

Liberating African Heritage From Modernity Through A Radical Decolonial Path - 3rd Keynote Speaker

Olga Bialostocka

Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA)
Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)

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Author biography

Olga Bialostocka received her PhD in Archaeology, specialising in Egyptology, from the University of Warsaw (Poland). She holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Development Studies from the same institution, and a Diploma in Advanced Studies in Ancient History from Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris IV (France). She was a postdoctoral fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2013. Her archaeological experience includes more than a decade of excavation and conservation work at several sites, including Deir el-Bahari (Egypt) and El-Zuma (Sudan).

Abstract

What is modernity and why do Africans aspire to arrive at it? Do African cultures embrace the values of modernity and do the existing conceptualisations of modernity cover African axiologies? If modern heritage is a manifestation of modernity, are modern heritage sites in Africa necessarily rooted in coloniality? Can African modern heritage be conceptualised in a way that makes it more than a subcategory of (Western) modern heritage?

This conceptual paper addresses the above questions from the perspective of decoloniality. It analyses the precepts of modernity in order to reclaim the place of African heritage of the 20th century and liberate it from modernity's Western/Eurocentric legacy and associated values. It questions the rhetoric of alternative modernities, seeking alternatives to modernity instead. Guided by the 'border thinking' of the decolonial school of thought, it proposes defining post/colonial heritage of Africa through 'exteriority' and transmodernity, in recognising the existence of a counter-narrative to the Western modern movement/modernism. It proposes a new transversal heritage category, rooted in decoloniality movements, as a way of decentring modernist histories and cultural heritages of Africa.

Keywords: modernity, coloniality, decolonial de-linking, exteriority, transmodern heritage

Libérer le patrimoine africain de la modernité par une voie décoloniale radicale

Résumé:

Qu'est-ce que la modernité et pourquoi les Africains aspirent-ils à y parvenir? Les cultures africaines embrassent-elles les valeurs de la modernité et les conceptualisations existantes de la modernité recouvrent-elles les axiologies africaines? Si le patrimoine moderne est une manifestation de la modernité, les sites du patrimoine moderne en Afrique sont-ils nécessairement enracinés dans la colonialité? Le patrimoine moderne africain peut-il être conceptualisé d'une manière qui en fasse plus qu'une sous-catégorie du patrimoine moderne (occidental)? Ce document conceptuel aborde les questions ci-dessus dans la perspective de la décolonialité. Il analyse les préceptes de la modernité afin de récupérer la place du patrimoine africain du 20^{ème} siècle et de le libérer de l'héritage occidental/eurocentrique de la modernité et des valeurs associées. Il remet en question la rhétorique des modernités alternatives et cherche plutôt des alternatives à la modernité. Guidée par la "pensée des frontières" de l'école de pensée décoloniale, elle propose de définir le patrimoine postcolonial de l'Afrique par l'"exteriorité" et la transmodernité, en reconnaissant l'existence d'une contre-narration du mouvement moderne/modernisme occidental. Il propose une nouvelle catégorie de patrimoine transversale, enracinée dans les mouvements de décolonialité, comme un moyen de décentrer les histoires modernistes et les patrimoines culturels de l'Afrique.

Mots-clés : modernité, colonialité, déliaison décoloniale, exteriorité, patrimoine transmoderne.

The roots of modernity

From a historical perspective, the beginnings of modernity can be linked to the 'discovery' of the New World in the 15th century CE. From a philosophical perspective, modernity originated some two centuries later when the Reformation and the Enlightenment movement took over Europe (Mignolo, 2007). The decolonial school of thought considers the invasion of America by Spain as the geopolitical opening for modernity in the West, which led to the introduction of capitalism, the invention of the colonial system, and eventually to the control of the world system by Europe. From the decolonial perspective then, colonialism, the world-system, and capitalism are intertwined with and constitutive of modernity.

Modernity is 'a European phenomenon constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity that is its ultimate content' (Dussel, cited in Mignolo, 2007: 453). To become the centre of the world, or the 'core', Europe needed a periphery for reference, against which it could define itself. This periphery was created through the invention of tradition, which was juxtaposed against modernity; the latter seen as the pinnacle of a universal socio-cultural progressive transition. The rhetoric of modernity thus constructed tradition and placed it in its exteriority (Mignolo, 2007). Applying further the Western linear theory of socio-cultural transformation to non-European populations, it created a binary of pre-modern/traditional (understood as primitive) and modern (constructed on the premises of rational and scientific thinking, secularisation, materialism, individualism and man's control over nature) (Gusfield, 1967). This Western theoretical understanding of the concepts of modernity and tradition was further used as a tool to marginalise and suppress colonised, 'traditional' communities, which were represented as in need of being saved through conversion, civilisation and development (Mignolo, 2009). All of these 'salvage projects' were rooted in the logic of coloniality that 'enforced control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernisation, and being good for everyone' (Mignolo, 2005: 6). Coloniality – the 'dark side of modernity' as Walter Mignolo (2009) calls it – was invented using the concept of 'colonial difference'. At its core was the process of assigning values to differences through, among other models, racial ranking of human beings to establish a hierarchy of 'beings'. This hierarchy was subsequently used to rule over the inhabitants of the exteriority through:

- (1) the management and control of economy,
- (2) the control of authority,
- (3) the control of gender and sexuality, and
- (4) the control of subjectivity and knowledge (Mignolo, 2007).

These four mutually articulated domains have been the basis of the colonial matrix of power, a system still upheld today by the underlying racial and patriarchal organisation of knowledge-making and by capital.

Alternative modernities – why not?

As part of their project to question the universality of the trajectory of economic and socio-cultural transformations suggested by the West to achieve modernity, the countries from the periphery saw a possibility to construct their own 'modernities', by mixing elements of their local cultures with ideas and solutions adopted from 'global' culture.

In this pursuit, Asian countries transformed their economies while protecting their local cultural precepts and values. Meanwhile, African countries, in the hope of reaching the status of a 'modern state', chose to 'modernise' their cultures, often perceived as relics and obstacles to development. Whatever the trajectory chosen to pursue an 'alternative' modernity, the eventual outcome of the process of socio-cultural transformation was envisaged to be the same – the concept of a 'modern state' remained unquestioned; only the path leading to it has been changed. From a decolonial perspective, the construction of such plural modernities does not lead to a changed narrative.

Expressions such as alternative modernities, subaltern modernities and peripheral modernities were introduced to account for modernity but from non-European perspectives. All of them have one common problem: these narratives and arguments maintain the centrality of Euro-American modernity assuming one 'modernity of reference' and putting themselves in subordinate positions (Mignolo, 2009: 42).

All of these new modernities continue to speak from within the same frame of modern/colonial system and reproduce the problematic binary of tradition and modernity.

Alternative to modernity

In order to describe the reality from the perspective of exteriority, a radical path is proposed by Mignolo (2009). His decolonial option of de-linking questions modernity with its capitalist economy as the 'imaginary construction' and proposes instead a decolonial epistemic shift through de-linking from both the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality (Mignolo, 2007). This path opens up a way for alternative epistemologies and principles of knowledge to come to light, and for other socio-economic systems and 'new' ethics to be acknowledged. The decolonial option breaks away from the delusion of universality of the European model rooted in coloniality and moves towards the knowledge of a locality (Mignolo, 2007). It questions the core on which modernity has been constructed, in order to bring to light 'alternative' realities constituted through epistemologies and ontologies of the exteriority. This 'border thinking' is what in the end connects the diversity of local cultures subjected to the modern world colonisation, as it leads to the universal project of pluriversality.

The alternative realities, previously silenced by the rhetoric of modernity, can now be used as a basis for what Enrique Dussel calls transmodernity (Dussel, 2012). When Europe colonised Africa, it subdued the existing economic and political systems that it encountered on the continent to exploit African people and accumulate capital. The diverse cultures of the oppressed peoples, denigrated and left out, survived hidden from the eyes of the oppressor who deemed them useless. With their diverse economic and political models, technological innovations, and ethical values, they evolved in the face of modernity. Being exterior to modernity, they can be deemed as simultaneously pre-modern (older than modernity) and contemporary to modernity. Free from the Western binary of tradition and modernity, they display a transversal nature, announcing the possibility of a new, future-oriented transmodern reality. A transmodern culture, as imagined by the decolonial scholars, assumes the positive moments of modernity while being rooted in a tradition distinct from the modern (Dussel, 2012).

Transmodernity is not the same as cultural relativism. Since each local history today has to deal with the rhetoric of modernity and its counterpart – the logic of coloniality – all these diverse local histories have the experience of the modern/colonial world system in common with each other, which they can use to connect across their differences (Mignolo, 2007).

Transmodernity – a tool to reframe UNESCO's modern heritage

The category of 'Modern Heritage' was created by UNESCO for reasons of representivity on the World Heritage List, and as a result of the realisation that the outstanding examples of architecture, town planning and landscape design of the 19th and 20th centuries were under threat from many developmental and other factors (UNESCO, 2003). The conceptual framework included in the UNESCO paper on Identification and Documentation of Modern Heritage (2003), situates the beginning of 'modern society' at the end of the Victorian age. The geopolitical point of enunciation is thus well established. Defining 'modernisation', the UNESCO paper states: 'Although modernisation as a technical term was introduced only in the 1950s, its main driving forces were the processes of individualisation, democratisation and industrialisation that started in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (UNESCO, 2003: 9). The framework uses the moment Europe became the 'centre' of the world as a point of departure to speak of modernity. The choice of this specific timeframe is based on Jürgen Habermas' understanding of modernity as the concept that refers to:

a bundle of processes that are cumulative and mutually reinforcing: to the formation of capital and the mobilisation of resources; to the development of the forces of production and the increase in the productivity of labour; to the establishment of centralised political power and the formation of national identities; to the proliferation of rights of political participation, of urban forms of life, and of formal schooling; to the secularisation of values and norms (Habermas, cited in UNESCO 2003: 9).

Elements of the colonial matrix of power that underlies modernity are clearly articulated in this short exposé.

UNESCO makes space for local variations of modernity but claims the primacy of Western modernity nevertheless, presenting it as an ultimate point of reference (UNESCO, 2003: 10). It therefore suggests that there exists another narrative to Western modernity, hinting at the process of de-westernisation (as represented by the previously mentioned example of Asian countries). This process produces alternative modernities, but it does not interrogate the rhetoric of modernity itself, which hides its 'dark side' – coloniality.

Given that alternative modernities can only be considered a subcategory of Western

modernity, African modern heritage defined using this concept keeps being entangled in the colonial matrix of power rooted in the racialised hierarchies of colonial difference. In order for the category of 'modern heritage' to reflect the experiences of African people and account for the narratives of the cultures of exterior, it needs to be reframed using the decolonial option of delinking. The 'transmodern heritage' thus created will open the space for cultures (and heritages) that evolved 'on the sidelines' of modernity to be included on their own terms. Being transversal, this new heritage category will simultaneously comprise traditional and modern cultural expressions and will be able to embrace Western and non-Western conceptualisations of heritage, time and space, held by people around the world.

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