Postcolonial African Philosophy
A Critical Reader

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Honor, Eunuchs, and the Postcolonial Subject

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Jacques Eliza Joannes Capitein (1717-47) is the quintessential postcolonial subject. Capitein's poetry and disputations are similar to exemplary postcolonial texts by such authors as Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohamed, and Gayatri Spivak. Capitein, I will argue, was an intellectual eunuch. He was incapable of being honored, I try and show, for reasons having to do with his ideas, the world which those ideas inhabited, and what it is to be eunuch. Why Capitein is the quintessential postcolonial subject reveals the deep limitations of postcolonial theory—a theoretical approach that relies on a way of explaining reality incapable of lending support for a world any different than the one we now inhabit.

Capitein was born in West Africa, sold to the slave trader Captain Arnold Steenhart, and given by Steenhart to Jacobus van Goch, chief trader in Guinea at Elmina.1 He was soon taken to Holland for formal education. Ordained by the laying on of hands, May 7, 1742, ten months later he gave a public Latin oration on March 10, 1743, entitled “Dissertatio politico-theologica de servitute libertati christianae non contraria.” Capitein argued that slavery was compatible with Christian doctrine. Booker T. Washington, in Tuskegee, Alabama, approximately a hundred and fifty years later, saw African Americans as having gone through the “school of slavery,” a school that prepared its pupils for entrance into the Christian West as members and eventual co-equals in, and co-creators of, the new world.

Capitein arrived at Elmina, Ghana, on October 8, 1742, as chaplain and reformed pastor for the West Indian Company. He requested permission from his superiors in Holland to marry a local African woman. However, this was denied and he was sent, as one of the most honored of Africans, a Dutch girl, Antonia Ginderdos, by the West Indian company. Capitein faithfully pastored at Elmina, with little success as a missionary. Laudatory poems were written about him in Europe, and as a man of great learning his reputation was highly regarded by the Asante King Opoku Ware. A portrait of Capitein bears the most telling description of the highest honor he could achieve: “Look at this Moor! His skin is black, but his soul is made white, since Jesus himself intercedes for him. He goes to teach the Moors in faith, hope, and charity, so that they, made white, may honour the Lamb together with him.” The inscription accompanies the portrait of Capitein drawn by P. Van Dyck and etched by P. Tanjé.

Capitein saw the world as posttribal, postagrarian, postfeudal, and postbarbarian. He could, like contemporary authors, see the world as postnationalist, postindustrial, postcolonial, and postmodern. Assuming that Capitein was right, his explanations for why “post” conditions existed allowed him to infer that his world was the teleology of world history: that is, the world of Christology was the only reasonable world to envision and, as such, the end of world history. Posttribalism existed because Dutch Christianity and its mode of commerce helped destroy tribalism. All laudable character traits—for example, love, piety, sobriety, and grace—were expressed in Dutch Christian terms by Capitein. His dress, the geography of slave castles, Latin, etc., were for him embodiments of Christian traits. Character traits, in effect, caused, created, and shaped dress, castles, and language. Power, postcolonial theory often holds in concert with Foucault, is pervasive in literature as well as in politics. The abiding beliefs underlying christological doctrines were for Capitein the source of power shaping the world and any future world.

Capitein could not explain reality in a way that allowed him to infer or require, from his explanation, radical action. Nor, from his explanation of reality, does he predict the possibility or likelihood of a fundamentally different world. He could, however, hope for revisions of his existing world; revisions that would help make the ideal of christology universal. The death of slavery for Capitein, for example, would be coterminous with the triumph of Christianity over all domains; a triumph identical with the triumph of the Dutch. And the death of heathen, barbaric, and all “pre” forms of antiquated social life—or at least their absolute subordination to the material, military, commercial, and religious will of “post” sectors of the new global agents—would be coterminous with the triumph of christology. Capitein, living in a condition of posttribal reality, is analogous to the condition of postcoloniality in a way that makes Capitein’s role and theoretical stance quite similar to postcolonialist authors.

It is arguable that “Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-
style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In a perceptive critique of postcolonial theory, Kenneth Parker describes postcolonial authors as performing a similar role – bearing Euro-American culture to the formerly colonized. Appiah suggests that the condition of postcoloniality may not commit us to pessimism. Appiah writes:

For what I am calling humanism can be provisional, historically contingent, antiesSENTial (in other words, postmodern), and still be demanding. We can surely maintain a powerful engagement with the concern to avoid cruelty and pain while nevertheless recognizing the contingency of that concern.

Appiah, however, expresses a hope that Capitein did not share: “This human impulse – an impulse that transcends obligations to churches and to nations” may be found in postcolonial literature, but it is in no way an obvious obligation. If there is an impulse to condemn suffering and pain, the forms of suffering and pain that deserve strenuous condemnation are tied to religious obligations and identities. As Capitein surely knew, what counts as undue suffering, pain, and misery is tied to one’s religious obligations and identities. Such obligations help determine precisely whose suffering counts and for what. Thus, Capitein could consistently support slavery and continue as a good Christian ministering to the natives. He could hope for a better tomorrow because of the globalizing effects of such companies as the Dutch West India Company and the slave trade, which brought the unlettered in Latin and un-Christian into the world of civility, albeit painfully. Hope, like Christian faith, is what postcolonial theory appeals to as a bulwark against pessimism. Such hope and faith are completely empty of content, since nothing that is being hoped for is structurally different from what already exists. Capitein performed his role as mediator between Euro-Americans and the posttribal world admirably, lamenting the misery of the enslaved, having faith or hope in a better future, but having no way to fundamentally condemn the world that made that misery.

Parker and Ajay Ahmad share an interesting insight about the reasoning strategy of postcolonial theory. They demonstrate that “theoretical eclecticism runs increasingly out of control” in several ways: theories understood as offering a system or grand unified account of knowledge are rejected because they propose a finality (i.e., an ultimate end to capitalism in particular); grand unified accounts rely on collective agents and identities to explain, particularly, class and nation, when all such collectives are oppressive and all such identities falsely require or promote some notion of authenticity or origin. Yet, postcoloniality reintroduces collectives of class, race, nation, and gender as somehow collectives suffering from harm. Phenomena rejected for purposes of explanation are ironically accepted as recipients of concern. That is, “classes” are not treated as causal agents, but they are treated as groups suffering from a misery. These authors have done well to point out an explanatory incongruity of postcolonial theory – the use of social entities as impotent agents except in relation to fairly mundane expressions of sympathy and empathy.

I wish to point to how, if Parker and Ahmad are right, a postcolonial theory cannot make the misery suffered by starving immigrant workers, battered women, or enslaved children warrant concern more than the misery suffered by a multimillionaire exploiter of migrant workers who stubs his toe, the loneliness of rich lesbians, or the fear of bankruptcy by rich stockbrokers. There is nothing about any one of these categories that should require our commitment to the liberation of its members. The liberation of these categories and their members has no bearing on the benefit of any other category. Starving immigrant workers, for example, certainly want liberation from their misery, but their liberation cannot be taken as substantively capable of causing any other benefit. Postcolonial theory, in other words, rejects the idea of social entities as causal agents and it rejects the idea of social entities as people by a common subject. Thus, the liberation of women, for example, cannot mean any more than the liberation of the working class, lonely lesbians, or fearful rich stockbrokers. Mundane appeals to “humanity” will in no way explain why anyone should expect greater or less benefit from the relief of one misery over the other. It might be objected, however, that although Capitein, and authors employing postcolonial theory, consider social entities such as workers, women, nations, and classes as impotent causal agents, there are important differences between them.

Unlike Capitein, authors employing postcolonial theory disavow a totalizing narrative such as Christianity and deny envisioning the world as monocultural. However, these are not differences that matter. The world, for the postcolonialist, is already monocultural in the sense that it is an abiding tenet of postcolonial theory that we live in a postnationalist world of common cultural currencies. Consequently, by default, a totalized narrative already rules. To be against any new totalizing narrative is quite different from fighting against the one that already rules. One way to see this is by considering the contemporary status of religion.

The most important cultural movements in postcolonial nations are movements of religion. Never before has the world been so dominated by so few religions. There are no belief systems and associated social practices gaining more adherence than the religions of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Capitein’s desire is, to some degree, successful by default. That is, Christianity as a dominant force is undeniable. Yet, none of the authors associated with postcolonial theory supports an organization that advocates the absolute destruction of religion. To be against any new totalizing narrative could not warrant the same sort of radical organization required to seriously confront the existing totalizing narratives. Thus, any attack on the first is qualitatively different from an attack on the latter. There are other reasons...
besides Capitein’s similarity to postcolonial theory, however, for why Capitein is the quintessential postcolonial author.

Of particular importance to my argument is that J.E. Capitein had no way of explaining global reality in a way that would allow him to find the world of Christian Europe irredeemable, or at least sufficiently wretched to warrant enslavement as a modus vivendi for eventual liberation. He could certainly describe his social condition using a multiplicity of variables: for example, the sinful character of the human spirit or the struggle to achieve grace occurring too often through dedication to earthly items of worship. He had no way, however, of providing a system of variables (of the sort used by banks, Marxists, consulting firms to major political parties, or tea manufacturers). Capitein could explain the world in structuralist or poststructuralist terms. Sobriety and reason or frugality and wealth, for example, could be used by Capitein to explain why the Dutch West Indian Company was more successful than other companies or why slavery was a conduit for bringing heathens into civility. Even if Capitein rejected the idea of “explaining” in favor of a postmodernist concept of depicting reality, the success of the West Indian Company would still be pictured as a reality which did not allow us to predict any alternative future. His “post” world was, ipso facto, the end of all worlds.

Capitein was a voluntary intellectual eunuch. A genuine eunuch is incapable of creating progeny and is a member of a group that is generally despised. Eunuchs cannot create, control, or shape future generations. They cannot ascend above the trait that makes them generally despised – artificially delimited and alienated from affiliate relations. Eunuchs, as a collective group, are without the ability to provide an ideology that future generations would want to immolate or reverse. There is no way to assure the transfer of assets, wealth, and authority across well-defined generations. They are a category that does not have, as a function of what eunuchs are, redeeming qualities. Eunuchs, as individuals and as a category, cannot receive the exalted regard of honor.

Honor is a good that is necessarily attributed to a representative of a kind; and simultaneously, it allows the honored to ascend above their kind. Courage, for example, is a good that a Zimbabwean soldier can have as a Zimbabwean, but the soldier has the good as a function of traits shared by all courageous persons. Honor is a good that can be held just in case one is a member of a group that is susceptible to honor. Consequently, eunuchs cannot receive genuine honor because they cannot embody inviolable virtues as eunuchs and they cannot escape, or be seen as something other than a eunuch. Although, for example, poems were written to praise Capitein’s renown, he could never be honored. That is, he was prestigious but never revered. A voluntary eunuch, especially an intellectual eunuch, has the same limitations in relation to his or her ideas and lifestyles as a genuine eunuch.

Capitein is historically noteworthy solely because he represents a racial type encrusted in an intellectually respected cloak – a rare European-educated African – a DeFoe’s Friday who writes well. Capitein could proclaim in unison with Gayatri Spivak:

When Benita Parry takes us – and by this I mean Homi Bhabha, Abdul JanMohamed, Gayatri Spivak – to task for not being able to listen to the natives or to let the native speak, she forgets that we (Capitein included) are natives too. We talk like Defoe’s Friday, only much better.  

Capitein talks like Spivak, etc. He is concerned with the poetics of beauty and incongruity. He sees himself as beyond a representative of an origin, race, or authentic type. He too spoke better than DeFoe’s Friday. He never saw himself as representing any social collective, other than the one he inherited. He was African by heritage, a heritage he did not choose; but he was happily Christian. He was never a patriarch of any African tribe or nation, never an intentional representative of any class, or a defender of any civilization other than the one he understood as Christian.

Capitein was a model of what missionaries might accomplish and, consequently, he could only be a subject – someone to be written on – or at best an agent of critique. Capitein was like a dissenting colonizer. He could never propose modes of thinking or acting that would destroy any social entity that stood in opposition to the only social entity he gave ontological status – the European Christian community.

One way to see why the subject of the postcolonial discourse (i.e., the authors of the discourse and the postcolonial culture of which the discourse is about), is incapable of being honored is to ask the following: In defense of what, and in pursuit of what, is it reasonable to imagine Capitein as ruthless? Why does “being ruthless” seem antithetical to the being of Capitein? Ruthlessness is something Capitein could be if defending Christianity, or, with a stretch of the imagination, if acting as a missionary. He could not be ruthless in pursuit of his own freedom because then he would have to kill other Christians, destroy their ill-gotten property, and make use of weapons of war. Capitein would have to act in opposition to the social realities that give him meaning: that is, Christianity and modeling what an otherwise heathen can become – de-racial, ethnic, national, and “de” any other trait threatening to Christianity as Dutch. It would be out of character for Capitein to be ruthless toward any European-based Christian community.

Analogously, postcolonial discourse can discuss the oppressive character of autocratic regimes in former colonies, but it cannot proffer an explanation, depiction, or prediction that recommends ruthlessness toward former colonizers. The social entities that give postcolonial discourse meaning – the imperialism of England, France, Germany, etc. – cannot be the object of justifiable ruthlessness, destruction, and death. They are the “post” world which the “pre” world of former colonies is destined to become identical with, or
subservient to, save trivial differences of culture. That is, the “pre” world’s only
future is for its members to produce, distribute, value, and worship in the same
fundamental ways as the “post” world. The route to the “post” world is either
a school such as slavery leading to the “post” world or an unfortunate state of
autocratic barbarism awaiting enlightenment. The very meaning of “postcolonial”
is that nations in that position are no longer in the condition most definitive
of colonialism: that is parasitism. Why things happen is explained by what
called “post” conditions, and those causes have reached their teleology. The
lack of agency of classes, nations, races, ethnic groups, etc. leaves no reason to
believe that any future world would differ from the present. To recommend
ruthlessness toward former colonizers would be, for an author of postcolonial
theory, as out of character as Capitein recommending or killing a Christian slave
master, rapist, or thief.

There are no cases of someone having honor, ~ that is, having exalted regard
and deference, and being understood as the possessor of enviable virtues such as
courage, temperance, or sagacity ~ without that regard being a condition of
“representing.” No slave, eunuch, serf, or peasant was ever honored as slave,
eunuch, serf, or peasant. When members of such groups attained honorable
regard it necessarily had to be a function of behavior or attributes which made
them exemplary as “above” their lowly station: that is, “post.” In this “post”
world, no group, according to postcolonial theory, is an agent capable of
bringing into existence human liberation, no group embodies especially
laudable character traits, all future social structures are already present, and we
are to hope for a better future on the field of existing normality ~ a normality
that allows totalizing visions such as Christian visions to flourish. Since there
is nothing about social categories in the postcolonial theory that gives us reason
to believe that there will be a radically different future, we are free to be like
Capitein: an intellectual eunuch made so because his ideas could not help create
a different future than the one that made him despised.

Notes
1 Hans Werner Debrunner, Presence and Prestige: Africans in Europe (Basler Afrika
Bibliographien, Basel, 1979), pp. 80–1. Also see Sander L. Gilman, On Blackness
without Blacks (G.K. Hall and Co., Boston, MA, 1982).
2 Kwame A. Appiah, In My Father’s House (Oxford University Press, New York,
3 Kenneth Parker, “Very like a whale: post-colonialism between canonicities and
4 Appiah, In My Father’s House, p. 155.
6 For an explication of explanation, as a causal account, and a depiction, unfolding,