural Studies*, (21 2007) p.260

12. Asish Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Oxford University Press 1983) p.xi

13. Mahmood Mamdani, “Between the public intellectual and the scholar: decolonization and some post-independence initiatives in African higher education,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (Volume 17, 2016) p.68

Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, the American author James Baldwin, and the Tanzanian head of state Julius Nyerere. Writing in *Transition*, Mazrui would argue that the “committed” intellectuals at Dar had become lackeys of Julius Nyerere. He also took aim at the Africanization projects which scapegoated minorities in the name of anti-colonialism—such as Idi Amin’s persecution of Ugandan Asians. If Mazrui’s focus was the internal situation in post-colonial African states—the authoritarianism and stifling of free inquiry in the name of anti-imperialism—Rodney was thinking about the larger neo-colonial structures that were constraining Africa’s development. After student protests against obligatory national service, Nyerere issued the Arusha Declaration in February 1967, organizing a conference on the role of the university in socialist Tanzania. The gathering ended with a call for relevance, noting that “various disciplines and related subjects [were not studied] in the context of East Africa’s and Tanzania’s socio-economic development aspirations, concerns and problems”. The conference would also call for a “continuous ‘curriculum review’”¹⁴. The two groundbreaking works that would appear in the wake of this conference were Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972)—a reformulation of the dependency theory argument—and Issa Shivji’s volume *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (1976), which dissected Western domination’s effects on the Tanzanian state¹⁵. A handful of scholars at Dar—including Marjorie Mbilinyi, Mahmood Mamdani, Walter Rodney, and Issa Shivji, would subsequently put together a decolonized syllabus aiming to consolidate the social sciences across different disciplines in favor of a more unified approach¹⁶.

The University of Dar Es Salaam would thus play an important role in decolonization efforts, serving as an incubator for world systems theory, and laying the foundations for what would come to be called decolonial thought. Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Giovanni Arrighi would all spend time in the Tanzanian capital during the peak of the Dar school in the 1960s and 1970s. Walter Rodney, in his courses, would purposely try to shift the unit of analysis from nation states, highlighting instead the inter-connected global system.

14. Kimambo, Isaria N., ed. *In Search of Relevance: A History of the University of Dar es Salaam* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 2008)

15. Issa G Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (New York and London Monthly. Review Press, 1976); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications 1972)

16. Yousuf Al-Bulushi, “Thinking racial capitalism and black radicalism from Africa: An intellectual geography of Cedric Robinson’s world-system,” *Geoforum* (February 2019)

World systems theory emerged from these debates, as Wallerstein in his work shifted the level of analyses from state actors to the larger world system¹⁷. Aníbal Quijano, a leading decolonial thinker, would in 1980 maintain that his unit of analysis was Latin America as a region, rather than any specific nation state¹⁸.

Decolonizing Turath

In North Africa, the Moroccan philosopher Abed Al-Jabri (1935-2010) was one of the earliest to consider the importance to decolonization of reading and interpretation of turath (patrimony). Al-Jabri would call for an interpretive approach that draws on the “critical-rationalist, unificatory, and civilizing [city-making]” trends in Islamic intellectual history¹⁹. In the conclusion to *The Critique of Arab Reason* (1999), Al-Jabri stated that modernity can only be initiated from within a society’s culture, not from without. He re-stated the central question: how could we initiate renewal and modernization from within our own tradition? The answer, he said, is elusive and lies “in ongoing, cumulative and ever-changing proxis (al-mumarasa)”²⁰. Although he was writing from a pan-Arab perspective, his ideas would influence African and decolonial thought more broadly. Walter Mignolo—one of the originators of decolonial theory—has cited El Jabri’s work as example of how Muslim thinkers have tried to “the enduring enchantment of modernity” through “building from what is alive, today, in both ‘traditions’: the tradition of European modernity and the tradition of the Arab-Islamic world”²¹.

Similar questions were raised in Dakar with the establishment of Council for the Development of Social Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in 1973. This center

17. J.L. Kanywanyi, “The Struggles to Decolonize and Demystify University Education: Dar’s 25 Years’ Experience Focused on the Faculty of Law, October 1961 – October 1986.” *Eastern Africa Law Review* Issue # 15 1989

18. Aníbal Quijano Obregón, A. 1980. “The marginal pole of the economy and the marginalised labour force,” in Harold Wolpe, ed., *Articulation of Modes of Production* (Routledge, London 1980)

19. Cited in Yasmeen Daifallah, “The Politics of Decolonial Interpretation: Tradition and Method in Contemporary Arab Thought,” *American Political Science Association* (May 2019) pp. 1-14

20. Cited in Yasmeen Daifallah, “The Politics of Decolonial Interpretation: Tradition and Method in Contemporary Arab Thought,” *American Political Science Association* (May 2019) pp. 1-14

21. Walter Mignolo, “The Enduring Enchantment (or the Epistemic Privilege of Modernity and where to go from Here),” in *Enduring Enchantments*, *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Fall 2002) pp. 927-954

would draw scholars from smaller African countries, where the national universities were closely monitored by states, and scholars from larger countries like Egypt and Ethiopia, which were undergoing political gyrations that in some cases sent public intellectuals fleeing. Scholars at CODESRIA, including Samir Amin, Claude Ake, Wambadia-Wamba, Ifi Imadiume, and Sam Moyo, would produce path-breaking works on dependency, democracy, gender, and the land question²². With the end of the Cold War, CODESRIA would feed off debates taking place in post-apartheid South Africa, on how to teach about Africa, given that that African Studies as a field of inquiry was not born in Africa, but in Western universities in a context shaped by colonialism, Cold War politics, and apartheid. One question that would often surface involved the colonially-inspired fissure between disciplines and area studies, where disciplines studied the European experience, while area studies analyzed the traditions of non-European people as a particularistic, ethnic experience. In the late 1990s, the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe would assume leadership of CODESRIA and try to broaden the research agenda beyond political economy to include issues of discourse and representation.

Mbembe, who is based at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, has recently reflected on the calls to decolonize coming out of South Africa. He reminded readers that in the 1960s and 1970s, such demands were known as Africanization, and were viewed warily by Frantz Fanon. The Martinican theorist treated such initiatives with suspicion because Africanization like nationalization rarely led to structural reform but rather to “the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which were a legacy of the colonial past”²³. The discourse of Africanization has been deployed strategically by political actors, leading to chauvinism and scapegoating in Uganda, Ivory Coast, and Senegal; in the name of Africanization, “the nation is passed over for the state, and the tribe is preferred to the state”²⁴. With this cautionary note in mind, Mbembe observed that current decolonial efforts should aim for an African

cosmopolitanism that celebrates the continent’s multiplicity—an “Afropolitan modernity”. In the South African context, he has called for great government investment in universities and free access, as well as the urgent need for multicultural education. He writes: “Colonialism rhymes with monolingualism. The African university of tomorrow will be multilingual. It will teach (in) Swahili, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Shona, Yoruba, Hausa, Lingala, Gikuyu and it will teach all those other African languages French, Portuguese or Arabic have become while making a space for Chinese, Hindu etc.”²⁵.

Afrotopia and Arabic

The question of whether Arabic is native or foreign to Africa, and how/whether North Africa fits into the continent, has become part of the decoloniality debate. Two recent thinkers who have addressed the matter of Afro-Arab relations and decolonization are worth highlighting, as they have addressed the colonial categories and the Hegelian partition of Africa. The first is Senegalese political scientist Ousmane Kane, who has demonstrated how the Hegelian depiction of Africa as divided by the Sahara underpins influential books about Africa, including Valentin Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa* (1988), which argued that knowledge production in Africa was linguistically dependent on Western languages and epistemologically reliant on the “colonial library”, which provided essential conceptual frames for post-colonial African intellectuals. In *Beyond Timbuktu*, Kane drew attention to what Mudimbe neglects—the rise and transformation of Arabo-Islamic erudition in West Africa from the sixteenth century through the colonial era to the twenty-first century. Kane demonstrated that the dominant intellectual framework for the “Islamic library”—the multitude of texts written in Arabic and ‘ajami—could not have possibly been Western, for the simple reason that the West or modern civilization did not yet exist, or was still in its infancy, when the Muslim intellectual tradition was flourishing in West Africa²⁶.

In a similar spirit, the political theorist Zeyad el Nabolsy has been revisiting the writings of Amical Cabral,

22. Sabo. Bako, 1993. “Education and Adjustment in Nigeria: Conditionality and Resistance,” in *Academic Freedom in Africa*, edited by Mahmood Mamdani and Mamadou Diouf (Dakar: CODESRIA 1993) pp. 150– 175.

23. Achille Mbembe, “Decolonizing the University: New Directions,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* (January 2016)

24. Frantz Fanon, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

25. Achille Mbembe, “Decolonizing the University: New Directions,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* (January 2016) p.61

26. Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Harvard University Press 2016) p.18

observing that the Bissau-Guinean revolutionary thought that one reason Nkrumah's project had not succeeded was because it lacked a fully-developed ideological vision. Cabral envisaged an African modernity based on scientific progress: "we have to rid out culture of everything insofar as it is antiscientific", calling for a liberating culture, though rejecting the (essentialist idea) of racial culture or of transnational African cultural values.²⁷ As Cabral would remark, "a profound analysis of cultural reality removes the supposition that there can be continental or racial cultures", stressing that "culture, like history is necessarily an expanding and developing phenomenon"²⁸. El Nabolsy contends [the tense is present – Nabolsy is writing today] that Cabral's conception of cultural liberation foreshadowed and accords with Samir Amin's and Anibal Quijano's ideas of liberation, where modernity entails thinking of oneself as a maker of history and identity. El Nabolsy also broaches the ongoing debate between Ngugi wa Thiong'o and others, who believe that the adoption of French or English by post-colonial African states is comparable to the "linguistic pacification programs" undertaken by the colonial powers; and this policy leads to "foreign languages assuming the mantle of the identity of the national"²⁹.

Nabolsy counters this perspective by pointing to Cabral's embrace of the Portuguese language, provided its adoption was a matter of choice and not domination. The young theorist also demonstrates the influence of Cabral's thought on Arab scholars including Samir Amin, Hilmi El Sharawy, and others.

The decolonizing and re-centering of Africa that Wa Thiong'o called for forty years ago is happening across the continent, in fits and starts. Yet as decolonial initiatives proliferate, it is worth recalling Amilcar Cabral's advice: "we should not avoid something because it's from a foreigner, or again, because it's foreign; if it's already good and we have to accept it immediately, then it's not worth refusing. That's not culture. It's crazy, it's a complex—be it of inferiority or stupidity. Faced with things from the foreigner, we should know how to accept what is acceptable and refuse what isn't useful"³⁰.

27. Amilcar Cabral, "Analysis of a Few Types of Resistance" in *Resistance and Decolonization*, translated by Dan Wood (Rowman & Littlefield 2016) p.73-156

28. Amilcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," *Unity and Struggle; Speeches and Writings of Amilcar Cabral*, translated by Michael Wolfers (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), p.149

29. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The politics of translation: notes towards an African language policy," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (August 2018) pp.124-132

30. Amilcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," *Unity and Struggle; Speeches and Writings of Amilcar Cabral*, translated by Michael Wolfers (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), p.137

About the author, Hisham Aidi

Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009).

In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's Encarta Africana project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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Policy Center for the New South

Suncity Complex, Building C, Av. Addolb, Albortokal Street,
Hay Riad, Rabat, Maroc.

Email : contact@policycenter.ma

Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

Website : www.policycenter.ma