

Rhodes Must Fall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa

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- Francis B. Nyamnjoh -

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Introduction

In a world that is increasingly marked by generous assertions of inclusiveness, even for extra-terrestrials, while paradoxically dogged by practices of exclusion, hence, Nyamnjoh's book is indispensable for teasing out hypocrisies of citizenship and belonging especially by those nations in the world that evangelise about openness, human rights and democracy. The book retraces the resilient hierarchies of belonging, citizenship, and humanity using a unique unsullied approach offered by the recent "Rhodes Must Fall movement" in South Africa. The work meticulously interrogates the Rhodes Must Fall xenophobia/Afrophobia, inequalities, and exclusion in South Africa and beyond.

In the introduction, Nyamnjoh focuses on *whiteness* and how indigenous Africans inspired by colonial hierarchies of humanity encourage their children to become “white” through self-cultivation assimilation. For the author, although whites are often conflated with whiteness, this should not visor and blind scholars to the whiteness that the so-called “blacks” and other variants of skin pigmentation may aspire to enact, achieve and eventually have in common, however hierarchised the order may be (pp. 1-2). Nyamnjoh traces the hierarchies of whiteness that have existed since colonialism while revisiting the hierarchies of blackness in which [indigenous] African people were historically reduced to property and considered indistinct from animals (p. 2-3; 9). Black South Africans insist on Black people as the only *makwerekwere* because the colonial and apartheid hierarchies of humanity and the whites’ assumptions of purity blind them to the fact that even whites such as Rhodes are *makwerekwere*, some of whom used corruption, self-deception, and greed for their own advantage and self-aggrandisement.

While questions of belonging and citizenship in Africa have been, as elsewhere in the world, amounted to aspirations of purity, authenticity, primary and often parochial identities (p 15). Thus, the writer argues for the need to encourage and provide for citizenship that negotiates and navigates matrices of conviviality from the intersections of myriad identity margins.

Content Evaluation

The book contains seven chapters. The first chapter argues that being and becoming are works and processes in progress requiring borrowings and enhancements to render them astute, beautiful and acceptable. In this chapter it is argued that bodies and essences are interconnected such that consciousness inhabits bodies and parts which are themselves never complete, but rather open, malleable vessels that are appropriated by consciousness in its multiplicity (p. 21). This is a conscious that allows for diversity, generative dialogue, and conviviality. While in his missionary evangelisation of the fineness and completeness of his British race Rhodes deluded himself about supremacy of his race (p. 24 - 25). This was coupled by his self-deception about the divine origins of his mission to civilise and convert others even as he ignored engaging them in conversations. Thus, in missions to evangelise about the superiority of their races, some humans like Rhodes ignore borders, visit uninvited, indulge, conquer unprovoked and transform others into zombies (p. 26, 29). Sadly, this proclivity to supremacies and purity is still evident in a dented world pregnant with resurgence of white supremacy, and where whites have for long fallibly believed that Africa has been lying ready for them to explore, exploit and take. The author demonstrates beyond question that racists design means to reproduce and maintain themselves through invisible structures including imperially outsourced companies, internationally influential secret societies and other racial social structures (p. 39, 41). To further substantiate his position, Nyamnjoh shows how the recent address in 2016 by Durban-based Penny Sparrow of Black South Africans as monkeys indicates resurgence of racism and colonial hierarchies of humanity.

In the second chapter (Black Pain Matters: Down with Rhodes), it is audaciously discussed how racists expect African people to trample and crush on their past “primitiveness” in order for them to be counted as progressive. He shows how “whitened” Black people, pregnant with fantasies of whiteness, try thick and thin to fit elusive and tantalising criteria for inclusion in a racialised world mired with mimicry and values of assimilations. This, for the author, is not only dehumanising but denies Africans their right to identity and self-esteem. Nyamnjoh, thus as with critical scholars Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) and Asante argues for the need to decolonise the minds of Black people that desire whitening-up and believing that whites and the West are hierarchically at the apex of humanity. Paradoxically, Black people, some of who exert a lot of efforts in whitening-up have been settled in poorly serviced places/locations where they are expected to bear with deep intimacy with excrement. Yet, some found revolting the fact that the Rhodes statue suffered only a bucket of excrement thrown on it (p. 72). On this note the author argues that black pain and white privilege are two sides of the same coin which for a long time have inherently co-existed in South Africa and many other African societies. For him, abstract human rights do not help address South Africa’s unfinished business as evidenced in the protests for “Rhodes Must Fall.” Although some sought to make protesting individual student leaders accountable as individuals, the writer argues that they did not act as individuals but represented collective disgust of Black people, the shared views of Black people that are still marginalised and excluded by the post-apartheid dispensation in the world, particularly in South Africa, including at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Thus, it is urged that there is a need to recognise Black humanity not through benevolence or magnanimity of the oppressor, but through collective action struggle. Sadly, however, many whites in South Africa seem to cling to their privileges conferred by apartheid (p. 90; 95). Such whites continue clinging to and benefitting from such privileges emanating from Rhodes’ colonial and apartheid projects even as they would want to behave as if Rhodes’ imperialism was merely his personal project. Such behaviour, for the author is a clear testimony of double standardness inherent in some “white” South Africa; even they claim to be Africans of equal status as indigenous Africans. Chapter three engages the question of identity wherein Nyamnjoh takes us back to the philosophy of hierarchies of humanity as forms of divide and rule which have occasioned violent ethnic cleansing in many parts of Africa. He argues that through its policy of inventing indigenes or natives, colonialism created and reinforced hierarchies among the “native” populations of its Africa colonies (p. 111). The consequence has been hierarchies of residency and inequalities in citizenship in many countries where some citizens are more citizens than others. Owing to these gradations, the “Rhodes Must Fall Movement” occurred concomitantly with an upsurge on violent attacks on Black *amakwerekwere* from Africa north of the Limpopo (p 114). In South Africa, thus, immigration policies and practices defy the rhetoric of inclusivity, conviviality, human rights and ties to the rest of Africa that proliferate in official pronouncements and civil society discourses.

In the fourth chapter, Nyamnjoh traces reactions to the intensity of the protests for Rhodes Must Fall Movement that saw the statue of Rhodes lifted on 9 April 2015 (p.145). While noting the source of the protest as present at UCT, the author argues that the protests spoke to much broader failure in higher education in South Africa since 1994 and to a much broader and deeper problem of exclusion of Black South Africans. Basing on this observation, the book argues for the need to transform structures that sustain racism and to transform curricula across academic institutions. However, the author is quick to advise that such transformation requires careful thinking to get it right (p. 145, 161). Chapter five (Lessons from Rhodes Must Fall) focuses on how to imagine and realise a common humanity in a context of mutual accommodation of people, irrespective of gender, race, class, place, generation; hence, the author discusses the Mandela-Rhodes Scholarship and its implication given the Rhodes Must fall movement and debates on inclusion (p. 188). In the chapter, the book also discusses African Renaissance and its implications on inclusion and connections in South Africa and between South Africa and the rest of the continent. Hence, the author discusses the implications of renaissance for open-ended identities of citizens in a way that recognises a futuristic inclusivity, generative symbiosis, interdependence and conviviality; a future that is not trapped in delusions of superiority or in celebrations of victimhood.

In chapter six, the similarities between missionary evangelists and Rhodes' colonial adventures is discussed, both of which had ambitions of dominance of which their evangelism was the method. On this note, Nyamnjoh critically grapples with the common aim between Rhodes and other evangelists who privilege conversion of others rather than conversations with them. He observes that like the missionaries, Rhodes did not want to learn from the interdependence and collectivism of endogenous Ubuntu but his intention was to convert Africans to his imperial project. To further expound on his point, the writer uses the biblical metaphor of ecclesiastical bodies in which he draws similarities between universities and missionary, ecclesiastical orders and hierarchies. Using this metaphor, Nyamnjoh advances the argument that questioning in a world of unequal relations and encounters can be a very serious offence notwithstanding pretences with critical engagements. In universities, such realities are perpetuated by solid disciplinary boundaries. There is need to un-discipline the disciplines in every university to ensure conviviality, intellectual freedom and generative symbiosis. Thus, the book argues against the existence of discipline and disciples in universities where secularism serves as smokescreen for fundamentalism (p. 218). The way to go, it is argued, is to take seriously the idea of conviviality, the need to cultivate and sustain accommodating and interdependent styles of relating, of sociability and communality, through careful and innovative negotiation of the constructive and destructive dimensions of being human.

In his last chapter, the author meticulously interrogates citizenship as a nebulous concept that tantalises reality given that in everyday life people have little room for dichotomies, even when their pronouncements or discourses might otherwise sometimes suggest. Against this backdrop, Nyamnjoh calls for nuanced citizenship that does not shy away from the complexity of being African.

He lobs for an understanding of identities as permanent works in progress. This is peremptory because for the author, the future of citizenship in Africa and globally lies in recognising and providing for the truism that rights articulated in abstraction and without obligations do not amount to any considerable significance. It is, thus, necessary to avoid scapegoating outsiders to ensure that the politics and economies of the world are not dominated by people of particular racial composition.

Conclusion

The book is a must read, and thus, useful for scholars, civil society activists, politicians, administrators, and students who desire to think and live beyond parochial notions of belonging into which Africa has been trammelled by colonialism and apartheid. The book is handy for discerning how colonialism and apartheid are resilient in Africa and the world as a whole. It is also useful for those who are working with contemporary theories on de-coloniality, resilience, transformation and vulnerability.