

Everyday Interpretations of African Independence: A Discussion

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1. Introduction

This thematic issue engages the quotidian vantage point on African states' achievement of independence from colonialism. Existing scholarship frequently takes nationalism, in this case African nationalism, at face value and believes its constructions of national homogeneity. When conflict and alternative interpretations are allowed into the African nationalist story, these arise between great men, rather than bringing the actual and lived diversity of understandings and hopes within these purportedly uniform nations to the fore. The articles collected here widen the lens beyond the pervasive focus on elites and leadership in the literature to introduce a historiography on what ordinary Africans – the non-elite, the subaltern – expected from independence.

These insights are valuable as part of a wider rethinking of the post-World War II global liberal order, which seems to be coming apart due to political dynamics unleashed by socio-economic inequality and deprivation in the wake of neoliberal capitalism. As elsewhere in the world, the twenty-first century has also in Africa been marked by a growing push-back against the democratic gains of the 1980s–1990s. African political, economic and social phenomena have served as harbingers for developments elsewhere in the world.¹ The fallout from neoliberal capitalism's shrinking of the state through deregulation, liberalisation and informalisation includes a degeneration to authoritarian-

¹ See, for example, J. Hyslop, Trumpism, Zumaism, and the fascist potential of authoritarian populism, in: Safundi, 21 (2020) 4, pp. 464–472.

ism frequently abetted by populism. These developments go hand in hand with the blurring of public and private, and legitimate and criminal, economic activities in shadow economies that are interconnected with global organised crime networks. As happened after African independence, the idea arises again that democracy is anathema to development. Re-thinking development and democracy from the bottom up can assist with understanding continuities from colonialism, including the continuing crisis of development in Africa. The rest of this article provides a brief discussion of the articles in this thematic issue and then moves to comparisons with South Africa as the last African state to emerge from colonialism, before providing concluding remarks.

2. Discussion of Articles

Enid Guéné's article explores comics in Zambia's Copperbelt as a most accessible and everyday art form until the 1990s, when it was crushed by the government. Analysing comics surfaces an African script for modernity in the form of expectations for African modernity at a time when the Zambian and the Congolese economies were booming because of Copperbelt mining. These comics were technologies for popular discourses showing how the fortunes of the Copperbelt were commonly understood, moving from a booming to a faltering phase. Such comprehension hence shifted discursively over time, away from the initial hopeful vision of a prosperous future towards nationalist identity within one-partyism. Comic readers were eventually guided to source their identity from the Big Man in the shape of then President Kenneth Kaunda, for example by foregrounding messaging from him. When economic prosperity took a turn for the worst, these comics took a nationalist turn, with self-actualisation redirected towards the achievement of nationhood in which independence is conflated with the personalised leadership of Kaunda.

Finding a gender division in the aspirations occasioned by postcolonial independence, Ngozi Edeagu explores education as key to opening the door to modernity, specifically from the perspective of non-elite women in Nigeria from the 1930s to the 1950s. Whereas the existing literature disproportionately emphasises conformism, she shows how non-elite women challenged the male nationalist vision of Nigerian identity. A significantly more expansive vision of Nigerian life merged from ordinary Nigerians in that they expected better returns from education in the form of employment and government services. These expectations clashed with those of the nationalist elite's self-perception as entitled to the positions and resources formerly held by the British colonial elite. These dynamics played out in a notably gendered form in the response to the 1958 protests by women against the reimposition of school fees. Newspaper reporting showed a distinctly patriarchal framing in suggesting that men instigated the protests, with a stigmatisation of agentic women for stepping out of the nationalist script that accorded them a passive version of motherhood.

Johanna Wetzel in her article homes in on Mozambique in the late 1970s and the main liberation movement Frelimo. Again the exploration exposes the machinations of post-

independence nationalism, in this case through two important findings. The first is the coverage of the contestation among versions of radical political solutions for colonialism in Mozambique. Frelimo's energies were not solely focused on resisting Renamo, which worked as a proxy for the Rhodesian and South African apartheid regimes. Instead, similar dynamics can be seen as elsewhere in Communist movements, that is, the drive to achieve hegemony by combating alternative versions of radicalness. In this case these alternative versions were organic and bottom-up, which Frelimo met with a top-down imposition of its version of the 'correct' sort of radicalness. This article also shows how the political category of 'the youth' was formed as a mainstay in African nationalist politics, again with a vision of what the 'correct' radical youth would look like.

Charles Ambler's article pivots to similar themes than Edeagu's, namely post-independence contestations in understandings of African modernity in Nigeria. The meaning of freedom in the Nigerian transition to independence was subject to intense dispute, as reflected in newspaper letters and editorials in the Lagos daily press before and after independence in 1960. Particularly, a dispute emerged about freedom as access to elements of modernity. The Western-educated class sought the Nigerianisation of public and private sector employment and benefits. What might ordinary people hope for? Responses articulated in the press revealed a global ambition, a seeking of interconnection with global modernity. Instead of the cultural decolonisation pushed by elites, non-elite members expressed affinity with the larger world. They associated post-independence freedom with personal autonomy and individual opportunity. An eventually dominant strand opposed the equation of freedom with democracy, arguing that freedom means development and that Nigerians hence had to forgo democracy as it was not facilitative of development. Prescient anxieties were expressed in the Lagos press about elite attempts to force 'the currents of human thoughts [into] one single groove'.

Dmitri van den Bersselaar unusually presents the under-studied perspective from the corporate sector on the African independence moment, as opposed to that from political or party elites, which is in much greater abundance in the literature. His article highlights how company archives, in this case in Nigeria, frequently also do not provide voice to the subalterns. For example, he finds that company employees who were manual labourers are hardly represented. Administrators more typically aired their grievances in writing, so are more present in the archive. Resonating with other articles in this collection, the expectation of these white collar workers was Africanisation, which hinged on Africans replacing Europeans in jobs.

The next section brings South Africa into view for a comparison.

3. Comparing South Africa

Turning to South Africa: it is the last African state to transition from colonialism, that is, from an intensified, settler form of colonialism known as apartheid. While the decolonisation of other African states involved European colonial officials relinquishing posts and departing, South Africa as a settler state had been colonised in successive waves

by the Dutch and British, with the descendants of the Dutch, the Afrikaners, creating homegrown Afrikaner nationalism and claiming rootedness in Africa.² Instead of departing colonials, the liberation movements returning from exile had to contend with a still powerful Afrikaner-run apartheid state. The balance of forces required multi-party negotiations (1990–1994) with compromises on both sides enabling constitutional democracy and the creation of a new political community beyond the settler/native division.³ Therefore, the 1996 constitution, in which vests primary authority, possesses innovative hallmarks that address shortcomings of purely liberal constitutions. These include socio-economic and environmental rights alongside political rights. Furthermore, at the heart of the constitution is a troika of rights with human dignity as *primus inter pares* alongside freedom and equality. While parliament is not the supreme authority, it is designed according to the principles of participatory democracy to enable accountability by and responsiveness from political elites. The constitution also creates several other independent institutions to ensure accountability of the powerful. Proportional representation provides for the broadest possible inclusion of political actors to overcome colonial divisions. Democracy-supporting decentralisation of power can be seen in federal-type features that include a three-tier governance system (national-provincial-local) and devolution of the implementation of health and education policies to provincial level.

As with other African states, international actors loomed large in the South African transition. The end of the Cold War contributed to the fall of official apartheid. The backing that apartheid South Africa had enjoyed as a Western proxy against Communism collapsed, while its liberation movement opponents lost Soviet support due to perestroika in the then USSR. South Africa adopting a democratic design is attributable to its emergence amid the surge of democratisation across Africa and other regions of the Global South at that time. It was also the time of neoliberal triumphalism, however – as opposed to the state welfarism of Keynesian capitalism, which had been predominant when most other African states attained independence. South Africa was inducted into the Washington Consensus and the newly ruling African National Congress (ANC) exchanged its redistributive Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) for the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) Programme. The ANC government compensated for the effects of GEAR with the most comprehensive social security programme on the African continent.

But neoliberalism's reduction of democracy through the marketisation of basic services and other interventions dovetailed with the pacification of citizens as welfare recipients. Paradoxically, this fitted with the ANC's perception of itself as a Leninist vanguard party preferring a passive version of 'the people', activated on command as and when needed in the party's struggle to dislodge the still economically dominant white minority.⁴ This

2 C. Van der Westhuizen, *White Power & the Rise and Fall of the National Party*, Cape Town 2007.

3 M. Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, Johannesburg 2020.

4 T. Reddy, *South Africa, Settler Colonialism and the Failures of Liberal Democracy*, London 2015.

ideological posture also came with a drive to establish a hegemony over all spheres of society, primarily through Soviet-inspired 'cadre deployment' throughout the state, with loyalty trumping professional ability and expertise. The ANC's mix of Leninism and neoliberalism clashed with the liberal precepts of separation of powers and the rule of law, as well as with the social democratic rights entrenched in the constitution. A descent into patronage and clientelism eroded state capacity, exacerbated by grand-scale corruption known as state capture.

Scholarship on South Africa has only recently turned towards making sense of subalterns' interpretations and responses to post-apartheid realities. Similar to other post-independence African states, popular disillusionment has arisen. This is due to the mismatch between the promise of the official end to apartheid and everyday reality in which human needs for sustenance remain unmet for 55 percent of the population living in poverty. In South Africa, such disappointment is arguably especially acute because apartheid seemed intractable and the transition to democracy without civil war was hailed as a 'miracle'.⁵ Another similarity with other post-independence states can be found in the contested meanings of freedom: Hlengiwe Ndlovu found in field work in marginal communities that subalterns had not imagined democracy as much as *inkululeko*, which translates as 'freedom' in the country's second largest language isiXhosa.⁶ *Inkululeko* is described as firstly material emancipation. Similar to Edeagu's description of the lavish lifestyle of the new ruling elite provoking anger, relative deprivation evokes intense emotion. Research by Jason Hickel in the rural hinterland shows that democracy is associated with the devastating effects of the deindustrialisation that coincided with the transition.⁷ The neoliberal destruction of the social fabric is attributed to democracy, perceived as bringing about social death due to the upset in patriarchal and ethnic hierarchies. A mass withdrawal from voting has occurred, due to disillusionment in a state seen as disinterested and unresponsive. This has gone hand in hand with a steep increase in ever-more violent demonstrations at community level. Masses of excluded people have reverted to informal processes that Hannah Dawson describes as 'patronage from below': protests are strategically used to extract resources and services from local elites that are increasingly difficult to source through formal government processes – jobs, clean water, sanitation, roads, and so forth.⁸

Especially ANC supporters exited the voting process in the national and local elections between 2009 and 2024: neither voting for the ANC, nor transferring their votes to an opposition party. As its promises falter, the ANC imaginary of singular nationhood

5 C. Van der Westhuizen, South Africa's 1994 "miracle": What's left? *The Conversation Africa*, 25 April 2021, <https://theconversation.com/south-africas-1994-miracle-whats-left-159495> (accessed 2 May 2024).

6 H. Ndlovu, *The (Un)making of Democracy as a Struggle for Inkululeko: Rethinking Corruption from the Margins*, in: C. van der Westhuizen, S. Dube and Z. Jolobe (eds.) *The D-Word: Perspectives on Democracy in Tumultuous Times*, Gqeberha 2023.

7 J. Hickel, *Democracy as Death. The Moral Order of Anti-Liberalism Politics in South Africa*, Oakland 2015.

8 H. J. Dawson, *Patronage from Below: Political Unrest in an Informal Settlement in South Africa*, in: *African Affairs* 113 (2014) 453, pp. 518–539.

falls apart – comparable to experiences detailed in the articles in this volume. This has sparked competing populisms, as noted elsewhere in post-independence Africa where state nationalist attempts failed to subsume differences within imposed national identities.⁹ In order to recapture support, ethno-racial populism arises from within the ANC, personified by Jacob Zuma, state president between 2009 and 2018 and the figure most associated with state capture. The unitary African nationalist vision has fractured along older fissures, with a re-ethnicisation and racialisation following the logic of the colonial state.¹⁰ In the 2024 national elections, this translated into the rise of the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK Party), led by Zuma.

What remains different when South Africa is compared with post-independence African examples is that the ANC still accepts the ‘rules of the game’ of the country’s constitutional democracy. The party dropped to 40 percent in the 2024 national election, but the current leadership has not used this to argue against the system. However, splinters from the ruling bloc in the form of Zuma’s MK Party and the Economic Freedom Fighters, led by Zuma protégé Julius Malema, carry with them authoritarian sentiments and influences akin to what had been seen elsewhere on the continent.

4. Conclusion

This collection of papers turns us away from the limited ‘big man’ version of African history and politics and towards finding the agency of the historically dispossessed. Foremost are the competing contentions that marked African transitions from direct colonialism. Overlapping sites of contestation can be identified. The first of these sites, as emerging from the archive, shows non-elite members of African societies expecting freedom from independence, and challenging elite views about what the content of that freedom should be. This challenge intersects with others at the axis of modern/traditional. For example, Nigerian elites were worried about how common Nigerians’ externally oriented awareness and enjoyment of aesthetic products from the wider world may influence their sense of nationhood. This interlinks with contestation about modernities, or versions of modernity, in the form of Western capitalism vs Marxism-Leninism.

These coinciding sites of contestation all fed into a larger plain of friction about the question of what would constitute a proper nation, and therefore a proper subject of the nation. In postcolonial Mozambique, this has a Marxist-Leninist inflection through the idea of the proper revolutionary subject. In the 1970s, Frelimo, which subsequently came to rule Mozambique, enforced its version of radicalness against competing socialist visions in an example of top-down disciplining within the liberation movement. In

9 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Africa for Africans or Africa for ‘Natives’ Only? ‘New Nationalism’ and Nativism in Zimbabwe and South Africa, in: *Africa Spectrum* 44 (2009) 1, pp. 61–78.

10 C. Van der Westhuizen, From the leader or from the led? Populist xenophobia in South Africa, in: *Comparativ Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 33 (2023) 4, pp. 460–479.

South Africa, a comparable attempted disciplining into obedience to the vanguard party is notable.

Viewpoints from non-elite members of African societies, and phenomena such as vernacular interpretations of freedom and 'patronage from below', reveal people who were not simply empty vessels to be filled by political leaders. Instead, much imagination existed in everyday interpretations of what independence should bring in terms of individual autonomy and self-actualisation. These fledgling nations were not monolithic groupings, as nationalist elites preferred to project them as.

Moreover, subaltern imaginations were fired up by aspirations towards forging African modernities in productive interaction with the wider world. Emerging from colonial conditions at the high point of mid-twentieth century modernity with its associated economic growth and material success, expectations were high that individual ambitions could be realised. These included not simply materialist possibilities but specifically education as pathway to assertion as modern subjects. Education was pursued by 'unruly' women, as scandalised male elites regarded them. Threaded through the articles is the significance of cultural and aesthetic expressions but not as per the colonial and also present-day Western stereotype of Africans as frozen in some traditionalist past. Rather, the archive shows the enthusiastic embrace and use of modern, urban technologies such as film, newspapers and comics for cultural voicing.

Material improvement of lives emerges as of pivotal importance, also when looking at South Africa. The achievement of middleclass ideals was projected as a sign of the success of decolonisation. There is an irony in regarding incorporation into the capitalist system as a sign of decolonisation's success, as it is not only peripheral incorporation but also one determined by the mostly nominal independence that African states had achieved. Induction into the global capitalist system could also be read as commodification seeking to bottle the energies and aspirations of the postcolonial moment, which had the effect of channelling aspirations into modes of consumption.

As time wore on, disillusion set in among subalterns as political elites occupied themselves with displacing white colonials/settlers amid the evaporation of promises of development. The more development faltered, the more political elites attempted to enforce singular nationalist imaginaries. As is asked in Ngozi Edeagu's article: deliverance from colonialism came with pledges of abundance but for whom? The fruits of independence turned to be mostly reserved for ruling elites, an outcome that increasingly required clampdowns on expression and opposition. Thus, it is only in conflict with the state, according to Edeagu, that we can find the voices articulating alternative imaginaries for post-independence existence, which again confirms the extent of suppression through grand nationalist narratives.