



The Emergence and Development of Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN) in South Africa: A Reflection on Trajectories, Challenges, and Prospects

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Abstract

One of the fundamental challenges facing many of the decolonial initiatives today is the challenge of reproducing coloniality in the name its opposite, which is decolonization or decoloniality. This happens as a result of many reasons that include among them, the problem of entrapment in colonial mindset that comes with being socialized into a consenting colonial subject and the deliberate attempt to be part of the racket by selfish individuals, among others. Whether deliberate or not, the challenge of contradictions within the decolonial movement is a long-standing challenge that we cannot afford to neglect. For there are always invaluable lessons to be learnt in order to move the struggle to the next level. In this short treatise, I intend to review the challenges and prospects of the ADERN initiative within a modern university institution in South Africa with a view of unmasking some few lessons for the overall decolonial struggle after the demise of juridical-administrative colonialism.

The ADERN initiative and the challenge a decolonial struggle in a modern/colonial forcefield

The struggle for decolonization in Africa after the demise of what can be considered to be the 'official' or 'classical colonialism' and apartheid is a struggle that has taken many forms and attracted various interpretations among scholars, policy-makers and activists. On one hand, there are those who view

this struggle as a continuation of the unfinished business of liberation from the clutches of what is now known as coloniality and/or neocolonialism and on the other hand, are those who are convinced that we now live in a post-colonial world; that is a world without colonialism.

This contribution is not about who is right and wrong about what constitute the presence or absence of colonialism. However, it is about what typically happens in the process of this second struggle for decolonization because I am one of those who subscribe to the notion of decolonization as an unfinished struggle. Thus, I am more concerned about excavating the challenges, issues and prospects that come with efforts to decolonize the 'postcolonial' world order where the colonial system remains intact, cunning and mutating even without the white settler governments in place. To me the postcolonial world order is just but an order in the colonial world system that is unchanging. In other words, this order hides rather than reveals the system which it is working to sustain. Thus, I am of the view that world orders have been mutating, giving the impression that colonialism as a system of oppression has collapsed, but alas, it remains hidden and unnoticed by those who are hoodwinked. In another treatise of this subject, I elaborated how the colonial system consists of both prescriptive and performative orders that enable it to reproduce itself even in circumstances where it appears not to exist (see Ndlovu 2013, 2018).

My observations of challenges, issues and opportunities that accompany decolonial efforts are based on my personal experience and interaction with decolonial initiatives within the university environment—a space in which I first came into contact with what some scholars have defined as 'decoloniality' or decolonization of the 21st century. There is an ongoing debate about the use of these labels with some arguing that the decoloniality project is a Latin American project and then others who have also found the term useful for capturing the struggle of our time. I am of the view that the term is useful though its origin is traceable to Anibal Quijano (2007), a Latin American sociologist. I am also of the view that a debate over the origins of terms and concepts is but a distraction whose purpose is to waste time and space that could have been used to discuss issues of substance especially by subjects whose lives are constantly under the threat of the unending colonial system. There are nonetheless several terms that have been used to characterise the struggles of the oppressed subject under the yoke of colonialism which their origins did not change the content and the objective of the struggle for liberation. One of them is the term

'Marxism' whose origin is traceable to Europe but has so far been useful to bring about some of the changes that we want to consolidate and deepen to finish the unfinished business of liberation. Others have chosen terms such as emancipation over liberation but to achieve goals that are more or less similar in nature.

In general, decoloniality is an umbrella term for various struggles against colonialism as a system and not just a mere event. In general, the debates that underpin the decolonial discourse of the Latin American decoloniality scholarship mirrors that of the epochal and the episodic schools of thought about colonialism among African scholars. These two schools of thought about the nature of colonialism pitted thinkers such as Ali Mazrui who insisted that colonialism amounted to a "revolution of epic propositions" since "what Africa knows about itself, what different parts of Africa know about each other have been profoundly influenced by the West" (Mazrui 1986, p.12-13), and against those such as Ade Ajayi (1969) who somehow reduced it to a mere episode or footnote in the history of Africans. In my view, decoloniality represents a perfect balance between recognising the epic impact of coloniality as a system and its failure to erase the ontological presence of the agency of the oppressed. This can be seen in the instance of the discussion of the subject of epistemicides that were committed and/or continue to be committed by the colonial system. In this discussion, there is a need to acknowledge the destructions that were made by the colonial system without insinuating that the colonised have no alternative worldview to turn to in order to raise a substantive challenge to the system. This is why decoloniality has an anti-coloniality leg whose focus is to unmask the true nature of the colonial system and a counter-coloniality leg that is propositional in terms of alternatives and options out of the quagmire.

Among the many decolonial initiatives that I have engaged with during the course of my academic career is the Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN). In general, ADERN is a loose network of the likeminded whose concern is to produce a rapture out of the colonial system. It was formed by a group of young black scholars who were mainly based at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and some few from the neighbouring universities such as the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of

Pretoria (UP) and University of Johannesburg (UJ). It was formed around 2012. The idea was conceived and initiated by Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni who, by then, was a new UNISA staff member within the Department of Development Studies.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni joined UNISA's Department of Development Studies on the 1st of February 2011. He was the first black Associate Professor to be hired by the department several years after South Africa attained democracy in 1994. Instead of being excited by the fact that he was the pioneering figure (as many would do) and the most senior staff member among those of his racial category to join the department, Ndlovu-Gatsheni was puzzled by the situation in which the professoriate of the department remained white while black colleagues constituted the junior staff complement. This was not the only department with a distorted reflection of the demographic makeup of the South African population but many others departments within this university had a similar structure except for the few. This was the same situation with many other 'white' universities in South Africa—a situation that is making mockery of the much vaunted democratic values of equality and equity.

At first, Ndlovu-Gatsheni established ADERN to address the short-term objective of correcting what was in front of him—which was the racial misnomer of black juniors and white seniors within the department. This was a typical 'Cappuccino syndrome' of a racial hierarchy that placed white individuals at the top and black individuals at the bottom using the ruse of merit that functions through the distortion of the level playing field. In this way, the idea of ADERN was to come up with a program that would accelerate the mobility of black academics within the academic structures of the university by helping them to obtain higher qualifications, publish scholarly works and gain confidence in presenting ideas in national and international platforms. Secondly, ADERN played a therapeutic role of a safe space whose role was to rehabilitate a people who have lost confidence in themselves by being consistently reminded that they were not capable of thinking. In other words, ADERN became a perfect response to Hamid Dabashi's rhetorical question in the title of his book, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (Dabashi 2015).

Beside the short term goal of accelerating the social mobility of academic staff in the department and the university at large, the ADERN group also developed medium and long-term goals that were designed to bring about positive change in the lives of academics within the South African university landscape as well as improving the life chances of the society at large. These medium and long term goals included among them the decolonisation curricula, pedagogy, the university and the archive, among other achievable goals in our life-time; all which in the long run will positively impact on the life chances of the members of the marginalised in South Africa. For we understood from decolonial literature that epistemology reproduced ontology and, as such, it is impossible to change the lived experience of the oppressed subjects without changing the knowledge foundation on which this experience is manufactured. Thus, as Mignolo & Walsh (2018) have argued: "Ontology is made of epistemology. That is, ontology is an epistemological concept" (Mignolo and Walsh 2028, p. 135). What, indeed, one can decipher from the above articulation of the relationship between knowledge and reality is the fact that the latter cannot exist without being enabled by the former. In other words, there is a co-production between the physical empire and the cognitive empire. Thus, to decolonise sites of knowledge production such as the modern/colonial university institution is to decolonise the very factories in which the normative experiences of coloniality are manufactured. Even political decolonization that was achieved through so much human expenditure could not translate into concrete manifestations of freedom because the political theory remained colonial hence leading to the current state of unfinished business. This is why Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) thesis on 'epistemic freedom' and wa Thiong'o's (1986) 'decolonization of the mind' are even more important for enabling the emergence of an extra-structural agency that is both counter-colonial and anti-colonial in the making.

In general, the first task of deracialisation through populating the senior membership of the academic structure with black bodies was a necessary but artificial form of decolonisation in that a black body alone does not translate into decolonisation. Thus, as a result of the fact that coloniality is a socializing system, many of the

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black bodies are already carriers of this coloniality, if minds are epistemically dislocated from the social location. This was the role of colonial education—to produce a consenting colonial subject by making the colonised to think from the coloniser’s dominant side within the colonial system of power differential in a situation that made the colonized work against him/herself through sustaining the very power structure in which he/she is oppressed. With this understanding, the other role of ADERN was to re-socialize the black subject in matters of self-love and thinking and/or acting from one’s vantage point and not against oneself.

Many of the short-term and some of the long-term objectives have so far been proven to be achievable. For example, between 2014 and 2024, almost 90% of the cohort that joined and participated in the formation of ADERN from the Department of Development Studies and other departments that faced a similar challenge have not only obtained their PhDs but have also gone on to attain the statuses of senior lecturers, associate professors and full-professors. This is the case with those who joined ADERN from other universities, such as the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg. Many of them were scholars who were struggling to rise above the rank of lecturership as a result of the epistemic and non-epistemic barriers. I vividly remember Ndlovu-Gatsheni lamenting the length of time that some of young academics took to complete their Masters and Doctoral projects within the university, with some taking up to 10 years to complete a doctoral project—a situation that he characterised as a challenge of epistemic dislocation that I have

elaborated on above. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argued that this delay was not only caused by non-epistemic barriers, such as marking large quantities of undergraduate assignments and a lack of time, among other legitimate obligations, but also because of trying to ‘stand up from where we are not seated’. He gave us an example of a poor individual who is forced to think from a position of the rich individual or female individual who is forced to think from the position of a male figure—a situation that leads to the overstretching of imagination as a result of dislocation between our epistemic and our social positions. This is how we discovered the colonial process that led to our stupification until we almost lost confidence in our human-ness. It was only when we aligned our epistemic and social locations that we gained our voices to speak as ourselves and not anyone else, then we were able to write with confidence, reflecting on our own experiences. This only did not enable us to generate original ideas but also to think deeply about things that we took for granted, such as the application of received methodologies that we, all along, thought were neutral and, therefore, can be applied without critical interrogation.

The history of ADERN cannot be complete without the contribution of Latin American scholars based in the United States. I need to emphasise the ‘contribution’ and not the ‘imposition’ of the Latin American scholars to our conversation about change that needed to happen. It can also not be complete without the history of our struggle for existence within the Westernised university institution, as well as opportunities that we were afforded by the same institution. With regard to the Latin American contribution to the development ADERN, the story has to be captured accurately to avoid misinterpretations and general falsehood that usually get propped up by those who are always bent on negating the concerted effort of racialised subjects. The association of ADERN with Latin American scholars stems from two developments that have not only enriched the decolonial discourse but have also enhanced its planetarity across subjects located in different parts of the world.

The first development is the quest to revive the long-standing academic exchange between African and Latin American scholars on the subject of decolonization. This long-standing history of academic exchange has seen the movement

of ideas from and to between the two group of scholars in two interconnected regional locations as a result of their shared experience of colonial domination. During our interaction with one of the most eminent Latin American scholars, Walter Mignolo, he revealed that he learnt decoloniality from one of the eminent African scholars, VY Mudimbe, who is well-known for his groundbreaking theses namely, *The Idea of Africa* (1994) and *The Invention of Africa* (1988). Following in Mudimbe's footsteps, Mignolo went on to produce his own groundbreaking thesis on *The Idea of Latin America* (2000). It is not only Mignolo who has acknowledged the influence of African thinkers on his decolonial thinking but also Ramon Grosfoguel who disclosed that he was influenced by Bernard Magubane in some of his systematic thinking about decolonization and racism. This explains why many of us who have found the language of Latin American scholars resonant and attractive for articulating our struggle cannot reject it merely on the basis that some of the terms were coined by Latin American scholars. The act of sharing ideas and cooperating with the like-minded based on shared experiences of equal partners can never be another form of colonisation as our detractors have sought to propagate but as has always been the case, regions and people with shared colonial history have previously sought to cooperate on issues of decolonization. This, perhaps, is best exemplified by the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement at the Bandung Conference of 1955. These forms of cooperation and concerted effort are important not only because the colonising agency has always divided the colonised through brewing 'non-revolutionary violence' among them but also because coloniality is a global power structure that requires a planetary effort to dethrone it. As much as the success of coloniality can be credited to the unity of colonisers in their mission to maintain their privilege through colonial domination, the success of the decolonial project will also depend on the concerted effort of the colonised rather than non-revolutionary squabbles and competition.

The second development that informs ADERN's relationship with Latin American scholars and their scholarship is a result of some practical activities that cemented this relationship. In November 2011, I travelled to Australia to attend an Annual Conference of Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA)

on: 'Cultural Re-Orientations and Comparative Colonialities' which was organised by the Centre for Muslim and Non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia. During the course of the conference, I met Ramon Grosfoguel who was giving a keynote address in that conference. I then informed him of the formation of ADERN at UNISA and he immediately sought to contact Ndlovu-Gatsheni thereby making a critical connection that led to the current co-operative academic relationship. This relationship began with ADERN members attending a Decoloniality Summer School in Barcelona, Spain in 2012—a process that was funded by UNISA after the then Dean of the College of Human Sciences, Professor Rosemary Moeketsi persuaded the university to release funds to support this worthwhile endeavour. In general, the university management, which was predominantly constituted by some of the pioneering and progressive black professors, including the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mandla Makhanya, supported this decolonial initiative.

At the summer school, teaching was conducted by scholars of African and Latin American descent, which included among them Professors Kwame Nimmako from Ghana, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni from South Africa, Nelson Maldonado-Torres from Puerto-Rico, Ramon Grosfoguel from Puerto-Rico, Linda Martin Alcoff from the United States of America, Tiffany Ruby Patterson from the United States of America, to name but a few. From 2014 onwards, the Decolonial Summer School was replicated at UNISA in Pretoria, drawing on a diverse faculty that included scholars from India such as Professor C.K. Raju and a host of local scholars which included among them scholars such as Professor Siphamandla Zondi and Mogobe Ramose. This brief history is necessary to dispel the unfounded falsehood that decoloniality is another colonial project imposed by Latin American scholars on a supposedly naïve African subject who has all along been content to live under coloniality. Never at any given moment in the history of ADERN has any of the scholars involved in the decolonial project sought to impose his/her views on others. In fact, speaking from our own local experiences has always been encouraged including deploying our own 'grammars of change' such as Africanization or indigenization. Thus, for instance, the leading decolonial scholars Walsh

and Mignolo in his 2018 book, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* have flatly rejected the idea of a master plan but instead they advocate for relationality in our decolonial efforts. This is very important because though different regions of the world suffered and continue to suffer coloniality, the process of colonization took different forms hence our responses tend to vary from place to place and time to time even though we share a common objective. This has seen scholars of different persuasions such as those advocating for Africanization and indigenization expressing why they have chosen to frame their struggle in language instead of decoloniality or decolonization thereby enriching and expanding the vocabulary of dealing with the problem of Eurocentrism and coloniality.

While ADERN has been very exciting and has largely been successful in its short-term and long-term goals, it has also experienced some challenges since its formation more than a decade ago. Thus, it has faced and/or continues to face challenges that are worthy learning experiences for any other initiative of this nature. Among the challenges that ADERN faced over the years, is the challenge that one can liken to the prevalence of colonial egos that have manifested through ills such as jealousies, sabotage, gossip and badmouthing among its members. Since the network's short-term goal was to enable members to progress in their academic careers, the unintended consequence of this was an ugly competition that ensued among its members that culminated in negatives such as jealousy, competition and sabotage. This has led to divisions and factionalism between those who were competent and excelling on one hand and those who were not doing well enough to catch-up with their counterparts. Since ills such as jealousies are always masked in acceptable language, accusations and counter-accusation soon emerged between factions that classified themselves as 'activists' and those that were viewed as 'theoreticians' because of their commitment to scholarship and ideas. Xenophobic and tribal sentiments were also evoked whereby some members who accused others of not being the rightful individuals to lead or participate in the ongoing decolonial discourse within the university, while others were even expected to write for some members who cannot in order to be accepted as authentic members of the network. The zeal to

oppress was and/or remains more that the zeal to liberate—a development that one can liken to colonial egos within the decolonial movement.

At a certain moment, attempts were even made to prevent some members of the network from writing about certain subjects such as 'Soweto', 'Nelson Mandela', 'Archie Mafeje', etc., ostensibly because they were not born in a particular place or did not belong to a particular ethnic group. Deliberate conflation between decoloniality and nativism had been evoked to legitimise colonial tendencies of exclusion, oppression and dehumanization. At some instances, decoloniality was no longer against all forms of oppression, but it was made to accommodate certain forms of oppression that were seen as legitimate and acceptable to perpetrators. Incompetence, sloppiness, hatred, anger, laziness and witchcraft; all became decoloniality or worse still, 'African culture'. Noise, insults and shouting at innocent individuals became a measure of radicalism. With decoloniality gaining momentum and having some clout within the academy, those who were opposed to the discourse and initiative such as ADERN have started distorting its history by claiming to be its founders. The point of mentioning these problematic experiences is not to lay the dirty linen in public in order to shame the concerned actors, but it is deduce lessons that can be learnt in the struggles for decolonization.

They are quite a number of these lessons, but the most important of them, at least in my view, is the challenge of the seduction of the colonial office in which the decolonizer is also an aspirant colonizer thereby making him/her always a contradictory subject within colonial environment. Apart from epistemic dislocation brought about by the hegemonic colonial pedagogic discourse within and outside the modern/colonial academy that have turned many potential decolonizers into some unwitting consenting colonial subjects, colonial dispossession has put the colonised in an unenviable socio-economic situations that compels him/her to aspire for colonial office as the only route for improving his/her life chances. This brings me to the point of a sympathetic gaze on decolonial contradictions that are happening within the decolonial movement at large—a gaze that makes one to magnify patience, perseverance, endurance and decolonial love as important ingredients for sustaining a decolonial movement.

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