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## BOOK REVIEW

# *What is Africanness? Contesting nativism in race, culture and sexualities*

**Charles Ngwena**

2018. Pretoria University Law Press, Pretoria. X+298pp.  
ISBN: 9781920538828, Paperback.

That colonialism in its motivations and scope far exceeds economic considerations is now a fairly incontrovertible fact. Thus, to comprehend colonialism in its complexity, we ought to traverse its economic motif, but not accord to it the status of an originary impetus. Admittedly, this point has been sufficiently argued by post-structuralist scholars such as Albert Memmi (1967). What African studies has not fully exploited, however, is the intellectual horizon that opens precisely at the moment of the decentring of the materialist analysis of colonialism and its aftermath. In a sense, what has not been vigorously pursued is the writing of the colonial historiography of Africa as a socio-symbolic order of things constituted in/by discourse and its discursive rules of truth formation. Proceeding down this path, Ngwena claims as his interest “exploring from a broad identitarian perspective how African peoples have been discursively produced and named” (p. 13).

Nonetheless, what renders the book’s object timely is the fact that, because of the extended dominance of materialist analysis of African colonial social formations, we have accepted as a given that Africa and the Africans exist as empirical facts. The corollary has been to write being African with a homogenizing gloss or to represent Africanness as reducible to one subject position: an economically exploited *qua* culturally dominated counterpoint of the bourgeois western European. However, outside and beyond the materialist analysis of colonialism, two other discourses are equally guilty of essentializing the African. Both insist on representing the African as an entity suffused

with a pre-determined substantive essence. Under the logic of these two discourses, the African becomes an identity category whose defining feature is “reductive sameness” that is “difference-erasing” (p. 2). Although the two discourses are animated by two contradictory currents, they both insist on recognizing the African as defined by a primordial essence – they both totalize and “hypostatise African identity” (p. 6).

Of these two discourses, both of which subscribe with equal verve to a “nativised Africanness”, one has a much longer history bending over backwards toward European Enlightenment thought (p. 5), whereas the other, much more recent, emerges as a response to the former. To be precise, the first of these two discourses emerges within the interstices of Europe’s encounter with Africa. Similarly, it renders possible three distinct figurations of this encounter, namely mercantile imperialism, slavery, and colonialism. Simply put, its object is to render the African available as a colonizable object of sexual plunder and (colonial) domination. Owing to the efficacy of its signifying practices, the African identity becomes comprehensible as the ‘Other’ of the European ‘Self’. More precisely, according to this European imperialist and colonial discourse, to be African is to signify lack, lack of all that with which the European ‘Self’ is endowed. In the framing of the book, this “imperialistic and colonial current is referred to as *nativism from without*” (p. 8). Though equally nativizing, the second discourse is styled as a counter to the first. Auto-generated within the continent, its impetus is the will to be free or desire for freedom among those rendered inhuman by the racializing imperialistic colonial discourse. This will and desire to be free coalesces into the Black/African emancipatory current. Yet again, in the framing of the book, this current constitutes “*nativism from within*” (p. 8). Both discourses, despite their contradictory metaphysics – the will to dominate and the will to be free – are guilty of essentializing the African. Both arrive via different routes at a modular example of an authentic African, with a prescribed “homogenised African sexuality that specifically excludes sexualities outside heterosexuality and, more specifically, delegitimises non-heteronormative and same-sex sexualities” (p. 15).

Against the backdrop of a long-established tradition of essentializing African identity, the book poses anew the long-debated question of “Who/What is African?”. Styled as a discourse-theoretic, the book comprises eight chapters, which are thematically organized into three sections, ending with an epilogue. Chapters one and two, organized under the thematic *Background to the hermeneutics of heterogeneous Africanness*, constitute part one of the book. The concern in this segment of the book is to establish the “manyness of Africanness” (p. 1). To do so, the book turns to Stuart Hall’s (1990; 2000) writings on cultural identification, wherein the author warns against viewing identity as a transcendent, supported by innate or intrinsic features that remain constant throughout history, in all cultural contexts. The danger in/with such a trans-historical conception of identity *qua* Africanness is that it turns being African into “an identity grounded in archeology, an ahistoricised narration of cultural identity that

holds in place the imagined essentials of the African past” (p. 26). Following Hall (1990; 2000), the author avers that identities have a history; they are produced within specific histories and nameable cultural contexts. As such, they are subject to historical transformation and cultural change, lodged in contingency rather than fixity. And being African is no exception. Like other cultural identities, it is a state of “becoming as well as of being” (p. 27). Never able to fully account for itself or to fully symbolize itself, identification is “an incomplete, non-determinable process that has no closure ...” (p. 30). The section concludes by applying Hall’s (2000) cultural theory on our understanding of African sexuality identifications. At the end of this theoretical manoeuvre, African sexualities cease to be unchanging artefacts of a backward anthropological past. Rather, we end up with “a historicised notion of African sexuality identifications as enunciations which are also always in the making” (p. 36).

Part two of the book, organized under the theme *Africanness, race and culture*, comprises three chapters. The intent in the first of the three chapters is to uncover that which the name ‘Africa’ has been made to stand for, to signify, or to represent. We learn that, while the name ‘Africa’ has a much longer history, its present-day understanding as well as its referent is a function of Enlightenment European thought (p. 50-51). Importantly, the naming of the continent and its inhabitants through race and culture was not an idle, but productive process, aimed ostensibly at rendering Africa and Africans available as legitimate objects of colonization. To buttress the point, the chapter reads closely Mudimbe’s (1988) explication, in *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*, of how each of the different colonial disciplines, namely Christianity and anthropology, contributes to the epistemic task of producing the African as a subject of colonial difference. Chapters four and five in this section stand in a (dialectical) thesis-antithesis relationship. Whilst the former outlines how in, and through a number of signifying practices in philosophy, science and the display of Saartjie Baartman, the African was and continues to be discursively produced and made to stand “for both racial and cultural signposting of evolutionary backwardness whose repository was black embodiment” (p. 77). Chapter five is a negation of African humanness. The intent, however, is not to uncritically return the African identity back to its supposed primordial context wherein it exists untouched by the vicissitudes of history and vagaries of the ever-changing culture context. Aptly named *Decentring the Race of Africanness*, its stated object is to put race under erasure “so that Africanness can be imagined as an inclusive category without the normative albatross of biological and metaphysical essences that both colonial and, significantly, racial emancipatory discourses purposefully saturated it with” (p. 117).

Armed with the critique first broached in Appiah’s (1992) *In my father’s house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*, the author aims his sharpened pen at du Bois (1970), Blyden’s notion of Black personality, and the ideology of Negritude. These racial African emancipatory and nationalistic discourses and their sponsors tended, according to Ngwena, to “absorb

and implicitly accept European racial thinking, that there are, in fact, races with different racial essences” (p. 122). Commenting on Negritude *qua* racial emancipatory African nationalistic discourses, he writes:

[I]t is a thesis which is fixated on the past ... Its ahistorical and archeological orientation inclines it towards creating an ontology of Africanness in which African identity manifests not as open, ever-evolving subjectivities and identifications that are subject to radical historicisation ... Instead, African identity appears hypostatized: as an epidermalised monument which articulates the final truth about the qualities of black people and their normative future (p. 131).

What makes the chapter central to the argument of the book is the answer it volunteers to the question: Who is an African? Ngwena presages his answer to the question with the following claim that must unsettle the sensibilities particularly of South African readers: “[W]hereas in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism race played a central historical role in the formation of African identities, it is now being eclipsed by other categories ...” (p. 142). Perhaps to preclude any possibility of doubt, he repeats the claim two pages later and writes: “[T]he ‘comprehensive’ power ‘race’ had in the high noon of colonisation has been weakened” (p. 145). Having emptied race of its supposed centrality in African identity formation, he formulates his answer thus: “[A]t a basic level, a simple though not simplistic response to the question of who is African might be: ‘[Y]ou are African if you say you are. Africanness is belonging”’ (p. 150). If the reflex is to extend the logic of the claim and aver that “you are European if you say you are”, that temptation must be held in check on the part of the reader.

The last of the three parts into which the book is segmented, thematically titled *Heterogeneous sexualities*, consists of three chapters. The section opens with Chapter 6 on how African sexualities have been constructed within the nativising as well as normalising imperialist and colonial discourse. Drawing on the work of Stoler (2002), Ngwena surfaces a fact often glossed over, namely that the regulation of colonial sexualities was neither limited to, nor directed only at the Black colonized. Crucial to the maintenance of colonial power was the need to not only perform, but also preserve constructed White sexual respectability. This constructed White sexual respectability imposed upon White people – women mostly – a “compliant [W]hite deportment” on matters of intimacy and sex by “prescribing the somatic horizons for horizontal sexualities consistent with normative whiteness” (pp. 181-182). In the following chapter, the book makes a case for ‘transgressive’ sexualities often proscribed or marginalized by discourses of nativism from within that equate Africanness with heteronormative sexuality. The last chapter is an eclectic, theoretical assortment. Its object is to outline a theoretically derived solution to the complex problem of status subordination suffered by non-heterosexual minorities on the continent. Drawing on four different theories proffered by Rawls (2005), Rescher (1993), Young (1990), and Arendt (1972), the chapter

chisels a theoretical compass for mediating what it calls “difference in sexuality” (p. 247).

Students concerned with issues of race, gender and sexuality will undoubtedly encounter the book as a welcome addition to the list of available bibliographic references. However, they will also notice one major defect in the structuring of the book’s argument. Ngwena begins the book by correctly pointing out that the problem he is concerned with originates at the level of discourse. More pointedly, he foregrounds the fact that, in order to be available for colonial domination, Africans had first to be discursively constructed and produced as less than human – as the inferior ‘Other’ of the superior European ‘Self’. Consequently, it is the discourse of African difference locatable within Enlightenment thought that constitutes the condition of possibility for the colonial domination of the continent and its peoples. According to him, and he is correct in making the claim, the problem was “an epistemological disregard of the human being, of the mode of being of [B]lack Africans” (p. 63). It must then baffle the mind that, without justification, when proffering in the last chapter of the book what he considers to be the way out of this impasse, Ngwena shifts the discussion from the level of discourse to the political. As an antidote, he offers liberal constitutional provisions, status-equalizing policies, and difference-recognizing mechanisms. Implied in this shift is the assumption that political domination, subordination and dehumanization of Africans and transgressive/minority sexualities is a function of the political – its system of value allocation and organisation of power. By so doing, he seeks, at the level of political praxis, a solution to a problem whose source he himself earlier recognized to be locatable at the level of discourse. If postcolonial South Africa is any lesson, we note that how to be Black/African (belong to a minority sexuality) is to continue to experience life as the ‘Other’ of a White superior ‘Self’ (heterosexual self) amidst a liberal constitution, a litany of difference-recognizing/-promoting policies, and innumerable social and political rights guarantees. To reiterate the humanity of the Black ‘Other’ has first to be re-established at the level of discourse for equality at the level of the political to have any meaning. More appropriately, to become conceivable. The verdict explicitly stated must then be that the book fails to answer its own question.

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