



## Opinion

## Genealogy of African Debates on Decoloniality: Afrikaans and Kiswahili

## Part I: Introduction

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I AM immensely thrilled to think alongside you in these series, on the *Genealogy of African Debates on Decoloniality*. Two central issues, in this opinion, are explored. Firstly, I situate Afrikaans and Kiswahili within a historical and decolonial context. Secondly, it studies the conceptualization of decoloniality.

This is significant because language and culture serve as a liberatory element within Africa's decolonization project, however, I demonstrate that the concept of decoloniality also entails institutional complexities exemplified by the African university context launched as a colonial project according to Mahmood Mamdani.

Furthermore, Suren Pillay's critique cautioning the universalization of Latin American decolonial theory in the African context unveils the urgency of a politico-historical understanding of decoloniality highlighted by the shift from assimilation to difference.

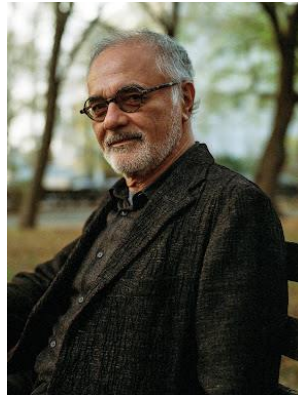
I advance a holistic conception of decoloniality asserting that there is no single self-sufficient path of articulating decoloniality instead different aspects constitute the whole: that is decoloniality comprises a liberatory, institutional, politico-historical, a geo-political and temporal understanding. It is geo-political because the concept is inextricably linked with the dynamics of power between the West and non-West, but also it is temporal because it helps us conceptualize how to think about the past in relation to the present but also the possible future.

This opinion equally examines the question of epistemological decolonization or decoloniality within the historicity of language and culture; particularly the significance of Afrikaans and Kiswahili to this theoretical debate.

The primacy of language is chiefly advanced by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his 1986 seminal text *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics*



Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o



Mahmood Mamdani

*of Language in African Literature* thereby contributing to the Latin American decolonial tradition, core to which Walter Dignolo argues in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (2011) the need to decolonize knowledge from Western hegemony.

In this regard, Ngũgĩ's central preoccupation is de-centering English and re-centering African languages as the

purveyors of African culture within Africa's decolonization attempts. The issue of medium of instruction at the university as a major site of decoloniality is exemplified by the debate on the abolition of the English Department at the University of Nairobi in 1968 and at Stellenbosch University in 2016 where Afrikaans, English, a combination or hybrid to include other South African languages sprung controversy.

The conceptual question, however, is: what language(s) embody Africa's strides towards a decolonial future or epistemic freedom?

Afrikaans and Kiswahili seek to respond as my thoughts develop, albeit with some differences. Later, one grapples with decoloniality in terms of its meaning in the context of the African university whose blueprint is the European university, as Mahmood Mamdani argues in a book chapter entitled *Decolonising Universities* (See D. Jansen (Ed.), *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*, 2019) and similarly the limits of decoloniality as Suren Pillay puts it in *The Problem of Colonialism: Assimilation, Difference and Debating Decolonial Theory in Africa*.

Finally, yet to begin with, the opinion justifies the role of Afrikaans and Kiswahili towards the conceptualization of the central question of decoloniality. In *Part II* we shall historicize and contextualize Afrikaans in the language and culture debate.

The writer is Ph.D. Fellow at the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), Makerere University. These thoughts, originally titled: *Genealogy of African Debates on Decoloniality: A Synthesis of Afrikaans and Kiswahili* were first shared with the Cultural Studies Institute, Kampala.

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