Why has Europe's Past Become Africa's Postcolonial Present? Reflections on Mahmood Mamdani's Ideas on Decolonising the Political Community

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Introduction

The leading Ugandan intellectual, Mahmood Mamdani, has since the publication of his seminal book *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996) been making cutting-edge interventions in understanding how Europe ruled Africa, how colonialists dealt with what they called the 'native question', how colonial governmentality interpellated African nationalism and shaped African political consciousness, how colonialism manufactured problematic, antagonistic and racially hierarchised political identities, how the legacy of late colonialism lives on in postcolonial Africa long after the dismantlement of the physical empire, and indeed how to make sense of conflicts and violence including genocides.

At the centre of colonialism, Mamdani identified the project of 'define and rule' (as a form of colonial governmentality symbolised by a bifurcated colonial state), which produced problematic political identities, with far-reaching consequences, including generation genocides in countries like Rwanda and fuelling complicated postcolonial conflicts in places such as Sudan (Mamdani 2001, 2009, 2013a). One of his theses is that the invented 'settler-native' and indeed 'majority-minority' intersubjective construction survived the dismantlement of the physical empire to continue to generate postcolonial conflicts and violence, while at the same time providing a deeper understanding of the bifurcated architecture and configuration of the state produced by colonialism in Africa. Mamdani's interventions can be read together with that of Nigerian sociologist Peter P. Ekeh (1975), who introduced the widely cited concept of 'the two publics', a concept which he argued 'led to the emergence of a unique historical configuration in modern post-colonial Africa'.

Taken together, these are very persuasive, well-thought-out and usable theses, that helps in understanding many of the postcolonial African dilemmas of conflicts, governance and identity. They are even useful for understanding other parts of the world where imperialism, colonialism and racial capitalism wreaked havoc and left a legacy of conflicts and violence. Mamdani's position on the impact of colonialism and its consequences on Africa and the world that fell victim to it, places him firmly within the 'epic school' rather than the 'episodic school' that was advanced by the veteran historian, Jacob Ade Ajayi, of the Ibadan School of History (Ajayi 1969). Of course, the notion of colonialism being a 'mere episode' in African history emerged within the 'golden age' of African nationalism and within a terrain in which African historians were challenging and dethroning colonial/imperial historiography, which denied history to Africans. However, the nationalist corrective went too far and provoked Ekeh to question its complacent view of such a force as colonialism, with its transformations of Africa in 'epic proportions' (Ekeh 1975, 1983). In short, the epic school does not reduce colonialism to an event but understands it as a process and power structure located at the centre of what Mamdani terms 'political modernity'. At the heart of political modernity is the question of the 'birth of the modern state amid ethnic cleansing and overseas domination' (Mamdani 2020: 2).

What is distinctive about Mamdani's scholarship is its fidelity to nuanced historical understanding, its anti-imperialist orientation and grounded theorising, even though he has yet to address and integrate the topical issues of patriarchy and sexism, which cannot be ignored in any serious social science. This is a glaring gap in his work, bearing in mind

that heteronormative patriarchy ranks alongside enslavement, imperialism, colonialism and racial capitalism as a modality of oppression (see Mama 2001; Nnaemeka 2004; Lugones 2008). So, depatriarchisation of the modern world must be part of anti-imperialist and decolonial scholarship (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 2020, 2020b). This is urgent within a context in which there cannot be any cutting-edge social science that is not attentive to the intersections of race, class, gender, culture and other categories to highlight multiple forms of oppressions (see Crenshaw 1995). This point was delivered forcefully in the seminal work *Engendering African Social Sciences* (1997) edited by leading feminist scholars Ayesha M. Imam, Amin Mama and Fatou Sow. While Mamdani has not expressed any hostility to gender as an analytical category, several chapters in *Engendering African Social Sciences* made clear that there was a general resistance and hostility to it within African scholarship and African academy (see also Tamale 2020). It was this resistance and hostility that prompted Ayesha M. Imam to articulate the feminist standpoint this way:

> What makes the political character of this hostility even more marked is that, as we all know, at least half of humanity is of feminine genders. This fact alone gives sufficient grounds for our argument that a social science which does not acknowledge gender as an analytical category is an impoverished and distorted science, and cannot accurately explain social realities and hence cannot provide a way out of the present crisis in Africa (Iman 1997: 2).

The violent postcolonial state, like its predecessor the colonial state and indeed the modern state elsewhere, is characteristically male-led and -dominated, making its engender-ing and depatriarchisation very necessary as part of the efforts towards its pacification. While there is a gender gap in Mamdani's work, it has other positive distinctive features—not only a meticulous diagnosis of the modern problems of genocides, conflicts, identity and indeed the problematics of living together, but also in daring to prescribe what the historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (1997) depicted as the 'murky present and mysterious future'.

Europe's past as Africa's postcolonial present

Contrarianism is another hallmark of Mamdani's cutting-edge scholarship. This is well captured by Moustafa Bayoum in his endorsement of Mamdani's latest book, entitled *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (2020). This book is a treasure trove of razor-sharp and deep political diagnoses of issues of European political modernity and how these impinged on colonial notions of the state, constructions of political identities, the character of conflicts and the nature of violence(s). It offers robust, courageous, daring and sensible resolutions predicated on the radical agenda of decolonising the political community.

In this expansive and wide-ranging work, Mamdani spreads the canvas of his analysis wide to reflect on the Native American Indian question in the United States, the Nazification and limits of de-Nazification in Germany, apartheid and de-apartheidisation in South Africa, secession and the crisis of nation-building in South Sudan, and the Israel-Palestine question. While the human rights discourse has, since the end of the Cold War, assumed a normative character and has enchanted many scholars, Mamdani is very critical of its ability to resolve injustices connected to colonial and postcolonial conflicts, violence and even genocides, where the Nuremberg template cannot be easily implemented. Instead of being enticed by the reformist and transitional justice discourses cascading from neoliberal democracy and human rights, Mamdani is pushing for an epistemic revolution capable of delivering a new kind of political imagination and indeed decolonisation of the political community.

It is in this push that his work coincides with my own on epistemological decolonisation for the delivery of epistemic freedom. My books, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (2018) and *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over A New Leaf* (2020a), highlight the primacy of the epistemic question as perhaps the foundation of the systemic, structural and institutional problems that haunt not only Africa but the modern world in general. In *Epistemic Freedom*, I made the following observations:

> If the 'colour line' was indeed the major problem of the twentieth century as articulated by William E. B. Du Bois …, then that of the twenty-first century is the epistemic line. … Epistemic freedom is fundamentally about the right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is

> located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3)

This intervention was gesturing towards an epistemic revolution for epistemic freedom. These two epistemic agendas for me formed the basis for a paradigmatic decolonial work of 'reconstituting the political' away from the dominant Eurocentric conception predicated on the paradigms of difference, discovery and war, and the notions of the survival of the fittest. Building on the work of Enrique Dussel and the life of struggle stalwart Nelson Mandela, I proposed a decolonial political project predicated on the 'will to live' and politics of life (see Mandela 1994; Dussel 1985, 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016, 2018). Mamdani's work, together with that of Latin-American decolonial theorists and liberation philosophers, influenced my thinking in a profound way (see Maldonado-Torres 2008, 2007). In particular, Mamdani's notions of survivors and political justice (2013b) made me begin to rethink the constitution of the political.

A close reading of Mamdani's expansive archive leaves one with the impression of a leading historically-inclined intellectual's take on how Euro-political modernity impinged on African postcolonial modernity and beyond—to the United States and the Middle East. Mamdani poses hard, serious and disturbing questions pertaining to the problematics of the contemporary era. Here are some of them:

- Why did Europe's past become Africa's present?
- Why did nationalist elites revive the civilising mission that colonialism had abandoned when it embraced the defence of 'tradition'?
- Is nation-building violence a criminal act, calling for prosecution and punishment?
- Or is it a political act, the answer to which must be a new, non-nationalist politics?
- Can a multinational society, organised as a nation-state that divides its population into a permanent national majority and minority, be democratic?
- Can the principle of the state, which calls for equal treatment of all citizens under rule of law, be reconciled with the principle of the nation, which preserves sovereignty for the nation—the permanent political majority?

Asking difficult questions is part of Mamdani's methodology and approach. One learns a lot from the questions themselves. Mamdani responded to the first, on why and how Europe's past became Africa's present, by delving deeper into Europe's political modernity and revealing how it provided a template for the constitution of the political, how it informed colonial governmentality and how it impinges on the postcolonial world. In the process, Mamdani manages to successfully rewrite the 'biography of the modern state', beginning from before the time of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This rewriting is very necessary, as Mamdani posits:

> But this story starts too late, and, as a result, provides the wrong lesson. … Modern colonialism and the modern state were born together with the creation of the nation-state. Nationalism did not precede colonialism. Nor was colonialism the highest or the last stage in the making of a nation. The two were co-constituted. (Mamdani 2020: 1–2)

Like the Latin-American decolonial theorists, Mamdani identified 1492 as a beginning of the construction of the modern nation-state. It was not born out of a peace settlement or the abstract ideas of classical European philosophers, but from blood and tears (ethnic cleansing, genocides, displacements and conquests). For Europe, tolerance emerged after Westphalia; for non-Europeans, violence and conquest became the signature of Euro-political modernity. What is intriguing for me is Mamdani's interest in the epistemic aspects and epistemic consequences of Euro-political modernity. Listen to Mamdani (2020: 3): 'Embracing political modernity means embracing the epistemic condition.' He links the epistemic and the political this way:

> The violence of postcolonial modernity mirrors the violence of European modernity and colonial direct rule. Its principal manifestation is ethnic cleansing. Because the nation-state seeks to homogenize its territory, it is well served by ejecting those who introduced pluralism. (Mamdani 2020: 4)

Thus, *Neither Settler Nor Native* is thematically cut across by a desire to make sense of ethnic cleansing not as an aberration but as part of the epistemic condition of political modernity that normalises it as part of nation-state making and consolidation. Mamdani's thesis is that colonialism underpinned by Euro-political modernity unfolded in terms of 'making permanent minorities and their maintenance through the politicisation of identity, which leads to political violence—in some case extreme violence' (Mamdani 2020: 18).

In my own work I use the concept of the 'cognitive empire' to refer to

an empire that is not physical but that survives through the invasion of the mental universe of a people, in the process committing epistemic violence (see also Santos 2018, where the concept of cognitive empire is used in the title of the book). The victims tend to repeat/mimic what has been inscribed on their minds (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020b). This epistemic condition was well articulated by Frantz Fanon (1968) in terms of pitfalls of consciousness/alienation and by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) as 'colonization of the mind'. Paradigmatically, what Mamdani is driving at is how epistemology framed ontology. This is a point also made by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (2018: 135), who openly stated that 'Ontology is made of epistemology. That is, ontology is an epistemological concept, it is not inscribed in entities the grammatical nouns name.' Mignolo and Walsh elaborated that:

> What matters is not economics, or politics, or history, but knowledge. Better yet, what matters is history, politics, economics, race, gender, sexuality, but it is above all the knowledge that is intertwined in all these praxical spheres that entangles us to the point of making us believe that it is not knowledge that matters but really history, economics, politics, etc. (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 135)

The primacy of knowledge in understanding even issues of conflicts and violence is increasingly gaining some consensus, including the concept that without changes in knowledge the outcomes might never be revolutionary (see Maldonado-Torres 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). This is why we find leading decolonial theorists and activists like Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2011: 8) advising that:

> Revolutions need their epistemologies, or ways of approaching knowledge, its production, and its justification. Political revolutions have arguably suffered for not having good epistemologies, and the wrong epistemology can halt a revolution or even bring back the very vices and problems that the revolution seeks to overcome.

What also emerges poignantly is that Mamdani has a number of fellow travellers in his journey of arriving at an epistemic revolution capable of unleashing the decolonisation of the political community.

Towards an epistemic revolution for the reconstitution of the political community

Across the case studies in *Neither Settler Nor Native*, Mamdani is demonstrating empirically that for paradigmatic change to take place an epistemic revolution is an essential prerequisite—for political change and practical political reconstitution of the political community in such a way that conflicts and violence are pacified. The current model and template of political modernity normalises violence 'as an act of constructing the political community' (Mamdani 2020: 329). The second problem is that in the current template and model of political modernity, the nation and the state are coupled problematically into what is known as the 'nation-state'. Nandita Sharma (2020: 3) expressed this problem in a profound way:

> In the Postcolonial New World Order, being a member of a nation in possession of territorial sovereignty is *the* thing to be(come). It is an aspiration, moreover, that cannot be named as such, for, to be convincing, it must be seen as an invitation but an *inheritance*. … The Postcolonial New World Order of nationally sovereign states thus ushers in a new governmentality, one which produces people as Nationals and produces land as territories in control (in the past and sometime in the future if not always in the present) of sovereign nation-states.

How African anticolonial nationalists casually embraced this model and template provoked Basil Davidson (1992) to write about the 'Black man's burden' and the 'curse of the nation-state'. The coupling of the nation and the state is increasingly identified as a major problem. For example, Hamid Dabashi (2020: 17) has this to say: 'My concern is a complete decoupling of the nation and the state. This is a bad and misbegotten marriage, and the sooner it ends, the better.' So, Mamdani is not alone in identifying the nation-state as an obstacle to the process of the reconstitution of the political. According to him:

> The decoupling of state from nation begins with a retelling of the history of the modern nation-state. In this retelling, the seemingly permanent categories of settler and native, majority and minority, are made provisional. They are exposed as products of modernity's obsession with civilisation and progress. (Mamdani 2020: 329–330)

Mamdani's latest book is the best example of how to retell the history of the modern state with a view to rendering its cognitive and epistemic foundation transparent, temporary and provisional. And in this way, it opens a political path for new political imagination

as an essential prerequisite for the painstaking process of the reconstitution of the political. Throughout the dense case studies, of the United States, Nazi Germany, Apartheid South Africa, Sudan and Israel-Palestine, Mamdani has successfully demonstrated through careful historical analysis how the political is produced through historical process mediated by the conflicts and violence that accompany state formation. Through law, state monopoly of violence is normalised, routinised and rendered 'righteous', making the state 'blameless' (Mamdani 2020: 331–332).

What is revolutionary about Mamdani's work is how he posits the agenda of decolonising the political as an epistemic revolutionary solution to violence as well as to the problematic identitarian categories of settler-native and minority-majority statuses. To him, the decolonisation of the political is in the first instance an act of new political imagination—an act of dreaming about another political community. Epistemic revolution is an enabler of this new dreaming and imagining of a new political community. The future political community can be imagined as an inclusive formation in which the state does not wither away but is decoupled from the plural nation and operates as a legal structural management institution protecting every citizen rather than a chosen and privileged nation above other nations.

Conclusion: Which social forces for epistemic revolution and for the decolonisation of the political?

Mamdani's *Neither Settler Nor Native* was published at a time of insurgent and resurgent decolonisation in the twenty-first century. This makes it very timely. Because at the heart of this decolonisation are deep cognitive and epistemic issues as well as a deliberate drive towards an epistemic rupture, which the decolonisation of the twentieth century failed to deliver. While most of the discussions are about decolonising the university, in which Mamdani is also involved, the decolonisation of the state is a necessary and urgent task partly because even the decolonisation of the university and knowledge cannot be realised without the decolonisation of the state.

Like all good books, Mamdani's *Neither Settler Nor Native* will provoke many questions but its shelf life and its virtual space life are guaranteed. The questions that arise from it include, 'Who are the potential social forces to be relied on for this decolonisation of the political community?' This question becomes pertinent if one considers Michael Rothberg's notion of 'implicated subjects', which he explained this way:

> Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do occupy such clear-cut roles. Less 'actively' involved than perpetrators, implicated subjects do not form the mold of the 'passive' bystander, either. Although indirect or belated, their actions and inactions help produce the positions of victims and perpetrators. In other words, implicated subjects help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present, apparently direct forms of violence turn out to rely on indirection. Modes of implication—entanglement in historical and present-day injustices—are complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory, but are nonetheless essential to confront in the pursuit of justice. (Rothberg 2019: 1–2)

We know that the leading social forces in the decolonisation of the twentieth century were the African educated elite born within the belly of the beast of colonialism, about whom Fanon had expressed misgivings because of their intellectual laziness and pitfalls of consciousness. With hindsight we also now know that the African educated elite never paid attention to Amilcar Cabral's call to commit class suicide to be reborn as genuine revolutionaries. Today, this elite, which is in charge of the postcolonial nation-states, contains the most vociferous defenders of the nation-state in Africa. Epistemically and cognitively, this elite is blind to any new imagination of the political community. It is this lazy bourgeois elite that has internalised Euro-political modernity and colonial political modernity to the extent of reproducing it in Africa within their problematic nation-building and state-making projects.

Even for those South African leaders who met the erstwhile apartheid leaders at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) and produced the notion of a 'rainbow nation', there was no clear radical epistemic awakening that would sustain the articulation of a decolonised

political community beyond the rhetoric of neoliberal democracy and human rights that was in vogue. And this is evident in South Africa's political elite's disturbing pandering to xenophobia and its fidelity to the notion of South Africa as just another 'nation-state'. The rainbow nation is today facing its most trying moments, with Mandela himself being accused of having sold out those who were fighting for the decolonisation of South Africa.

South Africa is today an epicentre of resurgent and insurgent decolonisation, symbolised by the Rhodes Must Fall political formations. In this context, which social forces have the potential to advance the revolutionary agenda that Mamdani has meticulously mapped out ? This is a pertinent question, because these social forces have to first of all undergo the painstaking process of learning to unlearn in order to relearn so as to make them ready to set alight an epistemic revolution for the purpose of reconstituting the political. Mamdani ends his book with a call to rethink political modernity for our own political survival:

> Recognizing this history gives us the power to change perspectives and reality. The history of political modernity tells those of us who identify with the nation that we have been co-opted. The nation is not inherent in us. It overwhelmed us. Political modernity led us to believe we could not live without the nation-state, lest we not only be denied its privileges but also find ourselves dispossessed in the way of the permanent minority. The nation made the immigrant a settler and the settler a perpetrator. The nation made the local a native and the native a perpetrator, too. In this new history, everyone is colonized—the settler and native, perpetrator and victim, majority and minority. Once we learn this history, we might prefer to be survivors instead. (Mamdani 2020: 355)

Yes, we must listen to Mamdani. He combines the direct experience of Idi Amin Dada's exclusionary nationalism with extensive and meticulous research. His call to decouple the nation from the state will benefit many and perhaps lay to rest the inimical politics of xenophobia and racism in a world that is best described as a planetary entanglement of people. But what requires even more attention is this question posed by Sharma (2020: 280):

> But what would a world without nations, without borders, without racisms, without people being separately categorized as either National-Natives or Migrants look like?

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Reimagining Decolonisation Today: A Review of *Neither Settler nor Native*

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In his 2001 book on the Rwandan genocide, *When Victims Become Killers*, Mahmood Mamdani asks, 'What can the study of Africa teach us about late modern life?'(Mamdani 2002: xv). This question, as Ibrahim Abdullah has recently reminded us in his review of Mamdani's latest book *Neither Settler Nor Native*, emerged in the context of Mamdani's nearly five-decade-long examination of the practices and consequences of African state formation, which began with his 1973 work, *From Citizen to Refugee*. Abdullah argues that this early autobiographical account of Idi Amin's regime in Uganda spurred the trilogy of *Citizenship and Subject, When Victims Become Killers and Saviors and Survivors*, which reconstructed the framework of late colonial rule in Africa and examined its legacies for postcolonial citizenship, attending in particular to the recurring problem of political violence. In these works, Mamdani pioneered a method of studying African politics that maintained a concern with historical specificity yet viewed the continent as a site of generating political theory. Mamdani described this critical standpoint in *Citizen and Subject* as one that refuses the choice of 'abstract universalism and intimate particularism' (Mamdani 1996:11). This is a position that refuses to view Africa through an exceptionalising gaze while approaching the crises