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Decolonization and Afro-Feminism

by Sylvia Tamale, Ottawa, Canada, Daraja Press, 2020, xv + 395 pp., US\$34,00, softback, ISBN 9781988832494

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BOOK REVIEWS

Decolonization and Afro-Feminism, by Sylvia Tamale, Ottawa, Canada, Daraja Press, 2020, xv + 395 pp., US\$34,00, softback, ISBN 9781988832494

If I could, I would introduce Sylvia Tamale with singing and dancing – an aptly Afro-Feminist way to honour an author whose reputation as a thinker, scholar, and activist is renowned. She stands on the shoulders of her ancestors and dedicates her book to *Wanafunzi wa Afrika* (the students of Africa), for whom this is a rare and valuable gift. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* is an epic testament to Tamale's courageous political and intellectual rigour, it imagines a world with reconfigured social institutions that restore dignity to African people. Although much of her formal training and work has been in law, Tamale's activism and scholarship have crossed many disciplinary boundaries, notably in the fields of gender and sexuality, jurisprudence, and politics, all with an African feminist framing. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* brings together all of these interests in a textual and empirical analysis of colonialism's effects and their potential undoing.

Decolonial studies is a growing field, with scholars from the Global South building on the work of Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others who helped to shape the post-colonial discourse in the 20th century. The twenty-first century has seen Walter D. Mignolo, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Ramon Grosfogel, Arturo Escobar, and many others guiding the conversation with a focus on 'decoloniality', which Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues 'is not a singular theoretical school of thought, but a *family of diverse positions* that share a view of coloniality as the fundamental problem in the modern age' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 15; emphasis added). The field is not without its contestations. In a recent editorial, Siseko Kumalo and Leonard Praeg make a scathing accusation that mediocre scholars can and have co-opted the 'discourse and praxis' (Kumalo and Praeg 2019) of decoloniality to re-inscribe the marginality of Black/Indigenous people by a failure to engage with empirical and substantive evidence and voices.

This charge struck a chord. A frustration for me has been the paucity of African women's voices in the carefully curated global conversation, for instance in edited volumes with multiple authors. Like panel discussions on webinar, these showcases of scholarship are opportunities to put politics into practice, right? Two recent volumes I bought to supplement the African feminism I have been reading reveal more than the topics anticipated in the contents page. The first, *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge* (2018) edited by Bernd Reiter, has 15 chapters, only 5 of them by women – there is one African author, a man. Notwithstanding the excellent contributions to the ideas of decoloniality with its focus on plurality in the politics and hierarchy of knowledge, it is as though African women have nothing to say here. The second purchase was *Knowledges Born of the Struggle: Constructing the Epistemologies of the Global South* (2020), edited by Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses. Of the 13 chapters, 4 are written by women, one of them the Mozambican co-editor, and one chapter is written by an African man. Surely, in a field that unpicks the legacies of imperial, patriarchal, anthropocentric colonialism and how it positions African women in the social and knowledge hierarchies, more African women could be invited to speak for themselves?

Into this gap and 'family of diverse positions' (while unpicking the idea of 'family' from its colonial discourses), Tamale enters the conversation. She does so with a scrutiny of colonialism (the political and economic process) and coloniality (the lingering psychological process), to induce in the reader the conscientisation and unlearning she advocates as a decolonising strategy. Tamale's scholarship blends a historical view of events and processes with current examples of ways in which coloniality continues or is countered on the African continent. Her unique contribution to the field is her application of the transformative lens of Afro-Feminism to show a way forward to a decolonial future. She does not shy away from the complexities of Afrocentric and Eurocentric politics and behaviours, and the intricacies of the dance between these continental cultures that continue to be dominated by men.

Motifs run like harmonies through all nine chapters: firstly, the intersectional, mutually constitutive subjugations of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Tamale explains that their entitlements rely on the fault lines of binary thinking (black/white; public/private; male/female; rich/poor *et al*). Alongside these oppressions are the consequential dehumanising and othering contingent on the intersections of race, class and gender amongst other categories. The fixedness and homogeneity of all things is troubled, bringing nuance and density to every category and chapter. And finally, how power and resistance have shaped the continent and will shape the future resonate throughout the revelations, scholarship and experiences that make up this volume. Importantly, she unearths the women of Africa's past and present who were/are buried by the patriarchal refusal to recognise gender relations, histories and contributions that do not serve a colonial purpose.

Afro-Feminism is a fresh lens through which to consider decolonisation and decoloniality because it gives voice to and perspective from African women. It brings together the activism and scholarship of women who have fought for and alongside men in the political struggles for independence from colonial rule and continue to fight the injustices of colonial effects. They challenge the normative academic models for knowledge-making, offering different kinds of methodologies that recognise ways of knowing and being that resist and contest the scientific, positivist bias of Eurocentric gatekeeping. For precisely this reason, Sylvia Tamale's layered and meticulous attention to epistemic alternatives opens up new conversations about what it is to decolonise our thinking, being and acting in this world. She scrupulously explains how the African continent was/is plundered, and its people dehumanised, by trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism, and its constituent components of patriarchy and capitalism. And speaking from the location of this continent, Tamale refuses to be othered by the objectifying colonial gaze but looks back with a sharp and unfaltering eye that sees how the tentacles of history reach into the present to distract and destroy the aspirations of African people.

Of course, the history of Africa pre-existed the colonial invention of it, and Tamale remembers the relations and ecologies of peace and power whose trajectories were disrupted by colonial brutalities. She does this without resorting to nostalgia for a romanticised version of the past, but laying out the convolutions that were, and can be, navigated by people who work from a localised, collective perspective to manage governance, conflict and difference. This sense of community, epitomised in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, Tamale recognises as a spiritual, material, and collective connection to the earth and our ancestors and to each other. This is in stark contrast to the universalism and individualism which dominates the rights discourse. For instance, in the chapter on *Legal Pluralism and Decolonial Feminism*, Tamale describes three processes which ran/run alongside formal, legal, rights-based processes in Africa. One of these was the *Gacaca* Process, contrasted with the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), where both sought to deal with the aftermath of the genocide in that country in 1994. *Gacaca* ('judgement on the lawns' in

Kinyarwanda) is a traditional African justice system, focused on reconciliation and reparation, and unlike the ICTR, working with the whole family and community rather than individuals. The *Gacaca* process lasted for 10 years, outliving and outperforming the ICTR process by far. Tamale reveals the gender relations in these processes, layering as she does Afro-Feminism with decoloniality to conscientise and expose the nuanced dynamics at play in the clash between Afrocentric and Eurocentric processes. She explains how the *Gacaca* process was diluted to an extent by incorporating it into the formal legal system in 2001, where it lost some of its traditional potency. However, she adds that the new process included women to a much greater extent in formal and informal roles which was a leap forward in the restoration of civil relations. What this and the other two case studies she describes demonstrate with such clarity is that the colonial legal and state systems, and liberal rights discourse which emerged from these, have complicated how local communities sort out their differences. Tamale shows how substantive justice could be achieved through a hybrid approach, and how community justice systems can be viable alternatives to colonial-inspired solutions to conflict. Every chapter does similar work: exposing the fault lines and challenges, bringing scholarship and experience to thinking through to a different kind of future.

Everybody reading this book (and everybody should) will have their own favourite chapter. For me, it is not easy to pick just one, but perhaps the chapter on *Challenging the Coloniality of Sex, Gender and Sexuality* stands out as a superb example of Afro-Feminist decolonial analysis of so-called universal norms and standards that re-inscribe the intersecting colonial oppressions of race, class, sex, sexual orientation and gender. Tamale juxtaposes two world class athletes, Michael Phelps, a relatively wealthy white heterosexual male from Baltimore USA, and Caster Semenya, a relatively poor black queer female from Ga-Masehlong in Limpopo, South Africa. There is of course much more written and pondered about Semenya in worldwide media, health and legal reports, far more examinations, appeals and committee meetings, and ultimately it is she who is banished from the races she believes she was born to win. Both athletes have physical conditions which might or might not give them an advantage over others in the field. But only one has been subjected to abnormally brutal public and legal inspection and censure. Phelps' Marfan syndrome and other significant anomalies have somehow escaped attention. Using discourse analysis on a wide range of media and other documents Tamale exposes many of the institutionalised prejudices against a non-binary body that is also black, female, and poor. Institutions of religion, media, law, health, and culture, are structured by racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia that are consequences of colonial ideologies which are residual in the psyche of people all over the world today. The chapter is a must read for countering the ideology and the aggressive strategy that has all but discarded this beloved champion of South African people.


There are many reasons to read this book, one of which is that I can barely do it justice in a review. Tamale covers the range of colonial effects on African experiences and relations with compelling confidence and articulation, conveying a profound understanding of the essential work of decoloniality from an Afro-Feminist perspective. There are 'aha' moments on every page, detailed and multiple references which encourage the reader to keep searching for and finding the conscientisation and truth that will liberate. Tamale puts her finger indelibly on gender, ecology, the law, human rights, the academy, Pan-Africanism and their colonial legacies and decolonial possibilities. The punchy epilogue urges an understanding of and resistance to the current risks: the digital colonialism of social media, the dangers of its surveillance and data mining, and its consequences for fragile economies and identities and the unequal distribution of public goods. Significantly, and to counter the domination of men even in the field of decoloniality, Tamale brings the voices, insights, ways of being, of

women and *wananchi* ('ordinary folk' in Swahili) to the conversation about decoloniality, which should not be about them without them.

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Malibongwe: Poems from the Struggle by ANC Women, edited by Sono Molefe, Uhuru Phalafala (Preface), Makhosazana Xaba (Introduction), Durban, uHlanga Press, 2020, vii+192p. (paperback), ISBN 9780620869126

Eight years after the publication of the first edition of *Malibongwe: Poems from the Struggle by ANC Women*, the Langa¹-born musician and cultural icon Brenda Nokuzola Fassie released the critically acclaimed song 'Too late for mama' (1989). In this song, Fassie laments a mother figure who dies while carrying her 'little baby'² on her back. In this harrowing scene, this bare-footed Blackwoman³ is struck by lightning while fetching water from a source that is ten kilometres away from her home. Her lifeless body is found by her husband and relatives in a remote veld alongside her child whom she was trying to save. 'She's gone. She's gone. She's gone', Fassie echoes.

Fassie's words which reverberate across time (and space) not only capture this particular Blackwoman character's ultimate sacrifice (the loss of her being⁴), but her utterances are an embodiment of Blackwomen's martyrism⁵ in the service of others. This reality is no more evident than in the 'struggle [...] for national liberation'⁶ in South Africa. Fassie's expression of the precariousness of the lives of Blackwomen in apartheid South Africa runs parallel to the artist Dumile Feni's visual re-presentation of Blackwomen's experiences during this turbulent time.

Feni's striking image (as seen in [Figure 1](#)) first appeared in the German translation of *Malibongwe* in 1987. As suggested by the academic Uhuru Phalafala in the preface found in the most recent publication of *Malibongwe*, Feni's imagery is evocative of the Blackwoman guerrilla in apartheid South Africa. In her writing, Phalafala juxtaposes Feni's work with an iconised photograph which represents Minister Lindiwe Zulu 'look[ing] away from the book in her hands to confront us with a direct gaze, a Kalashnikov resting easily next to her hip' (8). Phalafala observes that this photograph also 'represents a battle fought with both ideological and military warfare; what the Cold War machine would have called soft power (culture) and hard power (artillery)' (8).