

Subject to Colonialism

African Self-Fashioning and the Colonial Library



GAURAV DESAI

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For Papa and Aai

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Acknowledgments

Completing one's first book project is perhaps one of the most awe-inspiring moments of an academic's career. One spends many years looking forward to its completion, and yet when it is done, one cannot help but feel nostalgic over the many trials and tribulations it has posed and the many persons in many places that have sometimes unknowingly provided encouragement, guidance, and occasional solace during its composition. Many of these are persons who to the writer remain nameless—the countless librarians and desk attendants in libraries, the various audiences at conferences, the many coffee-shop owners who let us sit in their cafes for hours pondering over the latest arguments of a Ngũgĩ or a Foucault. These are the many faces that appear before me and whom I wish I could thank individually.

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Dangerous Supplements

Critical (Mis)understandings

In October 1848, about forty years before the formal European partitioning of Africa, the British lieutenant governor Winniett visited the king of the Asante in the city of Kumasi. Winniett notes:

We immediately entered into conversation, and after briefly adverting to the kindly feelings of Her Majesty's Government towards him, I embraced the favourable opportunity thus offered for speaking to him on the subject of human sacrifices; I told him of the anxious desire on the part of Her Majesty, that these sanguinary rites should be abolished, and begged his serious attention to a question so important to the cause of humanity.¹

Upon hearing this the Asantehene, we are told, asked whether the governor had himself witnessed any such sacrifices. When Winniett responded in the negative, the governor's journal records the king's response as follows: "He then observed that although human sacrifices were the custom of his forefathers, he was reducing their number and extent in his kingdom, and that the wishes of Her Majesty should not be forgotten."²

The fact that this last utterance is as much a product of Winniett's official discourse as it is perhaps that of the Asantehene should be self-evident to any student of colonial discourse. The particular historical circumstances in

1. W. Winniett, "Journal of Lieutenant Governor Winniett's Visit to the King of Ashantee," in *British Parliamentary Papers, 1949*, 235.

2. Ibid.

which this report emerges, the circumstances of growing colonial commercial interest and the sure encroachment of political rule, mark this utterance as emblematic of the moment of early colonialism in Africa. The trope is that of a savage Africa awakening from its ugly history of “cruelty” and “doom” (two of the most common descriptive terms employed in the official letters, telegrams, memoranda, and directives) to face a more “civilized,” “humane” culture personified in the very being of “Her Majesty” the English queen. The “civilizing mission,” in other words, is here seen to promise positive results and vindicate Winniett’s ambassadorial mission. Yet ironically, this particular image of a changing Africa has always to be put in check by the fear of the possible return of the repressed. Thus even over half a century later, with British rule well under way, the threat of an African return to “savagery” must remain to legitimate the project and the presence of colonialism.

Consider here the report of Sir Frederick Hodgson writing from the same space—Kumasi—in the year 1900. In response to the Asante demands for increased political autonomy and the return of Prempeh (the Asantehene deposed and banished by the British), Hodgson resorts to the traditional argument for colonialism. Equating African political autonomy with indigenous desire for commerce in slavery, Hodgson employs the familiar rhetoric of a British humanitarianism: “As regards the buying and selling of slaves,” he informs the Asantehene, “black men might regard themselves as no better than cattle, to be bought and sold as opportunity offered or as circumstances dictated, but the white man [does] not and would not so regard them.”³ Through a convenient forgetting of the earlier non-African locus of the transatlantic slave trade, the traffic in slaves becomes in Hodgson’s rhetoric yet another manifestation of an inhumane and savage custom from which the natives must be saved.

If these images of an Africa capable of change but only under British tutelage become canonical ones, they do so because they fulfill the dreams and the promises of the colonial project itself—the “dual mandate,” as Frederick Lugard would later name it, of spreading “civilization” and humanitarianism while simultaneously expanding British economic interests.⁴ But even at the heart of these legitimating discourses, there are undercurrents of ambivalence

3. Frederick Hodgson, “Hodgson to Chamberlain, The Fort, Kumasi, 16 April 1900,” in *Great Britain and Ghana: Documents of Ghana History, 1807–1957*, ed. G. E. Metcalfe (Accra: University of Ghana, 1964), 512.

4. See Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (1922; rpt., London: Frank Cass, 1965).

and anxiety. If we were to return to our opening encounter between Winniett and the Asantehene, we would notice precisely such an anxiety. For we find in Winniett's records that the governor has been censured by the Asantehene not only when he is asked about his own encounters with human sacrifice, but also when the two men converse the following day:

[The King] then observed, that the number of human sacrifices were not so numerous in Kumasi as they had been represented, and expressed a hope that mere reports relative to such a subject, flying about the country would not be listened to; and he then observed, "I remember that when I was a little boy, I heard that the English came to the coast of Africa with their ships, for cargoes of slaves, for the purpose of taking them to their own country and eating them, but I have long since known that the report was false."⁵

Here, then, all the familiar accusations are reversed, and Reason and knowledge are seen to be on the side not of the British but of the Asante: just as the English invent a "savage" Africa, so do the Asante invent a "savage" English nation; slavery and homicide (in the form of cannibalism) are read here as English features, not African; the Asantehene through a period of cultural contact has overcome his prejudices; the English, however, have failed to do so. The Asantehene's story is not just meant to be didactic—in light of the encroachments on land and liberty that are soon to come, it is also a performative event intended to demonstrate his own critical awareness of the colonial uses of such tropes as "human sacrifices" for the purpose of legitimization.

If what is at work here is a form of critical (mis)understanding between cultures, then it is "critical" in at least three senses: "critical" as necessary or essential (since without such "mis-understanding" the project of colonialism would lose some of its legitimization); "critical" as incorporating the potential of critique (as we notice in the rebuke of the Asantehene); and finally "critical" in the sense of crises-ridden. Critical (mis)understanding in all these three senses becomes the very motor of colonial growth, and the trajectory of its functioning can be discerned at various moments in the colonial archive.⁶

5. Winniett, "Journal," 236.

6. See, for instance, the discussion of "profound misconceptions" between the missionaries and the Tswana in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 170–97.

The Colonial Library

If Winniett's narrative is about the critical (mis)understandings that the colonial encounter engenders, then it is also, at another level, about the processes of invention and counterinvention that take place between two cultures in contact. Functioning so effectively as a parable of the possibilities of native agency in a colonial context, Winniett's narrative speaks directly to the central issues of this book.

Concerned with a rethinking of what V. Y. Mudimbe has called the "colonial library"—the set of representations and texts that have collectively "invented" Africa as a locus of difference and alterity—*Subject to Colonialism* attempts to reimagine the colonial library as a space of contestation. Mudimbe's claim is that along with the physical colonization of geographical spaces and human lives in Africa, there existed an epistemological "colonization" that was responsible for reorganizing "native" African minds.⁷ My project is to investigate the conditions of possibility and the actual manifestations of precisely such an epistemological colonization as it emerges through the study of the colonial library. Inspired by the Asantehene's rebuke, however, my aim has been to understand the construction of the library and of the colonial process itself as a complex series of interactions between the colonizers and the colonized rather than as a unidirectional practice. African resistance, collaboration, and accommodation in all their forms are as much part of the history of colonialism, both on the social as well as epistemological plane, as are the various actions and intents of the European colonizers. I have sought to study the culture and practices of colonialism precisely as such a struggle between the colonizers and the colonized.

In proceeding with such a study, I have asked myself to be mindful of five caveats. First, that although the "colonial library" is a convenient label, it is by no means a body of texts that can be isolated in any absolute or rigid way. The constitution of this body of texts is in itself a subject of concern, as the system of inclusions and exclusions that are enacted in a given framework—disciplinary or otherwise—provide much ground for a political analysis of both epistemic and ontic relations. Much of the discussion in the second chapter is geared precisely to such a questioning. Here, in a historical interrogation of the concept of African rationality and its alleged basis in "race," I quite intentionally

7. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

read those colonial texts that have been excluded from consideration even in the most sophisticated postcolonial discussions of the concept of rationality. These texts, primarily written by psychologists and eugenicists, are integral to an understanding of the more widely read corollary discourses of anthropology or philosophy. To read these latter discourses without the backdrop of the former is to lose a great deal of their own historicity and their potentially interventionist intent. Furthermore, it is to have a very limited and skewed perspective of the constitution of the colonial library itself. Of course, any such widening of the scope of the colonial library must remind us that such pushing of its limits is endless, and any of our own readings of the colonial archives must remain at best partial and tentative.

My second caveat is that the most productive readings of the colonial library are bound to be those that read the texts not as reflections of particular colonial relations but rather as constitutive of them. This is a lesson I learn not only from the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams but also from the more recent work of speech-act theorists who insist on recognizing that even the most innocently constative utterance is at once a performative one.⁸ Discourses, in other words, *do* things with and in the world, and their very entry into the social is a subject of great importance to students of culture. The question to ask of a discourse is not so much what it says but what it does. And the results of such an investigation—of a reading for “rhetoric” rather than a reading for “sense,” as Andrzej Warminski puts it—will on occasion entail a paradox or *aporia*.⁹ For the literal meaning of a discourse may well contradict its rhetoric or its functioning in the larger context of its utterance. Throughout this book, I have been particularly interested in the rhetorical strategies deployed by various agents in securing their interests. Whether it is the advocacy of a particular pedagogical preference on the part of a South African inspector of schools (Charles Loram), or the marketing of a disciplinary agenda (Edwin Smith and Bronislaw Malinowski), or instead the framing of a nationalist project based on the ideas of culture and history (Jomo Kenyatta and Akiga Sai), I have found that the rhetorical ingenuity of these particular individuals makes their work all the more compelling.

8. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). For an account of the collapsing of the constative and the performative in speech acts, see Stanley Fish's reading of J. L. Austin, “With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida,” in *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 37–67.

9. Andrzej Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, Heidegger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

A third caveat that I have been mindful of is the importance of a revised notion of subjectivity—however decentered—that nevertheless retains a sense of human agency and practice. Here I find most compelling the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and his notion of the *habitus* as a structuring structure that limits but does not efface individual agency. The individual's *habitus* predisposes him or her to act in certain ways but does not limit him or her from choosing a wholly other set of options. One exciting task of interpretation is just this exposition of how a given subject functions when confronted with a set of options. The notion of the subject that underwrites this treatise is precisely such a Bourdieuan one, even though Bourdieu himself is invoked in a limited manner.¹⁰ Indeed, the most specific instances of such workings of subjectivity are my readings of Bronislaw Malinowski and Akiga Sai, the former an intellectual in exile attempting to find himself a home in a disciplinary and professional locus, and the latter a protonationalist subject attempting to gain political legitimacy in a colonial context. Such a focus on agency is indispensable for a critical understanding of the nexus of various discursive and institutional

10. Here I want to register my difference with a terminological distinction made by Bourdieu between “agents” and “subjects.” Bourdieu, working against the grain of a Lévi-Straussian humanism, is wary of the term *subject* because within the discourse of humanism, “subjectivity” and “subjectivism” has often implied an unlimited capacity of the “will” to rise above social constraint. As opposed to this free-willing and boundless “subject,” Bourdieu proposes “agents” who “fall” into the game of living and develop strategies (sometimes even unselfconsciously) that maximize their interests while acting within the rules of the game (Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990], 62–63). In a related move Chantal Mouffe writes, “We can . . . conceive the social agent as constituted by an ensemble of ‘subject positions’ that can never totally be fixed in a closed system of differences, constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation, but a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement. The ‘identity’ of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions and dependent on specific forms of identification. It is therefore impossible to speak of the social agent as if we were dealing with a unified, homogenous entity” (Mouffe, “Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott [New York: Routledge, 1992], 372). I am persuaded by both Bourdieu's and Mouffe's accounts of “agents” but am not worried about calling them “subjects.” So I choose instead to work with a revised and redefined understanding of subjects and subjectivity along the lines advocated by Bourdieu and Mouffe and to relieve the category of its earlier connotations. After all, who is to say that “unity” and “homogeneity” must always underwrite every conceptualization of the “subject”? Could we not—do many of us already not—think of ourselves as “subjects” and recognize that such subjectivity is split, multiply mediated, often contradictory and ambivalent?

formations in colonial Africa, and any attempt to efface such human agency is, I suggest, politically suspect.¹¹

My fourth caveat, and this is perhaps the most radical, is that the colonial library must include those African subjects who took it on themselves to engage with the discourses of the colonizers and to produce their own inventions of Africa. There seems to be no conceptual, theoretical, or even political advantage in reading the works of these African subjects as somehow removed from the colonial library. Africanism, like Said's Orientalism, was a discourse that permeated the lives of both the observed as well as the observers—the colonized as well as the colonizers—and both participated, albeit unequally, in the constitution of the colonial library. To say this is not to erase the distinction between the colonizer and the colonized but to understand the colonial library as itself an important terrain of colonial tension and struggle. Seeking to represent themselves from their own perspectives and worldview was indeed an important aspect of African cultural nationalism and resistance, and to undermine these attempts by placing the writings of such important thinkers as Jomo Kenyatta or Akiga Sai in a space tangential rather than central to the colonial library does both them as well as us a great disservice.

My fifth and last caveat is that just as the inclusion of Africans in the colonial library forces us to reshape our understanding of its configurations, so it is that the attempt to hear the voices of “other others” in the archives forces us to recognize its continued limitations. The most obvious instantiation—though not by any means the only one—is the marginalization of African women in the colonial library both by European as well as by African writers. Thus, for instance, when issues of rationality and pedagogy are discussed in this library, they almost exclusively revolve around male education. It may well be the case, as some may want to argue, that no exclusion of girls was intended, but the absence of any discussion of gender, particularly in light of the fact that on many an occasion the pedagogical situation did reflect gender divisions (with girls taking courses on “home education”), renders this claim implausible. Yet as my own project shows, particularly in the context of the Af-

11. Or as Simon Gikandi eloquently puts it, “If there is any political motivation behind my book, it is the absolute rejection of the popular image of the colonial borderland as a victimized margin, one without a voice in the shaping of the larger imperial event, one without its own strengths and interests, one without agency in the shaping or representation of modern identities. The colonial archive contains many instances of what I consider to be peripheral agency” (*Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1996], 38).

rican texts that I read, the issue of gender and the issue of “woman” become central to the work of a nativist imagination. The central thematic of Kenyatta’s text and its reception is the question of female circumcision, and as I argue extensively in my last chapter on the Tiv historian Akiga Sai, “woman” becomes a synecdoche for tradition.

These five caveats—the constitution of the colonial library as essentially open; the reading of discourses as actions rather than reflections; a revised notion of subjectivity and agency; the central rather than marginal character of African texts in the colonial library; and the importance of gender as the often unspoken category of analysis—underwrite the claims that I make herein. The book as a whole moves analytically from the outside in as well as from the panoramic to the particular. Thus, for instance, the first chapter on race and rationality almost exclusively reads the texts of non-Africans, the second chapter reads two Europeans and ends with a Kenyan, and the last chapter focuses exclusively on a Tiv historian. This intentional move is paralleled by a move from an interest in larger disciplinary or discursive issues to an interest in very particular and local articulations of colonial modernity. Both these levels of analysis are necessary for an understanding of the colonial library, and taken together, they enable us to rethink the workings of colonialism.

At the most general level, this book attempts to generate a historical understanding of some of the issues that continue to permeate our own “postcolonial” discussions of Africa. What happens when Africa, for so long the great aporia of postcolonial thought, takes center stage? How must the discourses of postcolonial studies—discourses such as those of hybridity, colonial subjectivity, subalternity—necessarily be revised, given a more elaborated understanding of their manifestations in colonial Africa?¹² It is important to rec-

12. Abiola Irele writes in this regard: “In very significant ways, African discourse, along with other ‘minority discourses,’ has urgently anticipated some of the current preoccupations in Western thought. These anticipations were not necessarily theorized, or if they were, as in the case of Fanon mentioned earlier, they were not formulated in exactly the same terms as in currents of thought now commonly grouped under poststructuralism and postmodernism. But the ideas that are coming out of the Western world today strike us with a certain familiarity, for they address issues of authority, pluralism, and especially the relation between discourse and power. These ideas are concerned crucially with the question of discursivity and its crucial function in the claims to legitimacy and normativity in the social sphere, a question that goes to the very heart of our modern experience stemming from our encounter with Europe” (“Dimensions of African Discourse,” in *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy, and the “Postcolonial,”* ed. Kostas Myrsiades and Jerry McGuire [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995], 24–25).

ognize that although guided by postcolonial agendas, the story that I tell is primarily focused on the *colonial* moment. Much of the discussion of African discourse has revolved around *postcolonial* writers and philosophers. Although certainly significant in itself, a singular focus on *postcolonial* African discourse runs the risk of assuming an easy binary between Empire and Nation, the former being characterized as a condition of absolute domination and subaltern voicelessness and the latter by a triumphant revolutionary consciousness. One point of my story is to show that for better or worse a careful study of the colonial archive shows that this binary cannot be retained.¹³

The valence of the binary Empire/Nation is often at work in ways that sometime escape us. Why else, if not as a result of this binarism, would a text like *Things Fall Apart* (1958), written on the eve of Nigerian independence, continue to be characterized in the popular consciousness as one of the “earliest” written literary texts of Africa?¹⁴ Or why again does a discussion of African history before the postcolonial moment become synonymous in our minds with the tradition of the griots? Let it be clear that I am not suggesting that *Things Fall Apart* is an unimportant book or that griots were not crucial carriers and indeed propagators of historical consciousness in various African societies. Instead, I am pointing to our unacknowledged conceptual divide between the colonial and postcolonial moment that leads us to falsely equate the colonial moment with the oral and the postcolonial with the written. What happens then, to the works of those Africans who were *writing* under colonialism? What might a careful attention to writers such as Jomo Kenyatta and Akiga Sai do to our own stable periodization of the colonial-postcolonial divide?

It is here that the workings of the “dangerous supplement” that Jacques Derrida first elaborated in his reading of Rousseau become useful to my own

13. In his most recent book, Simon Gikandi makes exactly this claim. I see Gikandi's project along with the recent work by Ato Quayson and Carolyn Martin Shaw as sharing the same intellectual dispositions as my own project. Although Gikandi's project is an interrogation of the constitution of Englishness itself and in particular the gaze of the colonized, Quayson's a rigorous study of Nigerian literary tradition, and Shaw's an interrogation of race, sex, and class in Kenya, all of our projects are rooted in a desire to take the cultural production of African *colonial* subjects seriously. See Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness*; Quayson, *Strategic Transformations of Nigerian Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); and Carolyn Martin Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

14. What happens to texts by earlier writers such as Herbert Dhlomo, Sol Plaatje, Samuel Ntara, and Paul Hazoumé?

analysis.¹⁵ As Derrida elaborates, the dangerous supplement is that part of a given binary structure that is at first relegated to the outside, to the margin, to the position of inferiority, but works its way to the very center of the dichotomy, putting under erasure the earlier political hierarchy of the binary. Thus, for instance, in his various readings, Derrida shows how Woman, the supposedly subjugated figure of the male/female binary, begins to emerge in Nietzsche's thinking as the carrier of truth and power; or again, writing, often thought of as a debased form of speech in Western logocentric thought, often appears in the texts of Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss as always already structurally implicit in oral societies.¹⁶

This simple insight of the workings of the dangerous supplement is a powerful way to think about the African colonial library. If, instead of ignoring the cultural and intellectual production of *colonial* Africans, we take them seriously, we would see them precisely as the dangerous supplements of the colonial archive. My aim in reading Jomo Kenyatta and the Tiv historian Akiga Sai is quite explicitly to read them as such and to show that no matter how pernicious the colonial library may have seemed in the hands of some colonial agents such as eugenicists and clinical psychologists, it did not go unchallenged. Although postcolonial African thinkers must certainly be credited for extending the critiques and taking them in new directions, we must not forget their colonial predecessors.

Indeed, we cannot afford to forget them, since in an important way colonial writers such as Kenyatta and Sai serve the double function of being the dangerous supplements of both the colonial archive as well as our own postcolonial consciousness. For if it is clear that by including their voices in the archive of the colonial library the library is itself rendered fractured, incomplete, subject to internal critique, then it is no less clear that these thinkers most effectively put under erasure our all too easy schematization of the colonial-postcolonial divide.

In many ways, then, this book presents a study of colonialism not as a singular, monolithic structure but rather as a practice fraught with contradictions and tensions.¹⁷ *Subject to Colonialism* draws its inspiration from recent

15. The working of the "dangerous supplement" is illustrated by Derrida in ". . . That Dangerous Supplement . . ." in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 141–64.

16. Derrida calls this structural possibility *arche-writing*.

17. See Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).