



Is Decolonization More Than a Buzzword?

By Kathryn Toure



One is never intelligent alone.
- Senufo proverb

The 4th African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA) biennial conference was all about being human and (re)imagining the human from Africa. About 600 people participated, in person in Cape Town and/or virtually. The theme of decolonization was discussed in many of the [160 sessions over five days in April 2022](#). This article explores some of the themes that emerged in the presentations and discussions regarding decolonization, which some called merely a buzzword.

Is decolonization more than a buzzword? And if so, is it even possible to achieve decolonization? To begin the reflection, how is the concept defined? [Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed](#), drawing on other scholars, writes that “Decolonization is rooted in dismantling colonial and imperialist systems that are built into the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious realities of colonized peoples” and “requires tremendous work and effort in addressing these injustices.” People and organizations in communities around the world are trying to understand colonial hierarchies and legacies and how to dismantle them and refashion ways of relating and organizing in society that account for mutual respect and reciprocity for one and all. However, if decolonisation is more than just talk, is it sufficient as a concept and a strategy to attain that end? Another question to keep in mind.

This article is organized in nine sections: Doing Africa; Speaking out through *kangas*, writing and

publishing; Values, history, language, education, and culture matter; Epistemic journeys; Umoja; Exercising real power in parliament; Leveraging digital spaces; Hope for Africa as a forever incomplete project; Positionality. The non-comprehensive nature of this “coverage” of the decolonization debate at the ASAA conference makes this reflection incomplete and open to dialogue. The intergenerational conversations and queries and affirmations of Global Africa’s next generation at ASAA2022 suggest that the project of Africa, building on ancestral foundations in a spirit of conviviality and incompleteness, is very much on the move.

Doing Africa

In a conference [session](#) exploring inclusion and exclusion, Martha Mbuvi of Tangaza University College described marrying into the Akamba community in Kenya – which made her, according to her husband’s community, a “*Muki*”. The term means “one who has come” and brings fresh blood and new ideas, and it can also connote stranger or outsider. The way it is used in practice can leave women with a diasporic feeling – part of the community yet not entirely.

Mbuvi mentioned how she is inspired by the work of Ghanaian scholar [Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye](#) (born in 1934, now in her 80s) who worked “for women’s voices and concerns” to be heard. Martha goes on to declare how her own research on the term *Muki* among the Akamba will help bridge gaps and bring attention to ignored or uninterrogated issues, including relationships between language and power.

Such participatory research, conducted in a spirit of sisterhood and solidarity and focused on African culture is part of the decolonization process, even though Mbuvi did not describe her work as “decolonial”. As African American artist Bisa Butler, who makes life-size quilt portraits celebrating Black life, says in an [interview](#), Black history and culture – which are a part of world history and culture – have been “concealed, deliberately erased or ignored”. The work of Martha Mbuvi and other young researchers trying to understand the nuances and complexities of everyday lived experiences and interactions in Africa will certainly shed light on African his/herstory and culture in context.

Africa has for centuries been described and characterized from outside the continent, let us say, through “fuzzy lenses”, and from within the continent by Africans who often feel compelled to use those external lenses or simply take them for granted. If we look through fuzzy lenses, won’t vision be blurred? Even with fuzzy lenses, the more the angles and perspectives, the greater the possibility of representation of silent and silenced voices. It is paramount to multiply initiatives to tell the story of Africa by listening to everyday Africans. “[Ces vieux sages m’apprennent ce que n’ont pu m’apporter les docteurs en Sorbonne \[...\] faire la science relève de la vie ordinaire.](#)” (Those elders taught me what I could not learn from doctors of the Sorbonne [...] doing science is part of everyday life). What is being done to support the Martha Mbuvis across the continent?

“Who are you that mumbles in the dark?” asked Langston Hughes in a [poem](#). In the poem, he turns from mainstream musings about life in America to centre previously parenthesized voices, voices from the margins of society, subdued voices of oppressed and colonized peoples. Mbuvi as a researcher and knowledge producer is listening to the stories, perspectives, and experiences of those who may be mumbling in the dark. Mbuvi is “doing Africa” from an Afrocentric point of view. This is part of decoloniality. She is sensitive to power dynamics, to who is included and who is not, and is seeking more wholistic and nuanced representations of relations and people in society.

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At the ASAA conference, South African researcher Sabelo Mcinziba stressed that “We need to do us, see us, hear us.” In an April 23 2022 [Facebook post](#) describing some of his historical research with elders in townships, Mcinziba insists that we must tell stories “that must be told because their memories will be erased while we prioritize elite history as official history.” My guess is that Martha Mbuvi does not spend most of her time thinking about whether decolonization is a buzzword or not but is getting on with her work of “doing Africa”, of telling stories that do not get told and making voices heard that otherwise get ignored. And she will be obliged to develop new tools and concepts along the way, which will contribute meaningfully to African and global knowledge production - and make us more humxn. Is that part of decolonization? I would venture to say yes.

Speaking out through kangas, writing and publishing

Pfungwa Nyamukachi spoke at the conference about how *The Conversation Africa* helps academics translate research findings for the public. Others discussed how women speak and are heard through songs they compose and share at the local level and through messages emblazoned on the *kangas* that they wear - including in efforts to resist colonization and patriarchal systems.

Esther Karin Mngodo shared about how she is disrupting patterns of knowledge production by creating a platform for women to publish in Swahili: *Umbu Online Women’s Literary Magazine*. Esther explained how she did not get to read in Swahili about topics of interest growing up, nor later in life, and is working to change that. She asked, “Why can’t I read about breasts or postpartum depression in Swahili?” Swahili is one of the ten most spoken languages - with 16 million speakers worldwide - and was adopted this year as an official working language of the African Union. Mngodo’s work will have decolonizing and healing effects, although she did not use those terms, because she is making space for the sharing of reflections related to concerns close to her heart and to those of others, and in a language that can express the nuances of the lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Her work of enlarging the frame of “who knows” and of “what is considered as knowledge” comes with challenges. People ask: “Why dwell so much on women’s perspectives? Why are you so angry? Why are you so angsty? You are too educated for a woman.”

But Mngodo persists. She sees her disruptor role as important and does not mind when heads turn. She said, “Writing on *kangas* is not enough for me. Our literature and our libraries also need to reflect what is going on in our society at large.” She asks why anyone familiar with the Tanzanian literary scene knows about Shaaban Robert (1909-1972) but may not have heard of Penina Muhanda (born in 1948, now in her 70s) who wrote her plays in Swahili. Indeed, it can be a struggle for women to write and be published and recognized, perhaps especially if they write in an African language - which Muhanda wanted to do to reach her people. So much can be lost in cultural translation to colonial languages. Future generations will hopefully be grateful to the efforts of Esther Karin Mngodo who, in the tradition of Penina Muhanda, is helping to ensure that people will be able to read about everyday life experiences in Swahili. Esther and Penina contribute to shifts in the ebbs and flows of knowledge.

Esther is full of action and agency. This contrasts with a literary character, Jonas, whose obscurity was essential to his survival. Jonas, a character in the [second novel](#) of Dinaw Mengestu, is the son of parents who emigrated to the USA from Ethiopia. Caught between cultures and unsure of himself, he is ostracized by classmates and neighbours. Ultimately, Jonas opts out of a marginal existence - of being forced into colonial frames and ignorance of his humanity. This, according to Grace Musila, Associate Professor of African Literature at the University of Witwatersrand.

When I saw in a [meme](#) on social media with the text, “Although I was born visible, I now identify as invisible. I am trans-parent. My pronouns are who/where,” and the progression of images of someone disappearing, I somehow thought of the pain and trauma of Jonas, who is not alone in the

experience of feeling erased or of being in a zone of non-being. I also think of the partners of miners in [Marikana](#), described by Asanda Benya, and their struggles for dignity.

Like Esther, [Sandra Tamele](#), Executive Director of independent press Editora Trinta Zero Nove in Mozambique, is another inspiring example of making the world accessible to her compatriots, through the written word and audio books. A trained architect-turned-professional translator and interpreter, she began translating novels and stories into Portuguese and supporting others to do the same. She subsequently founded Editora Trinta Zero Nove to provide a publication outlet for those works. Then, because only 11 per cent of the 31 million people in Mozambique speak Portuguese, she realized the works needed to be translated into four of the major languages of the country and, because only 50 per cent of the population read and write, to be turned into audiobooks as well. Her dream is to enrich education through access to literature in a country where bookstores can be rare, and many people do not know how to use the digital plazas available in the country. Tamele explains how both her grandmothers were child brides and did not have the opportunity to go to school and recognizes her privilege, being among the 1 per cent of Mozambicans with access to tertiary education. She believes she is planting seeds for the future, one book, one story, and one reader at a time. The press Tamele founded translates and publishes mostly female writers and writers living with disabilities.

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Pfungwa Nyamukachi, Esther Karin Mngodo, Grace Musila, and Sandra Tamele are each filling a gap in valuing African history, culture, people, and knowledge production. This is long overdue, considering the vast inequalities in the global knowledge economy, where African voices are sorely underrepresented and often misrepresented. These women are part of the process of decolonizing minds and cultures. With colleagues at *The Conversation Africa*, Nyamukachi is making the work of African researchers available to people with access to the Internet. Mngodo is disrupting the status quo and making heads turn with new and exciting writings in Swahili by women writers. Musila is deepening understandings of literary productions related to eastern and southern Africa. Tamele is strategically and creatively challenging the lack of access to literary productions by fellow Mozambicans. They are not just writing in Big English to advance their careers. Each of these formidable women is speaking out, proactively taking decolonizing action, uplifting African voices and perspectives, and planting seeds for the future. I find their work buzzworthy. A buzzword in this sense should be lauded, not discouraged.

Values, history, language, education, and culture matter

In the ASAA session on “Remembering Humans”, Christopher Ouma, Associate Professor at the University of Cape Town, evoked the critical and creative work of Dr Harry Garuba of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, who died in February 2020. Throughout his career, he [“tirelessly laboured against the erasure of worlds, people, ways of thinking and being - and offered critical tools with which to knowledge differently.”](#)

“I miss the language that once lived in my body,” wrote Harry Garuba in his poem [“Leaving Home at 10,”](#) which Christopher read at the conference. How many other people remember or know about someone leaving behind family and a whole linguistic and cultural world to go to school - to learn to perceive the world through the prism of colonial language, culture and thinking?

Lawino, in a [poem](#) by Okot P’Bitek, observing the newly acquired values and attitudes of her

schooled husband Ocol, speaks to him in the following way:

Husband, now you despise me
Now you treat me with spite
And say I have inherited the stupidity of my aunt;
Son of the Chief,
Now you compare me
With the rubbish in the rubbish pit,
You say you no longer want me
Because I am like the things left behind
In the deserted homestead.
You laugh at me
You say I do not know the letter A
Because I have not been to school
And I have not been baptized

[...]

Take care,
Take care of your tongue,
Be careful what your lips say.

[Francis Nyamnjoh](#) shows “how the values acquired during the colonial era that teach the superiority of the colonizer set the tone for the imbibing of knowledge and continue to dominate education and life in postcolonial Africa.” Thus, the decolonial project includes the need to unpack education, learn and relearn history, bring a critical perspective to what is valued and not valued, and revalue what has been devalued. Acclaimed Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo (born in 1942, recently turned 80), as Secretary for Education, called for children to learn to read and write their mother tongue and one other Ghanaian language, but this proposal did not see the light of day at the time; today she [encourages](#) writers to not hesitate to write in African languages.

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At the ASAA conference, Wesley Maraire described Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms, which, contrary to courts of law, are not adversarial in nature and draw on African traditions and values. Anthony Diala called for the (re)education of a whole new generation of teachers, aware of their past. Lauren Paremoer explained the value of solidarity as described in the [Banjul Charter](#). The producers of the [film](#) “When Women Speak”, which was screened at the conference, demonstrate a true spirit of sisterhood. Thaddeus Metz elaborated how the African philosophy of *ubuntu* acknowledges interdependencies among people and self-fulfilment through social ideals.

ASAA President, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, in her presidential lecture, called for empathy, kindness, humaneness, and love. She challenged conference participants to “Dare to be kind.” Mamokgethi Phakeng, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, and Rama Salla Dieng, Lecturer at the University of Edinburg, called for a culture of care and for justice. Many youthful voices called for being seen, heard, counted and considered, and for African values, history, language, ways of knowing, and culture to be part and parcel of the project of Africa. They are not talking about something that is just fashionable or trendy. They are calling for what can make for a better humanity.

Epistemic journeys

In stripping away vestiges of colonialism, understanding of and attention to values, history, language, education, and culture is important but insufficient. The epistemological underpinnings of knowledge production need to be interrogated. Whose knowledge counts? Who is considered to know? What knowledge is valued and promoted? How is knowledge produced? With what assumptions and from what vantage points? From what philosophical perspectives? And for what purposes? According to Harry Garuba, decolonization and decoloniality, which may seem trendy and confusing, simply mean “putting the needs and interests of the epistemologically disenfranchised at the forefront of knowledge production.”

African children, for example, have been epistemologically disenfranchised. Oduor Obura argues that for many years the realities of childhood in Africa have been constructed through a western colonial lens, with a focus on want, need, and lack. His book, [Decolonising Childhoods in Eastern Africa](#), challenges such domineering mono-directional narratives and “universalising experiences and notions of childhood” which silence “the pluralities of experiences and knowledges” present in eastern Africa. Through multidisciplinary work, the Congolese concept of Bula Matadi (the use of force in breaking of obstacle rocks), engagement with children and those around them, and studies of the presentation of children in literary works, he presents pluralistic counter-narratives about child agency, negotiation, resilience and creativity in eastern Africa.

The devalorization of Africanness and African ways of being, the “attempted epistemicide” of African ways of knowing, and centuries of “concessions to the outside” require critical perspectives and methodical and intentional epistemic work for true transformation. Francis Nyamnjoh [argues](#) that:

In Africa, the colonial conquest of Africans – body, mind and soul – has led to real or attempted epistemicide – the decimation or near complete killing and replacement of endogenous epistemologies with the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror. The result has been education through schools and other formal institutions of learning in Africa largely as a process of making infinite concessions to the outside – mainly the western world. Such education has tended to emphasize mimicry over creativity, and the idea that little worth learning about, even by Africans, can come from Africa.

Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai was aware of these epistemological challenges. At the ASAA conference session on “Remembering Humans”, Besi Brilliant Muhonja argues that Wangari Maathai is celebrated mainly as an environmental activist, which ignores or erases her contributions as a scholar and African knower, thinker, and theorizer. Muhonja, in her book, *Radical Utu: Critical Ideas and Ideals of Wangari Muta Maathai*, presents a more multidimensional portrait of Maathai and her words and works, to situate her ideas and concepts in global discourse. She focuses on her practical philosophical and epistemological approaches. Maathai promoted the decolonization of knowledge and theories of self-knowing and facilitated emotional and spiritual processes of learning about self, language, ecology, and community. In a paper titled “[The Cracked Mirror](#),” she wrote the following:

By the end of the civic and environmental seminars organised by the Green Belt Movement, participants feel the time has come for them to hold up their own mirror and find out who they are. This is why we call the seminars kwimenya (self-knowledge). Until then, participants have looked through someone else’s mirror – the mirror of the missionaries or their teachers or the colonial authorities who have told them who they are and who write and speak about them – at their own cracked reflections. They have seen only a distorted image, if they have seen themselves at all!

Maathai resisted the idea of the missionaries that “God does not dwell on Mount Kenya” but rather

in heaven. She stressed that “Cultural liberation will only come when the minds of the people are set free and they can protect themselves from colonialism of the mind.” She promoted women’s rights and the use of African languages to reflect nuances of African ways of being and thinking. She believed that people need to reclaim their culture to attain cultural liberation and that that freedom will help people care for nature and future generations.

The decolonial project includes the need to unpack education, learn and relearn history, bring a critical perspective to what is valued and not valued, and revalue what has been devalued.

According to Muhonja’s interpretation of the philosophy of Wangari Maathai, when we have nothing to call our own, to reflect to us who we are, we no longer see ourselves and will forget who we are. We will try to fill voids with material things. Planting trees and telling our stories is important to conservation. “Let us mind our language, practice our spirituality, and live our communal culture,” she urged, drawing on the philosophy and critical ideas and ideals of Wangari Muta Maathai.

Wangari Maathai is an example of someone who took decolonization and Afrocentric thinking beyond the academy into her practice and interactions with rural Kenyan women and others involved in the Green Belt Movement.

Another issue I would like to cover in this discussion of epistemic journeys is the ASAA roundtable discussion on: Are African Studies Centres Gatekeepers of African Knowledge Production and Enablers of (De)Colonisation? Prof. Thoko Kaime of the University of Bayreuth in Germany launched the discussion by speaking about knowing and playing by the rules or disavowing the rules in the interest of reshaping African studies to focus on African perspectives and predicaments rather than imperial interests. After all, these centres were created to “study the native”. To promote the status quo, however, an environment of fear which discourages critical thought can be created. Kaime insists that decolonization happens “only when those we study can speak and be heard”.

One participant in the discussion called for auditing African studies centres around the world for Afrocentric perspectives and pedagogical approaches and closing those that perpetuate a colonial gaze. “What has changed since anthropologist Audrey Richards created the Cambridge Centre of African Studies in 1965?” they insisted. Isabelle Zundel, a University of Bayreuth student of legal and political trends in eastern and southern Africa, noted how African studies centres can, regrettably, promote the use of Africa as a career path, with the assumption of a “submissive Africa”.

Research cooperation in African Studies was discussed at [two conference sessions](#). New ways of cooperation are emerging “due to individual interests” and “institutional awareness of the necessity of collaboration”. The session participants discussed demands for decentralising African Studies and for “fair participation of researchers from the Global South”.

In the discussion about gatekeepers and enablers of (de)colonization, legal anthropologist Anthony Diala insisted that the [decolonization debate](#) and its lack of structuration is keeping people from focusing on restorative justice and the dismantling of racist and hegemonic structures. Educationalist Prof. Brenda Leibowitz spoke to this tension to some degree in her [2016 inaugural address](#) on the decolonisation of knowledge at the University of Johannesburg. She called for cognitive justice (through a university curriculum in which students see themselves and the pedagogical processes in which they are active) but also social justice (equitable access to resources, services, and opportunities in society). She went on to insist that decolonization is not just

exchanging one knowledge for another and called for the dehegemonization and diversification of knowledge, understanding that different knowledge systems are in dialogue and need to dialogue with each other.

Leibowitz went further to reference [Raewyn Connell](#) who insists that southern knowledge systems need to be especially supported to respond to southern preoccupations and planetary questions and disruptions. [Connell et al.](#) went on to show that patterns of extraversion in Southern scholarship can suppress theoretical advances and thus limit the quality and robustness of Southern and global knowledge production.

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Other sentiments discerned at the ASAA conference about epistemological aspects of the decolonization journey include: “Colonialism took so much from our people, and it serves the status quo for us to be patient. We need pluralities rather than dichotomies. We need more Afrocentric ways of teaching and learning and the right as Africans to participate fully in knowledge production and be seen and heard. How we theorize matters. Our conceptual frameworks matter - we need to expand the frames of understanding. We need to use appropriate methodologies and humanize fieldwork.”

In her [paper](#) on the Dagbanj philosophy of respecting the human dignity of interlocutors, Wunpini Fatimata Mohammed cites two postcolonial thinkers, who write on decolonizing, respectively, the mind and methodologies. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o draws our attention to the importance of “pulling our languages, literature, and knowledge systems out of the periphery to which they have been banished.” Linda Tuhiwai Smith presents us with “the importance of disrupting the Western canon in knowledge production” and “the potential that Indigenous knowledges hold not only to affirm the lived experience of colonized peoples, but also to dismantle the colonial values embedded in and woven into academia.”

Rather than force themselves to write in a hand that is not theirs or force their research into frames that do not quite fit, [Harry Garuba](#) urges students to “center the questions that are important to you and let that drive your research and your methods and concepts formation”. Let knowledge production be directed by the “needs, interests, and desires of people epistemologically disenfranchised”. This will lead to conceptual voids, opportunities to rethink things, and new concepts and possibilities across disciplines. “When you reach the cul-de-sac, that is when we get invention” that transcends fragmentation and “moves beyond methodological fundamentalism”.

Umoja

African integration, *umoja*, and pan-Africanism were part of the ASAA conference. Participants in different sessions appreciated the comingling and the dialogues across boundaries - national, linguistic, disciplinary, generational. Scholars and writers described the beauty of meeting new colleagues, encountering new concepts, learning about similarities and differences from context to context, and discussing potential transboundary collaborations. The international and pan-African spirit was palpable, inspiring, and uplifting. If this is part of decolonization, I want to be a part of it.

The screening of the film [Umoja](#) - Swahili word for “unity” - and the subsequent discussion, with producer/director Dr Mjiba Frehiwot of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, addressed pan-Africanism directly. Through a series of interviews, pan-Africanism is presented in the film as the celebration of African people and values, the teaching and practice of solidity over

division, and investment in systems of thought and action that unite the continent. Pan-Africanists dreamed of a common foreign policy, currency, and defence for pan-Africanism to work and recognize the need to continually “give people the tools with which to liberate themselves”. Today there are new social movements - *Y'en a marre* and *Nouveau Type de Citoyens* for example, and #EndSARS, Black Lives Matter, #FixTheCountry, #ShutItAllDown, #NoMore and initiatives like *re_sisters*, Year of Return to Ghana, and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. How do Africans come together, address issues collectively, invest in education and create an *ubuntu* economy and shared prosperity? Then and now, pan-Africanism is rooted in values of dignity, love, sharing, learning, compassion, caring, dialogue, reciprocity, and interdependence.

When we have nothing to call our own, to reflect to us who we are, we no longer see ourselves and will forget who we are. We will try to fill voids with material things.

One interviewee in the film expressed the following: “We need to stop performing peace. Peace is the ability to claim rights, for the media to speak, and for people to not fight unimaginable rising prices and traffic. We need to protect ourselves and uplift each other. Let us keep telling the truth. The year 2063 is too far, we need to unite now.” Another interviewee insisted that “Girls should not be forced to marry, and education needs to be relevant.” And a third added, “Education needs to address our challenges, including psychological ones. The inherited institutions were not meant for transformation.” Rabbi Kohain, Executive Secretary of the PANAFEST Foundation is featured in the film saying, “We have had to put a mask on every day. Be prepared to be born again as Africans.”

Sabelo Mcinziba said on day one of the conference, “We trade too little with each other and cite each other too little.” Nonetheless, lived experiences of pan-Africanism are real - especially in frontier spaces. The film producer/director described observing women engaged in cross-border trade in West Africa. They speak several languages, take cedis, dollars, and CFA, know the exchange rates, and ask you how you want your change. “In whichever direction you are moving, they work with you.” Very convivial. They straddle borders that others so jealously protect. “But do police officers know about *Umoja*?” asked a participant. Indeed, cross-border traders and travellers can be challenged by authorities.

South-South collaboration and conversations among Southern scholars is another form of unity and was addressed implicitly in some conference sessions and explicitly in a panel on “Decolonizing Southern thinking” with Fabricio Pereira da Silva of Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and Mjiba Frehiwot of University of Ghana. They examined the decolonial philosophies of [Amílcar Cabral and of Paulo Freire](#) as an intellectual bridge between Africa and Latin America and examined Yves Valentin Mudimbe’s *Invention of Africa* for insights on ways forward for pan-Africanism and Latin-Americanism. Although African and Latin American experiences are vastly different, there are shared experiences of being on the receiving end of colonialism and thus the value of unpacking the implications of colonial legacies together. The two presenting scholars travelled between their continents, reminiscing how Paulo Freire travelled to Guinea Bissau to work in a literacy programme there after Amílcar Cabral was murdered.

The [panel](#) sought to “rescue epistemologies in the process of being silenced. In a world in deep crisis and accelerated transformation, we believe that the Global South (Africa in particular) is well-positioned to contribute to the imagination of more humane alternative futures - and to the very survival of humanity. In this sense, we think about Global South contributions in terms of concepts and practices of interconnectivity, conviviality, communality, equality, and emancipations.”

Exercising real power in parliament

Gender, women's rights and concerns for intersectionality were integral to decolonial thinking and movements in Africa, and women were visibly involved – like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Bibi Titi Mohammed, and Djamila Boupacha – as well as working behind the scenes. The attention to [gender issues during decolonisation struggles](#) “led to practical gains for women in many newly independent states,” but with time, some of the “spaces created by decolonisation movements were closed,” and imperialist and patriarchal structures continue to shape everyday life in many ways.

The ASAA conference session on “Women as Lesser Humans?” explored women's influence in African parliaments, particularly the cases of South Africa and Uganda. The number of women in parliament, or their “descriptive representation,” has increased in part due to affirmative action measures including quotas. But how does this translate into “substantive representation,” for example pro-gender agendas and policies that address the specific challenges and aspirations of girls and women, with concern for intersecting factors, like class, educational level, disability, and geographic location? Women are increasingly present in parliaments, but are they influential? In the end, it seems that substantial representation is difficult. The “stickiness of old rules” and the power of informal institutions (like male social networks, decision-making conversations with selective participation behind closed doors or in other shadow spaces) inhibit new ways of working.

African studies centres can, regrettably, promote the use of Africa as a career path, with the assumption of a “submissive Africa”.

At this conference session, [Amanda Gouws](#), of Stellenbosch University in South Africa, explained how the women's movement in South Africa was successful in ensuring a whole package of institutions to help advance women's equality post-apartheid. Those active in the movement did not want just a gender or women and youth ministry that might be side-lined but the integration of concerns for gender equality and inclusion in all ministries, an office of the status of women, a commission for gender equality, and other institutions. This holistic approach facilitated substantive representation (for example the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of 1998 and the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1996). This package of institutions, however, lost its vibrancy under President Mbeki (1999-2008) and President Jacob Zuma (2009-2018), who came to power after President Nelson Mandela, and has not been reinvigorated. Prof. Gouws, in responding to a question, said that “we cannot just want the institutions back – we also need the feminist consciousness and commitment.”

Dr Hannah Muzee, who studied at the Pan African University Institute for Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences, hosted by Cameroon, and lectured at Kyambogo University in Uganda, explored how women in Uganda have “a seat at the table but no voice”. Women can make it into parliament, but then what? Since the 1995 Constitution, women have been fast-tracked into politics through affirmative action but have also been tokenized. Factors that hold women back in politics include the lack of access to resources for campaigns, party loyalty pressures, and the perpetuation of gender division of labour in political parties and in parliament (i.e. men are usually in charge of finance, law, policy). In addition, women's leagues of political parties do not work on pro-women's issues. They speak or operate if sanctioned by the party executive, and their biggest role is to mobilize funds and votes.

However, the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association, an all-party parliamentary caucus, has supported [networking](#), training in public speaking, and mentorship on pro-women issues for women parliamentarians. This has helped to enhance women's voices and pass pro-women legislation, i.e.

the Domestic Violence Bill and the Children's (Amendment) Bill. The Association strategically admits male legislators as allies, with the understanding that men need to understand injustices women suffer so they too can speak to the issues. Promoter of women's rights, [Miria Rukoza Koburunga Matembe](#), who served in Uganda's parliament and became Minister of Ethics and Integrity, writes from her experience about how the gender question and the journey of women to top positions need to be tackled by both men and women. She also [wrote](#) about the challenges of translating a gender sensitive constitution into reality, especially regarding land rights for women, and co-founded in 2006 the [Centre for Women in Governance](#) to "make women's participation in politics and governance go beyond numbers."

The phenomenon of women's substantial representation is further explored in [Gendered Institutions and Women's Political Representation in Africa](#). In addition to the South Africa case study, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana are covered. Chapter 3 by Sethunya Tshapho Mosime and Maude Dikobe explores whether political candidate training programmes in Botswana are "A waste of resources or pedagogies of the oppressed?"

Then and now, pan-Africanism is rooted in values of dignity, love, sharing, learning, compassion, caring, dialogue, reciprocity, and interdependence.

In the current context of androcentric legislatures, can policies be advanced to fight persistent and prevalent forms of gender-based violence and promote equality and inclusion? The question stands for many legislatures around the world. Can we talk about decolonization at all in the contexts of male-centric political systems described by Gouws and Muzee? Where are the openings for transformative change? The session asked: For how long will women be kept as secondary citizens? Just [as it is important to bring an intersectional gender lens](#) to understanding fights against colonial rule, an intersectional gender lens – considering not only gender but also sex, sexuality, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and other identity factors, depending on the context – is necessary to understand and inform ongoing decolonization efforts.

Are hierarchies of power and belonging that were at the centre of colonial rule being reproduced? Or questioned and dismantled? Who is included and who is not? Who is respected? Whose humanity is valued? Whose agency is recognized? Who speaks? Who is listened to? Whose rights are considered as important? Whose knowledge is considered knowledge? Who may be taking up too much space or speaking or writing over others? Who has influence and power? And how is it exerted? Are processes inclusive or exclusive? Who is considered Greater? Who is considered Lesser? Does equality matter? Whose voices and needs and aspirations are considered? Is anyone dismissed or erased?

Leveraging digital spaces

Digital technologies can reflect, reproduce, and even reinforce the inequalities, hierarchies, and power dynamics that exist in society. Their creative and strategic use can also facilitate new ways of organizing across multiple boundaries for social change, challenge authoritarianism and heterogendered relationship norms, and promote more horizontal ways of relating. During the COVID-19 pandemic, relations, even among diplomats on the continent, moved from strictly formal spaces to include more informal spaces on social media, and this induced changes in ways of relating.

The ASAA conference organizer, the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA), brilliantly leveraged air travel and digital technologies to connect people in person and virtually after two years of

hunkering down during the pandemic. What a beautiful opportunity to connect across the continent and beyond. Like at the 3rd ASAA conference in Nairobi, the energy was infectious. For the 4th conference, participants in Congo, North Africa, and Japan debated alongside people physically present in Cape Town. People participated online and offline.

Highlights were shared via Twitter at #ASAA2022, which serves as a record of important encounters and a space for continuing the discussions - among conference participants and with people who did not attend. In a tweet, Chichi Ayalogu affirmed that “#ASAA2022 is top of the list for organized conference executions and really should be noted as ‘the’ example of a Hybrid event done right.”

A dozen different meeting rooms for parallel sessions, each equipped with a roving camera connected to internet and someone present to ensure convivial use of the technology. What a feat. Considerate moderators of different ages fielding questions from the floor and the chat box and calling on people raising a virtual or in-person hand. People checking for sessions and room numbers in the online programme or via the ASAA2022 space on the EventApp. A virtual Information Desk where people could put themselves into the designated room for a parallel session or ask the attendant, Roxanne Adams of HUMA, to do so. Mx. Roxanne calmly reassured people toward the end when there was a temporary Zoom hiccup or two. Important human touches.

[Jean-Marc Éla](#) reminds us: “*Le cerveau a besoin de rêver comme le corps de respirer.*” The brain needs to dream, just as the body needs to breathe. ASAA2022 was a place to share knowledge and dreams and collectively (re)envision what it means to be humxn and what that means for organizational and institutional change initiatives.

“We trade too little with each other and cite each other too little.”

The conference was itself an exciting digital space, and some conference sessions dealt with the theme of leveraging digital spaces. Amani Abdel Rahman spoke about how a 2019 social media uprising in Sudan led to the disintegration of a regime that had governed the country for 30 years. “Youth were ahead of classical political parties - unfamiliar with internet and social media.” Aghi Bahi shared about the apparition of cyber activists on Facebook to address political concerns in Cote d’Ivoire. “Are the activists free, though? Or working for a political entrepreneur?”

Digitisation might be another buzzword, but, if well harnessed, its decolonial capabilities could be significant. Political analyst and activist [Nanjala Nyabola](#) has written about online organizing, efforts to contain online organizing, the circulation of fake news and hate speech on social media, and the threat of digital colonization. Nyabola participated in ASAA2022, along with Timnit Gebru of the Distributed Artificial Intelligence Research (DAIR) Institute, in a keynote debate on “Meta Forms, Artificial Lies & Digital Futures”. [Artificial intelligence](#) (AI) is part of digitality. To what extent is it creating a new colonial world order? To take but one example, languages, it can “further codify the supremacy of dominant languages” or be used “outside the wealthy profits centers of Silicon Valley to serve people and language revitalization work.”

Digitisation might be another buzzword, but, if well harnessed, its decolonial capabilities could be significant.

Digital spaces should also be leveraged to make African knowledge production more visible. This was discussed at the ASAA session on “Making African Research Visible and Accessible.” The work of the Training Centre in Communication (TCC Africa) to train scientists in effective communication

skills was discussed, and [AfiArXiv](#) was presented as an option for open scholarly publishing - to promote accessibility to research outputs by African scholars and scholarship on Africa more broadly. Part of decolonization would include the promotion of African journals, data repositories, research portals and means of circulating African scholarship.

Hope for Africa as a forever incomplete project

It was great to see ASAA2022 - as Africa in miniature and a project for Africa - at the University of Cape Town. I would argue that it contributes to the decolonization debate in universities across South Africa and the continent and beyond, and makes the prospects for decolonization and transformation more real and tangible. One could also argue that the decolonization debate has been co-opted and that the conference was one big talk shop. On Twitter, [Sandeep Bakshi](#) suggests that assimilating decolonization into academic discourse as a buzzword "is one way to monitor and begin to incapacitate it" - because of its perceived or real threats to power. And a conference participant asked, "How can we decolonize the academy if society is not decolonized?" "True," was the response. "It is hard to decolonize the academy when it is surrounded by a colonial world. But academics should not spend too much time being engulfed by the academy and forgetting about the interdependencies between community and university."

The intergenerational conversations and debates are a sign of hope - for Africa as a forever incomplete project. At the conference, the voices of the living intermingled with those of the dead in a constructive spirit of learning and taking appropriate action for the current times and specific contexts. One generation feeds the other. From Wangari Maathai of Kenya, Ugandan politician Rukoza Koburunga Matembe, and writers Penina Muhanda from Tanzania and Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana, to women of another generation - Martha Mbuvi (studying the Akamba in Kenya), Esther Karin Mngodo (publishing women writers in Swahili), Grace Musila (helping us understand history and culture through literature), and Sandra Tamele (expanding access to literary works in Mozambique) -, we have examples to guide us. People who had not heard about Langston Hughes and his poetry or Harry Garuba and his poetry and writings over several decades about decolonization could learn more, delve deeper, make connections. At ASAA2022, papers and thoughts were shared and films screened. People bravely challenged each other. Curiosities were aroused and collaborations discussed. Participants were enriched and hopefully inspired by the encounters. Were there absences or silences? Perhaps. How much did we hear from people from South Sudan or the Central African Republic, for example? How much did we hear from people living as refugees, about their experiences of displacement and more?

Gender, women's rights and concerns for intersectionality were integral to decolonial thinking and movements in Africa.

Is it enough to talk about and work for *de*-colonization? In opposition to centuries of erasure through colonization? Probably not. One conference participant said something like, "We cannot just describe ourselves and what we want as *de*- or *non*-" - in the negative. In envisioning and working toward desired futures, perhaps we need to resuscitate and reinvent some forms of knowledge? Maybe decolonization is a fuzzy concept and needs more context or focus?

[Dr Leyla Tavernaro-Haidarian](#) describes the value of a decolonization lens as well as its limits - as an adversative strategy which itself may imbibe colonial logics. She suggests it be married with a philosophy such as *ubuntu* so that decolonization involves "fighting against" and dismantling unjust colonial systems and constructively creating futures for the common good. Conference participants and this article refer to concepts and philosophies that are affirming and aspirational in nature and

that inform and shape decolonisation processes, for example: *kwimenya*, *ubuntu*, *umoja*, “doing Africa,” conviviality, incompleteness, and *Bilchiinsi*, the Dagbanɔ philosophy of respecting the human dignity of interlocutors.

And there are other existing and emerging African-inspired concepts and philosophies to help forge and weave the way forward. However, [George Sefa Dei and Chizoba Imoka](#) argue that “It is impossible to have a sincere reflection about the question of development without an anti-colonial lens.” They suggest asking questions such as these:

What sort of development should be taking place in our communities today? Whose knowledge informs this development? To what extent is the vision of development that is advanced aligned to and grounded in the indigenous epistemologies, histories and the aspirations of local people? How are community members coming to learn and use multiple lenses of critical inquiry to understand the processes of colonization and the impact on social development?

[W.E.B. Du Bois](#) came to realize how “the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted.” Thus, the necessity of reconstituting history, seeking truth and teaching our children to do so as well. [Bernard Fonlon](#) argued that the worst effect of colonialism was the wresting of African cultural genius and initiative from African hands. [Wangari Maathai](#) stressed “how crucial it is to return constantly to our cultural heritage.” And elaborated:

If believing that God is on Mount Kenya is what helps people conserve their mountain, I say that’s okay. If people still believed this, they would not have allowed illegal logging or clear-cutting of the forests.

It is not, however, just a matter of going back in time. But going back to fetch what is needed in a forward-looking manner (Sankofa). The new cord is attached to the old (West African proverb). Philosopher [Paulin Hountondji](#) argued that, to end extraversion and dependence, there must be a “methodical reappropriation of one’s own knowledge and know-how as much as the appropriation of all the available knowledge in the world.” He also [urged](#) scholars of his time to go beyond theory and abstraction to “take concrete measures to justify their sociopolitical existence and relevance.” If young people are “[unable to breathe](#)” because they cannot see themselves in society’s institutions, we must do something.

Professor Akosua Adomako Ampofo, University of Ghana, did something, as President of the African Studies Association of Africa, to shift consciousness and inspire critical thinking and action. Professor Toussaint Murhula of *Université Loyola du Congo*, in his response to Prof. Ampofo, called for support as the new ASAA President by affirming that good leadership requires the contribution of the wider society.

In the current context of androcentric legislatures, can policies be advanced to fight persistent and prevalent forms of gender-based violence and promote equality and inclusion?

To begin to wrap up, in a forward-looking fashion, let me share from *The Africa I Want*, a [collection](#) of poems by Fatma Adam, which book I received from the author at the 3rd ASAA conference in Nairobi, in October 2019. Her poem, “The Story of Her Hands,” is about lines on the hands of a woman, which tell the story of her struggles. They show where she spends most of her days, holding the responsibility of the entire family on her shoulders. The lines on her hands tell the story of a woman who longed to hold a pen. They show the opportunities that slipped through her fingers and the unveiled secrets she holds deep within her heart. They show the reasons why she keeps on

moving with love to change her destiny.

Concerns about positionality

Who can study and write about Africa? And how? These are questions that many researchers and writers ask. “If you use a western lens, stay away,” I heard someone say at the ASAA conference session on African studies centres as enablers of (de)colonization. “Check your lenses. Understand race. No one would mention it when I studied at Cambridge,” said one participant.

[Positionality and approach matter](#) not only between Africa and the West but also within Africa. In the very last session of the conference, it was advanced that unpacking the inherent power dynamics within Southern-based knowledge systems is equally important, to avoid mimicking systems of exclusion and inequalities of the current knowledge agenda. For example, speakers observed that because research is more resourced in South Africa than in some other African countries, South African-based researchers should question their positionality and check their privilege. Participants in the session suggested: “Let local spaces speak. Understand and share the perspectives of people in those spaces. See the world thru their eyes. Let the local values guide. Rather than coming with ‘South Africanism’.” A US scholar, Regina Fuller, [reflected on Twitter](#) on her positionality: “As a Junior scholar in African Studies, questions I have are How can I conduct ethical, feminist ethnographic gender sexualities research in Africa? How do I grapple with my positionality as black US Scholar? #ASAA2022.”

“It is impossible to have a sincere reflection about the question of development without an anti-colonial lens.”

As author of this piece, what is my positionality, related to the ASAA discussions? I became interested in Africa at the University of Kansas, through a visiting professor of political science from Sierra Leone, who made West African realities come alive and sparked my interest to know more. I later studied literature, art, and history at the University of Abidjan in Cote d’Ivoire. When working in international and comparative studies at the University of Iowa, I took a course on African history where we read novels to learn history.

This humanistic and holistic approach to understanding history through stories of people and their communities resonated with me. Since then I promote, on both sides of the Atlantic, the writing and publication of personal stories and reflections that might otherwise go unheard and that, in their sharing, make us more [humxn](#). I recognize my privilege as a white cis able-bodied woman who can “waltz” into certain situations and spaces. I also recognize the continual work it takes to decolonize myself - my attitudes, outlooks, and behaviours. I believe that decolonization requires efforts from people of all colours and abilities and parts of the world. Some sisters and brothers might suggest that I should “[stay in my lane](#)”, knowing that my knowledge of different African languages is minimal and that the way I describe *ubuntu* and other concepts may be lacking as well. Like any piece of knowledge production, this writing is open to critique and conversation. I do envision a world in which colonial mind-sets, hierarchies, and structures are recognized, questioned, and dismantled - for more equitable and convivial ways of relating, for the benefit of current and future generations. We are bound up together in the colonial project. How do we free each other from its grip? As [Harry Garuba says](#), there is “no easy walk to education and freedom.” But we must each do our part.

To conclude

Through a quick and non-comprehensive “tour” of sessions of the April 2022 African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA) conference, we have tried to show that decolonization, more than

jargon or a mere buzzword, is a process in progress. However, like Prof. Anthony Diala of the University of the Western Cape said in the session about gatekeeping and enabling (de)colonization, “the reality of coloniality makes a mockery of decolonization.”

In the face of very real colonial legacies, various organizations work with greater and lesser degrees of intentionality. For some people and organizations, decolonization may just be talk or political correctness. Others are going beyond important, necessary and challenging conversations to collectively develop strategies and frameworks and put in place initiatives to shift thinking and power in academia and institutions and structures of everyday life - for greater inclusion and participation and with regard for African sociocultural, political and historical processes.

Is decolonization more than a buzzword? We have suggested that it is and needs to be. However, some may continue to insist that decolonisation is poison to be avoided to the degree that it promotes a spirit of opposition in humxn endeavours. Others may suggest the concept is fuzzy - a catch-all net that buzzes and fuzzes busily around the real issues of bringing about a shared humanity and consciousness of the hierarchies that pose a formidable challenge to attaining sustainable equality and dignity for all and sundry.

Colonization and its extractive and dehumanizing processes were entrenched over centuries. Resistance to colonization existed during the slave trade, movements for flag independence in the 20th century, and calls for transformation in post-apartheid South Africa and the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements and continues to exist in renewed calls for integration and pan-Africanism in a spirit of *ubuntu*. As much as colonial structures, processes and mind-sets persist, they are being questioned, undone, and reshaped.

At one of the ASAA conference sessions, Aïdas Sanogo, lecturer and researcher at *Centre Universitaire de Manga* in Burkina Faso, explains that “The students I teach are more impatient than I was at their age.” This provides reason for hope. The intergenerational conversations and queries and affirmations of Global Africa’s next generation suggest that the project of Africa, building on ancestral foundations in a spirit of conviviality and [incompleteness](#), is very much on the move. But is the urgency felt and the movement swift enough? Some argue that decolonisation is impossible, “[but we must make her possible](#).”

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Thanks to all those who took the time to read and comment this article. I take the time to do the same for others, in a spirit of give and take, of learning, and of continual co-construction. I take responsibility for any errors in relating what I heard at the ASAA conference and interpreting subsequent readings.

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