

Online Article

The Making of the Essential Mamdani: Reading *Citizen and Subject* After Three Decades

'Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.'

Frantz Fanon

La Problématique

Thirty years after the publication of *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996), Mahmood Mamdani occupies an assured place in African political thought. Few books published in African studies since the 1990s have travelled as widely or supplied so durable a vocabulary for thinking about colonial rule and its aftermath. 'Citizen' and 'subject', the 'bifurcated state' and 'decentralised despotism' now circulate well beyond the historical arguments in which they were first formulated. Their portability is evidence of the book's conceptual force. It is also the source of a problem.

As *Citizen and Subject* has become canonical, it has increasingly been read apart from the African intellectual world that made it possible. The book now often appears as a self-contained work of political theory, available for extension across colonial and postcolonial settings far beyond Africa. Such readings are productive, but they can produce a subtle dehistoricisation: the concepts travel while the institutional, political and scholarly formation from which they emerged recedes.

Ibrahim Abdullah

Department of History and
African Studies
Fourah Bay College
University of Sierra Leone

The result is not simply an incomplete biography of Mamdani. It is a distorted history of African theory, one in which a collective intellectual achievement is retrospectively reorganised around the singular authority of a canonical author.

This essay argues that the most productive way to reread *Citizen and Subject* after three decades is to reconstruct the African formation in which Mamdani's questions took shape. That formation was centred on the University of Dar es Salaam, extended through Makerere and continental networks such as CODESRIA, and sharpened by the political upheavals of post-independence East Africa. Its members disagreed profoundly about socialism, class, nationalism, law, the agrarian question, state power, armed struggle and liberation. Yet they shared a refusal to treat Africa merely as an empirical field to

which theories produced elsewhere could be applied. Knowledge production itself was part of the struggle over decolonisation.

Reconstructing this formation does not diminish Mamdani's originality; it makes that originality historically intelligible. *Citizen and Subject* was distinctive because it reorganised inherited problems of political economy into a new conceptual vocabulary of citizenship, subjecthood, customary authority and institutionalised political difference. The shift was consequential. It enabled the book to enter a wider conversation about colonial political modernity, but it also loosened the visible connection between Mamdani and the African debates from which his questions had emerged. The history of the book is therefore also a history of intellectual translation: from African political economy into a globally legible language of power, subject formation, citizenship and coloniality.

The question is not whether Mamdani should be restored to a single, pure genealogy nor whether later readers were mistaken to place *Citizen and Subject* in conversation with Foucault, Talal Asad, Partha Chatterjee or postcolonial theory

more broadly. It is instead to ask what becomes visible when the genealogy of the book is reconstructed from the African academy outward. That perspective alters not only how *Citizen and Subject* is read, but how Mamdani's subsequent work—from *Neither Settler nor Native* to *Slow Poison*—can be understood as successive reformulations of a sustained inquiry into the political identities and institutions produced by colonial rule.

Dar es Salaam and the making of an African intellectual formation

The search for the intellectual making of Mahmood Mamdani leads to the University of Dar es Salaam, provided that Dar es Salaam is understood as more than a university. Between the late 1960s and the early 1980s it became one of the continent's most important sites of intellectual experimentation (Babu and Tandon 1982; El Nabolsy 2024).¹ Scholarship there was inseparable from the political questions opened by decolonisation: What would political independence mean without economic transformation? What social forces could carry a socialist project? How should the colonial state be understood? What forms of knowledge were adequate to societies emerging from empire? In *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (2001), Mamdani casually observed the shortcomings of the political economy approach: 'Walter Rodney wrote *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. But no one wrote how Europe ruled Africa' (Mamdani 2001: 19).

The political setting mattered. The Arusha Declaration of 1967 made Tanzania a focal point for debates on African socialism, self-reliance,

rural transformation and national development. Development studies became a compulsory part of the curriculum, institutionalising the proposition that the university could not stand outside the social transformation of the continent. Dar es Salaam also became a meeting place for southern African liberation movements and for exiled intellectuals displaced by authoritarian regimes elsewhere.² The campus was at once a national institution, a continental forum and an international centre of anticolonial debate.

What distinguished Dar was less ideological uniformity than the density of argument. Historians, economists, lawyers, sociologists, political scientists and philosophers debated dependency, class formation, imperialism, law, accumulation, the agrarian question, nationalism and the postcolonial state. Disciplinary borders were unusually porous because the objects under discussion exceeded them. Scholarship and political commitment were not conceived as mutually exclusive vocations. Theory itself became one of the terrains on which the meaning of decolonisation was contested.

A remarkable body of African social science emerged from this environment. Walter Rodney reconstructed underdevelopment as a historical relation rather than a condition internal to Africa. Giovanni Arrighi situated African accumulation within the structures of global capitalism. Issa Shivji transformed legal scholarship by treating law as a historical expression of class and state formation. Dani Nabudere, John Saul, Yash Tandon and others debated imperialism, dependency and the contradictions of African socialism. The importance of this generation lies not in a common

doctrine but in a shared intellectual wager: Africa could be a site from which social theory was produced, not simply a location to which metropolitan theory was exported. Journals such as *UTAFITI* gave institutional form to these debates.

Archie Mafeje is especially important for recovering the methodological world in which Mamdani's later arguments became possible. Mafeje's critique of colonial anthropology was not only a dispute over representation. It questioned the status of the categories through which African societies had been made intelligible. Tribe, custom, tradition and ethnicity could not be treated as transparent descriptions of timeless social realities; they had histories, and those histories were inseparable from colonial rule and colonial knowledge (Mafeje 1971, 1976).³ The task of African social theory was therefore not merely to replace false descriptions with more accurate ones. It had to explain how colonial categories themselves had been produced, institutionalised and naturalised.

The relation between Mafeje and Mamdani is most illuminating at this methodological level. It is unnecessary to reduce the argument to a claim of direct influence. Both confronted a shared problem: how to historicise categories that colonial knowledge had presented as cultural givens. Both resisted the naturalisation of political identities and treated institutions as historically constituted. *Citizen and Subject* would push this methodological refusal into a theory of political rule. Where Mafeje exposed the historical production of categories in colonial anthropology, Mamdani showed how colonial government made such categories politically consequential through institutions of authority.

The intellectual world formed at Dar did not end at the boundaries of the campus. CODESRIA, established in 1973, created a continental arena in which African scholars could debate political economy, democracy, the national question, constitutionalism, agrarian transformation and the crisis of the African university without metropolitan centres serving as the necessary intermediaries. Under figures such as Samir Amin and later Thandika Mkandawire, it became an infrastructure for a continental intellectual community. Sam Moyo's recollection that *Citizen and Subject* bore 'strong direct and indirect imprint of CODESRIA's networks and interactions' is therefore more than an anecdote (Chen and Yoshikoko 2016).⁴ It places Mamdani within a field of sustained exchange in which problems, methods and arguments circulated collectively.

Seen in this frame, Mamdani's intellectual trajectory runs through Makerere, Dar es Salaam and CODESRIA rather than from an isolated African experience towards an already constituted global theory. His originality consisted in giving a distinctive conceptual form to questions that were already central to this formation: how colonial rule reorganised authority; how political identities were made; how inherited institutions survived independence; and why national liberation did not necessarily democratise the state. *Citizen and Subject* therefore should be read as both an individual intervention and a crystallisation of a wider African argument about the historical structure of rule.

'Can there be a society without chiefs?': *Citizen and Subject* after thirty years

The history of *Citizen and Subject* contains a revealing paradox. The book emerged from the intellectual milieu of Dar es Salaam and the wider CODESRIA tradition, yet its most visible later reception increasingly placed it within another intellectual constellation. Mamdani himself provides an important clue to this movement. In the preface to the 2018 edition, he recalled that some of his 'comrades in Dar es Salaam expressed a sense of betrayal' because *Citizen and Subject* had abandoned political economy (Mamdani 2018a: x).⁵ His response was precise: what he had abandoned was not political economy as a substantive problem but the language in which political economy had conventionally been appropriated and discussed (Mamdani 2018a: x).

That distinction helps explain both the continuity and the rupture. The vocabulary of *Citizen and Subject*—citizenship, subjecthood, customary authority, decentralised despotism and the bifurcated state—was markedly different from the idiom of class, dependency, accumulation, imperialism and modes of production that had structured many of the Dar debates. Yet the underlying questions remained recognisably concerned with the organisation of power, the institutional structure of rule, and the reproduction of political inequality. Mamdani did not simply leave political economy behind; he re-described its central problem through the political technologies and institutional distinctions of late colonial rule.

The change in vocabulary mattered because concepts do not merely express arguments; they locate arguments within communities of interpretation. Once Mamdani's account was formulated through citizen and subject rather than through class and dependency, it became legible within debates on power, subject formation, government, colonial modernity and citizenship. This helps explain why later readers found strong affinities between *Citizen and Subject* and Foucault, even though Mamdani resisted the idea that the book should be genealogically derived from French theory. He emphasised that much of the work had been written in Kampala before Foucault became part of his immediate intellectual environment. 'I thought they failed to see in what was new in my contribution: even if I was not quite with them, I had not parted company with them' (Mamdani 2018a: xi).⁶ Mamdani affirmed his political economy credentials.

The issue is not settled by choosing between an 'African' and a 'Foucauldian' Mamdani. Genealogy and reception are different questions. A book may emerge from one intellectual formation and acquire a second life in another. Readers can recognise affinities that were not relations of direct influence, and those affinities can become powerful enough to reorganise how the work is classified. *Citizen and Subject* thus demonstrates how reception rewrites genealogy: a text grounded in African political economy came to be canonised as a major work of comparative postcolonial theory.

The 2023 anthology *On the Subject of Citizenship: Late Colonialism in the World Today* makes this translation especially visible. Its subtitle expands the horizon from *Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* to *Late Colonialism in the World Today*. (Katumusiime 2024: 83-85) Africa becomes not merely an object of inquiry but a point of departure for a broader theory of colonial political modernity. This is a legitimate extension of Mamdani's conceptual achievement. Yet it also highlights a displacement. The African intellectual voices that helped establish the problems to which *Citizen and Subject* responded are less audible than the global theoretical conversations that the book subsequently entered.⁷

The question, then, is not whether *Citizen and Subject* is fundamentally Marxist or Foucauldian. That opposition obscures the historical movement that requires explanation. The more interesting issue is how a work can retain the substantive questions of one intellectual tradition while becoming canonical through the vocabulary of another. Mamdani's claim that the shift involved language rather than substance is useful precisely because it directs attention to the politics of conceptual language. A change in idiom can preserve a problem while transforming its audience, affiliations and afterlife.

The elder's question that Mamdani encountered during one of his numerous rural indabas in Uganda—'Can there be a society without chiefs?' (Mamdani 2018a: x)—condenses the historical problem more sharply than any abstract classification. It directs attention to the persistence of an institutional form of authority that formal independence did not

necessarily overcome. The chief appears not as a remnant of untouched tradition but as a political office remade by colonial power and inherited by the postcolonial state. The question therefore belongs to the prehistory of *Citizen and Subject* because it joins the book's central concerns: custom, authority, institutional continuity and the limits of decolonisation.

From *Citizen and Subject* to *Slow Poison*

Recovering Mamdani's African intellectual formation also changes the relation among his major works.⁸ Read in isolation, *Citizen and Subject*, *Neither Settler nor Native* and *Slow Poison* can seem to belong to different moments and genres: a historical sociology of colonial rule in Africa; a comparative account of colonial political identities; and a political history of Uganda centred on Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni and the deformation of the postcolonial state. Read genealogically, however, they form a sustained inquiry into the production, institutionalisation and reproduction of political identities across the colonial and postcolonial divide.

Citizen and Subject supplied the foundational architecture. Its decisive claim was not merely that colonial rule distinguished citizens from subjects but that it created separate institutional worlds through which political membership was organised. Civil power and customary authority did not simply govern pre-existing populations differently. They helped constitute different political subjectivities by attaching distinct rights, obligations and forms of authority to them. The bifurcated state was therefore a machinery for producing political difference.

This is why the customary domain could not be treated as a preserved residue of 'precolonial' Africa. Colonial rule reorganised customary authority, codified and territorialised identities, and incorporated 'native' institutions into a system of decentralised despotism. Categories such as tribe, custom and native authority gained political force precisely because the colonial state governed through them. Here the methodological connection to Mafeje becomes especially clear. The problem was not only that colonial knowledge misdescribed African realities. Colonial institutions made those classifications operative within political life.

The persistence of the bifurcated state after independence gave the argument its postcolonial force. Postcolonial governments could deracialise civil power while leaving customary authority substantially undemocratised. Formal independence changed the personnel and ideological language of the state without necessarily dissolving the institutional distinctions inherited from late colonial rule. Authoritarian local authority, uneven citizenship and ethnicised political identities therefore could not be explained simply as survivals of tradition or failures of modernisation. They had to be traced to the political form through which colonial rule had reorganised authority.

Neither Settler nor Native widened the scale of this inquiry. Its central concern was no longer only the institutional architecture of indirect rule but the broader political production of populations as permanent identities: settler and native, majority and minority, Indigenous and immigrant. The movement from the bifurcated state to colonial modernity was thus an en-

largement rather than a repudiation of the earlier argument. *Citizen and Subject* had shown how colonial institutions differentiated political membership; *Neither Settler nor Native* asked how such distinctions could become constitutive principles of the nation-state itself (Abdullah 2021, 2024).

This widening also intensified the danger of abstraction. As Mamdani's concepts became increasingly portable, they could be detached more easily from the African struggles and institutions in which his method had been formed. By the time he could be read primarily as a global theorist of political modernity, Dar es Salaam, CODESRIA, the Ugandan Left and the African university had receded from the foreground. The conceptual gain of portability was accompanied by a historiographical loss: the collective formation that had produced the questions became less visible than the theorist who carried them into a global conversation.

Slow Poison interrupts this tendency. Its return to Uganda through the political careers of Amin and Museveni brings Mamdani back to the historical and political terrain from which many of his enduring questions emerged. The book can therefore be read as more than a political history. It is an intellectual return to the problem that had animated *Citizen and Subject*: why liberation, armed struggle and independence so often fail to transform the political institutions through which colonial power was reproduced.

The contrast between Amin and Museveni discloses a continuity beneath different regimes and political projects. The 'slow poison' is the normalisation of a political order in which liberation can reproduce the institutional logics it

once promised to overcome. This does not collapse the differences between colonialism, dictatorship and post-liberation rule. It instead restores the state to the centre of a long historical inquiry into how political forms survive changes in personnel, ideology and regime. In that sense, *Slow Poison* reconnects Mamdani's theoretical architecture to the lived history that first gave it urgency.

Read together, the three books describe a movement of concentration, expansion and return. *Citizen and Subject* identified the institutional production of citizen and subject. *Neither Settler nor Native* generalised the problem into an account of colonial modernity's manufacture of durable political identities. *Slow Poison* returned those questions to Uganda and to the postcolonial history in which Mamdani himself had been politically and intellectually formed. The continuity lies not in the repetition of a fixed thesis but in a recurring problem: how inherited structures of rule transform political identities and survive projects that claim to abolish them.

By way of conclusion

Citizen and Subject remains indispensable not only because its concepts continue to travel but because it changed the terms on which colonial and postcolonial rule could be understood. Yet the history of its influence should not substitute for the history of its making. Canonisation has encouraged a reading of Mamdani as a singular theorist whose concepts appear to emerge fully formed and then move outward into the world. The reconstruction offered here points in the opposite direction. Mamdani's work became globally possible through an African

intellectual formation composed of universities, journals, study groups, political movements and continental networks in which theory was produced through collective argument.

Dar es Salaam, Makerere, CODESRIA, the East African Left and the liberation struggles of the period were not simply settings in which Mamdani happened to work. They constituted the historical conditions under which his questions became thinkable. To restore those conditions is not to dissolve authorship into context or to deny the distinctiveness of his conceptual interventions. It is to reject the mythology of solitary theoretical production and to take seriously the proposition that intellectual originality is itself historically made.

This reconstruction also changes the historiography of African political thought. Too often, that history is organised around individual thinkers while the institutions and communities that sustained their work disappear into the background. Such a method can inadvertently reproduce an old division of intellectual labour: theory is attributed to exceptional individuals, while Africa remains the source of empirical experience. The Dar es Salaam–CODESRIA formation suggests a different history. It shows African institutions not as peripheral containers of scholarship but as sites where conceptual innovation was generated through sustained argument over colonialism, capitalism, socialism, law, liberation and the postcolonial state.

From this perspective, the 'essential Mamdani' is not contained in a single book. He is made across a trajectory. *Citizen and Subject* transformed inherited problems

of African political economy into a theory of differentiated political rule. *Neither Settler nor Native* enlarged that theory into an account of colonial modernity and political identity. *Slow Poison* returned the conceptual problem to the East African history from which it had first acquired urgency. What connects these works is an insistence that political identities are not natural facts and that institutions cannot be understood apart from the histories that produce them.

To read *Citizen and Subject* after three decades is therefore to recover more than the origins of a canonical text. It is to restore an African intellectual formation obscured partly by the global success of one of its most distinguished participants. The making of Mamdani and the making of that formation were not identical, but they were inseparable. Recovering their relation allows the book to appear again as what it originally was: not an isolated theoretical monument but an intervention in a collective struggle to understand how colonial rule had remade African political life and why decolonisation remained unfinished.

The question ‘Can there be a society without chiefs?’ is a fitting place to end because it refuses the comfort of conceptual closure. It asks whether the institutions through which colonial authority was localised can be dismantled without confronting the political order that gave them force. More broadly, it asks whether decolonisation can succeed if it changes the occupants of power while preserving the structures through which subjects are made. Read in that register, *Citizen and Subject* remains contemporary not because its vocabulary can be detached endlessly from its history but be-

cause the historical problem from which that vocabulary emerged has not disappeared.

Notes

1. What subsequently passed into history as the Dar Debates began to be documented in 1976, when historian A.J. Temu inaugurated *UTAFITI: Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences*, University of Dar es Salaam. The journal continued publication after Temu's departure to Nigeria in 1977.
2. For an expansive discussion of the transformation of Dar es Salaam into a hotbed for left-wing activities and revolutionary struggles in East and southern Africa, see George Roberts, 2022, *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar es Salaam: African Liberation and the Global Cold War, 1961-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
3. These two articles from Archie Mafeje were foundational: ‘The Ideology of Tribalism’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 9, No.2, 1971: 253–261; ‘The Problem of Anthropology in Historical Perspective: An Inquiry into the Growth of the Social Sciences’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1976: 307–333.
4. Late Professor Sam Moyo worked closely with Mahmood Mamdani—they were both president and deputy president respectively in CODESRIA. He sadly passed away in a car crash shortly after granting this interview.
5. The 1996 edition has no preface, only an acknowledgement. The preface in the 2018 edition later surfaced as a substantive chapter five years later, as ‘Looking Back, Looking Forward’, in Surren Pillay, ed., 2023, *On the Subject of Citizenship: Late Colonialism in the World Today*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 210.
6. Also, in ‘Looking Back, Looking Forward’.
7. None of the contributors to the Pillay anthology are actually embedded in the African Academy that Mamdani constantly invokes. They are predominantly postcolonial theorists/ non-African specialists in the South African academy outside the African continent.
8. The reading that informs this postulation is post Mamdani's 1976 *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda*, the pre-history of *Citizen and Subject*.

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