Online Article

The Compradorial Intellectual Challenge in Africa

This article confronts the resilient and corrosive problem of comprador intellectualism and scholarship in Africa. It builds on long-standing debates about intellectuals and their social vocation, from Gramsci, Benda, Said, Dabashi, Fanon, Cabral, Mafeje, Hountondji, Mkandawire, Falola, Zeleza and Mamdani to Shivji. It argues that the cognitive empire produced not only the racialised Black subject but also a stratum of African intellectuals, whose habitus, theoretical reflexes and citation practices remain organically tied to the metropole. I propose a heuristic typology of comprador intellectualism—the Schizos, the Assimilados, the Akimbos, the Flatterers, the Reactionary Sellouts and Those Who Cry More Than the Bereaved—while also articulating five concrete consequences of this phenomenon for African societies: extraversion of research agendas; theoretical poverty and conceptual dependency; the demobilisation of African publics; the distortion of policy; and the deferral of epistemic freedom. I conclude that the resurgent and insurgent decolonisation of the twenty-first century, galvanised by #RhodesMustFall and the wider continental insurgency in knowledge, offers the most viable horizon for resolving the comprador problem and constituting a genuinely African decolonial intellectualism.

Keywords: *African studies; cognitive empire; coloniality of knowledge; comprador intellectuals; decolonisation; epistemic freedom; extraversion*

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Introduction

The question of intellectuals is a loaded one. It is about who they are, whom they serve and what they owe to the social formations that produce and sustain them. It is one of the oldest and most consequential questions in modern social and political thought. In Africa, however, that question has acquired a particular urgency because of the unfinished business of decolonisation. While colonial flags were lowered and African flags raised across the continent throughout the 1960s, the deeper structures of what Aníbal Quijano (2000, 2007) named the 'coloniality of power' and what Ramon Grosfoguel (2007, 2011) elaborated as the modern/colonial world-system remained intact. Coloniality, as I have insisted across my work, 'is what survives colonialism' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 11; see also Maldonado-Torres 2007). It is the longue durée of imperial reason that continues to organise our economies, institutions, languages, gender relations, subjectivities and, most stubbornly, our universities and our scholarly habits.

This article addresses one of the most painful symptoms of that survival: the problem of comprador intellectualism and scholarship in Africa. The term is deliberately provocative. Originally drawn from Portuguese and applied first to merchants in Chinese treaty ports who served as intermediaries for foreign capital, 'comprador' passed into the lexicon of Marxist political economy through Mao Zedong, Frantz Fanon and Walter Rodney to describe a class whose interests are tied to imperial capital rather than to its own people (Fanon 1963; Rodney 1972; Amin 1990). Hamid Dabashi's (2011) *Brown Skin, White Masks* gave the concept a new life in his examination of immigrant intellectuals from the global South who serve as 'native informers' for empire. My argument is that, mutatis mutandis, the African academy harbours its own comprador stratum, that is, intellectuals whose locus of enuncia-

tion has been pulled out of African soil and re-grounded in the citation circuits, theoretical fashions and policy preferences of Euro-North American academia and its Bretton Woods extensions.

My intervention is not about individuals but a problematic phenomenon. The argument that follows therefore proceeds carefully. I begin by clarifying what I mean by comprador intellectualism and locating the concept within a broader genealogy of debates on intellectuals and society. The article draws from Antonio Gramsci's (1971) distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals through Julien Benda's (1927) *La Trahison des clercs*, Edward Said's (1994) Reith Lectures and Hamid Dabashi's (2011) reworking of Fanon. I then turn to the African scene and read the comprador problem through the work of those who have done most to map the terrain. These are Toyin Falola (2001, 2003), Thandika Mkandawire (1995, 2005), Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2003, 2009), Mahmood Mamdani (2007, 2018), Issa G. Shivji (2006, 2009), Archie Mafeje (1976, 2000), Paulin Hountondji (1997, 2002), Claude Ake (1979) and Peter Ekeh (1975), among others.

Building on these foundations, I propose a typology of comprador intellectualism with six recognisable figures: the Schizos, the Assimilados, the Akimbos, the Flatterers, the Reactionary Sellouts and Those Who Cry More Than the Bereaved. I then identify five interlocking consequences of this phenomenon for African societies. Finally, I sketch the elements of a 'strong case for epistemic freedom' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) and argue that the resurgent and insurgent decolonisation of the twenty-first century, which was given material force by the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements (Nyamnjoh 2016; Mbembe 2016) and continental institutions like CODESRIA, offers the most credible horizon for resolving the comprador problem.

The intellectual stakes are high. Without confronting the comprador question, African scholarship cannot advance the wider struggle for what I have called epistemic freedom: the right of African peoples to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop their own methodologies and write from where they are (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3). It cannot constitute the African university as a locus of African thought rather than a colonial outpost (Mamdani 2018). And it cannot honour the Pan-Africanist injunction, articulated most powerfully by Kwame Nkrumah, Amílcar Cabral and Steve Biko, that decolonisation must reach the mind as much as the soil and the state (Cabral 1973; Biko 1978; wa Thiong'o 1986).

What Is comprador intellectualism? A conceptual clarification

The category of 'comprador' carries a specific freight. In Mao's writings on China and Fanon's diagnosis of post-independence Africa, the comprador bourgeoisie is a class without a productive base of its own; it lives parasitically off the circulation of metropolitan goods, ideas and recognition (Fanon 1963; Mao 1971). Fanon's verdict on this stratum in *The Wretched of the Earth* is searing. He charges it with 'intellectual laziness', 'spiritual penury' and a 'profoundly cosmopolitan mould'(Fanon 1963: 149). The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries, he wrote, is 'not engaged in production, nor in invention nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalised into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket' (Fanon 1963: 150). Fanon's analysis was political-economic, but its application to intellectual life was already implicit. The native middle class, he warned, would inherit colonial institutions and content itself with mimicking metropolitan modes of thought and consumption.

Walter Rodney (1972) extended Fanon's analysis in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, mapping the structural location of the African comprador class in a world-system organised by imperial capital. Samir Amin (1990) further theorised 'delinking' as the only viable strategy for societies trapped in this asymmetrical integration. Dabashi (2011) shifted the analytic from class to academic vocation. His comprador intellectual is the figure who writes, lectures and consults from positions in Western universities or think tanks but whose authority depends on his or her ability to translate, simplify and confirm the imperial gaze upon his or her own region of origin. The comprador, in Dabashi's account, performs a double labour: extraction of cultural raw material from the periphery, and production of 'native informer' knowledge that justifies imperial intervention.

In Africa, the comprador intellectual takes particular forms because the continent has been so deeply structured by the cognitive empire (Santos 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 2021). The cognitive empire is the long imperial project of capturing, organising and provincialising African mental universes through colonial languages, colonial schools, colonial universities, colonial disciplines and colonial canons. Even African universities that came into being after indepen-

dence remain, in Boubacar Boris Diop's evocative phrase, 'outposts of European thought in Africa'. Paulin Hountondji's (1990, 1997) thesis of intellectual extraversion captures this structural condition with great precision. African research, he showed, is overwhelmingly oriented towards debates, audiences, theoretical fashions and institutional gatekeepers located in the global North. African scholars become, in effect, fieldworkers for theories made elsewhere; they collect data on Africa and ship it abroad to be theorised.

I therefore define the comprador intellectual as a scholar of African origin whose epistemic, theoretical and institutional fidelities lie outside Africa, and whose intellectual labour (whatever its formal subject matter) works ultimately to authorise rather than to dismantle the cognitive empire. This is not a charge of personal venality, although venality often accompanies the type. It is, rather, a structural and habitus-level diagnosis. A comprador intellectual may genuinely believe himself or herself to be a critic of empire even as the conditions, audiences and reward structures of his or her work continue to reproduce imperial hierarchies of knowledge.

Three clarifications are essential. First, comprador intellectualism is not the same as engagement with non-African theory or thinkers. African thought has always been worldly; from Kwame Nkrumah's reading of Marx to Cheikh Anta Diop's mastery of Egyptology, our greatest minds have moved confidently across world archives (Mkandawire 2005; Falola 2001). The question is not whether one reads Foucault but on whose terms and in whose service. Second, comprador intellectualism is not synonymous with diaspora. Many of the most radical African scholars work or worked outside the continent, including Mamdani (1996), Zeleza (2003), Mbembe (2001), Falola (2001) and myself, and yet remain firmly anchored in African intellectual problems. Geography is less decisive than locus of enunciation (Mignolo 2009). Third, comprador intellectualism is not reducible to political loyalty. Some comprador scholars are vehemently anti-government; others are praise-singers for power. What unites them is a deeper alignment with the categories, theories and reward structures of the cognitive empire.

With this conceptual ground laid, I now situate the problem of the comprador intellectual within a broader genealogy of debates on intellectuals and society.

Intellectuals and society: A broader genealogy

Modern debate on the figure of the intellectual is often said to begin with Julien Benda's (1927) *La Trahison des clercs*, written in the wake of the Dreyfus affair. Benda accused the 'clerics'— men of letters and learning who, in his view, were custodians of disinterested universal values—of betraying their vocation by harnessing thought to nationalist, racial and class passions. His diagnosis was conservative and idealist; his ideal of the intellectual as detached spectator has been thoroughly criticised. But Benda named a problem that recurs: the intellectual's susceptibility to the sirens of power.

Antonio Gramsci's (1971) *Prison Notebooks* gave the question a more sophisticated formulation. Gramsci's distinction between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals continues to shape contemporary debate. Traditional intellectuals consisting of clergy, judges, academics and men of letters present themselves as autonomous from the social classes they serve, but their autonomy is largely illusory. Organic intellectuals, by contrast, emerge from particular social classes and articulate those classes' worldviews and interests. For Gramsci, every social group 'creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function' (Gramsci 1971: 5). The political stakes of intellectual labour, in this view, are inescapable: the question is not whether an intellectual is partisan but whose interests his or her thought articulates.

Edward Said (1994), in *Representations of the Intellectual*, distilled a Gramscian-inflected ethics of intellectual life. The intellectual, Said argued, is 'an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public' (Said 1994: 11). The intellectual's posture should be one of 'exile and amateurism', that is, outside the sanctuaries of the establishment, refusing the consolations of expertise, 'speaking truth to power'. Said's diagnosis of the corruptions of intellectual life, such as the lure of the consultancy, the seduction of think-tank stipends, the fear of professional marginalisation, remain pointedly relevant to the African scene.

Hamid Dabashi (2011) recast Said's 'intellectual in exile' through Fanon's vocabulary of skin and mask. Where Said imagined the exiled intellectual as a critical conscience, Dabashi traced the underside of it: the immigrant intellectual who exchanges criti-

cal exile for native-informer privilege. His *Brown Skin, White Masks* examined how scholars from the global South became central to the rhetorical infrastructure of the post-9/11 imperial project, lending their 'authentic' voices to wars and interventions that ravaged their home countries. The comprador intellectual, in Dabashi's analysis, is structurally a subaltern in metropolitan institutions but functionally a collaborator with empire.

These four interlocutors, namely Benda, Gramsci, Said and Dabashi, frame the wider terrain. They establish three propositions that are essential for what follows. First, intellectual labour is inescapably political. Second, the intellectual's social location and audience matter as much as his or her subject matter. Third, the lure of empire, which include its rewards, prestige and protections, is a permanent danger to those who work in its institutions. Africa's comprador problem must be read against this wider terrain but it cannot be reduced to it. The African case has its own specificities, given the depth of the cognitive empire's penetration of the continent and the structural extraversion of its knowledge institutions.

Understanding African intellectuals

African intellectuals have not been silent about their own predicament. From the founding generations of African nationalism to the present, a rich literature of self-examination has accumulated, mapping the conditions, contradictions and choices that face those who think and write from Africa or about Africa. This literature deserves more careful engagement than it usually receives.

Toyin Falola's (2001) *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* remains foundational. Falola traces the symbiosis of nationalism and intellectual life across the long twentieth century, from Edward Wilmot Blyden, James Africanus Beale Horton and Joseph Casely Hayford to Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Amílcar Cabral. The first generation of African intellectuals, he shows, was self-consciously engaged in producing knowledge for liberation. They wrote, lectured, organised newspapers and built institutions in the service of African self-determination. Their successors inherited the universities and the states; the question was whether they would inherit the political vocation. In a related study, Falola (2003) emphasised the 'intellectual challenges' of African globalisation and the necessity of building autonomous African knowledge institutions.

Thandika Mkandawire's (1995, 2005) periodisation of three generations of African intellectuals provides the most influential schema for understanding intergenerational change. The first generation, trained largely abroad in the late colonial period, returned with anticolonial conviction and devoted itself to the decolonisation of institutions and knowledge. The second generation, trained from the 1970s and 1980s, came of age amidst structural adjustment, the closing of the African public sphere and the imperial rehabilitation of authoritarianism through Western-led 'good governance' agendas. The third generation, born after independence and locally trained under conditions of profound institutional crisis, is, in Mkandawire's diagnosis, 'less ideological' and 'very critical of [its] own governments', but also more vulnerable to the seductions of the consultancy and the donor circuit (Mkandawire 2005: 12). His analysis is sober and important: it reminds us that the comprador problem is generational as well as structural, and that each generation faces distinct material conditions.

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2003, 2009) has written extensively on the relationship between African nationalism, African intellectuals and the global political economy of knowledge. His *Rethinking Africa's Globalization* (Zeleza 2003) offers a wide-ranging diagnosis of the asymmetries that structure African knowledge production: the exodus of scholars to the global North; the donor dependency of African universities; the dominance of Anglophone publication outlets; and the marginalisation of African languages from scholarly life. His later work has turned with increasing urgency to the question of the African academic diaspora and the conditions for its productive engagement with the continent (Zeleza 2009).

Mahmood Mamdani's reflections on intellectuals are dispersed across many texts, but his now-classic distinction between the scholar and the public intellectual, drawn from his reading of the Mazrui-Rodney debate at Makerere and Dar es Salaam in the 1960s and 1970s, repays close attention (Mamdani 2018, 2019). Mazrui, in this rendering, embodied the universal scholar, 'fascinated by ideas' and committed to the classical European model of the disinterested university. Rodney embodied the public intellectual, who saw the university as a space of activism and knowledge as a weapon in the unfinished struggle against imperialism. The crucial moment in Mamdani's recollection is Mazrui's reply to Rodney that 'no amount of radicalism in a Western-trained person can eliminate the Western style of analysis he acquires. After all, French Marxists

are still French in their intellectual style' (cited in Mamdani 2018). The exchange exposes a problem that any honest African scholar must face: the radicalism of one's politics does not automatically translate into the decolonisation of one's mode of reasoning. Mamdani (2007) developed these themes in *Scholars in the Marketplace*, his autopsy of the neoliberal reform of Makerere University, and in his later writings on the African university (Mamdani 2018, 2019).

Issa G. Shivji's (2006, 2009) interventions form an indispensable counterpart to this literature. Shivji has been the most consistent and uncompromising critic of what he calls the 'compradorial intelligentsia' of postcolonial Africa. His *Silences in NGO Discourse* (Shivji 2007) remains one of the sharpest dissections of the consultancy economy and its corrosive effects on African intellectual life. Shivji's thesis is straightforward: the NGO sector and the donor-funded research economy that grew up around structural adjustment produced an entire generation of intellectuals whose primary skill is the writing of project proposals to satisfy Northern funders, not the building of an African theoretical tradition. The 'rights talk', 'good governance' and 'civil society' idiom that has come to saturate African political vocabulary is, in his view, a product of this compradorial knowledge economy. Shivji was deeply disturbed by the fall of some African intellectuals from being revolutionary thinkers to camp-followers on neoliberal thinking especially after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. He was never amused by the shift from radical political economy analysis to culturalism and identitarian analysis.

Archie Mafeje (1976, 2000) waged a relentless war against what he called the 'epistemology of alterity', that is, the practice, originating in colonial anthropology, of constituting Africa as Europe's eternal Other. His insistence on the 'endogeneity' of knowledge, grounded in and driven by the affirmation of African experiences and an autonomous African accounting for the self, anticipated by decades the contemporary calls for epistemic freedom (see also Bangura 2005). Mafeje's career, twice broken by the racism and parochialism of South African universities, is itself a parable of how institutions punish those who refuse to be compradors (Hendricks 2008).

Across these thinkers, a shared diagnosis emerges. The conditions of African intellectual life are not benign; they exert constant downward pressure towards extraversion, mimicry and the surrender of theoretical autonomy. The comprador intellectual is not an aberration but a structural product. The question, then, is whether and how that structure can be broken.

Mapping the types: Six figures of comprador intellectualism

Drawing on this literature and on my own observation of the African scholarly scene over four decades, I now propose a typology, which is necessarily heuristic and necessarily incomplete, of six recurring figures of comprador intellectualism. These types are not mutually exclusive; particular scholars often combine elements of several. The point of the typology is not to label individuals but to make visible patterns of intellectual posture that have proven remarkably durable and remarkably damaging.

The Schizos

The first figure is what Ali A. Mazrui (1978) named, with characteristic flair, the schizophrenic African intellectual. Mazrui's *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa* traced the production of the African educated class through colonial and missionary schools and diagnosed the crisis of consciousness that afflicted those of us who passed through that machinery. The Schizo lives in two worlds: an African home life of extended kin, ancestor, vernacular language and embodied memory; and a professional life conducted entirely in English or French and structured by the categories of Western disciplines. The condition is one of double consciousness, in W. E. B. Du Bois's (1903) sense, but without the synthesis Du Bois imagined as a horizon. The Schizo is not a traitor; he or she is divided. The danger of the type is that the division, unresolved and unexamined, produces work that is theoretically unmoored, neither rigorously African nor genuinely universal, but a kind of bilingual ventriloquism. Mazrui himself was, of course, far more than a Schizo; his recognition of the condition was part of his lifelong wrestling with it (Mazrui 1986; Adem 2014). But the type he named persists across generations.

The Assimilados

The second figure is the African scholar who has embraced the Eurocentric protocols of his or her discipline and seeks excellence within them. This figure adopts the methodologies, theoretical canons, citation practices and disciplinary boundaries of the metropolitan academy and aspires to acceptance on its terms. Validation in this stance comes from publication in

high-ranked Northern journals, citations from Northern colleagues and invitations to Northern institutions. The Assimilados, to borrow the bitter Lusophone term for the colonial-era Africans who were granted limited citizenship in exchange for cultural conformity, are often outstanding within their disciplines and frequently produce work of genuine quality. The problem is not their competence but their imagination: Africa appears in their work as a case study, not as a site of theory; as a problem to be explained, not as a place from which the world is interpreted. The Assimilado is the contemporary heir of what Fanon (1967) diagnosed as the colonised intellectual whose 'white mask' was inseparable from the conditions of professional success. Hountondji's (1990, 1997) thesis of intellectual extraversion describes their structural condition with precision, and Mafeje's (1976, 2000) critique of alterity describes the epistemological consequences. The Assimilado position is in many ways the default of the contemporary African academy.

The Akimbos

The third figure is harder to name and harder to evaluate. The Akimbos are those who occupy a liminal position, with one foot in Africa and one in the global North, and who try to forge a third space between them. They write for both Northern and African audiences; they cite both Northern theory and African thinkers; their work is often hybrid, ambivalent and difficult to categorise. The Akimbos are not, in my analysis, straightforward compradors. Many of the most important African scholars working today occupy this liminal space and have produced enormously valuable work from it (compare the discussion in Mbembe 2001 and Mudimbe 1988). But the position is unstable. It can produce critical hybridity; it can also produce a perpetually deferred decision in which the scholar avoids the full implications of decolonial commitment by continually appealing to the Northern audience as ultimate arbiter. The akimbo posture with arms on hips, refusing to commit fully to either side, is intellectually generative when self-aware and politically clear. It becomes compradorial when its ambiguity becomes a strategy for never having to make a stand.

The Flatterers

The fourth figure is what I and others have called the 'regime intellectual' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Adesanmi 2011). The Flatterer makes his or her career by serving political power rather than examining it. In Zimbabwe, the term has acquired specific currency to describe those academics who provided ideological cover for the worst authoritarian excesses of the late Mugabe period in exchange for cabinet positions, parastatal directorships, academic chairs and access to land (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). The late Pius Adesanmi (2011) wrote with searing clarity about the Nigerian variant: the 'errand boys' of state power who travel between palace and lecture hall, lending intellectual prestige to whatever the regime requires. The Flatterer is a comprador not of foreign capital but of domestic power; he or she has betrayed the intellectual's vocation in Said's (1994) sense by exchanging truth-telling for proximity to office. Yet the Flatterer is rarely truly autonomous from the wider cognitive empire either, since the categories of his or her flattery—'African solutions to African problems', anti-imperial nationalism, sovereignty discourse—are typically deployed instrumentally rather than thought through. The Flatterer is the regime's organic intellectual in Gramsci's (1971) sense, but for a regime that itself remains structurally subordinate to the world-system.

The Reactionary Sellouts

The fifth figure is, in my view, the most damaging of all. The Reactionary Sellouts are those scholars who, in the long aftermath of structural adjustment, have made careers out of producing the conceptual vocabulary of African pessimism. Their analyses depict Africa as the world's congenital problem case: prebendal, neopatrimonial, primordial, criminal, failed. They are routinely celebrated as 'critical scholars' in Northern policy circles and in Africa's English-language press. Their critical posture, however, is bizarrely one-sided. They are merciless towards African states, African leaders and African societies, but apologetic when it comes to deeper structural realities, such as enslavement, racism, colonial conquest, apartheid, the longue durée of imperial extraction and the violence of neoliberal restructuring. They are the ideal interlocutors for the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), USAID, Department For International Development (DFID), the European Union (EU) and the global consultancy economy. Their work fills the policy briefs that justify each new wave of conditionality. They are, in Issa Shivji's (2007) terms, the organic intellectuals of the 'new humanitarianism' and the 'good governance' agenda. They embody what decolonial scholars called the 'rhetoric of modernity', consisting of the salvationist, civilising idiom

that masks the underside of coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 11; Mignolo 2011). They are dangerous because they write fluently and publish prolifically; their imprint on African policy and on African self-understanding is correspondingly large.

Those Who Cry More Than the Bereaved

The sixth and final figure is, in some ways, a variant of the Reactionary Sellout, but distinct enough to deserve separate naming. These are the African scholars who have constituted themselves as the most vehement public opponents of decolonisation. They publish op-eds denouncing decolonial scholars as charlatans; they write essays warning that decolonisation is a threat to academic standards; they convene panels to argue that the African university must remain 'world class' by metropolitan standards. There is a Ndebele proverb that captures their posture exactly: *ukukhala okudlula abafelweyo* or, in Shona, *uchema kupfuura mufirwa*, that is, to mourn more than the bereaved. The bereaved here are those who built the Eurocentric intellectual and scholarly architecture and have attained dominance in the world and see the agenda of decolonisation of knowledge as a threat to their status. The criers are those who, well after the funeral, perform the most ostentatious lamentations not for the loss of African life and culture but for the imperilled prestige of the colonial library. Some of these figures occupy positions in elite universities and what unites them is their disproportionate emotional investment in defending the cognitive empire. They are comprador intellectuals at their purest because their entire intellectual identity has become organised around the defence of the structure that subordinates them.

These six figures do not exhaust the African comprador stratum; they are heuristic types intended to make pattern visible. Some scholars resist all six and produce decolonial work of the highest order. The point of the typology is to enable diagnosis, not denunciation; without diagnosis, we cannot prescribe.

Consequences: What comprador scholarship does to Africa

The comprador problem is not an abstraction. It produces concrete consequences for African societies. I identify five.

Extraversion of research agendas

The first and most general consequence is the extraversion of African research agendas. Hountondji (1990, 1997) named this condition with great precision. African research, he showed, is structured by the priorities, fashions and funding cycles of the global North rather than by the questions that matter most to African societies. African scholars do not choose their research questions in dialogue with their fellow citizens; they choose them in dialogue with grant-making bodies in Brussels, London, Washington and Berlin. The result is that vast intellectual energy is poured into questions that matter little to African publics and almost no energy into questions that do. There are questions that are intellectually important, but in the context of the global political economy they are commercially unfundable. Comprador scholarship is thus characterised by a vast asymmetry between the questions it answers and the questions Africa actually asks of it.

Theoretical poverty and conceptual dependency

The second consequence is theoretical poverty. African scholarship, despite the genuine richness of African intellectual traditions, has come to depend on metropolitan theory in ways that have impoverished its theoretical imagination. The seminar room in Cape Town, Nairobi, Dakar, Ibadan or Harare is more likely to take its bearings from Foucault, Bourdieu, Habermas or Latour than from Cabral, Mafeje, Diop, Hountondji, Nkrumah, Fanon, wa Thiong'o or Zeleza. This is not, again, an argument against reading widely. It is an argument against the asymmetry of citation. Mafeje (2000), Hountondji (1997) and Zeleza (2003) all observed how rarely African theorists are cited in African work and how routinely European theorists serve as the theoretical 'spine' of African studies. The consequence is conceptual dependency: African phenomena are described through metropolitan categories ('modernity', 'civil society', 'the state', 'the public sphere', 'neoliberalism'), with the result that what is most distinctive about African experience falls through the categorial gaps. Comprador scholarship thus produces a peculiar pathology: theoretically dazzling treatments of African material that fundamentally fail to illuminate it.

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The demobilisation of African publics

The third consequence is the demobilisation of African publics. African intellectuals were, in the founding generation, organic intellectuals of liberation. They wrote in newspapers, debated in the streets, agitated in church halls, organised study circles, spoke from rural barazas and contributed to a vibrant Pan-African public sphere that ran from Accra and Dar es Salaam to Harlem and Paris (Falola 2001; Mkandawire 2005). The contemporary comprador intellectual, by contrast, is largely invisible to African publics. He or she writes in English or French for journals that few Africans can access, attends conferences in cities most Africans will never visit, and has little connection to the political life of the people in whose name he or she claims to speak. The consequence is a vast gap between the African academy and the African polity. Where African publics confront crises such as debilitating debt, corruption, climate, war and displacement, the comprador stratum is conspicuously absent from the public conversation. This is not because African publics are uninterested in ideas; they are profoundly interested. It is because the comprador intellectual has been gradually retrained to address other audiences entirely.

The distortion of policy

The fourth consequence is the distortion of policy. Where the comprador stratum is most active, it is in the policy and consultancy economy, and there its effects have been calamitous. The structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s were not imposed on Africa entirely from outside; they were also crafted, validated and operationalised by African economists trained in the World Bank and IMF and recruited into ministries of finance across the continent (Mkandawire and Soludo 1999; Mkandawire 2005). The 'good governance' agenda of the 1990s and 2000s likewise depended on the production of African intellectual cover. The current donor enthusiasm for 'tech-led leapfrogging', 'blended finance' and 'youth entrepreneurship' follows the same script: a metropolitan policy fashion, an African intellectual translator, an African ministry that signs off, and a wide public that lives with the consequences. In each case, the comprador stratum supplied the legitimacy that domestic constitutions could not (Shivji 2007; Adesina 2011).

The vocabulary that the comprador stratum has supplied to African policy is itself a damning witness. Concepts that originated as descriptive shorthand in the metropolitan academy, such as 'neopatrimonialism', 'prebendalism', 'primordial loyalty', 'fragile state' and 'ungoverned spaces', have been refined, exported and applied back to Africa by African scholars themselves, often with an enthusiasm that exceeds that of the original metropolitan formulators. These concepts share a common feature: they treat African political pathologies as endogenous deficits rather than as products of the longue durée of imperial extraction and the structural asymmetries of the world-system. They depoliticise; they pathologise; they substitute moral diagnosis for historical explanation. Adekeye Adebajo, Issa Shivji, Thandika Mkandawire and Jimi Adesina, among others, have all observed how the conceptual idiom of African pessimism functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy in donor circles, justifying intervention while foreclosing the possibility of African-led alternatives (Mkandawire 2005; Shivji 2009; Adesina 2011). The comprador stratum is the conduit through which these concepts pass from policy fashion to policy practice. The cost is borne by ordinary African citizens, who live in the world the policies make.

The deferral of epistemic freedom

The fifth and deepest consequence is the deferral of epistemic freedom. This is the master consequence; the four already named are its faces. Epistemic freedom, as I have defined it, is 'the right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop our own methodologies and write from where we are and unencumbered by Eurocentrism' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3). It is not a niche scholarly concern; it is a precondition of every other freedom that African peoples have fought for since the sixteenth century. As long as Africa cannot think for itself, it cannot govern itself; as long as it cannot govern itself, it cannot decide what to produce, what to teach, what to plant, what to build, whom to marry, how to die. The comprador stratum is the social basis for the deferral of epistemic freedom. Its existence allows the cognitive empire to project itself indefinitely as the natural form of knowing and to absorb each successive wave of African insurgency through the cooptation of its theorists.

This deferral is not merely an academic loss. It has profound implications for how African societies imagine their futures. When Africa cannot theorise its own experience, it cannot generate its own developmental visions; it can only translate visions made elsewhere into local idioms. When Africa cannot

theorise its own past, it cannot construct the historical consciousness on which any sustained collective project depends. When Africa cannot theorise its own present, it cannot recognise the openings for transformation that are visible only from where its peoples actually stand. The compradorial stratum thus functions as a kind of cognitive sluice gate, slowing and channelling the flow of African self-understanding into forms that are compatible with the wider system. The pathos of the situation is that many in this stratum genuinely believe themselves to be advancing African interests; the structural effects of their work nonetheless serve other ends.

The struggle for epistemic freedom is urgent

The remainder of this article sketches the elements of what I have called 'the strong case for epistemic freedom' and traces the contours of an emerging African decolonial intellectualism that has taken on resurgent and insurgent form in the twenty-first century.

Critique of Eurocentrism and refusal of the European game

The first move in the strong case is the critique of Eurocentrism and the conscious refusal to play what Frantz Fanon memorably called 'the European game'. Claude Ake's *Social Science as Imperialism* (1979) argued that the social sciences as constituted in Africa were not neutral disciplines that might be put to liberatory or imperial use depending on the practitioner; they were imperial in their very constitution. To do 'good political science' or 'good economics' by metropolitan standards was already to participate in the imperial project. Ake's claim is uncomfortable, but it is the indispensable starting point. As long as African scholars accept the metropolitan frame as the standard against which their work is to be judged, the comprador problem can never be resolved; it can only be displaced.

Understanding colonialism as a system of power

The second move follows Peter Ekeh's (1975, 1983) argument that colonialism in Africa must be understood not as an episode but as a system of power that produced enduring social formations, including the bifurcation of African public life into a 'civic public' and a 'primordial public', a disjuncture between state and society that has shaped African politics ever since. Mahmood Mamdani (1996) developed this analysis further in *Citizen and Subject*, showing how the colonial state institutionalised a 'bifurcated' rule that continues to shape postcolonial citizenship. The decolonial scholar must take seriously the institutional and ideational longue durée of colonial rule rather than treating colonialism as an unfortunate episode that ended with the lowering of the flag (Quijano 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007).

Grappling with the cognitive empire and the coloniality of knowledge

The third move is the conceptual labour of mapping the cognitive empire and the coloniality of knowledge. This is the work to which I have devoted the past two decades (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 2018, 2020a, 2021, 2023), carrying the burden of decolonisation with its deep roots in African scholarship and politics. The coloniality of knowledge designates the deep grammar of Western knowledge systems: their racialised division of humanity into knowing and known; their elevation of the European observer as the universal subject; their relegation of non-European thought to the status of folklore, ethnoscience or primitive philosophy; their structuring of disciplines around imperial cartographies (Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2000). The cognitive empire names the institutional and material apparatus of universities, journals, curricula, libraries, accreditation regimes and examination cultures through which the coloniality of knowledge is daily reproduced. To grapple with the cognitive empire is to recognise that decolonisation cannot be a matter of additive reform—including African names on reading lists, sprinkling case studies into modules—but must reach into the structure of disciplines themselves.

Engaging with the global political economy of knowledge

The fourth move is engagement with the global political economy of knowledge along the lines pioneered by Hountondji (1990, 1997). Knowledge is materially produced; its production depends on libraries, laboratories, publishing infrastructures, professional networks and currencies. The global political economy of knowledge is structured by the same asymmetries as the global political economy of goods. African scholars must understand and confront these asymmetries directly: the dominance of Northern publishers, the geographic skew of citation databases, the punishing cost of subscription journals, the dependency of African universities on donor funding, the brain drain (Zeleza 2003, 2009). These are not laments; they are sites of struggle.

Rethinking and unthinking

The fifth move is what Catherine Odora-Hoppers (2002, 2009; Odora-Hoppers and Richards 2012) has called 'rethinking thinking'. Decolonial scholarship must do more than substitute African content for European content within unchanged disciplinary frames. It must unthink the frames themselves. Why is it that 'philosophy' should be the name of one tradition rather than many? Why is it that 'history' should privilege written archives over oral and embodied ones? Why is it that 'economics' should privilege monetary exchange over reciprocity, gift and ancestral obligation? Odora-Hoppers's insistence on the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into the modern academy is not a sentimental gesture; it is a methodological one (Odora-Hoppers 2002).

Privileging the locus of enunciation and endogenous knowledge

The sixth move is the privileging of the African locus of enunciation and the recovery of endogenous knowledge (Hountondji 1997; Odora-Hoppers 2002; Mignolo 2009). This is not a return to a frozen, precolonial Africa; African knowledge has always been dynamic and worldly. It is the assertion that African experience, language, memory and concept are legitimate starting points for theory and not merely raw material for the theorisation of others. Mafeje's (1976, 2000) lifelong call for endogeneity, and the work carried out at CODESRIA and at the Archie Mafeje Research Institute (which I had the honour to direct), are foundational here.

Building new architectures of African knowledge

The seventh move is institutional and structural. It is not enough to write differently; we must build differently. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), founded in 1973, remains the most important and durable continental institution for autonomous African knowledge production (Mkandawire 2005; Sall 2017). The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements that began in South Africa in 2015, and the parallel insurgencies on campuses across the continent, represent the most powerful student-led challenge to the cognitive empire in two generations (Nyamnjoh 2016; Mbembe 2016; Heleta 2016). New architectures are also visible in the proliferation of decolonial journals, in the recovery of African languages of scholarship, in the building of South-South research partnerships, and in the political insistence on what I have called 'deprovincialising Africa'. This entails refusing the notion that European thought is universal and African thought is particular, and treating both as the situated theoretical traditions that they are (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

The student insurgencies of 2015–2016 deserve particular attention because they have done more in five years to disturb the cognitive empire than five decades of professorial commentary. The toppling of the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town on 9 April 2015 was an iconographic act with theoretical force: it materialised the recognition that the colonial occupies space and that decolonisation must be enacted in space, not only argued in print. The #FeesMustFall movement that followed forced the question of access onto the agenda of universities that had treated their own demographic transformation as a Human Resources matter rather than an epistemological one. The movements that ran in solidarity at Wits, Rhodes, Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Fort Hare, Durban, Western Cape and across the continent, including parallel insurgencies in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, produced a new generation of African scholars whose decolonial commitments were forged in struggle rather than acquired in seminars (Nyamnjoh 2016; Heleta 2016). The challenge facing those of us who teach this generation is to make sure that our institutions become hospitable to their commitments rather than absorbing them into the very structures they came to challenge.

A complementary institutional development has been the rise of new continental and South-South initiatives that operate outside the citation circuits of the global North. The Pan-African University, the African Humanities Programme, the CODESRIA Higher Education Leadership Programme, the various initiatives of the African Studies Association of Africa, and the proliferation of regional and continental open-access journals have built genuine alternatives to the metropolitan publishing economy. The cognitive empire still vastly outweighs these alternatives in resources, prestige and reach. But the architecture of an autonomous African knowledge economy is no longer merely a wish; it is an emerging reality. To build it further requires the conscious choice of African scholars to publish, cite and teach within it, even when, in the short term, doing so costs them the rewards that the metropolitan economy continues to offer.

Conclusion: Resurgent and insurgent decolonisation in the twenty-first century

The decolonial turn in the twenty-first century is not a repetition of decolonisation in the mid-twentieth. The earlier wave was, in Walter Mignolo's (2011) terms, 'first wave' decolonisation, which concentrated on the political and territorial questions of flag, anthem, parliament and border. It produced enormous gains; it left enormous unfinished business. The current wave is what Frantz Fanon (1963), Amílcar Cabral (1973) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) anticipated as the deeper struggle: decolonisation of the mind, the institution and the structure of knowledge itself (see also Chen 2010 on the parallel 'deimperialisation' project). It is resurgent because it draws on the long African intellectual tradition, stretching from the Kemetic libraries to Timbuktu, the courts of Great Zimbabwe and the universities of Sankoré, to the Pan-African congresses, the Bandung moment, the writers' conferences of the 1960s, the CODESRIA generation and the present. It is insurgent because it does not ask permission of the cognitive empire; it acts.

What is new about this twenty-first-century decolonisation? Several things. First, it is global in scope and explicitly situated within a wider global South solidarity that links African scholars to colleagues in Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean and the Indigenous Americas (Quijano 2007; Mignolo 2011; Grosfoguel 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Second, it is conducted under conditions of digital connectivity that allow African students and scholars unprecedented direct access to one another and to global archives without the brokerage of metropolitan gatekeepers. Third, it is led, in important ways, by students and by women, two groups that have been historically marginalised within African intellectual establishments and which have brought crucial energy to the current moment (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Heleta 2016). Fourth, it is multidisciplinary in the strongest sense, refusing the inherited boundaries of colonial disciplines and insisting that the questions of land, language, gender, sexuality, ecology and spirit must be thought together. Fifth, it is theoretically self-conscious about its own conditions of possibility and its own potential cooptation; its scholars know that the cognitive empire has been adept at metabolising its critics.

Can this resurgent and insurgent decolonisation resolve the comprador problem? Honesty requires that we say: not by itself, and not soon. The comprador stratum is structurally produced by the cognitive empire, and the cognitive empire will not vanish soon. What the current decolonial moment can do, and is doing, is to make comprador intellectualism visible, to make it costly and to make available the conceptual and institutional resources for a different practice. Visibility matters: the typology I have offered in this article is one small contribution to that work. Cost matters: as the prestige of decolonial scholarship grows, the prestige of unreflective extraversion declines. Resources matter: the founding of new departments, programmes, centres, journals and movements gives today's African scholars institutional homes that earlier generations did not have.

How, finally, does this advance epistemic freedom? Epistemic freedom is not a destination but a horizon and a practice. It is advanced every time an African scholar refuses the assumption that European theory is universal and African theory is local. Every time a graduate student dares to begin from her grandmother's vocabulary rather than from a French theorist. Every time a conference is convened in an African city and conducted partly in an African language. Every time an undergraduate syllabus places Cabral and Diop in genuine dialogue with Marx and Foucault rather than as exotic supplements. Every time we cite our own. Every time we write for our own publics in addition to whichever others we address. Every time we refuse the consultancy logic that turns research into procurement. Every time we say no to the offer of metropolitan validation that requires our theoretical autonomy as the price.

What is the nature of African decolonial intellectualism? It is, in my view, a form of organic intellectualism in Gramsci's (1971) sense, but organic to the African popular classes and to the long Pan-African project of liberation rather than to the comprador stratum or to global capital. It is committed, not detached; situated, not pretending to a false universality; rigorous, not relativist; plural, not monolithic; African in its locus of enunciation, and worldly in its concerns. It refuses both the consolations of nativism, since there is no pure African essence to be recovered, untouched by history, and the seductions of cosmopolitanism without place. It is, in short, what Cabral (1973) called the 'weapon of theory': the disciplined production of knowledge in the service of liberation, accountable to the people in whose name it speaks.

It is worth pausing on the discipline this commitment requires. African decolonial intellectualism is not simply more emphatic decolonial

assertion or more militant denunciation of the cognitive empire. It is the patient, daily work of building a different practice of knowledge: of reading widely in African intellectual traditions, of citing African scholars seriously rather than ornamentally, of teaching graduate students that they may begin from African questions, of insisting in editorial meetings that African journals deserve the same care as their metropolitan counterparts, of refusing the consultancy that compromises one's autonomy, of mentoring younger scholars into a craft that is both rigorous and emancipatory. None of this is glamorous; none of it produces the immediate prestige that the cognitive empire still controls. It is, however, the only path through which a different intellectual practice can become institutionally sedimented. Decolonisation, as Frantz Fanon (1963) reminded us, is 'always a violent phenomenon,' but the violence required of the comprador-against-himself or the comprador-against-herself is not bodily; it is the harder violence of giving up the self that imperial reward has constructed in order to become, at last, an African intellectual in the fullest sense (it is a return epistemically).

The choice before African intellectuals in the present moment is, in this sense, the same choice that has confronted every generation since the Pan-African Congress of 1900: whom do we serve, and on whose terms do we think? The comprador stratum has answered that question one way and produced the consequences this article has tried to name. A different answer is not only possible but already being given by the resurgent and insurgent decolonial scholars and movements of our time. The work of this generation is to give that answer institutional form, theoretical depth and lasting public consequence. There is no more important work for African intellectuals in the century ahead.

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