



# Why Decoloniality in the 21st Century?

What Africans must be vigilant against is the trap of ending up normalising and universalising coloniality as a natural state of the world. It must be unmasked, resisted and destroyed because it produced a world order that can only be sustained through a combination of violence, deceit, hypocrisy and lies.

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The fundamental question which has consistently cried out for a response throughout the Global South/Third World as an epistemic site that experienced the 'darker side' of modernity is that of how to extricate (ex)-colonised peoples from coloniality. African countries are prominent in this group of nations. Africa has experienced the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism (Washington Consensus and Structural Adjustment Programmes), and today globalisation. Taken together, these processes constitute coloniality as a global power structure that sustains asymmetrical power relations between the Euro-American World and the Global South.

Coloniality is a leitmotif of global imperial designs that has been in place for centuries. Decolonisation did not succeed in removing coloniality. Coloniality must not be confused with colonialism. It survived the end of direct colonialism. In 'postcolonies' it continues to affect the lives of people, long after direct colonialism and administrative apartheid have been dethroned. What, therefore, needs to be understood is not just the 'not yet uhuru' postcolonial experience but the invisible vampirism of technologies of imperialism and colonial matrices of power that continue to exist in the minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations, and epistemologies of modern subjects in Africa and the entire global South.

Coloniality as a power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design, lies at the centre of the present world order that Ramon Grosfoguel correctly described as a racially hierarchised, imperialistic, colonialist, Euro-American-centric, Christian-centric, hetero-normative, patriarchal, violent and modern world order that emerged since the so-called 'discovery' of the 'New World' by Christopher Columbus. At the centre of coloniality is race as an organising principle that hierarchised human beings according to notions and binaries of primitive vs. civilised, and developed vs. underdeveloped. What Africans must be vigilant against is the trap of ending up normalising and

universalising coloniality as a natural state of the world. It must be unmasked, resisted and destroyed because it produced a world order that can only be sustained through a combination of violence, deceit, hypocrisy and lies. This unmasking and resistance entails decoloniality as a political-cum-epistemological liberatory project.

Decoloniality is born out of a realisation that ours is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but also by pedagogies and epistemologies of equilibrium that continue to produce alienated Africans who are socialised into hating the Africa that produced them, and liking the Europe and America that rejects them. Schools, colleges,

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churches and universities in Africa are sites for reproduction of coloniality. We so far do not have African universities. We have universities in Africa. They continue to poison African minds with research methodologies and inculcate knowledges of equilibrium. These are knowledges that do not question methodologies as well as the present asymmetrical world order. In decoloniality research methods and research methodologies are never accepted as neutral but are unmasked as technologies of subjectivation if not surveillance tools that prevent the emergence of another-thinking, another-logic and another-world view. Research methodologies are tools of gate-keeping.

What is even more disturbing is that African children and youth begin a journey of alienation from their African

context the very moment they step into the school, church, and university door. They begin the painful path of learning to hate their progenitors as demons, they begin to be taught that all the knowledge they possessed before coming to school was nothing but folk knowledges, barbarism and superstitions that must be quickly be forgotten. They begin to be told that speaking mother-tongue is a sign of being primitive. In some schools direct punishments were inflicted on those who spoke 'mother-tongue' within school premises. Preachers, teachers, and lecturers produced by colonially-constructed institutions exist as lost children of coloniality.

Decoloniality is premised on three concepts. The first concept is that of coloniality of power. It helps to investigate how the current 'global political' was constructed and constituted into the asymmetrical and modern power structure. It delves deeper into how the world was bifurcated into 'Zone of Being' and 'Zone of Non-Being' maintained by invisible 'abyssal lines.' What needs to be understood is how modernity deposited its fruits of progress, civilisation, modernisation and development to the Euro-American world (Zone of Being) while at the same time imposing the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism and apartheid into the non-Euro-American world (the Zone of Non-Being).

The second concept is that of coloniality of knowledge, which focuses on teasing out epistemological issues, politics of knowledge generation as well as questions of who generates which knowledge, and for what purpose. African Studies frequently neglects to conduct serious investigations into the origins of disciplines, into epistemicides, into how knowledge has been used to assist imperialism and colonialism and into how knowledge has remained Euro-American-centric. Endogenous and indigenous knowledges have been pushed to the margins of society. Africa is today saddled with irrelevant knowledge that disempowers rather than empowers individuals and communities.

The third concept is that of coloniality of being. The starting point

of this perspective is the role played by philosophers like Rene Descartes and the long term implications of his motto 'Cogito ergo sum' (I think, therefore, I am) on conceptions of subjectivity. What is at issue here is the pertinent question of how whiteness gained ontological density far above blackness as well as how the notions of 'I think, therefore I am' mutated into 'I conquer, therefore, I am' and its production of 'coloniser and colonised' articulation of subjectivity and being. Coloniality of being is very important because it assists in investigating how African humanity was questioned as well as processes that contributed towards 'objectification'/'thingification'/'commodification' of Africans. One of the continuing struggles in Africa is focused on resisting objectification.

These three concepts enable a deeper understanding of the construction of current modern world that is today besieged by a plethora of crises. Even non-decolonial thinkers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri who produced the celebrated book entitled *Empire* (2000) acknowledged that 'the international order that European modernity continually proposed and re-proposed, at least since the Peace of Westphalia, is now in crisis. It has in fact always been in crisis, and this crisis has been one of the motors that have continuously pushed towards Empire.'<sup>1</sup>

The Colombian anthropologist and leading decolonial thinker Arturo Escobar whose well-known work *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, notes that the current global crisis emanates from the reality of modernity which created 'modern problems for which there are no modern solutions.'<sup>2</sup> The crisis of Western civilisation was noticed long ago by one of the early decolonial thinkers, Aime Cesaire, who in his *Discourse on Colonialism* proclaimed that:

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles of trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.<sup>3</sup>

From the time of Cesaire's

indictment, European civilisation has suffered a series of trials and questioning, beginning with decolonial struggles that were premised on rejecting colonialism as a medium of modernity and civilisation. The modern problems ranged widely from those of ecological destruction, climate change, global migration that is provoking new racism and xenophobia, right up to increasing inequalities, deepening poverty and the crisis of Euro-American hegemonic epistemologies.

To fully appreciate the gravity of the current multi-dimensional crisis, we must remember the promises of Euro-American modernity to humanity. In the first place, is the fact that historically modernity promised civilisation that was founded on the Cartesian notion of 'I think, therefore,

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I am,' which for Africa and other parts of the colonised world, mutated into 'I conquer, therefore, I am', which was used to justify mercantilism, the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism and other dangerous 'isms.' The second point is that sociologically, modernity promised new institutions such as the modern nation-state as the best model of human organisation.

The third point is that culturally, modernity worked to banish religious thinking and spiritualism and replaced these with rational and expert knowledge capable of rationalising life-world with a view to overcome all those cultural obstacles to human trajectories. Finally, there is the philosophical aspect in which modernity built on the 'cogito ergo

sum' to privilege 'men' in masculine gender terms, as the fountain of all knowledge about the world.

The leading Portuguese sociologist and decolonial thinker Boaventura de Sousa Santos clearly articulated how the human space was divided into two zones: 'Zone of Being' and 'Zone of Non-Being.' Santos provides details of how Western thinking operated as 'abyssal thinking' consisting of 'a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the visible ones being the foundation of the invisible ones.'<sup>4</sup> Those people like Africans and others who experienced colonisation: their realm was re-constituted by technologies of power and colonial matrices of power into an incomprehensible state of being. The possibility of co-presence or peaceful co-existence of those in the zone of being with those in the zone of non-being was rendered impossible. The end product of all this were colonial discourses and negative representations of black people as being characterised by a catalogue of deficits and series of lacks that led Ramon Grosfoguel, a leading Latin American thinker and theorist, to present the trajectory of those closed out of the 'Zone of Being' as unfolding in this way:

*"We went from the sixteenth century characterization of 'people without writing' to the eighteenth and nineteenth century characterization of 'people without history,' to the twentieth century characterization of 'people without development' and more recently, to the early twenty first century of 'people without democracy.'"*<sup>5</sup>

During the same period, those in the 'Zone of Being' were systematically gaining more and more fruits of modernity from sixteenth century 'rights of people,' to eighteenth century 'rights of man,' and to the late twentieth century 'human rights.'<sup>6</sup> What was happening is that the Anglo-Saxons and their descendants were increasingly consolidating their ontological density while Africans and those of African descent resident in the Diaspora were losing ontological weight.

Decoloniality arises from this context in which the humanity of

black people is doubted and emerges as one way of telling the story of the modern world from the experiences of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism. It is not the only way of articulating the history of the construction of the modern world. What distinguishes it is its starting point, which is coloniality. Decoloniality entails studying Africa as a product of 350 years of struggles against slavery in the first instance and against coloniality today.

### What is decoloniality?

Decoloniality 'struggles to bring into intervening existence another interpretation that brings forward, on the one hand, a silenced view of the event and, on the other, shows the limits of imperial ideology disguised as the true (total) interpretation of the events' in the making of the modern world.<sup>7</sup> Decoloniality is distinguished from an imperial version of history through its push for shifting of geography of reason from the West as the epistemic locale from which the 'world is described, conceptualised and ranked' to the ex-colonised epistemic sites as legitimate points of departure in describing the construction of the modern world order.<sup>8</sup>

To fully understand and appreciate decoloniality as a liberatory option, it is important to clearly distinguish it from colonialism, decolonisation, and coloniality.

#### Colonialism:

*Colonialism is a historical process that culminated in the invasion, conquest, and direct administration of Africa by states like Spain, Portugal, Britain, and France for purposes of enhancing their prestige as empires, for exploitation of natural and human resources and export of excess population, for the benefit of the empire. Colonialism as a historical process came to an end in the post-1945 period that witnessed the withdrawal of direct colonial administrations and with those that were reluctant to do so facing confrontation from national liberation movements.*

#### Decolonisation:

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*that was used to describe the withdrawal of direct colonialism from the colonies as well as the struggles ranged against those empires that were reluctant to do so. In Sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa became the last colony to decolonise in 1994 from an internal form of white colonialism called apartheid. Decolonisation became a historical process that was enabled by the emergence of the United Nations sovereignty and its global constitutionalism that embraced postcolonial states.*

#### Coloniality:

*Nelson Maldonado-Torres, a leading philosopher in decolonial thought, grapples with the meaning of coloniality and this is how he defined it:*

*Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another*

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*nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.<sup>9</sup>*

Coloniality is a name for the 'darker side' of modernity that needs to be unmasked because it exists as 'an embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernization, and being good for everyone.'<sup>10</sup>

Walter D. Mignolo argued that 'Coloniality names the experiences and views of the world and history of those whom Fanon called les damnés de la terre ('the wretched of the earth') those who have been, and continue to be, subjected to the standard of modernity.'<sup>11</sup>

Mignolo elaborated on the meaning of the wretched of the earth in this way: 'The wretched are defined by the colonial wound, and the colonial wound, physical and/or psychological, is a consequence of racism, the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (and the geo-politics of knowledge) of those who assign the standard of classification and assign to themselves the right to classify.'

What distinguishes decoloniality from other existing critical social theories is its locus of enunciations and its genealogy - which is outside of Europe. Decoloniality can be best understood as a pluriversal epistemology of the future - a redemptive and liberatory epistemology that seeks to de-link from the tyranny of abstract universals.<sup>12</sup> Decoloniality informs the ongoing struggles against inhumanity of the



Cartesian subject, 'the irrationality of the rational, the despotic residues of modernity.'<sup>13</sup>

### Why decoloniality in the 21st century?

The direct answer comes from Ramon Grosfoguel who argued that:

*One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world. This led to the myth of a 'postcolonial' world. The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same 'colonial power matrix.' With juridical-political decolonization we moved from a period of 'global colonialism' to the current period of 'global coloniality.' Although 'colonial administrations' have been almost entirely eradicated and the majority of the periphery is politically organised into independent states, non-European people are still living under crude European/Euro-American exploitation and domination. The old colonial hierarchies of European versus non-Europeans remain in place and are entangled with the 'international division of labour' and accumulation of capital at a world-scale.<sup>14</sup>*

Decoloniality announces the broad 'decolonial turn' that involves the 'task of the very decolonization of knowledge, power and being, including institutions such as the university.' Maldonado-Torres elaborated:

"By decoloniality it is meant here the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world."<sup>15</sup>

But this article cannot be complete without engaging with the postmodernist and postcolonial critique of all those combative interventions whose point of departure is coloniality.

### The poverty of postmodern-postcolonial critique

The postmodern and postcolonial critique of nationalism, Marxism and decoloniality is informed by a deep misunderstanding of how the modern world was constituted and how it works. Such celebrated scholars as Achille Mbembe and Kwame Anthony Appiah manifest this misunderstanding which makes them very critical of any critical thought that builds its case from the reality of colonialism, coloniality and racism. They wrongly criticised African scholars, particularly those whose thinking is informed by nationalism and Marxism, for being enclosed inside an intellectual ghetto from which they articulate false philosophies.<sup>16</sup> The reality is that postmodern and postcolonial theorists totally failed to understand that modernity had two faces, particularly that the progressive

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rhetoric of modernity including liberal democracy and human rights discourses help in hiding coloniality as the negative side of modernity.

What they identify as false philosophies that they name as nativism and Afro-radicalism emerge as Africans try to regain lost ontological density. What is needed is not severe critiques of these ideologies emerging from the zone of non-being but to understand life in this zone. It was actually coloniality rather than nativism and Afro-radicalism that installed the discourse of metaphysics of difference. Africans are genuine victims of this system of power and they have little choice but to reveal a psychosis of victimhood.<sup>17</sup> It was also coloniality that created a polemic relationship between the Euro-American world and the rest of the Global South.<sup>18</sup> As

long as coloniality exists and as long as African ontology is doubted and ridiculed decoloniality in its various forms will continue to reverberate and be 'repeated over and over again' by nationalists and Marxists'.<sup>19</sup>

Postmodernists and some postcolonial theorists are surprising in blaming those people who were and still are victims of the 'dark side' of modernity for continuing to blame slavery, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, dependence, and globalisation for the production of postcolonial problems. To characterise genuine people's pains inflicted by these inimical processes as an 'old refrain' informed by unproductive and misguided intellectual exercise born out of the peddling of essentialist discourses of autochthony and authenticity, is mischievous and dishonest. Coloniality is still active and inflicting pain and death on Africans.

What is seen as the 'self-ghettoisation' of African scholarship, taking the form of 'territorialisation of the production of knowledge', is in fact a genuine effort to counter imperialist thought that pushes African knowledges to the margins of society. Africa is a victim of externally generated knowledges that are not informed by geo- and biographical contextual understanding of the African condition. But scholars like Mbembe deliberately distort this intervention and cast it as promotion of a 'false belief that only autochthonous people who are physically living in Africa can produce, within a closed circle limited to themselves alone, a legitimate scientific discourse on the realities of the continent.'<sup>20</sup> Avoidance, if not scholarly failure to engage with coloniality, is the worst sign of intellectual laziness compared to African scholarship that continues to get to modernity, colonialism and coloniality as foundational elements of postcolonial African problems.<sup>21</sup>

Logically, postmodern and postcolonial critique of African scholarship provoked an equally severe response from such scholars as Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and others. For instance, Mbembe was criticised for uncritical celebration of the globalisation and cosmopolitanism that underpin Euro-American hegemony.

His call for 'internationalization' of African scholarship as a way of 'getting out of the ghetto' was equated with 'globalizing tendencies of neo-liberal economic policies of liberalization.'<sup>22</sup>

The point was that the domain of knowledge generation in and on Africa has never been 'ghettoised.' It has never been closed from external influences and currents of thoughts. Instead it has been excessively exposed to external and imported Euro-American paradigms. This makes the case for decoloniality relevant, which pushes the agenda of decolonising knowledge. Mbembe was further criticised for surrendering to the triumphalist ideology of globalisation and the disempowering slogan 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA) doctrine.

### Rebutting postmodern and postcolonial critique of decoloniality

Decoloniality must not be confused with nationalist and Marxist thought. Decoloniality is against essentialism and fundamentalism as put by Grosfoguel: "This is not an essentialist, fundamentalist, anti-European critique. It is a perspective that is critical of both Eurocentric and Third World fundamentalisms, colonialism and nationalism. What all fundamentalisms share (including the Eurocentric one) is the premise that there is only one sole epistemic tradition from which to achieve Truth and Universality."<sup>23</sup>

As noted by Nelson Maldonado-Torres decoloniality is not a singular theoretical school of thought, but a family of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as the fundamental problem in the modern age. Yes, they might be some decolonial positions that might degenerate into romanticism and fundamentalism, but that is not generalisable to all decolonial thought.

Decoloniality gives ex-colonised peoples a space to judge Euro-American deceit and hypocrisy and to stand up into subjecthood through judging Europe and exposing technologies of subjectivation.

Decoloniality exposes the fact that Euro-American epistemologies are exhausted, opening an opportune moment for articulation of decolonial epistemologies from the South in an

endeavour to attain cognitive justice. Rationality and technology have not completely managed to overcome all obstacles to human freedom.

At another level decoloniality involves re-telling of history of humanity and knowledge from the vantage point of those epistemic sites that received the 'darker side' of modernity, including re-telling the story of knowledge generation as involving borrowings, appropriations, epistemicides, and denials of humanity of other people as part of the story of science. It is also a call for the

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democratisation of knowledge, de-hegemonisation of knowledge, de-westernisation of knowledge, and de-Europeanisation of knowledge.

At the core of decoloniality is the agenda of shifting the geography and biography of knowledge - who generates knowledge and from where? Decoloniality's point of departure is existential realities of suffering, oppression, repression, domination and exclusion. Decoloniality facilitates the unmasking of racism as a global problem as well as demonstrating how knowledge, including science, was used to justify colonialism. Finally decoloniality accepts the fact of ontological pluralism as a reality that needs ecologies of knowledges to understand.

### Conclusion

I hope this article has succeeded in making a strong case for decoloniality in the 21st century. Decoloniality needs to be appreciated as liberatory thought that gestures towards the possibility

of another world and knowledge. At the epistemic level decoloniality is about epistemological disobedience premised on three domains of power, knowledge, and being. At the political level, it is working in areas of new critical theory, new meaning-making and action. At the methodological level, it rebels against knowledges of equilibrium and those methods that operate as part of colonial matrices of power that prevent transformation.

In our modest terms, we are pushing decolonial thinking as Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN) based at UNISA. The newly established Archie Mafeje Research Institute (AMRI)'s research work is also informed by decoloniality. Our plan is to host an annual Summer School at Archie Mafeje Research Institute to expose students and young academics to decolonial thinking, the politics of knowledge generation as well as power, identity and epistemological issues at the centre of the modern world order. ■

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