Forget "Humanitarians"? Remember Givers, Receivers, and Sharers

Cilas Kemedjio
Professor of Black Studies, Francophone and French Studies
University of Rochester
cilaskemedjio@rochester.edu

Cecelia Lynch
Research Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of California, Irvine, and Honorary Professor at the School of the Arts, University of KwaZulu-Natal
clynch@uci.edu

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How can we conceive of the decolonization of humanitarianism? If such a decolonization project were ever to be undertaken, what means would be necessary to bring it to a successful conclusion? In the spring of 2024, when we conceived of the workshop that led to this special issue, we lived, arguably, in a different humanitarian world. Then, the notion of decolonization when applied to humanitarianism, if not already a trope, was in danger of becoming one. Our Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa (CIHA) collective, which had been working together for more than a decade and which sponsored, with Global Africa, the 2024 Accra Junior Researchers' Institute that led to this issue, was interested in pushing the debate about decolonization further to ensure it did not become just another buzzword in the long march of neoliberal humanitarian consolidation. In particular, we wanted to lift up and highlight the fact that African epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies provide guidelines, ethics, and long-standing if ever-evolving practices of care within and among peoples, communities, and ecosystems. We believe the contributions in this special issue demonstrate the critical need for such a change in perspective and provide powerful examples of it. In this introductory contribution, we reflect on our changing humanitarian times, think through literary as well as social science, humanistic, and policy contributions to debates about what decolonization is and might entail, and return to the needs of the present in light of the lessons of the past.

We insist on the need for a radical change in perspective (see also Kemedjio & Lynch, 2024) despite the crisis that has engulfed the neoliberal humanitarian aid world since at least the fall of 2024. Tom Fletcher, Emergency Relief Coordinator for the United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), wrote in February 2025:

> The postwar international system faces the greatest test since its creation. The humanitarian community confronts a massive funding, morale, and legitimacy crisis. […] This is not a drill. We are underfunded, overstretched and under attack. But we have not [yet—our addition] lost the argument.

Fletcher's first observation, that the "postwar international system" is in danger, has additional tentacles, however. This system fostered and fed not only the humanitarian aid industry, but also its attendant numerous and ongoing relations of power that has kept the postcolonial world subservient to its former colonizers. These have included longstanding practices of military intervention (euphemistically referred to as "humanitarian intervention" by some) that the main architect of the postwar international system, the United States, no longer supports, at least in its conventionally predictable form. This is not to say that military intervention by the U.S. or other powers has become less likely; merely that the Trump administration no longer appears to see a benefit in hiding outright exploitation under a "humanitarian" guise.

We thus recognize a realignment of the foundations of humanitarian power. Across the Sahel, the so-called "neo-sovereignty" movement is also challenging these bases, including especially the military and economic components of the franco-hegemonic system of domination known as "Françafrique". Beyond banning French (and sometimes all Western) nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many Sahelian countries are also dismantling French and U.S. military bases. These "neo-sovereign" countries are also challenging the economic exploitation made possible by the CFA franc, the currency inherited from French colonial rule. The irony of these initiatives being led by authoritarian military governments is not lost on many commentators in Africa. However, this questionable modality of "emancipation" compels us to confront another complication: in the debate about decolonial possibilities and meanings, who gets to decide the means through which decolonization is claimed, and who benefits? Without resolving these questions, we note that the current neo-sovereignty movement echoes some of the demands made by anticolonial leaders in the 1960s. For example, Kwame Nkrumah, in *The Challenge of the Congo*, suggests that colonialist forces, defeated on the ground, deployed all manner of subterfuges to sabotage Africans: "They have granted us independence taking great care to station on our soil such links as can still contribute to the maintenance of their interests" (Nkrumah, 1967, p. 190). Siba Grovogui, in his study of Namibian independence, shows how the survival of the old infrastructure of domination defeated "the process unleashed by decolonization" (Grovogui, 1996). Similarly, Olawale Akinrinde's contribution to this special issue shows how deeply colonial structures have continued to shape what has become conventional humanitarian practices in Niger. The current security context, therefore, exposes both humanitarian "need" and the inseparability of postcolonial humanitarian power relations and neoliberal forms of governance. Thus, attempts to decolonize humanitarian practices should be located within this broader postcolonial context, which Cilas Kemedjio centrally addresses in his contribution to this special issue.

Given these contextual factors, we assert that instead of jettisoning the debates around decolonizing humanitarianism, the underlying questions involved are more important than ever. While this special issue cannot reasonably address all of the issues that are upending the humanitarian landscape, we do want to return below to critical questions of what it means to be a "humanitarian" vis-à-vis powerful alternatives on the continent.

More specifically, critical questions include:

Who gets to be remembered as a giver and why is that some givers are forgotten?

What is the importance of naming the practices of giving and receiving?

If we start with the second question, we may realize that naming the practices of giving and receiving has both practical and theoretical consequences. Naming these in African languages, as Adame Ba Konaré called for during a symposium many years ago, alerts the student of humanitarianism to the

knowledges and practices produced by African communities in the sphere of giving and receiving. Indeed, the Partage, or Sharing Foundation, the organization that convened the symposium, embodies in its own name a kind of indigenization of thought on humanitarianism.

By simply naming these practices and the ethical understandings that shape them in African languages, we start to think about their meanings. Sharing, for example, underscores solidarity. We immediately start to realize that if you bypass the term "humanitarianism," or even if you provisionally forget it, Africa does not become a continent devoid of caring, sharing, giving, and receiving. Without entirely rejecting charity, which presupposes a certain hierarchy of relationships in exchange, sharing posits a certain conceptualization of shared humanity. This shared humanity would constitute, if such a utopia could ever be realized, the ideal of the human community, which is also the ideal of humanitarianism.

Many African communities are not unaware of these ambivalences that surround the relationship between the giver and the receiver. The concept of sharing suggests something deeper that we should pay attention to. Many other names could help open the door to knowledges and practices engendered by African communities. Decolonizing the story of practices of giving and receiving may simply mean sharing these knowledges to make our humanity a better place.

Naming the practices of sharing in Africa is not about translating the term "humanitarianism" into African languages. Rather, it is about recognizing that African societies are and have long been engaged in practices codified in what has become known as humanitarianism. It is also about translating them "back" to colonial languages to confront the dominant lexicons of the present and show another way forward. Since the vocabulary of humanitarianism, along with its related practices, was transmitted through processes that included colonization, it is important to emerge from the attendant conceptual or linguistic colonialism. Naming the practices of sharing in African languages has the valuable benefit of giving visibility to and foregrounding the practices of sharing in African societies, or, to apply a concept of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "re-membering" them (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009). This is first and foremost necessary for those whose practices and knowledges have been suppressed or ignored.

In this vein, we are honored to include in this special issue Akosua Adomako Ampofo's interview with the feminist activist and scholar Wangui wa Goro. In this rich discussion, Wangui takes us through numerous problems with humanitarianism as a term that brings with it associated practices of "development" and "philanthropy" that ignores (at best) African traditions of giving and receiving. (To understand ways in which some African practices have been rebranded by external humanitarians, see Kemedjio & Lynch, 2024). Wangui shows how the oppression and dehumanization of colonialism and slavery take a more benign but still extremely harmful form in external efforts to "develop" Africa. Wangui especially, but also Akosua in conversation, show how in their societies as well as many others on the continent, obligation is felt and practiced differently. One just takes care of others as a matter of course; including and often especially "the stranger." Their conversation foregrounds the subsequent contributions to this special issue, and also highlights numerous new and ongoing reparative efforts by feminist scholar-activists on the continent and beyond.

Contributions by emerging scholars demonstrate the depth and reach of African practices of solidarity, giving and taking, and sharing. For example, Cyprian Nanji points out in his explanation of the ethics and practice of "iba-iba" in Southwest Cameroon, such "methods were neither incidental nor informal, but [rather were] at the core of the organization of precolonial African life" (Nanji in this special issue). While *iba-iba* has adapted over time, including to today's postcolonial context, both the ethics and practices of reciprocity and mutual responsibility are potentially far more enduring than the relations embedded in contemporary humanitarianism. Moreover, in these African constructs, the hubris of the humanitarian gaze rarely becomes institutionalized.

This sharing and mutual responsibility, however, also brings us to the first question: who gets to be visible and who gets to be invisible?

The question of invisibility in the field of humanitarianism, as well as in the practices of giving, receiving, or sharing, takes many forms.

Following feminist insights, we can first note the invisibilization and suppression of African women in humanitarian economies, even as "women and children" have become the focus of so many humanitarian programs (Adomako Ampofo & Arnfred, 2010; Tamale, 2020). Suppression takes many forms: in the colonial economy, the work done by women did not count as work (Hartmann, 1987; Isaacman, 1996; Vaughan, 2009). Women were drafted into the colonial economic dispensation, overworked, and yet still excluded from the new opportunities of social mobility such as schooling. Consequently, women were invisible in decision-making agencies. Therefore, women and their children were the first ones to face food insecurity in times of disaster. Nevertheless, women have become hyper visible as consumers of humanitarian aid. Decolonizing humanitarianism presupposes that we take stock of these genealogies of dispossession that render some practices of giving and receiving (domestic workers versus wage workers for example) invisible or hyper visible. Decolonizing here may be as banal as rendering these contributions to humanity visible, as demonstrated in Jacqueline Sawadogo, Pon Jean-Baptiste Coulibaly and Lassina Koté's piece on pottery in Burkina Faso in this special issue. Humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their donors, by adopting a narrow understanding of "need" and ignoring the cultural as well as economic/productive significance of women's pottery making, miss the critical opportunity to support community livelihoods and socio-political order in a context of growing insecurity.

Rendering women's work and creativity visible is all the more necessary because even when women manage to break all the barriers and become full participants in the so-called modern economy, they can still be mocked (as in Fela Kuti's popular song *Lady*), as not being African women. Tejumola Olaniyan suggests that Fela's sexist tirade may "ignite into violence against the most vulnerable group of women" (Olaniyan, 2004, p. 42). Olaniyan, who ranks the song in the singer's moralist phase, confesses that it represents "a satire against overly Westernized African women and a most eloquent manifesto that gave boys of my generation our first popular and pleasurable language of male chauvinism" (Olaniyan 2004, p. 44). *Lady*, like the song *Mattress*, is "exclusivist, gendered, and vulgarly masculinist" (Olaniyan 2004, p. 41). The Lady demands equality. She refuses to do the dishes. The Holy Man must open doors for her. She greets men while sitting, not standing or bending according to obsolete traditional protocols. Many African feminists find themselves in similar conditions. For example, those attending a conference of Francophone African feminist activists in March 2024 in Dakar noted that, as African feminists and activist leaders, they continued to object to patriarchal norms, even as they were frequently shut out of access to the generous pipelines of Western funding going to externally-conceived aid programs for "women and children."

We now turn to African literature for additional examples, as novels have a way of eloquently capturing the tensions within and among humanitarian, patriarchal, and sharing worlds. For example, Tsitsi Dangaremgba, in her novels *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Book of Not* (2006), features a patriarch called Babamukuru, whose generosity sustains the entire clan. The wife of one of the less fortunate members accuses the patriarch of having emasculated her husband. Emasculation here apparently refers to a man's inability to provide for his family. The suspicion of emasculation, a concept that is undeniably patriarchal and burdened by heteronormative absolutism, resonates because it highlights the anxieties between humanitarianism and the rule of the patriarchs. Thus, Babamukuru considers his assistance to the clan a duty. This responsibility to provide assistance, in a way, mirrors the concept of sharing mentioned earlier. However, the patriarch's wife, who makes sacrifices to fulfill her duty of solidarity, is completely invisible on the radar of sharing. Her contributions are invisible to the clan, and the fact that she tells her story of invisibilized generosity may be a sign that her contributions would otherwise never be acknowledged. It is also significant that this story is told to Tambu, a girl who, in *Nervous Conditions* (1988), did not cry when her brother died. The refusal to cry is a protest against the gendered, patriarchal ordering, while the sharing of stories may signal the agency and emergence of givers otherwise rendered invisible.

The invisibility of this character in the novel captures the larger invisibility of women's work, a process made possible by the collusion between colonial patriarchy and community dynamics. The invisibility of women's work, exacerbated by colonization, contributes to their exclusion from the processes of social mobility initiated by colonial dynamics (Bloch et al., 1998, Sibatcheu,

1999). Exclusion, in turn, produces a long-term vulnerability that renders women and children more susceptible to even the slightest event that is typically understood as a humanitarian "crisis" (drought, armed conflict, or humanitarian disasters).

Ironically, however, during humanitarian interventions, the invisibility discussed here becomes transformed into the hypervisibility of women and children via media coverage of humanitarian disasters. It is important to highlight these dynamics in any attempt to decolonize humanitarian practices. Decolonizing requires an awareness of the injustice that renders women both invisible and hyper visible, and the implementation of discursive and practical mechanisms to recognize their work and to address the distortions that make it invisible. Perhaps most importantly, it requires heightened awareness of how humanitarian aid is both covered in the media and marketed by aid organizations themselves.

The relationship between invisibility and hypervisibility, as it plays out in the media as well as in humanitarian appeals for funding, raises additional, critical issues surrounding the question of who gets to be considered a giver or a receiver. Why is it, for example, that only those who form part of the postwar (liberal) humanitarian system can be considered "givers"? We have already suggested that it is not only the wives of African patriarchs who become invisible, but also the vast networks of givers, receivers, and sharers across the continent themselves. Dadusc and Mudu, for example, talk about "autonomous solidarities" to highlight the forms of mutual care provided by refugees among themselves, not by the "humanitarian industrial complex" which is often complicit in reproducing the regularized violence of regimes of border control (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020). Similarly, Elias Opongo (2026) analyzes how international nongovernmental organizations and institutions such as the International Criminal Court have obstructed peacebuilding in Northern Uganda, pointing instead to concrete means of centering African practices of reconciliation. Nevertheless, we also want to acknowledge those in the humanitarian industry who engage in processes of learning to support endogenous forms of assistance, as Tiéwendé Jean Balima's study of food aid in the Center-North region of Burkina Faso in this special issue details. This type of assistance, as Yvan Hyannick Obah shows in analyzing an NGO assisting refugees in the Far North region of Cameroon in this special issue, can result in "hybrid" models of aid, characterized by negotiations between communities and external humanitarian agents in a relationship that is both dynamic and still hierarchical.

But we also want to draw attention to the fact that those who are labeled "receivers" (even while their practices as "sharers" are invisibilized), are deceptively re-visibilized—indeed, their alleged vulnerabilities are *exposed*—as marketing objects. Their photos and truncated "stories"—crafted and told by external nongovernmental organizations for marketing purposes—are touted as "successes" of the humanitarian partnership. They are forced, in a sense, to reveal themselves, never as fully fledged human beings, but always as beings who become more fully human due to the generosity of others. And these others—both those NGOs that market their stories to raise funds, and those who respond to NGO appeals remain invulnerable and unexposed. The decision-making power regarding the "worthiness" of aid recipients rests with the unexposed. There is no understanding of historical obligation, or tracing of how they came to be in the role of givers in the first place. This is why the contribution of Ibrahima Mohamadou in this special issue is important. In examining a selection of photographs over time by colonial as well as African photographers, Mohamadou provides critical insight into the visual construction of voyeurism in humanitarianism, here juxtaposed with depictions of Pan-Africanist assertions of power and control of the early postcolonial period. He also shows the gradual move in African photography to "a form of reappropriation of the gaze… on an equal footing" by African photographers themselves.

The conversation regarding practices of giving, receiving, and sharing within African communities, and the real efforts to ensure that these practices are enacted on an equal footing, is also a major topic of the conversation between Akosua Adomako Ampofo and Wangui wa Goro. Even when a relationship is perceptibly unequal, for example when one party is visibly wealthier than another, Akan ethics teaches that today's givers can become tomorrow's receivers, so a certain humility is built into the system, challenging the patterns of paternalistic humanitarianism from the outset.

Humanitarianism, we have suggested, is a phenomenon with numerous tentacles and definitional possibilities. The term "humanitarian" also suggests its negative—what is inhuman, degrading, and unacceptable in human relations (e.g. Adomako Ampofo, 2019; Grovogui, forthcoming). Yet this explicit inclusion also falls short, because the well-being and the very survival of humans can no longer be separated from those of other forms of life and materiality, especially given the recognition of increasingly severe environmental threats and intrusive technological developments. Considering all forms of life raises then questions about the relationality of all forms of being, intergenerational responsibility, spirituality, and conceptions of the sacred. Much African spirituality and philosophy takes this kind of relationality as a central point of departure (e.g., Aina & Moyo, 2013; Dube, 2001; Kalu, 2001; Murove, 2009), and the contributions to this special issue begin from the premise that it can contribute greatly to reconfiguring, and hence decolonizing, humanitarian ontologies and epistemologies.

As a result, contributors to this special issue draw from a range of African forms of knowledge and practice, rather than continually employing neocolonial forms of "teaching to" others. Such humanitarian discourses, practices, and paradigms connote forms of relationality among living and nonliving beings that often cross temporal lines and that, if taught, disseminated, and deployed, can upend and enrich (i.e., "decolonize") relationships of care. Such a decolonial agenda could provide opportunities for disrupting the highly institutionalized and paternalistic logics and practices of the humanitarian industry, and for regrounding relationships of care in ethics and practices of repair, as well as forms of giving, receiving, and sharing among mutually-respected equals. Still, as Wangui wa Goro cautions, we must recognize that the process of achieving mutual respect requires *tajuk chu*, a kind of deep translation that is also felt bodily. Decolonization, then, requires a commitment to corporeal, deep, spiritual, epistemological, and ongoing challenge, practice, and change.

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