

Opinion

Genealogy of African Debates on
Decoloniality: Afrikaans and Kiswahili

Part III: Deciphering Decoloniality Conceptually

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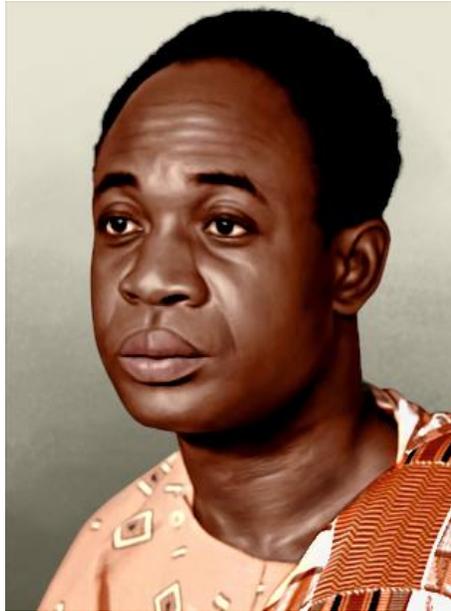


THE preceding parts, I and II have attempted to frame the concept of decoloniality in two ways: liberatory and institutional. The former means that decoloniality is innately an emancipatory concept for the non-West or formerly colonized populations mainly Latin America and Africa in response to Western epistemic hegemony.

In this sense, Afrikaans and Kiswahili serve as decolonial options. On the other hand, decoloniality is conceptualized as institutional in the sense that its locus is the university context which therein wields the power to theorize or create knowledge also referred to as an intellectual tradition thereby necessitating the development of institutional capabilities to theorize as typified by Afrikaans.

However, what does decoloniality mean within a Europeanized African university setting? Although Ngugi wa Thiong’o defines language as the start of the decolonization project, Mamdani defines the problem particularly at the African university which began as a colonial top-down modernist project with the prime ambition of transforming society in its own image.

Furthermore, this colonial project was unilingual (English or French or Portuguese) which only acknowledged a Western intellectual tradition. The implication herein is that rather than limiting the scope of decoloniality to the issue of language and culture, we need to broaden our conceptual horizons to the institutional framework within which language functions as a means to a transformative or decolonial end instead of conceptualizing language and culture as an end in itself. Stated differently, replacing European languages with African languages constituting epistemic decolonization is only part of a broader structural problem:



Kwame Nkrumah

that being a university setting within which language operates.

In a bid to harness a decolonial future, Mamdani claims the decolonising project ought to be a multilingual project seeking not only to provide Westernized education in multiple languages but also the provision of resources to develop non-Western scholarly traditions with the ability to sustain public and intellectual discourse. In addition, Mamdani asserts the need to broaden our referential world beyond the West to the non-West by “investing resources in developing academic units that can study and teach non-Western intellectual traditions” which necessitates learning the language within which the different intellectual discourse has been historically shaped.

Janet Halley in *Critique and Feminist Achievements in International Criminal Law* engages a profound question: what is critique? Unlike criticism understood as being against something, critique is the ability to understand something thence

critique “is an effort to get *the problem right*” rather than “an effort to get the answer right.” Halley quotes Mamdani as saying that critique shifts attention away from “the answer to the *question of the problem*.” The preceding quotes inspired this paper to scrutinize the concept of decoloniality regarding its meaning and implications.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres defines decoloniality as the dismantling of power relations and the conceptions of knowledge fomenting the reproduction of racial, gender and also geo-political hierarchies that came into existence or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern or colonial world.

Mignolo claims that decoloniality brings into existence another interpretation, on the one hand, a silenced view of the event while on the other, it unveils the limits of imperial ideology disguised as the total or true interpretation of events in the making of the modern world. He adds that decoloniality is a critical intellectual theory but also a political project seeking to disentangle formerly colonized populations from coloniality.

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that decoloniality gestures towards liberation from the complex colonial matrix of knowledge, power and being. This means that the concept of decoloniality is inextricably linked with geo-political power as it seeks an alternative epistemic vantage point (that of the formerly colonized). Stated differently, decoloniality deconstructs the colonial prejudice that the West produces theory while the non-West lacks the ability to theorize thereby privileging Western epistemology as the source of knowledge over non-Western knowledge.

Kwame Nkrumah says that neo-colonialism is the continued economic exploitation of newly “independent” African states after the formal end of direct

administrative colonialism, but Ndlovu-Gatsheni adds this commercial non-territorial empire is inextricably intertwined with the cognitive empire: the mental universe of the colonized where the “hard disk of previous African memory” is deleted and reinstalled with “software of European memory” which cognitive empire lives in the victim’s mind and body as “the intimate enemy”. This means decoloniality seeks to restore the mind of the colonial subject from the monopoly of European thought but also unlocking the mind by studying other epistemological perspectives not limited to Africa in order to revive the dignity and collective consciousness of the formerly colonized.

Suren Pillay critiques the Latin American experience as useful for illustrating how the colonial project thought about the colonized or the “Other”, and also the rationalization of conquest and assimilation, however, this experience is less illuminating for articulating the shifting rationale of nineteenth and twentieth century Africa as an account of Africa’s colonial encounter or how “Europe ruled Africa”.

Pillay also argues that the colonial technologies of rule that pre-occupied imperial administrators like Lord Lugard sought the manufacture of new political subjects for domination rather than decimation thence colonial power in the Latin American experience is repressive while in the African experience, the mode of imperial power is mainly productive.

Pillay adds that decoloniality in the African experience ought to acknowledge the impact of indirect rule colonialism as the legacy of a colonial project that emphasized difference instead of universality within its rationality of domination. This implies the politico-historical legacy of colonialism in Africa particularly the politicization and naturalization of ethnic difference as a key identity marker is significant towards the

conceptualization of decoloniality within the African context.

Similarly, Pillay critiques Latin American decolonial theory as limited in its conceptualization of the problem of colonialism and cautions its universalization as the way to theorize the problem of colonialism. The Latin American experience explains epistemic violence but falls short of explaining colonial rule in Africa through the administration of difference. Indirect-rule colonialism re-inscribed, created,



Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni

amplified and fixated difference through law in colonial and postcolonial Africa. This means that the colonial administration did not seek to force the native to become European (assimilation) but rather force the native into one through the institutionalization and politicization of difference.

What is the major significance of Pillay’s critique? It implies decolonizing knowledge should not only be analyzed from the lens of coloniality (epistemic) but also colonialism (politico-historical) perspective so as to understand the radical change from assimilation to difference seeking to consolidate the colonial political order.

Although Pillay’s thesis against the universalization of Latin American decolonial theory is merited in its own right, I find it quite interesting that Mamdani hails Afrikaans as the most

successful decolonial attempt in Africa in reference to the vast institutional network which has been established in South Africa, yet Pillay is cautioning us against universalization despite the fact that the achievements of Afrikaans are evident as this paper earlier demonstrated. This can mean that Pillay does not necessarily contradict Mamdani on the key success of Afrikaans but rather Pillay’s caution against the universalizing of Latin American decolonial theory seems to inadvertently overlook the triumphs registered at home in South Africa regarding decoloniality.

An irrefutable fact is that theory travels; rather than focus on its origin we can instead examine how the intelligentsia uses this theory wherever it has travelled. This is an attempt to critique or understand theory from the vantage point of its destination. Pillay is arguing that although decoloniality has an intellectual/ ideological history, this masks the politico-historical context of how Europe ruled Africa through an indirect rule system manifested in the politicization of tribe (ethnicity).

Although, in closing, Pillay speaks of the Latin American and African colonial episodes in generic terms, this obviously necessitates de-universalizing thereby unmasking parallels of settler colonialism (homelands/reservations) in both South Africa and America: the first settler colony.

The writer is Ph.D. Fellow at the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), Makerere University. These thoughts, originally titled: *Genealogy of African Debates on Decoloniality: A Synthesis of Afrikaans and Kiswahili* were first shared with the Cultural Studies Institute, Kampala. In Part IV, we will briefly examine the Portuguese experience in colonial Brazil (1500-1822). To support *The Sword*, please contact us via Twitter/X (@thesword_08) or send us an email via theswordug@gmail.com.