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Introduction

The Meaning of Freedom in Africa

> Seated in his armchair, his coat unbuttoned, his straw hat pulled down to his ears, slowly scratching his bare belly, Ti Noël issued orders to the wind. But they were the edicts of a peaceable government, inasmuch as no tyranny of whites or Negroes seemed to offer a threat to his liberty.
>
> *Alejo Carpentier, The Kingdom of This World*

The ideal of meaningful freedom in Africa today evolved from a complex history. For better or for worse, many people around the world came to associate the struggle for freedom in Africa during much of the twentieth century with the fate of the South African people. Several factors, from the duration and brutality of the apartheid regime, to the global campaign to end its oppression, made this a reality. On February 11, 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, he walked onto the balcony of City Hall in Cape Town and addressed the restless crowd that had gathered, evoking, once again, the cause of freedom: "Friends, comrades and fellow South Africans. I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy, and freedom for all!"[1] Indeed, it was this inclusive ideal of freedom for all South Africans that he had defended in his statement from the dock while on trial in 1963 and 1964. On April 20, 1964, he proclaimed, "I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."[2] That Mandela repeated the word "ideal" three times in the dramatic conclusion to what was a carefully crafted statement signals the vital importance of his vision for a free and democratic society – a vision he believed was worthy of both a collective armed struggle and his own ultimate sacrifice. This powerful ideal of freedom, which had brought Mandela and his codefendants sharply up against the repressive authority of the apartheid state, was more than an idea but not yet a collectively shared value among all South Africans.[3] For our purposes, the specific way Mandela performed the discourse of

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national liberation to advance the cause of freedom, which embraced the armed struggle as a means of attaining an inclusive ideal of freedom based on the principles of democracy, serves as a point of departure for articulating the relationship between national liberation and the idea of freedom in Africa.

Even as the National Party in South Africa brutally supplanted antiapartheid protest led by Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Robert Sobukwe, Ahmed Kathrada, Walter and Albertina Sisulu, and many others during the 1950s and 1960s, "new" African nations had begun to emerge elsewhere on the continent. The West African nation of Ghana played a pioneering role in this transition as the first to gain independence and as a crucible of pan-Africanism. Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister of an independent Ghana, was an ardent defender of national liberation and had been a participant in pan-African congresses since the 1940s, which "had the cause of African freedom at heart" and whose "moving spirit" had been W. E. B. DuBois, a leading US civil rights activist, pan-Africanist, author, and editor. We see the defining importance of Nkrumah's pan-African perspective in the speech he delivered on March 6, 1957, on the eve of independence: "At long last, the battle has ended! And thus, Ghana, your beloved country is free forever!" He also added a broader appeal to his fellow citizens: "We have won the battle and we again re-dedicate ourselves … Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa."[4] For Nkrumah, Ghana's achievement of national sovereignty was a partial triumph that could only be completed through the realization of his pan-African project to liberate every nation on the continent from foreign domination. The following year, Nkrumah rearticulated these goals in his address to his "fellow African Freedom Fighters" at the first All-African People's Conference on December 8, 1958. Whereas his conceptual repertoire in this historic speech included "emancipation," "liberation," "sovereignty," and "independence" in addition to "unity" and "struggle," Nkrumah most often evoked the cause of freedom with no fewer than thirty-five references to "freedom," "free," and "freely." The centrality of freedom in Nkrumah's pan-African project is equally evident in his enumeration of the four stages of liberation that was the subject of their collective deliberations:

1. The attainment of freedom and independence.
2. The consolidation of that freedom and independence.
3. The creation of unity and community between free African states.
4. The economic and social reconstruction of Africa.

Nkrumah goes on to articulate the need for freedom *and* independence in a discussion where freedom is associated with the potential for the culturally and spiritually liberating effects created by political independence

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in terms that echo both W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Alioune Diop's editorial vision in *Présence Africaine*. The comprehensive scope of Nkrumah's project was anti-imperial, calling for the consolidation of political power in the hands of African leaders, as well as the social and economic reconstruction of new nations. In his speeches at this conference, and at the United Nations two years later, Nkrumah promoted his ideal of pan-African freedom with passion and in explicit solidarity with southern Africa and demanded that European imperial powers decolonize the entire continent.[5] Nkrumah stands out as an important example for the way he assumed his responsibility as a pioneer, convening emerging leaders in Accra and articulating the relationship between the "Political Kingdom," which is to say "the complete independence and self-determination of national territories," and the broader goals of unity, reconstruction, and shared prosperity.

Of the icons of national liberation in Africa, Patrice Lumumba is remembered for his painful frankness and its tragic consequences. While I will consider the complexities of decolonization in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in some detail later, for now I would like to take another look at the language of freedom that Lumumba deployed in his speeches at the time of independence. Lumumba had the strongest national platform in the DRC and shared Nkrumah's dreams of unfettered sovereignty and African reconstruction in what Lumumba imagined would be a partnership among equals with former Belgian colonials. In fact, he attended the All-African People's Conference in Accra, and his participation in these deliberations transformed him.[6] In his infamous Independence Day speech on June 30, 1960, Lumumba opened with a tone that echoed Nkrumah's candor and self-confidence: "For this independence of the Congo, even as it is celebrated today with Belgium, a friendly country with whom we deal as equal to equal …"[7] Yet with the wounds of Belgian domination so "fresh and painful," Lumumba continued by listing the offenses he and his compatriots suffered, including exploitation, insult, dispossession of land and rights, social injustice, racial inequality, harassing work, brutal subjugation, and deprivations worse than death itself. In this respect, Lumumba was the least conciliatory of leaders. He boldly presented Congolese independence as a decisive step in the liberation of the entire continent:

> Together, my brothers, my sisters, we are going to begin a new struggle, a sublime struggle, which will lead our country to peace, prosperity and greatness.
>
> Together, we are going to establish social justice and make sure everyone has just remuneration for his labour.
>
> We are going to show the world what the black man can do when he works in freedom, and we are going to make of the Congo the center of the sun's radiance for all of Africa.[8]

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Lumumba clearly lays the fruits of freedom on the line. And the speech was interpreted differently in different quarters. Malcolm X effusively praised it as the "greatest speech" by the "greatest black man who ever walked the African continent."[9] King Baudouin of Belgium and his imperial partners received Lumumba's independence speech as an unpardonable affront. What Lumumba brought back with him from Accra, where he also met Frantz Fanon, was a "mature nationalism" that included "national unity, economic independence, and pan-African solidarity."[10] The popular support Nkrumah amassed for his party, the Mouvement National Congolais, was unique insofar as it was not based on regional or ethnic identities, and with this, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja claims in *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* that, "a veritable democracy movement was born as the nationalist awakening in the Congo found a positive articulation with the fight for expanded rights by the *évolués* and the working people's aspirations for freedom and material prosperity."[11]

I would argue that the way these and other leaders of African national liberation deployed the language of freedom to advance their cause was so pervasive as to be taken for granted. This equation of liberation with freedom persisted across the continent for much of the twentieth century from the mobilization of independence movements during the post-war era through to Mandela's election in 1994. Looking back on these important historical junctures in modern African history, one may be tempted to say that the pioneers of African national liberation were too idealistic, but evidence suggests they were quite aware of the imperial forces arrayed against them as a result of Cold War divisions and competition.[12] One might also be tempted to say that they were foolish to put faith in fellow Africans to choose solidarity and unity over rivalry; yet, here again, the archive reveals that they were cognizant of the colonial tools used to divide communities into weaker, manageable units, and they worked actively to overcome the threat of these divisions. We see this in the speeches and writings of Nkrumah and Black Consciousness Leader Steve Biko, to cite only two of the most well-known examples.[13] Thus, in my view, to advance criticism in a retrospective manner that emphasizes primarily the limited, insufficient nature of the discourse of national liberation or a given leader's naïveté about the gritty, unpleasant reality of the struggle tends to capture only part of a more complex set of dynamics at work.

It is also important to note that national liberation was seen as instrumental to changing daily life for ordinary people in the nations that were to emerge. While there are notable differences in style and sensibilities among Mandela, Nkrumah, and Lumumba – the three leaders I have cited as examples of nationalists who deployed the language of freedom

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to advance their cause of liberation – it is instructive to note from the outset how each of these leaders made a claim for national liberation that was embedded in a broader set of concepts. In *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (2002), Frederick Cooper interprets Nkrumah's often quoted phrase, "Seek ye first the political kingdom" as not "just a call for Ghanaians to demand a voice in the affairs of the state, but a plea for leaders and ordinary citizens to use power for a purpose – to transform a colonized society into a dynamic and prosperous land of opportunity."[14] The way leaders connected the promise of achieving political sovereignty with the potential for meaningful social transformation was explicit, and their performance of this discourse of nationalism appealed to the imagination of ordinary people. Yet, while critics have devoted substantial attention to the pitfalls of national liberation both as a discourse and as a process, the meaning of freedom deserves more careful consideration as an integral part of the cultural narrative of independence and renewal in Africa.

James Ferguson warned more than a decade ago that, "At the end of a century dominated by anticolonial nationalist struggles for sovereignty and independence, we can hardly help but see national independence as almost synonymous with dignity, freedom, and empowerment. This … may be in some respects a trap."[15] His observation in *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (2006) was directed at scholars in the field of African cultural studies and asked for a widening of the scope of analysis through disentangling national liberation and the ideas of "dignity," "freedom," and "empowerment." The distinction between liberation and freedom is especially useful and will be important for my definition of meaningful freedom as involving more than just the political achievement of national sovereignty. Other critics of African decolonization in the West, such as Basil Davidson in *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (1992), have argued with the cultural history of nationalism itself, claiming that the European idea of the nation became, in effect, the black man's "burden." Yet in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Benedict Anderson has shown that the way independence leaders in Africa appropriated the European language of nationalism and the way their communities engaged in an imaginative process of belonging left behind a significant, enduring legacy – much more than simply a burden. I will argue that understanding the history of the idea of the nation is indispensable to coming to terms with how decolonization unfolded, but the foreignness of the concept itself proved less problematic than how departing colonials took advantage of the structures and institutions within the nation-states that emerged.

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When we expand our focus beyond these academic debates to include the perspectives of activists at work after decolonization another kind of recalibration becomes possible. Citing her personal experience as a scholar, project director, activist, and teacher who travels extensively, Françoise Vergès remarked how working for change in practice shifted her critical thinking about narratives of emancipation:

> All this has transformed my theoretical approach and made me wary of grand claims, suspicious of grand narratives, particularly of the narrative of emancipation as a total rupture, as an erasure of the past, as the dawn of a "new" world. Instead, emancipation is a long process in which any victory opens up a terrain for new struggles (see, for instance, the abolition of slavery followed by struggles against new forms of economic exploitations and post-slavery colonialism).[16]

Like Vergès, I view progressive change – whether we call it *emancipation* or *liberation* – as incremental, involving a series of shifts over time, and necessarily limited to what Alejo Carpentier has called "The Kingdom of This World."

In order to explore further the idea of recalibrating our analytical perspective in relation to facts on the ground, let us return to the example of Mandela in South Africa – the hope he represented after he was elected in the first multiracial democratic presidential election, and what life is like for the majority of South Africans today. Unfortunately, we find that South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world; wealth is still concentrated in the hands of the white minority, while the vast majority of blacks do not enjoy a comparable standard of living.[17] In terms of statistics, the data show that there is persistent inequality in access to resources and land, as well as income distribution and indicators used to measure quality of life (see Appendix). In terms of a collective conversation, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) documented cases of individual abuse, but passed up the opportunity to frame a narrative of social justice in terms of the institutional oppression of groups.[18] As a result, a bitter sense of disaffection remains more widespread than some outside the country might imagine.

While it is fair to say that national liberation did not deliver meaningful freedom to a majority of South Africans, significant achievements have been made and are deserving of recognition. We may begin with the establishment of a multiracial democracy, the drafting of a new constitution, and averting civil war under exceedingly difficult circumstances during the tumultuous transition. Yet, in 2014, I had a conversation with a graduate student in political science at the University of Cape Town, who told me that having a civil war may have been better because, maybe then, fewer blacks would be stuck in grinding poverty. Although I disagree with this statement, because I believe that digging out from

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Figure I.1 Cape Town seen from Robben Island, South Africa, 2014
Source: Photo by Phyllis Taoua

civil war would have made the situation worse, I find it hard to dismiss the sentiment expressed. In addition to recalibrating our expectations and setting aside a narrative of triumphant nationalism, we must also broaden the scope of our analysis as we search for explanations. Perhaps it is Mandela's fault for cutting the cards with the Nationalist Party while he was negotiating his release from prison.[19] Perhaps the problems today derive from the African National Congress's ideological incoherence, poor leadership, and inability to deliver results after national liberation.[20] Perhaps the unacceptably slow progress is best explained by the long and brutal history of how all that wealth came to be concentrated in the hands of the white minority.[21] Perhaps the underlying problem is the persistent legacy of the bifurcated state where whites were citizens with civil rights and blacks were native subjects under customary law.[22] Or perhaps ongoing inequality and injustice are best explained by the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, of which South Africa is just one of many examples.[23]

There can be no doubt that a confluence of these and other factors explains the current situation. To make sense of these multiple,

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interrelated factors – not only in South Africa, but also in other countries – my analysis will draw on scholarship in the social sciences and readings of complex narratives by major African writers and filmmakers, which will allow me to flesh out the full range of human responses to the ongoing struggle for meaningful freedom in Africa. The hunger for freedom cannot be adequately understood with charts and statistical data about human development alone; it also requires us to try to comprehend the world from the people's point of view and how they represent their experiences of it.

It has been fairly well established by now that the various transitions to independence from Ghana to South Africa produced uneven results that do not fit neatly into a narrative of "failure" or "success."[24] The process of decolonization in Africa unfolded as a tug-of-war between the leaders of protest movements and the defenders of European colonial rule. Because this history was shaped by the dynamic relationship between resistance and repression, what happened to leaders mattered immensely. Mandela was in jail for nearly three decades, but ultimately survived. Biko died in police custody. Chris Hani was assassinated. Lumumba, like Simon Kimbangou and André Matswa before him, was arrested and detained for political reasons and died in the custody of colonial collaborators. The list could be extended further with the names of participants in armed anticolonial conflicts in Algeria, Cameroon, and Kenya, among others. All of this matters because the effects of violent repression defined the landscape by deciding who would participate in charting the way forward, and forcing survivors to continue to hope while living with tremendous loss. The historical record shows that African leaders forced the limits of what was acceptable to those in power, and the custodians of imperial domination pushed back in ways that were violent and nonviolent, direct and indirect.[25] While it is undeniable that Mandela's vision and leadership were instrumental in shaping the antiapartheid movement in South Africa, it is also true that thousands of activists died in that same struggle, activists whose names are not well-known. As those of us who have visited the prison on Robben Island can attest, it is painful to discover, as I did, in the presence of a former prisoner, so many intimate details – handwritten letters and photographs – that document just how many lives were crushed by the systematic dehumanization of political prisoners, who were stripped of their clothes and issued numbers as soon as they arrived.

The central argument of this book is that national liberation did not deliver meaningful freedom to the majority of people in Africa. While a reassessment of African national liberation has been underway for more than a decade, articulating a conceptual language for the ongoing struggle

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Figure I.2 Display inside the courtyard of Robben Island Prison, South Africa, 2014
Source: Photo by Phyllis Taoua

to achieve meaningful freedom has been missing from the debate. This is an unfortunate omission not only because leaders explicitly deployed the language of freedom to advance the cause of national liberation but also because writers and filmmakers have been wrestling with the meaning of their unfinished freedom in their creative works in such compelling ways since independence. To address these issues, we will examine facts on the ground as well as representations of life after national liberation, as writers and filmmakers were left to contend with the incompleteness of the process and a partial, imperfect legacy.

The argument I make in the pages that follow synthesizes the most significant issues into a single framing narrative and offers an in-depth exploration of how activists and leaders, as well as writers and filmmakers, engaged with the idea of freedom. This synthesis allows us to see connections and patterns that could not be accounted for in a more narrowly defined study. Whereas Orlando Patterson has argued that freedom is recognized as a cherished ideal and a widely shared value in the West, what freedom means in Africa today is not as well understood. For many, freedom may be thought of primarily in relation to slavery, but not necessarily as the objective of national liberation movements. However, the language of freedom has been explicitly used in the context of decolonization, and slavery is also frequently evoked, either as a

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political analogy for colonial subjugation in speeches by Nkrumah and Lumumba, or figuratively as a trope for the unfreedoms of motherhood by Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Because the meaning of freedom after national liberation is multifaceted and evolves over time, I will make my case by tracking specific examples of how writers and film-makers explore, interrogate, and refine the idea of freedom by expanding its parameters as part of their coming to terms with how much had actually not yet been achieved.

Before I say more about how I have approached the study of African freedom and organized my argument into chapters, let me step back for a moment and reflect more generally on how I have navigated this terrain.

Writing about Freedom

During the winter of 1998, I traveled to the West African nation of Niger for the first time. I arrived in this country that extends into the Saharan desert at a formative time in my intellectual life. I had already discovered Cameroon first-hand in the summer of 1996 after reading Mongo Beti, and had started a conversation with the author at his bookstore, Peuples Noirs. We corresponded until his death in 2001. I had also spent time that summer in Brazzaville after reading Sony Labou Tansi, but since my visit fell after he passed away, I only met his family and friends. As I prepared for Niamey in the winter of 1998, I packed lightly, taking only one carry-on bag for a month in Niger and that included my mosquito net. Yet I had some heavy questions on my mind. I brought Georg W. Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* and Robert Tucker's *The Marx-Engels Reader* with me, and every morning, with a pot of black coffee, I read these books, trying to decide whether I could consider myself a consciously committed Marxist or not.[26] A contemplation of Marx's definition of private property and Hegel's imaginative construction of others accompanied me around town as I tended to university business.

On my first evening in Niamey, I went down to have dinner on the terrace of the Grand Hotel overlooking the Niger River. I knew enough to request a safe, clean, local hotel, not a Sofitel where Western expatriates tend to gather. As I drank my cold Flag beer and ate my lamb brochettes, I started up a conversation with some men my age at a nearby table. In those days, I smoked on occasion, so I had asked to bum a cigarette. They were the leaders of UFRA (Union des Forces de la Résistance Armée), the last armed group involved in the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s to lay down their weapons and negotiate a peace agreement. As fate would have it, the government was housing them in bungalows at the Grand Hotel. Our conversations progressed over the course of the month, and

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