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# Eyes Wide Shut: Africanists And The Moral Problematics Of Postcolonial Societies

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## AT ISSUE

### Eyes Wide Shut: Africanists and the Moral Problematics of Postcolonial Societies

Timothy Burke

I welcome the message of Gavin Kitching's article 'Why I Gave Up African Studies', because I think some of it is substantially true and important, despite the protests of some scholars, generally unsaid in either formal or informal writing by Africanists—though often said in unreported conversations between them.

Most substantially, I feel that Kitching's composite feeling of personal and scholarly frustration with the ways in which postcolonial Africa in general, and postcolonial African elites in particular, figure as objects of analysis is reasonably justified.

It is not true, as some scholars already have noted in response to Kitching, that Africanists are unconcerned with postcolonial African societies, or have failed to write about them. Anthropologists, political scientists and economists predominantly write about postcolonial societies, and even many works by historians (or humanistic work on African expressive genres) extends into the postcolonial era.

What Kitching suggests, however, is that the *problem* of postcolonial Africa is treated by the majority of scholars, especially anthropologists and historians, as an extension of or continuation of the *problem* of the colonial, that the moral and political challenge of postcolonial society is subordinated to or situated within a modernity whose character is largely causally attributed to colonial intervention. Postcolonial misrule is not commonly regarded as an analytic question which poses a distinctive set of issues, or which lies on one side of an important break or cleavage from the colonial. (Here I exempt political science and economics from this charge, since if anything they have the opposite problem, namely regarding the postcolonial era as *sui generis* or as merely one data point in a much larger ahistorical set that typically includes states from most or all of the developing world.)

The moral outrage, which suffused most Africanist historical and anthropological writing about the apartheid state, is largely absent when it comes to postcolonial African misrule. The genocide in Rwanda passed without anything even remotely resembling that outrage: it was left to a journalist, Philip Gourevitch, to write a clear (and intellectually satisfying) indictment. [1] Africanists have followed Gourevitch either by redirecting the force of causal explanation back to the colonial era or by insisting that the genocide was irremediably complex in ways that Gourevitch failed to appreciate.

Similarly, the disasters of high modernist state socialism in postcolonial Africa have fallen to a non-Africanist, James Scott, to explicate and condemn: there are few Africanist works that echo Scott's darity about the follies of *ujaama* villages and similar high modernist and statist blunders.[2]

Colonialism in Africa, not to mention slavery in the Americas or the Holocaust in Europe, have stimulated a number of historical works of extraordinary elegance that struggle to understand suffering, injustice, tragedy, and oppression. Where are the comparable works about Amin's Uganda, Mobutu's Zaire or Banda's Malawi? To be sure, scholars have written about all three of those historical moments, but largely in a studiously detached and empiricist tone if they address the character of the regime and its civil society. Where is the work on the Zimbabwean government's violent rampage against its own people in the early 1980s? Only in 2000 did a work that addressed this episode centrally finally appear.[3]

It is not merely that Africanists do not write such work, or write it slowly, but that work which does exist is often ignored or marginalized as unsophisticated and unacademic. There are very good practical reasons why journalists and travellers like Gourevitch, Micaela Wrong, Peter Godwin and Martin Meredith are the first to write in plain but rhetorically powerful language about Rwanda or Zaire or Zimbabwe. What makes less sense is the thinly veiled hostility or carping nitpicking that such work occasions among Africanist scholars—that is, when they do not ignore it altogether. I have read several graduate student proposals in the past year dealing with Rwanda in which Gourevitch is not even cited, which seems markedly odd and not at all accidental to me.

Many historians and anthropologists dealing with such moments also do an end run around the moral problematics and focus instead on other issues like popular painting or millennial religious movements, as if the business of direct critique were either hopelessly unsophisticated or best left to someone else. This is not to knock such work in and of itself, because the kinds of monographs I am referring to, like Johannes Fabian's *Remembering the Present*, are extraordinary works of immense skill and intelligence, worthy by any rubric.[4] But there exists alongside them a notable void, one that did not exist in the case of South Africa under the rule of apartheid.

It may be that we have all become more sagely tolerant of moral and political ambiguity since the fall of apartheid. Certainly I know that my own assessment of colonialism and apartheid's meaning has become vastly more complex and less easily rendered in tones of casual outrage and invective than it was at the start of my training as a graduate student. Moreover, some authors have offered powerful rejoinders to the desire to frame postcoloniality as a moral question. David Hecht and

Maliqalim Simone's *Invisible Governance* is one of the most brilliant examples of this strategy, but it is not the only one.<sup>5</sup> There is also a persuasive larger comparative literature that views moral judgments of this kind as a fundamental intellectual and political error, such as Michael Ignatieff's *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*.<sup>6</sup> It is nevertheless hard to escape the sense that there is an intellectual double standard, that engaging postcolonial misrule is seen as accompanied by a strong imperative to dispassionate study when colonial misrule is not.

This goes beyond a sense that every work about postcolonial Africa needs to have an obligatory, tediously correct disclaimer in the introduction that the author thinks genocide or authoritarianism or corruption are Very Bad Things. What I think Kitching helps us to think about is that there are whole areas of scholarly investigation that are curiously, if not wholly, neglected by Africanists.

Certainly one of the most extraordinary, from my perspective, is the social history of African nationalism and nationalist organizations from the 1920s to the 1970s. Fred Cooper's work stands like a lonely beacon in this regard, magisterial and essential, but oddly unduplicated by the field at large, save for a handful of studies like Jean Allman's *Quills of the Porcupine* – and even some of the small handful of works that do exist in this vein are strikingly hagiographic, even sycophantic, towards African nationalism, such as Susan Geiger's *TANU Women*.<sup>7</sup> Comparably, the ethnography of postcolonial states and state institutions like militaries, of the culture of bureaucracy and its circulations of power, is mostly unexplored. Achille Mbembe's extraordinary work on the postcolony is widely read, but there is relatively little work that can be placed alongside it, particularly more empirical work.<sup>8</sup>

Kitching's provocation helps to engender some other critical discussions. What I appreciated most of all about it, in fact, was its straightforward, honest coupling of personal reflection with intellectual dissatisfaction, because it seems to me that this is one of the most curious absences in formal Africanist work. Although we are supposedly at the high water mark of ethnographic reflexivity, the conversations that one hears about field experiences at a meeting of the African Studies Association do not typically sound much like the consciously and highly structured reflexive work of Paul Stoller or Alma Gottlieb.

I have many colleagues who are energized and enchanted by lengthy fieldwork stays in African communities, who live without blinders but who somehow seem able to attune themselves to the wavelength of everyday survivability that many ordinary people in African societies function within. It is here that questions of postcolonial misrule shrink into insignificance alongside the next drink of water, the next meal, the next beer, and alongside other urgent if more abstract questions of meaning and struggle vested in the household, the local community or the generalities of cultural life.

I equally know many colleagues who make what seem to me to be heroic efforts to maintain a level of deliberate cluelessness about their surroundings. During my first fieldwork in Zimbabwe in 1990-91, an American scholar working in the National Archives asked me if I knew why there was so much corn growing wild in the open spaces around Harare. When I informed her that it was because people were cultivating it, she replied in confusion that this couldn't be the case, because the municipal government was regularly burning these maize fields before the corn could be harvested, and that made no sense. More recently, when I was in Harare in 1997, a very accomplished and intellectually formidable scholar commented to me that the Mugabe government just needed some breathing room and patience and they could be trusted to resolve land issues justly in time. As a development expert with long experience in several parts of Africa noted to me in an email recently, sometimes "being with Africanists [is] a bit like living in Ceausescu's Romania. After a while, terms of reference that are not moored to global reality begin to seem like the norm".

It is no longer enough for me to just close my eyes and try to pretend that I am not seeing what I am clearly seeing. I can't pretend any longer that I don't find postcolonial Africa intensely depressing, both personally and politically. I can agree that Kitching overlooks what many of my colleagues know, namely, that postcolonial misrule exists in parallel with the intense fertility and richness of African life. Not everything or even most things in contemporary Africa come down to blood, shit and tears. People live their lives with joy and creativity and beauty, sometimes amidst suffering and sometimes perpendicular to it. It is important not to bow to the less satisfying, more superficial caricatures of some kinds of Afro-pessimism, whether they come from the *Washington Post*, Robert Kaplan or George Ayyitey. But it is equally important not to plug our ears and hum real loud in reaction to them. The news from Africa really is bad, most of the time.

One other concern that I think Kitching's article stimulates for me comes from some reflection about what the purpose of African Studies as practiced in the Anglo-American academy really is. For all that I am clearly endorsing the notion that we are called to critique, I also think that Africanists desperately need to shuck off the accumulated weight of the field's pious concern for rendering service to Africa and Africans. It is not our job to give back Africa its history, to heal Africa, to save Africa, to protect Africa. We do not owe Africa a usable past or a renovated present. We do not work for or on behalf of Africans. All of the rhetorical gestures in this direction, so firmly and pervasively encoded into Africanist writing, are little more than a transfiguration of the White Man's Burden.

We also do not *take* from Africa. Information is not an exhaustible resource, and knowledge not something that one mines from the ground. Our speech does not silence the speech of Africans by the mere fact of its existence. If the relationship between Anglo-American academics studying Africa and African academics working in African institutions of higher learning is massively asymmetrical in terms of scholarly output, that has to do with the imperiled nature of the African university—which is imperiled largely by the very postcolonial misrule that some Anglo-American scholars are slow to confront. Such an asymmetry is not an inevitable result of postcoloniality itself: South Asian scholars writing from South Asian universities have an entirely different relationship with their counterparts in Anglo-American academia. Moreover, as Mamadou Diouf observed in the issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* devoted to the Kitching controversy, African intellectuals could mostly care less about what is being produced by Africanists in the US, Canada and the United Kingdom, so fears about the perceived domination of Africanist scholarship by Anglo-American scholars seem rather groundless.<sup>9</sup>

Isn't that as it should be? I am not saying there should be a total disconnect between the two academies, but it seems wholly positive to me that African intellectuals should be motivated by one set of problematics in their writing and thinking and Anglo-American academics by another. I am not writing and teaching about Africa for Africans, though I am delighted and educated by their readings of my work and avidly welcoming of any and all exchanges. I am writing and teaching about Africa for my students, my colleagues, my society.

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The moral, political and intellectual frameworks which inform my execution of those responsibilities, are shaped in relation to my experiences in Africa and with the material substance of African history, but they are largely cogent and meaningful in my immediate context. Where they are larger than that, it is not because I am subordinating my own concerns to some kind of altruistic desire to render service to Africans in the terms that I suppose they desire to be serviced, but because I see a larger, shared obligation to a global, universalizing ethics that binds all nations and peoples with equal force.

#### ENDNOTES

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[9]. Postel, Danny. 28 March 2003. "Out of Africa: A pioneer of African studies explains why he left the field, and provokes a firestorm of debate within it." In The Chronicle of Higher Education. <http://chronicle.com/prm/weekly/v49/i29/29a01601.htm>

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