

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Transmodern heritage as a space for imagining pluriversal relations—Insights from the African “periphery”

Olga Bialostocka^{1,2}

¹Africa Institute of South Africa, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Anthropology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Correspondence

Olga Bialostocka, Africa Institute of South Africa, Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa.

Email: obialostocka@hsrc.ac.za

Abstract

The N'zima village in Grand-Bassam and the Abbashawel area in Asmara were intrinsically connected to the “modern” colonial capitals of present-day Côte d'Ivoire and Eritrea, respectively, on the verges of which they functioned. However, structurally, organizationally and ontologically, they differed profoundly from their French- and Italian-planned “neighbors,” together with which they are today inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Interpreted as antithetical counterparts, products of African encounters with modernity, the two urban entities within Grand-Bassam and Asmara—European and African—tend to be described as interdependent, representing two sides of the same coin, neither of which could have existed without the other. This paper interrogates the said interpretation based on the center-periphery dynamic created by the politics of modernity, and proposes to use instead the decolonial pluriversal perspective and the concept of transmodernity to understand the experiences of being of the colonized African populations of Grand-Bassam and Asmara outside of Western onto-epistemologies. It points to the N'zima village and Abbashawel as the areas that enable visualizing reality that contests the binaries created by Western modernity in seeking pluralistic politics.

KEYWORDS

Manichean dualism, pluriversality, transmodern heritage

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In his essay *The Surreptitious Speech*, published in 2001, Mudimbe defined coloniality in terms of the presumably universal Western system of spatialization and temporalization through which Europe imposed its own narrative on the experience of being of Africans:

(...) African cultures and their designations were submitted to a European space that actualized them as figures of its own past, precisely as anterior to the rupture that radically separated prehistory from history. The memory of the European space would appear thus, diachronically and synchronically, as the paradigm of human experience and, at the same time, as that which historically has muted all other human differences by reducing them to the project of an evolutionary becoming.

(Mudimbe, 2001, p. 17)

Despite decolonization and decoloniality movements, which have proposed new narratives and subjectivities, European perception of space and time remains the paradigm used to define the principles of the “universal” system of representation, which is used as a point of reference to assign meaning to the practice of life. In this light, the African culturescape keeps being described as the realm of traditional forms and expressions, of vernacular or crude architectures, primitive social structures, and premodern or subsistence economies. All of these terms, while not necessarily negative, tend to be used to characterize some evolutionary backwardness, undeveloped forms of human practice that predate the arrival of and are subordinate to the ‘imaginary’ state of modernity (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993), the latter being the quality of urban and industrialized civilizations with their modern monumental architecture and centralized political power. The dichotomies created as a result were manifest in the articulation of space, which became the battlefield of the ideological struggle that can be still witnessed in many African cities today (Bester, 2001; Wright, 2001).

Pinpointing the porous nature of the limits of binary ways of thinking of modernity—as in black/white, control/chaos, traditional/modern—postcolonial scholars have argued for the recognition of the incompleteness as a mark of the colonial power (Wright, 2001), and plurality and hybridity of the forms and structures that can be deemed “modern” as the testimony to a “rich, variegated modernism that emerged from, survived, and transcended European colonialism” (Enwezor, 2001, p. 7).

But what about the experiences of being that existed long before European colonialism and have survived in the shadow of Western modernity, side-by-side with the life forms that are a result of the modern world system? They can be said to have transcended the European temporalization and thus provide evidence for the contested nature of places, including urban landscapes. Neither negating Western modernity nor representing its local version born out of the experience of colonization and based on a fusion of “universal” and place-based features, they seem to be ruled by their own awareness of time. As such, the complex nature of their reality cannot be easily expressed by the European space.

This paper looks at two colonial capitals inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, namely Grand-Bassam in Côte d'Ivoire and Asmara in Eritrea, and interrogates the system of spatialization commonly used to describe these properties, to demonstrate its European roots and the inherent bias that persists when “the Manichaeian scheme of the absolute self and the abject other” (Enwezor, 2001, p. 15) is used to articulate the reality of these places.

The Historic Town of Grand-Bassam, situated on the Atlantic coast, some 50km southeast of Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2012. The property includes two components, namely the Quartier France and the N'zima village located on a

coastal barrier, and a lighthouse on a nearby peninsula. The outstanding universal value (OUV) of this UNESCO property has been attributed to the role that Grand-Bassam played as the first colonial capital of Côte d'Ivoire, established by the French, and particularly its urban organization, which reflects rational colonial town planning based on functional zoning, and a sober, functional modern architecture. Alongside, the international community recognized the organization of vernacular houses in the N'zima village as “a testimony to the permanency of indigenous cultures” (UNESCO WHC 1322, 2012). Noticeably, the Quartier France, established in line with the principles of functionalism and hygiene of the time, is the central attribute of the recognized OUV. With its modern architecture adapted to the climatic conditions of the West African coast, it is a distinct urban entity connected to the N'zima village, which constitutes the African setting for the French colonial experience of urbanization. The Quartier France and the N'zima village, physically situated opposite each other along the coastal barrier, can be said to represent two separate units that reflect the colonial center-periphery spatial model founded on the dichotomy of tradition—represented by vernacular houses and “permanent indigenous values”—and modernity—with its urbanism and functionalism. Such an interpretation, which transpires from the way the OUV is framed, repeats the bias of the European space and time imposed on the African reality of the place. While acknowledging the values of the N'zima village, it uses the Eurocentric frame of reference to represent the experience of being of Africans, in relation to the European modernity, as its “complementary” by-product.

Asmara: Africa's Modernist City became the UNESCO World Heritage property in 2017. The capital of Eritrea, it has been inscribed as an example of a colonial city adapted to the geographical context and planned based on the principles of functionality and racial segregation. Its OUV lies both in the urban layout and the eclectic and rationalist architecture that used modern materials and techniques, while incorporating also local resources and construction methods. The exceptionality of Asmara is further found in the way the city planning took into account local conditions and the ideological foundation of Italian colonialism (UNESCO WHC 1550, 2017). The nomination dossier of the property distinguishes three sections within Asmara, which testify to the social and cultural divisions within the city population. One section comprises a zone designed and dedicated for Italians, the second is the center with the market at its core where the African and European populations mixed, and the third is a space devoid of any urban planning where African communities “clustered in an inchoate conglomeration of rudimentary dwellings and alleys known as Abbashawel” (Asmara Heritage Project, 2016, p. 292). This African section of the city, designated by the Italians as an “indigenous quarter,” is considered essential to Asmara's cultural heritage even though it developed as an unplanned part of the city devoid of modern architecture. Interestingly, the nomination dossier not only mentions the zoning instituted by the Italian colonial administration based on the principles of racial segregation, but uses modernity's binary opposition to describe the city as composed of two parts—rational and modern, on one end, and incoherent and “primitive,” on the other. Thus, figuratively, a European space becomes the reference based on which the whole city is defined.

What follows is an attempt at theorizing the two distinct spaces within both properties—the African and the European—as entities in their own right, treating neither one nor the other as a negative reflection or a supplementary part of any of them. This paper tries to look at the N'zima village and Abbashawel as independent realities that should be seen as spaces of “an otherness spatializing itself” (Mudimbe, 2001, p. 17) within the pluriversal world of complex values and contested meanings represented by Grand-Bassam and Asmara, respectively. It builds on the conceptual reflections that I shared in my paper published in *Curator: The Museum Journal* (vol. 65.3) in 2022, and expands on this initial theoretical exposé using two specific examples of the UNESCO World Heritage properties to suggest a possibility of a decolonial reading of these heritage places.

COLONIZATION OF SPACE AND TIME

A space is always a construct. It is a theoretical articulation that claims to render and represent operations, or put simply, the reality of a place, that is, a primary experience. A space is, to say the least, a second-order plane reflecting upon a first-order practice of life and human experience. This second-degree organisation, by its very being, considerably alters and transforms the primary logic in which it claims to root itself. To that extent, its narratives as well as its postulations invent “what is really out there” in the field of everyday place.

(Mudimbe, 2001, p. 17)

Colonial space is imposed from outside, literally and figuratively. The European powers spread their colonial structures in Africa to acquire land, exploit labor and control the economy of the colonies, while at the same time subduing the beings, the minds and the knowledges of the people, turning the continent into a European construct. By use of Western epistemologies and hermeneutics, they “invented Africa” (Mudimbe, 1988), defining the limits and trajectories of its progress, its aesthetics, ethics, and imagery. In the early stages of colonization, the experience of life of African peoples was represented as “instances of a frozen state in the evolution of humankind” (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 107). Within this paternalistic approach, African people were believed to be “stuck in tradition” or were subjected to civilizing missions meant to bring progress to the colonized. Arendt (1968, as cited in Mudimbe, 1988, p. 108) argued that “[Western] imperialism would have necessitated the invention of racism as the only possible ‘explanation’ and excuse for its deeds ...” In other words, Europe needed to invent the pathological inferiority of black people to justify total domination. Western norms and standards, Western aesthetics and moral beliefs, presented as universal, took firm root in African realities, to the extent that early African written texts, even in African languages, reproduced the genres and paradigms of Western literature (Mudimbe, 2001). In the same way, it can be argued, the so-called African modernism has roots in Western modernity (Bialostocka, 2022) and as such can be said to represent a child of its dark side, namely coloniality (Mignolo, 2009).

Modernist cities designed and built in Africa by the colonizers are interesting examples of the Western colonization of space and time, which is physically reflected in their layouts and architecture, and can be observed also in the planning process itself. These cities that are the outcomes of assimilationist and associative approaches to colonization, are today considered valuable testimonies of the creativity of Western architects, who experimented in the colonies with novel approaches to town-planning, styles, techniques, and materials (Wright, 1991, 2001). They are also appraised for the ways they demonstrate the principles of modernism, such as rationality, simplicity, functionality, and innovation. On the other hand, however, they reveal the cultural policies that promoted colonial ideology and perpetuated inequalities between the Europeans and the local populations (Negash, 1987; Wright, 1991).

AFRICAN “HERITAGE OF MODERNITY”

The heritage of modernity in Africa, represented largely by colonial cities and modernist architecture, has been intrinsically linked to colonialism and understood mostly as the heritage of the colonizer (Eloundou, 2005). As the heritage of the colonized does not necessarily reflect the principles of modernity established in the West, it is hardly viewed as “modern.” To the contrary, it is referred to as “traditional” or “vernacular,” the terms that indirectly convey its immutability. In instances where modern European architectural designs implanted in the African context made use of local technologies or materials creating hybrid, often ephemeral forms, these tend to be seen as “alternative visions of modernism” that amplify Western

notions of aesthetics (Wright, 2001). Yet, even these alternatives—these derivatives of modernity—are bound by the same Western frame and the restrictions of the Western unities of time and space. In this sense, all modern heritage as an outcome of the assumed universal developmental trajectory that the Western project of modernity conceived to dominate and exploit territories outside its borders can be understood as a construct of coloniality (Bialostocka, 2022).

The Historic Town of Grand-Bassam—The case of the N'zima village

The Historic Town of Grand-Bassam has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a testimony to the cultural tradition linked to Grand-Bassam's role as the first colonial capital of Côte d'Ivoire, an administrative center for the former Afrique Occidentale Française, and a regional commercial hub. All these functions have been fulfilled through the institutions that the French established in the Quartier France section of the town, planned and constructed at the end of the nineteenth century (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 1974). The Quartier France, with its colonial-style buildings, gardens, and wide tree-lined avenues, imitated a European town transplanted into the African context. Its urban organization was articulated in three functional zones: residential—at the westernmost end of this section of town, commercial—at the easternmost end, and administrative—between them. The residential zone included large plots of land with elaborate houses that reflected the principles of functionalism and hygiene of the time. Administrative buildings and religious establishments were located in the administrative zone, while in the commercial one were trade houses, financial institutions and marketplaces. The commercial zone was occupied by rich and established N'zima dealers, African foreign residents, as well as people from the Near East, especially Lebanese-Syrians (Wondji, 1972). To the east, it bordered the N'zima village.

The N'zima village was not planned and designed in the same way as the Quartier France. Its value recognized in the OUV of the property does not reside in the modern town planning and architecture but is related to the “vernacular houses,” which are said to bear witness to the “permanency of indigenous values” (UNESCO WHC 1320, 2012). Historically, the N'zima village has been inhabited by the N'zima kôtokô people who settled in the area of Grand-Bassam centuries before the French established their “modern” capital (Kodjo et al., n.d.). Densely built up, it was structured according to the cardinal points that played a role in organizing the space in relation to social standing (République de Côte d'Ivoire, 2012). This part of town had two sections. The western one, inhabited by the N'zima middle class (République de Côte d'Ivoire, 2012), had roads laid out using an orthogonal frame—an extension of the road network of the Quartier France. The largest street—the Abissa Boulevard—was officially demarcated at the beginning of the twentieth century at the request of the local population, at the time the Quartier France was subdivided into plots (République de Côte d'Ivoire, 2012). Figuratively, it can be said to announce the change in the settlement pattern, as the section east of it remained covered by narrow paths without a specific configuration. The family compounds in this section of the N'zima village had open spaces occupied in a communal manner (République de Côte d'Ivoire, 2012).

The antithetical division of Grand-Bassam into the “modern” Quartier France and the “premodern/traditional” N'zima village is suggested by the wording in the statement of the OUV of the property, which uses Western spatial and temporal conceptualizations to define both spaces. On the ground, the colonial structure can be identified in the urban design of the town—its morphology, visual and social dimensions, as well as functionality. The different land uses, plot patterns, and street grids as well as architectural forms used in both parts of Grand-Bassam organized the lives of its inhabitants and ordered the relationship between Europeans and Africans. The physical arrangement of the two sections, at different ends, reflected the functional, social, and strategic separation of spaces dictated by the modernist

principles of the time while constituting an intangible marker of the division between peoples. It is noteworthy that the commercial zone in the Quartier France functioned as a sort of mixed space in this regard, regulated by money and trade activities rather than social conventions. The organization of Grand-Bassam into two sections—European and African—may also suggest the limits of the space conceived as “modern.” The influence of European colonialism and Western culture on the N'zima village should not, however, be ignored. It is visible in the western part of the N'zima village where orthogonal street grids and houses styled after colonial residences mark the space that suggests a fusion of “modern” and “traditional” forms, a hybrid, in-between place within the village that could be associated with the notion of “alternative modernity.”

Asmara: Africa's Modernist City—The case of Abbashawel

Asmara: Africa's Modernist City features on the UNESCO World Heritage list for its urban layout and functional zoning, instituted through subsequent phases of town planning between 1893 and 1941. It demonstrates an adaptation of the urban landscape to the geographical and cultural context of an African setting and reflects the ideological foundations of the Italian colonial policy based on racial segregation. Asmara's modern rationalist architecture is recognized as a witness to the city's encounter with modernism, which resulted in a cityscape that served the functional, civic, and symbolic requirements of a colonial capital (UNESCO WHC 1550, 2017).

Asmara became the capital of the Italian colony of Eritrea in 1900. It was planned and constructed on a site occupied earlier by a local village called Arbate Asmera, which, according to local oral tradition, was established as a result of the unification under common leadership of four settlements on the Kebessa Plateau, inhabited by four clans—Gheza Asmae, Gheza Gurtom, Gheza Shelele, and Gheza Serenser (Ministry of Information, 2020). The Italians displaced the local people from the area around St Mary's Orthodox Cathedral to the north of the city, which has retained the founding village's original name of Arbate Asmera (Asmara Heritage Project, 2016). As the Eritrean population grew, the settlement area expanded to the north and west of Arbate Asmera, to the hill known locally as Gnbar Abba Awts, thus creating what is known today as Abbashawel. Abbashawel became the heart of the Eritrean urban settlement (Ministry of Information, 2017). To the south, in the center of the plateau, the Italians built their first military outpost of Campo Cintato, which became the heart of the European planned city.

The village of Arbate Asmera and the Italian fort of Campo Cintato in the center of the plateau were two of the principal elements that determined the form and layout of Asmara (Tecle-Misghina, 2022). The early development of the town dates to the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, when a grid system started emerging, later evolving into a hybrid of grid and radial patterns. It was used by the planners to serve the modern theories of zoning.

The use of a grid was a device often used to impose order on the urban landscape...
The grid plan implied “civilised” order over the apparent disorder of indigenous settlements, reinforcing the coloniser's “superiority” over its subjects.

(Asmara Heritage Project, 2016, p. 36)

Urban planning in Asmara was therefore from the outset a means of dividing the city physically into space for Europeans and for Africans, based on “colonial difference” (Mignolo, 2007) and the associated binary oppositions characteristic of modernity—civilized/primitive, order/chaos.

The city's plan from 1916 shows the division of Asmara into four urban zones (Denison et al., 2003; Teclé-Misghina, 2022, p. 14): a Europeans only zone located in the western and southern part of Asmara, a “mixed” zone centered on the market that both Europeans and Eritreans as well as other foreign traders had access to, a zone dedicated to the local population (“indigenous quarter”), which occupied the northern part of the city and included Arbate Asmera, as well as an industrial zone in the north. Subsequent plans, while taking into account the expansion of the city, retained the contours of this zoning.

The development of the city focused from the start on the needs of the Italian community. In 1933, an extensive program of public works was implemented. Streets were paved, a sewage disposal system installed, and the electricity network renewed (Asmara Heritage Project, 2016, p. 41). However, it is the years 1935–1941 that saw the most rapid growth of the city (Asmara Heritage Project, 2016, p. 48).

The zone occupied by the local communities was ignored and left out of urban planning throughout the colonial period. Abbashawel was made of dense housing, narrow alleys, and conical roofed huts known as agdos. In the crowded “indigenous quarters,”

People shared everything; above all they shared their secrets. In rows of housing where cardboard, corrugated sheets or porous walls were the only partition between families, there could be no privacy. A culture of openness thus evolved and common solutions were sought for common problems. Sharing, materially and spiritually, became the norm. Self-help groups (the ekub), and religious gatherings provided forums for discussion. Street safety evolved into a community concern as did child discipline and education. The practice of arbitration and the settlement of disputes within the neighbourhood and inside these associations prevailed over police intervention and court adjudication, a much later development. ...With all its unlit narrow streets, blind alleys, and dead ends, Abba Shawl has all the characteristics of a ghetto.

(Ministry of Information, 2017)

This “ghetto” was a product of the policy of discrimination. But as much as its effect was spatial exclusion and economic deprivation, Italian colonization did not manage to destroy the culture, identity and beliefs of Eritreans, living side-by-side with Western industrialization, urbanization, and modernity. Within the zone dedicated to the local population, a sort of spatial distinction based on religion has organically developed (Asmara Heritage Project, 2016). Each of the religious clusters was ethnically and linguistically diverse. Class also played little role in these internal divisions.

During the Fascist era, the separation of races was institutionalized through racial laws. Within the cityscape, the “mixed” zone started serving as a buffer zone between the European part of the city and the African areas around Arbate Asmera and Abbashawel. The commercial zone ensured that “the only contact of the whites with natives will be with the highest category of them, the commercial and industrial one” (Teruzzi, as cited in Asmara Heritage Project, 2016, p. 51). The hill of Emba Galliano served as an additional green barrier between the populations.

The concentration of the Eritrean population in dense and ultimately unplanned areas of the city in unsanitary conditions was as much a part of the city's encounter with modernity as the bars, cafes, restaurants, apartments, cinemas, theatres and dance halls in the city centre. The European areas of Asmara presented an anti-theatrical image of modernity. The burgeoning city had modern water and electrical supply, sewage disposal, industries, roads, railways, telephone and telegraph, and healthcare. The broad paved streets – lined with flowers, shrubs and trees, lit by electric lamps, patrolled by police and with more traffic lights than Rome

– created the setting for a modern European landscape that hummed to the sound of modernity.

(Asmara Heritage Project, 2016, p. 51)

In their paper accompanying the nomination dossier for Asmara's UNESCO World Heritage listing, Denison et al. (2017) described Abbashawel in juxtaposition to the European modern Asmara, yet an essential element of Asmara's modern cultural heritage. The authors argue that “the two distinct urban entities were equally products of Asmara's encounter with modernity. They were independent, yet antithetical – one was planned, rational and modern while the other spontaneous, incoherent and ‘primitive.’ Neither could have existed without the other” (Denison et al., 2017, p. 20). Abbashawel is presented as complementing Asmara's modern heritage by being the “opposite” of its modernism, its “non-modern” counterpart. This description recalls the center-periphery colonial narrative, offering the reader the understanding of Abbashawel from the standpoint of the ‘European gaze’. The European model is here presented as the standard and point of reference, where modern is defined in relation to primitive, planned to spontaneous, rational to incoherent; the latter always denoting the negative, or the opposite, of the former. Interestingly, while the nomination dossier follows this Western perspective, it states almost inconspicuously that “for many Eritreans, the native village of Arbata Asmara is the historic heart of Asmara” (Asmara Heritage Project, 2016, p. 237). What constituted the “periphery” for the colonial Italian administration, is considered the center for the African population, which proves that the center can be moved.

OVERTURNING MANICHAISM, SUBTENDING THE COLONIAL ORDER

In my paper published in *Curator: The Museum Journal* (vol. 65.3), I discussed the concept of modernity as “a European phenomenon constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity that is its ultimate content” (Dussel, as cited in Mignolo, 2007, p. 453), and the narrative of “colonial difference” that accompanied it. Using the center-periphery model, I explained ways in which African populations in the territories subjected to European colonization were denigrated, their lifestyles, values and socioeconomic systems presented using binary oppositions, as antagonistic to or as a negation of European identity and Western values. I further spoke about the colonial hierarchical systems that were put in place to dominate the colonized Other as an inferior, uncivilized being, and to exercise control over their resources. The below follows this initial paper by discussing ways of liberating the Other, their practice of life and experience of a place from this European “ontological occupation.”

Splitting the world in two

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argued that within the colonial space, “not only must the black man be black; he must be black *in relation to* the white man” (Fanon, 1986, p. 110; my emphasis). This colonial relationality conceived by the colonizer as a binary opposition illustrates the Manichean dualism on which the colonial order was built. In line with it, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963, p. 39) famously described the colonial condition as “a world cut in two,” and presented it using the Western logic of reciprocal exclusivity based on “bio-geographic determinism” (Reyes, 2012, p. 14), which physically resulted in spatial compartmentalization of the colony into European and “native” (or “indigenous”) quarters.

The settlers' town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about. The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea; but there you're never close enough to see them. His feet are protected by strong shoes although the streets of his town are clean and even, with no holes or stones. The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easy-going town; its belly is always full of good things. The settlers' town is a town of white people, of foreigners.

The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs.

(Fanon, 1963, p. 39)

It is easy to notice that the above description has much in common with the way the N'zima village—a crouching village without spaciousness—and the Abbashawel area—a world where native huts are built one on top of the other—have been presented as parts of their respective colonial capitals, albeit still appraised for the “indigenous African traditions” that are said to complement the modern towns. Yet, while Fanon (1963) asserts the antagonism between the colonizer's sector and the one where the colonized live, he does not consider them complementary: “The zone where the natives live is *not complementary* to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are *opposed*, but not in the service of a higher unity” (Fanon, 1963, p. 38, my emphasis). For Fanon (1963), the colonial world is a Manichean world—divided into two compartments—but not constituting one whole. Using the colonists' language, he claims that the two entities belong to two different species (Fanon, 1963, p. 40), which makes them incommensurable. The alterity of the Black person is affirmed by Fanon (1963) through their uniqueness instead of in relation to the identity of the White. The Black person is defined not within the identity continuum where they would represent the “negation of the Same” (Mudimbe, 1988) but as a category on its own, “congenitally antagonistic” (Reyes, 2012, p. 14). And it is in this alterity, regulated by the colonizer through policies and practices in order to uphold the status quo, that Fanon (1963) sees the source of the demise of the Manichean world. For by asserting their uniqueness, the colonized can “set out to achieve the alteration of being, to bring into existence another element, in, but not of, the colonial situation—themselves as an independent subjective force” (Reyes, 2012, p. 19). Accordingly, Fanon (1963) does not see moving the center to the periphery by inverting the colonial dualism as a valid solution; that would only lead to the “negation of the negation.” He proposes instead to “split the world in two” (Reyes, 2012, p. 16) and thus subvert the colonial binary opposition altogether by creating two worlds.

Creating many worlds to end with ontological occupation

Fanon's radical act of splitting the world in two can be understood as “the onto-historical condition of possibility” (Reyes, 2012, p. 19) for the end of the colonial Manichean dualism, and the beginning of the true “affirmation of difference” (Mudimbe, 1988). By splitting the world, the scholar sees the need for an ontological turn, whereby the difference between the “species” is conceived not merely as a difference in worldviews but a difference in realities. It is the first

step in the process of liberation from “ontological occupation” (Escobar, 2020, p. xxxi) and the imperial project of Western universality.

Walking in the footsteps of Fanon, decolonial scholars affirm the difference and renounce the universalization of Western universality, by replacing the universe with a pluriverse—“a world in which many [equally valid] worlds coexist” (Mignolo, 2018, p. x). Mignolo (2018, p. x) describes the project of pluriversality as “aimed not at changing the world (ontology) but at changing the beliefs and the understanding of the world (gnoseology), which would lead to changing our (all) praxis of living in the world.” Thus, the world is seen by the scholar “not [as] a world of independent units (as in the case with cultural relativism) but a world entangled through and by the colonial matrix of power.”

Dussel (2012) recognizes the colonial entanglement of the pluriverse and asserts the interconnectedness of “cultures of exteriority” through a common experience. He discusses how these cultures, which survived “on the outside” of modernity, have been impacted by it—their economic and political systems changed to serve the modern/colonial project—but have not been destroyed by its powers. Predating modernity, they cannot be seen as products of modernity. Surviving its onslaught, they can be considered neither premodern nor modern. Existing exteriorly to modernity, they are not truly postmodern, either. As they evolve, developing new forms and systems in response to the needs and circumstances of the changing societies, they travel to the future, rooted in their often ancient axiologies, philosophies and ways of being. As such they belong to transmodernity.

Escobar (2020, p. xx) sees these “cultures of exteriority” as an “antidote against globalocentric thinking, enabling us to consider the power of the place based and of local becoming in new forms.” It is within these cultures that often resist the heteropatriarchal and racist colonial capitalism that one can still find understanding of life based on relationality and communality in social life, rather than “the objectifying understanding of life,” where the individual takes precedence before the communal, and the society is made up of separate, albeit interacting, entities. Escobar (2020) acknowledges that modern epistemology, based on the modernist separation between subject and object, mind and body, nature and humanity, reason and emotion, facts and values, is prevalent in the world. Yet, he summons people to the “politics and ethics of interdependence and care as the paths for ushering in worlds and knowledges otherwise less shaped by axes of domination” (Escobar, 2020, p. xii). As a way forward for the pluriverse, the scholar proposes a new relational model for the world as a “meshwork of autonomous collectives and communities from both the Global North and the Global South” (Escobar, 2020, p. xvi).

THE PLURIOLOGICAL HERITAGE OF AFRICA

The interpretation of the two UNESCO World Heritage properties discussed in this paper along the lines of their respective statements of OUV amounts to what Escobar (2020, p. xxxi) calls “ontological occupation,” whereby different worlds are understood using norms and objectives of the modern/colonial world. While colonization has ended, the colonial shadow in the form of modern epistemology based on us–them ontology remains suspended over African settings that are being judged using Western hierarchizations, which continue to serve as the system of imperial domination. In this light, the Historic Town of Grand-Bassam and Asmara: Africa's Modernist City are seen as one world divided in two by colonial policies and practices. The N'zima village and Abbashawel in this configuration are indeed indispensable elements of the colonial capitals, complementing the modern European zones by giving them the “modern” meaning; without the periphery of the “native/indigenous/traditional village,” the term “modern” becomes void; one may ask “modern in reference to what?” The complementarity of the Quartier France and the N'zima village in Grand-Bassam, and the European zone and the

“indigenous quarter” in Asmara, as center and periphery, respectively, is artificial, made to serve the colonial project. As such, metaphorically, the two entities indeed “cannot exist without each other,” as the modern does not exist without the traditional or unmodern, the Black without the White, and the chaos without the order. The bond between them is, however, not physical but based on a false ontology.

Physically, in both cases, African settlements predated the arrival of Europeans. Bassam (or Gammo, as it was also referred to in the past) existed at least from the end of the fifteenth century, and by mid-eighteenth century was a commercial center in the region (Kodjo et al., *n.d.*). The settlements in the area of the future Asmara can be traced back to at least the twelfth century (Ministry of Information, 2020). Arbate Asmera was formed in the first half of the sixteenth century, though not much from precolonial times has been left in today's city (Teclé-Misghina, 2022). From this perspective, it is evident that it was the European settlement that was added to the African one, growing in its periphery, starting from an initial military fort or a trade outpost (Kodjo et al., *n.d.*; Teclé-Misghina, 2022). The colonial administration “redefined” the roles and reestablished the limits of the African existence within the urban landscape of both Grand-Bassam and Asmara through treaties, policies, building regulations, and violence (Kodjo et al., *n.d.*; Negash, 1987). The outcome was the symbolic and, at times, literal confinement of African people and their cultures to ghetto-like enclaves.

Interestingly, the urban design and character of both the N'zima village and Abbashawel did not change drastically after independence, and are now protected as attributes of the OUV of both properties, even if some modernization can be observed in both cases. The inhabitants of Grand-Bassam no longer distinguish between the Quartier France and the N'zima village, referring to both as Quartier France, or calling the latter “Quartier France village” (Guennequez, 2015). Administratively, the entire section of Grand-Bassam located on the coastal barrier functions as Quartier France (République de Côte d'Ivoire, 2012). In the case of Asmara, the area of Abbashawel was to be destroyed in the 1960s in line with the city mayor's urban reconstruction plans (Ministry of Information, 2017). However, the project was stopped by the residents who opposed relocation. While improvement of amenities and services was welcomed, resettlement of the residents was seen as contradicting the defining tradition of inclusiveness and tolerance; the development was seen as a way of alienating and rendering homeless the poor of the city. As a result,

Abbashawel and its environs live on, in many places pretty much in their old, original form. The few asphalted streets crossing the zone are still fed by the narrow alleys of a century ago. Neither have the few villas, rows of modern houses and one story buildings totally done away with the crammed shacks that gave to Asmara many of its personalities and luminaries. Famous historical figures – freedom fighters, politicians, bureaucrats and soldiers, artists, footballers and wits – learned their respective trades in that melting pot.

(Ministry of Information, 2017)

By presenting the European and the African zones within Grand-Bassam and Asmara as antithetical, yet complementary entities, the current interpretation of the two UNESCO World Heritage properties reiterates the division of the world based on “colonial difference” and imprisons the African people and their heritage within the telos of European modernity.

In the case of the Historic Town of Grand-Bassam, the Quartier France as the focus of the property—the modern colonial capital—becomes the reference for the N'zima village, which seems appraised through the prism of the European counterpart. The local “traditional” forms of housing found in the N'zima village can hardly be considered testimonies to the colonial urbanism, which was articulated through the layout and functional zoning of the Quartier France. The structural and organizational division of Grand-Bassam clearly indicates that

the property represents more than a model of a colonial modern town, the first capital of present-day Côte d'Ivoire. It offers also an important window into the history, socioeconomic conditions and political organization of the N'zima people before, during and after the arrival of the French to the coast with their “modern world system.” The N'zima village is therefore a world on its own, its own reference.

In a similar way, Asmara's European area should not be appreciated as a reference for Arbata Asmera and Abbashawel. Even though the latter physically constituted a whole with the remainder of the city, it was not subject to urban planning and provision of services to be representative of “a colonial planned city.” As with the N'zima village, this African “urban” landscape is considered more as a setting for the colonial experience—the European space with its functional zoning and elaborate architecture. And it is this European space that “alters and transforms the primary logic [i.e. the human experience] in which it claims to root itself” (Mudimbe, 2001, p. 17). The qualities of the “African setting” are mentioned in a rather laconic way, as “local cultural and geographical conditions,” which are said to have influenced the modern urban planning of Asmara. One is tempted to see in them the “conditions of existence” that Fanon outlined in his description of the European and “native” quarters.

“Universality is always imperial and war driven. Pluri- and multiverses are convivial, dialogical, or plurilogical” (Mignolo, 2018, p. xii). Neither articulating Grand-Bassam and Asmara by means of re-centering the African “periphery”, following the early African Nationalism (see Mkandawire, 2005), nor conceptualizing them as alternative modernities, that is, African hybrid/local responses to the modern/colonial world order (Bialostocka, 2022), are viable ways out of the Manichean dualism. Both preserve the dichotomy subtending the colonial system and reinforce the universals of modernity, thus representing the two towns through an imperial lens, and making this heritage irrelevant for the African people.

By getting away with the binary oppositions of the colonial order, the European cultural imperialism can be subverted and a liberated space of otherness created, in which “the stories of world making are told differently,” and what exists is presented in a way that makes “tangible the claim of multiple ontologies or worlds” (Escobar, 2020, p. xxxii). This approach, which Escobar (2020) calls “political ontology,” can provide a space for “an otherness spatializing itself” (Mudimbe, 2001, p. 17), where the practice of life and human experience can be liberated from the “European gaze.”

Seeing the reality of Africa's colonial past and the heritages it produced from this plurilogical perspective empowers thinking of these vestiges and their meanings for the present and future generations in terms of pluriversal politics (Escobar, 2020), and building a new relational model for the two properties as a meshwork, as alluded to earlier. It will involve “an entanglement of forms, inhabiting a spectrum from the radically relational to the modernist liberal,” which makes the “firm boundary between the Global North and Global South, and between what might be considered modern or not, weaken significantly and, eventually, begin to dissolve” (Escobar, 2020, p. xvii). Within this model, the different social, economic, cultural, and political systems, norms, and practices coexist bound by complex relations that make life a “collective weaving of a place” (Escobar, 2020, p. xvii).

This collective weaving has seemingly already organically started in Grand-Bassam and Asmara, where people continue using the two urban landscapes as their living heritage.¹ By appropriating the modern heritage of Grand-Bassam (Diabate, 1975; Guenneguez, 2015) and Asmara (Eloundou, 2005) through the intangible aspects associated with it and the liberation struggle history, they give it a new life, constructing a new space over the reality of these places.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The paper is based on published materials available online.

ENDNOTE

¹ For the purpose of this paper I use the definition of living heritage proposed by Wijesuriya (2015), who sees it in relation to the concept of “continuity”—of function and of community connections. It can thus refer to both intangible (such as a rite or tradition) and tangible (such as a site) heritage resources. This definition of living heritage breaks the artificial division into tangible and intangible, and movable and immovable heritage.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Archaeologist by training, **Olga Bialostocka's** research focuses on the issues related to heritage and identity, cultural diversity and inclusivity, as well as heritage management and protection in the context of globalization, decoloniality, and social justice.

How to cite this article: Bialostocka, Olga. 2024. “Transmodern Heritage As a Space For Imagining Pluriversal Relations—Insights From the African “periphery” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 00 (0): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12595>.