

Are All African Intellectuals Studying African Studies? An Auto-Critical Response to Issa Shivji's Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture

It is difficult, indeed redundant, to respond to someone or something you almost fully agree with. However, when a point of disagreement close to one's own heart, no matter how small, emerges, one is bound to respond. So, here I am, responding to Shivji's take on African Studies.

Shivji presents a profound personal and collective "auto-critique" of African intellectuals. In doing so, however, he singles out a "few, brilliant ones" who "migrate to the North joining ivy leagues." Although he does not name names, one can sense that the example *par excellence* is none other than his friend and colleague during the heydays of the radical Dar es Salaam School of the 1970s, Mahmood Mamdani, currently based at Columbia and Makerere. Shivji queries:

What about our migrants to the North? A significant few attain celebrity status. They are held up as an example of some – I say some! – brilliance in an otherwise intellectually barren continent. They are under pressure to produce best sellers to maintain their status. And what sells best in the North is that which finds a niche in the academic fashion of the day. Which means they end up recycling and regurgitating the same content packaged in fancier language.

Karim Hirji, another colleague of Mamdani during the famed Dar

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es Salaam School, shares Shivji's nostalgic sentiments. However, Hirji is more overt as he does not shy away from naming names. In his recent book entitled *The Enduring Relevance of Walter Rodney's How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Year?), he devotes a whole section on Mamdani as "an instructive example":

The Ugandan political Scientist Mahmood Mamdani is a case in point. An erstwhile Marxist and colleague of Rodney at the University of Dar es Salaam, he authored well regarded leftist books... To this day, he remains a prolific, respected, award winning writer on African issues. Yet while a few of his writings still display a critical stand on the Western role in global affairs... his conceptual horizon shifted in a fundamental way. Economic issues and ideas like underdevelopment, imperialism, neo-colonialism, neoliberalism and class analysis are no longer germane to his analytical method. Instead, he operates on the legal, political, and cultural planes with identity group, ethnicity, religion, race, tribe, and nation as his basic unit of analysis. His focus is on politics, law, administration and

conflict resolution, with class and anti-imperialist struggles deleted from the picture. Insightful and well researched as his analysis is, it is incomplete and biased as it avoids the underlying reality and economic trends that constitutes the long-term foundation for the problems he examines... Mamdani thus... stands in the company of the bulk of modern day historians of Africa who can go no further than distort and superficially critique the works and Marxist approach of Walter Rodney.

Contrast that with what Shivji lamented about in 2003 on Mamdani's apparent metamorphosis:

It is unfortunate that in his magnum opus, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996), Mahmood Mamdani abandons political economy too radically and falls into an *institutional* analysis of the colonial state. He finds that the colonial state was bifurcated, when an examination of its social character reveals the unity of state power. While his conclusions on the tasks of democratic struggle are unassailable, his institutional analysis results in a "recommendation" that state structures be reformed rather than a call for a new form of nationalist struggle. Throughout his analysis, Mamdani concentrates on the "native question," the preoccupation of the colonial power, but has

little to say about the National Question, the preoccupation of the resistance.

This background enables us to see where Shivji is coming from when he thus laments in 2017:

As the academia is increasingly commodified, universities become market places. Academics, willingly or under duress, have to break up their courses and introduce new ones to make them saleable to the consumers. They have to package, brand and certify their products. History becomes tourism and heritage; corporate greed becomes corporate responsibility and democratic governance is taught as good governance. Archaeology is museumised whose artifacts are exhibited at a fee to ignorant and disinterested American tourists. Political economy is replaced by econometrics, with no sense of either politics or economy. Africans in Africa study Africa in Centres of African Studies in the image of Centres in the North. Aren't all our studies African studies? Law students write PhDs applying the convention on rights of indigenous people to their own citizens. To talk of citizens' rights is foreign, Western; to ruminate on indigenous rights is authentic, African! We have been metamorphosed – from colonial natives and migrants to neo-colonial indigenous and tyrants, thanks to imperial intellectuals and their African caricatures.

As someone who has studied African Studies in both the 'Global South' and the 'Global North', I find it difficult to agree with Shivji's rhetorical question that seems to imply that all our studies are African Studies. For instance, to study Sociology in Africa does not necessarily mean engaging in African Studies. Its 'holy trinity' remains Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Marx Weber and not Ibn Khaldun, W.E.B. Dubois and Ida B. Wells. In my erstwhile discipline, Psychology, it is the same story – we start with the likes of Sigmund Freud and Carl Rogers rather than Frantz Fanon and Chabani Manganyi. An African student in the Philosophy department may graduate knowing the German George Hegel without having heard of the Ghanaian Anton Wilhelm Amo who taught and published in German universities in the 18th century way before Hegel. As Ernest Wamba dia Wamba reminds us, the "foundation of African scientific research is still based on a philosophy of returning to the Western sources." Shivji himself has captured this intellectual predicament regarding his discipline elsewhere:

Some of us who adopted more radical approaches, albeit still within Western traditions, did not perhaps subscribe wholly to Thompson's thesis that the rule of law was an 'unqualified good'. Yet we, too, saw in bourgeois law and legality, space for struggle to advance the social

project of human liberation and emancipation. Law, we argued, was a terrain of struggle; that rule of law, while expressing and reinforcing the rule of the bourgeoisie, did also represent the achievement of the working classes; that even though bourgeois democracy was a limited class project, it was an advance over authoritarian orders and ought to be defended. The legal discourse, whether liberal or radical, thus remained rooted in Western values, exalting the Law's Empire.

So, no, we are not all doing African Studies. However, all African intellectuals ought to do it irrespective of our disciplinary boundaries. Harry Garuba has consistently made a case for this by highlighting that the study of Africa has not yet been fully integrated in the traditionally Western disciplines. The "study of Africa", he aptly notes, "was calling upon us to open the disciplines rather than adopt and justify their self-admittedly fragmentary understandings of the world." It is what he refers to as the "blinkers of the inherited disciplines" that needs to be fully smashed. What is a better way of doing it than 'Bringing back African Studies to Africa'?

Note

1. First published in the UDADISI blog, October 22 2017: <http://udadisi.blogspot.com/2017/10/are-all-african-intellectuals-studying.html>