

# Review

## Mahmood Mamdani (2012) *Define and Rule: native as political identity*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press

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*Define and Rule* is a collection of three essays that were first presented as a series of lectures given in honour of WEB du Bois at Harvard. It is a crisp and elegant little book that, despite a couple of typos, has been put together in a handsome South African edition by Wits University Press.

The book offers an excellent introduction to the broad contours of Mamdani's thought since the publication of *Citizen and Subject* in 1996. It pays particular attention to some of the key ideas developed in that book, as well as later work on Darfur and Rwanda.

The three essays collected here make for a very useful introduction to Mamdani's work. This would be a perfect text for students and others new to Mamdani's ideas. But it does include new lines of analysis and will also be of interest to people well versed in his scholarship. In particular it situates Mamdani's thinking about political identities in Africa in a wider global context.

Unsurprisingly the book is, at its heart, about the colonial production of the native as a political identity. Mamdani, in a formulation that has a certain resonance with Frantz Fanon's use of the term 'a priori' in his first published essay, 'The "North African Syndrome"' (Fanon 1967), asserts that the colonial distinction between the West and the rest was based 'less on observation than conception' (104). But he goes on to show that an imposed fiction has had very real consequences for both colonial domination and the forms taken by anti-colonial resistance.

The first essay examines the genesis of the theory of the native. Particular attention is paid to Henry Maine, a legal expert in the Viceroy's cabinet in

colonial India, and the attempt to reorganise the colonial project on a firmer footing following the anti-colonial rebellions in India in 1857 and Jamaica in 1865. For Maine the colonised were ‘natives’, attached, in Mamdani’s formulation, ‘to local custom, not universal ideas or ideals’ (13). What Mamdani calls a bifurcated conception of culture – imagined as ‘a walled, isolated, and unchanging affair in the non-West, as opposed to a transformative one in the West’ (14) was used to legitimate colonial rule and to organise it through political and spatial bifurcation.

The second essay examines nativism as practice. Mamdani notes, following the legitimisation crisis noted in the first lecture, that the language of the colonial project shifted from the theological to the secular, from proselytising to enforcing the rule of law. The law was used to divide the colonised into a set of minorities – ‘tribes’ in Africa. The colonised, Mamdani argues, were distinguished from people with their origins elsewhere, who were deemed races. The colonial state ‘paid heed to one single characteristic, *origin*, and totally disregarded all subsequent developments, including, *residence* . . . the state portrayed the native as the product of geography rather than history’ (47). In this essay Mamdani also notes that some forms of anti-colonial nationalism have operated within the broad logic of colonial ideas about race and tribe.

The third essay explores the theory and practice of decolonisation. Mamdani notes the politicisation of the university in post-colonial Africa and begins his argument with an exploration of the work of the Nigerian historian Yusuf Bala Usman. His essential point is that for Usman the colonial archive needs to be engaged critically – and that this archive carries with it a set of ideas imposed on, rather than deriving from reality, about tradition, race and tribe in Africa.

The second part of the essay looks at nationalism and statecraft. Here Mamdani returns to his earlier work and pays particular attention to Julius Nyerere. He argues that for Nyerere the political task was not to smash the colonial state but to construct a new legal system that, drawing from multiple sources, meant that every citizen of Tanzania would be governed under a single legal system. For Mamdani this, and not the *ujamaa* villages, is the signal feature of Nyerere’s rule. A politics constituted around rights of residence replaced the politics constituted around (real or imagined) origin.

The recent emergence of an intensely contested debate, largely driven by student activism, of questions around the coloniality of knowledge gives this book an urgent contemporary relevance. It offers all kinds of valuable

historical and conceptual resources for making sense of the enduring salience of the question of coloniality and, also, for problematising simplistic notions of the anti-colonial. But there are some limits here. For instance gender is a marginal concern. Moreover there is no real engagement with how the problematic elaborated here relates to the urban space – a site of acute contestation in much of Africa, and the formerly colonised world more generally. Nonetheless this is a very useful book that deserves a wide readership and serious consideration.

## **References**

Fanon, Frantz (1967) *Towards the African Revolution*. New York: Grove Press.