

11. A Genuine Intercultural Ethics Requires a Decolonized Pluriversal Dialogue Between the Colonizers and the Colonized

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Introduction: A Search for a Genuine Intercultural Ethics between the Colonizers and Colonized

In this investigation, the question of intercultural ethics presupposes at least two cultural worlds: the culture of the colonized and that of their colonizers. In this regard, the former represents the African world (colonized) while the latter represents the European world. At 11.73 million square miles (30.38 square kilometers), Africa is the second-largest continent (after Asia) and was the last massive region of the world that Europeans colonized (between 1880 and 1910). More specifically, at the end of the nineteenth century, Europeans oversaw the conquest of sub-Saharan Africa in particular, dividing the resource-filled nations between European governments at the expense of African countries during the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. All tended not only to be essentially optimistic about the potential wealth of the new colonized territories in terms of both natural resources and cheap labor, but also embraced a vague mandate to “civilize,” “culturize,” “improve,” and “develop” the colonized.¹ In subsequent decades, the limited honest interaction between the colonized and the colonizers gave rise to continued coloniality. Even today, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres contends, coloniality is exceedingly pervasive:

¹ Helen Tilley, “Medicine, Empires, and Ethics in Colonial Africa,” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 18, no. 7 (2016): 743–744.

“As modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.”² In other words, coloniality as a continued form of colonization characterizes our current era. I will clarify what coloniality is in comparison to colonialism in the following section.

Challenges to Achieving Intercultural Ethics: Coloniality and Colonialism

If we are to appreciate the intercultural need of a decolonial turn between the colonizers and the colonized, we cannot help clarifying the concepts of coloniality and colonialism. The difference between the concepts of coloniality and colonialism is clarified by great Latin American scholars. Though Enrique Dussel (who died on November 5, 2023) is the most senior scholar among them and the most widely published on coloniality and decolonization at the philosophical and theoretical levels, Walter Mignolo remains, perhaps more than anyone, the greatest contributor to the decolonial turn globally and across several centuries.³ If we are to make use of his peculiar distinction, colonialism refers more to political and economic relations that could be characterized by domination and exploitation of the colonized, while coloniality signifies continuing ways of thinking that evolved from colonialism even after its collapse.⁴ Advancing the intercultural decolonial turn by explicating the relationship between colonialism and coloniality further, Ramón Grosfoguel understands

² Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 243, doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548.

³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Thinking Through the Decolonial Turn: Post-Continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction,” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011): 1–15; 8, doi.org/10.5070/T412011805.

⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, 2nd ed. [first ed. 1995] (University of Michigan Press, 2003). In chapter four of his book on local histories and global designs, Mignolo notes that when theories surface in places where colonial legacies are still in the memories of scholars and intellectuals, these theories may be perceived as new forms of colonization. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 172–214.

coloniality as “the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations.”⁵ More precisely, in explicating this continuity of longstanding colonial patterns of dominion, Maldonado-Torres elaborates more on how coloniality survives colonialism and brings out more clearly the distinction between coloniality and colonialism in intercultural pursuits:

Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, *coloniality survives colonialism*. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects *we breathe coloniality all the time and every day*.⁶

Undeniably, the significant point in the intercultural pursuit of a genuine dialogue, in which coloniality still survives colonialism, is how the colonized enduringly continue to breathe the superiority of the colonizers within a globalized pursuit of an intercultural ethics, to an extent that modernity cannot simply be conceived outside coloniality. Modernity is foremostly grasped as “a product of the European Renaissance or the European Enlightenment,” a discourse that “would not be possible without coloniality,”⁷ to an extent that we mostly talk of the universality of Eurocentric production of knowledge. We understand human rights

⁵ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 219.

⁶ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 243, emphasis inserted.

⁷ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 244.

and religion, and the broader “coloniality of knowledge,”⁸ against other would-be contributive forms found amongst the colonized, and these latter forms are repeatedly understood as downright inferior. One may additionally note that in spite of people from different cultures and countries having contributed to the universalized understanding of (for instance) human rights, some voices, notably African, seem not to have sufficiently received an intercultural hearing, which further reinforced, and still reinforces, coloniality. To demonstrate the current persistence of coloniality in the pursuit of genuine intercultural ethics, particularly in reference to Mignolo’s legendary studies on the needed decolonial turn globally, scholarship highlights how coloniality still strongly rests on epistemic and ontological biases that validly endorse the colonizer’s hegemony and superiority while invalidating, marginalizing, and eroding the knowledge, experience, and rights of colonized peoples.⁹ Just to mention a more specific example, we cannot help but mention the consequences of both coloniality and colonialism to the slave trade, the effects of which are still felt.

For illustration, slavery has not only depopulated the colonized nations of their energetic industrious members, but it has also continued to validate an imbalance of power between the colonized and the colonizers, which is accompanied by modern exploitative racism disguised in various frames that limit genuine dialogue and numerous interculturalization efforts. Moreover, we cannot forget the exploited economic resources and the economic urge to supply not only raw materials but also a cheap workforce (or free labor) to industries in the developed world, and also to target the markets of the colonized, where the processed goods from countries that colonized them are ultimately sold back to them at a

⁸ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 168–178.

⁹ Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 240–270; Linda Martin Alcoff, “Mignolo’s Epistemology of Coloniality,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7, no. 3 (2007): 79–101; Hussein A. Bulhan, “Stages of Colonialism in Africa: From Occupation of Land to Occupation of Being,” *Journal of Political Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2015): 241.

marked-up price. Countless simpler examples include indigenous people continuing to shun their local religions, languages, and names in preference to those of their Western colonizers. All this is plainly manifest in the concept of continued coloniality, where “the colonized do not exist except for the needs and convenience of the colonizers.”¹⁰ The pending question that needs to be answered is how to decolonize modern coloniality.

And in this twenty-first century that almost lacks significant gestures of a decolonization ethic, which would help deactivate modern coloniality, decolonial projects remain largely untapped in the contemporary epoch of coloniality. As Chammah J. Kaunda observes, “The African everyday life is permeated by gestures of struggles and resistance against coloniality and everyday politics of death arising from neo-colonial political accounts of the present.”¹¹ The problematic becomes clearer that the dominant melodies of coloniality experienced in Global Southern cultures prove recurrent visible challenges in achieving a genuine intercultural ethics. In this study, I appreciate intercultural ethics as the pursuit of a uniform project of the global community, in which we generate and negotiate functioning norms—in appreciation of our cultural values—which streamline and empower our global cultural interrelationships. Some of these cultural interrelationships are not simply interhuman or intercommunal but rather also transpire between broader global cultural communities and demand both the colonized and colonizers to embrace an intercultural ethics that appreciates our multi-coloredness, as well as the possibility of entering a genuine dialogue that is short of modern coloniality.

¹⁰ Bulhan, “Stages of Colonialism in Africa,” 245.

¹¹ Chammah J. Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” *Acta Theologica* 43, no. 1 (2023): 45.

Towards a Genuine Decolonial Ethics (Decolonization Ethics)

I propose that if intercultural ethics is to appreciate how multi-colored we are, it has to address the whole. I admit that this desired intercultural wholeness is still far from our reach as we witness coloniality to date. Consequently, given fears arising from the continued existence of coloniality among and across some cultures, and as precipitated by contemporary tendencies of recolonization and neocolonialization—former colonizers returning recently in the form of business investors—these fears can be better handled within genuine intercultural efforts that aim at decolonizing intercultural ethics by challenging all forms of coloniality without exception. Genuine decolonization or decolonial ethics should not only aim at revoking all forms of colonial amnesia—for instance, a universalized ethics that is still largely regulated by Western standards—so that intercultural realities can without hindrance productively flourish for all, but also facilitate mental decolonization of the colonized, allowing them to outgrow the effects of past colonial injustices.

For both the Global South and Global North, the colonized and colonizing peoples, the universalized and localized senses of ethics remain open to conversion which paves the way to a deeper and more fruitful intercultural network (wholeness). Many colonized peoples have been able to outgrow some negative effects and productively transform and localize foreign values, enabling them to flourish within the global community. Nevertheless, for integrative intercultural ethics that I envision to triumph, we must overthrow the mentality of standardizing one's ethical norms,¹² since this would still constitute a form of coloniality and a continued mental colonization.

¹² Godfrey B. Tangwa, "Global Bioethics: An Introduction by Henk ten Have," *Developing World Bioethics* 18, no. 3 (2018): 269; Alozie O. Onwubiko, "Re-encountering African Culture in Living Christianity in My Father's Home," *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie* 19, nos. 1–2 (2005): 93–94.

We are in no way suggesting that we ought not domesticate what is foreign. It would, e.g., be undesirable for Africans to continue bemoaning the imposed European languages on the African continent as well as colonial systems of education in foreign languages, since the advantages of modern writing over the African oral tradition are obvious, as different studies have disclosed. Contemporarily however, modern writing and scientific education belong to no single culture any more than to the single intercultural human family—even when we may culturally view reality differently (cultural tint). For instance, scholarship looks at English as a world language that has different valid variants globally (west Africa, east Africa, India, etc.), meaning that we cannot fully attach to it a hegemonic colonial trait. In other words, being against colonial imperialism is not tantamount to rejecting western values or domesticating them. But reflecting on such cultural tints shouldn't prevent us from humbly recognizing that "objective reality" should be understood among the colonized and colonizing peoples as multi-colored.¹³

This means that the pursuit of genuine intercultural ethics ought to appreciate how reality is multi-colored, and this means "no human community is perfect, and hence, no system of morality is perfect."¹⁴ So we cannot make any normative claims about universal knowledge on the basis of one specific culture. This implies not only a possibility of *gradual perfection*, since no rationality, tradition, morality, or approach to ethics is fixed or static, but also a chance *to enrich* and *be enriched interculturally*. This means that the cultures of the colonizers and colonizing are both equally fallible and perfectible, and also implicitly suggests that negative attitudes towards colonialism can be outgrown and directed positively towards a productive transformative intercultural ethics (*a genuine*

¹³ Godfrey B. Tangwa, "Colonialism and Linguistic Dilemmas in Africa: Cameroon as Paradigm," *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie*, no. 1–2 (1999): 4, 9–10; Godfrey B. Tangwa, *Elements of African Bioethics in a Western Frame* (Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2010), 96, 108–109.

¹⁴ Tangwa, *Elements of African Bioethics in a Western frame*, 142.

decolonial ethics)¹⁵ that speaks to the value of acknowledging the multiple spaces of cultural realities people occupy in the global community.

Decolonial ethics in intercultural ethics challenges the tendency of foreign value systems to reduce all the varied global understandings of values to one particular understanding of life. On the one hand, integrating the ex-colonies' world of values into global discourses humbles the global community, forcing them to desist from offering Global North *cultural particulars* as *universal norms* to be followed by every culture. Some have referred to this need as obligatory for "decolonizing universality."¹⁶ On the other hand, intercultural ethics can assist ex-colonials to realize a sufficient *mental decolonization* by exorcising colonial conceptions. Such conceptions include delusions that colonialism is the only reason for the crises and underdevelopment of Africa and its recent ethical challenges like human trafficking or modern slavery.

However, my argument is modest: to complete the unfinished project of genuinely decolonizing ethics, whenever we give a voice to an African thinker in intercultural ethics,¹⁷ we should also give a voice to global North partners. In this regard, the decolonization assignment compels Africans and non-Africans in equal measure. Both the colonizers and the colonized need to be freed from the stranglehold of colonial bonds (*coloniality*). Indeed, to decolonize ethics is to embrace the rich multiplicity of

¹⁵ Puleng Segalo and Lien Molobela, "Considering Africanist Research Ethics Practices in Social Science Research in Africa," in *Social Science Research Ethics in Africa*, ed. N. Nortjé, R. Visagie, and J.S. Wessels, Research Ethics Forum 7 (Springer, 2019), 45.

¹⁶ Suriumurthee Moonsamy Maistry, "Threats to Decolonial Immanent Ethics," *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 3 (2021): 31. Mbih J. Tosam raises a similar worry: "Proponents of culturally responsive bioethics are concerned that common morality may result in moral imperialism because of the asymmetry of power in the world and . . . that the difference between the leading Euro-American and indigenous African construal of autonomy is that the former ascribes greater weight on individual self-determination while the latter emphasizes responsibilities towards the community." Mbih Jerome Tosam, "Global Bioethics and Respect for Cultural Diversity: How Do We Avoid Moral Relativism and Moral Imperialism?," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (2020): 611.

¹⁷ Godfrey B. Tangwa, "Giving Voice to African Thought in Medical Research Ethics," *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 38, no. 2 (2017): 103.

worldviews springing from lived social and spiritual realities. Each culture interacts with its environment, and the environments of other people, in different ways. It is from this perspective that one side must question whether all structural constraints have been inflicted by Western colonialism, while the other side must cultivate the meekness to withdraw from any superimposition of their kind of ethics as infallible, since imported ethics may not relevantly tally with local spiritual-social realities, or they may alienate people from their rich and peaceful histories of life. They also may not embrace rich social realities that more abundantly promote genuine intercultural life.

Towards a Genuine Intercultural Dialogue

For a genuine intercultural ethics, I propose a decolonial ethics that ultimately requires us to genuinely embrace a decolonized intercultural dialogue—devoid of coloniality—between the colonized and the colonizers. Before expounding on decolonial ethics, it should be mentioned that colonialism shouldn't be confined to some geographic areas and eras,¹⁸ nor to some inoperative outdated systems, at least in our current discussion. It is this enduring colonial dominion, this modern form of coloniality, that we should genuinely decolonize.¹⁹

Decolonial ethics must reinvigorate a moral global responsibility for how best the colonized and colonizers can amicably embrace non-dominative relationships of coexistence and kindredness in spite of a contemporaneous colonial environment where Eurocentric ethical thoughts still act as modern assimilative and normative forces,²⁰ an impulse which hinders present-day intercultural life and which we must neutralize through decolonial ethics. Decolonial ethicists reject boundaries defined by culture or a nation-state assumed in hierarchical and exclusionary

¹⁸ These concepts are described by Bulhan, "Stages of Colonialism in Africa," 240.

¹⁹ See the description of coloniality by Bulhan, "Stages of Colonialism in Africa," 240–241.

²⁰ Noah De Lissoy, "Decolonial Pedagogy and the Ethics of the Global," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31 no. 3 (2010): 283.

legacies of coloniality.²¹ They challenge modern coloniality as a global contemporary fact, and most especially its continued presence amongst the colonized—i.e., the continued legacy of the colonial logic in the colonized nations.²² The question remains how best we can ethically arrive at the global fusion of the two logics and epistemologies, that of the colonized and the colonizer. What we are looking for is not merely an intercultural ethical dialogue, but more specifically a genuine intercultural dialogue.

In order to achieve this genuine intercultural ethics, while respecting concrete experiences in specific contexts, this chapter suggests “decolonial ethics” should not only serve as a means for Africans (the colonized) to genuinely outgrow past colonial fears and move towards intercultural life, but also should prompt Western partners (former colonizers) to cultivate genuine humility to learn from other cultural values and so abstain from offering their understanding of cultural ethics as the standardized universalized ethics, at least if we are to achieve a genuine intercultural ethics devoid of modern tenets of coloniality. However, this requires renewing everyday practice. As Kaunda notes:

I am arguing that academic decolonial talk in the African academy is a decolonial problem that has essentially become another talk within the black hole of the legacies of colonialism and its invention—neo-

²¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Harvard University Press, 2020). De Lissoyoy argues that a decolonial ethical orientation to globality (solidarity) is “possible only in the context of a recognition of the relations of power that have shaped history, and in particular the political, cultural, economic, and epistemological processes of domination that have characterized colonialism and Eurocentrism. Imagining an ethics of the global in this context means articulating a *decolonial* perspective.” De Lissoyoy, “Decolonial Pedagogy,” 279. Such a perspective is based on non-dominative principles of coexistence and kindredness. See also Louiza Odysseos, “Prolegomena to Any Future Decolonial Ethics: Coloniality, Poetics and ‘Being Human as Praxis,’” *Millennium* 45, no. 3 (2017): 447–472, doi.org/10.1177/0305829817704503.

²² Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 240–270; Maldonado-Torres, “Thinking Through the Decolonial Turn,” 1–15; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2011).

colonialism. Without engaging everyday decolonial gestures, academic decolonial talk is an impractical solution to global coloniality. The continent is bombarded with decolonial theories that not only do not arise from everyday life but also have no bearing on concrete experiences and social problems.²³

Closer scrutiny of concrete experiences in cultures is necessary without any discrimination in dialogue, if we are to embrace a genuine intercultural ethics.

Intercultural Ethics Necessitates a Bidirectional Pluriversal Dialogue

Having emphasized that a genuine intercultural ethics necessitates a decolonial ethics, one that requires us to embrace a decolonized dialogue between the colonized and the colonizers, I now turn to my core objective—realizing a genuine “decolonized pluriversal dialogue” as a fundament of intercultural ethics. Representatives of pluriversality share “a critique of the Euromodern world’s claim to universality and an assertion of multiple ontologies and the importance of the political and ethical implications of those ontologies.”²⁴

The decisive need for a pluriversal dialogue arises when a specific cultural perspective claims to offer the world universal knowledge, thus demonstrating a lack of healthy intercultural interaction. Relatedly, Hamid Dabashi, a major scholar of postcolonial thought, wonders, “How did Europe universalize its particularities, particularized other people’s universalities, and made itself normative to others’ abnormativity?”²⁵ The question of *how* the universalization of these particularities came about seems less relevant for this study, but the question of how we can neutralize

²³ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 46.

²⁴ Kimberly Hutchings, “Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2019): 117, doi.org/10.1017/S0892679419000169.

²⁵ Hamid Dabashi, *Europe and Its Shadows: Coloniality After Empire* (Pluto Press, 2019), 52.

the *consequences* of modern coloniality is more pertinent. In approaching this dialogue, we ought to judiciously scrutinize globalization in relation to cosmopolitanism. If we were to assume, just like Mignolo, that globalization is a set of designs to manage the world, while cosmopolitanism is a set of projects toward planetary conviviality,²⁶ both globalization and cosmopolitanism fail to help us achieve the desired genuine intercultural dialogue. The cosmopolitan pursuit of universal conviviality is in danger of not embracing a genuine decolonized dialogue since the dominating approach remains inclined to a particular way of life at the expense of another.

Where cosmopolitan approaches tend to articulate abstract principles developed from within a particular Western tradition, decolonial approaches reject abstract global designs in favour of inter-cultural dialogue amongst multiple people(s), including peoples who deem collective and non-human entities to be of fundamental moral importance. In addition, decolonial global ethics rejects universality in favour of “pluriversality.”²⁷

Accordingly, a genuine decolonized dialogue that eschews any cosmopolitan pursuit of universal conviviality must arise from a genuine intercultural decolonial ethics and should possess at least two traits. Firstly, it should be an ethics that is context sensitive. Secondly, it should be an ethics that is pluriversalist—i.e., an ethics that rejects an abstract universal approach to ethics in favor of a genuine intercultural dialogue.²⁸ In proposing an intercultural ethics, it must respect cultural contexts and embrace genuine intercultural dialogue as part of a broader pluralistic cultural interaction of global communities.

To further illustrate the problematic, among some Global South cultures, there is continuous fear of losing contextual indigenous values to

²⁶ Walter Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmo-Polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 721.

²⁷ Robin Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 13, no. 3 (2017): 380–397, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr0qtvb, see abstract and notes 4 and 6.

²⁸ Moosa-Mitha Mehmoona, “Decolonial Ethics as a Framework for Anti-Islamophobic Social Work Praxis,” *International Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics* 19, no. 2 (2022): 24–25, doi.org/10.55521/10-019-205.

foreign values on the one side, as well as a deepened inferiority-superiority complex between the colonized and the colonizers on the other side. The fear of re-experiencing disuniting historical injustices like the slave trade, colonization, the loss of cultural values, and so on makes some cultures in the Global South hesitant to view modern attempts as genuine moves towards intercultural ethics, since these moves appear to be neither context sensitive nor open to a decolonized pluriversalist dialogue.

In summary, a pluriversal dialogue (pluriversality) doesn't privilege universality of principles—one single universal truth—but rather recognizes the plurality of values in a world where we are all equally human. Secondly, a pluriversal dialogue is not encoded in one particular cultural epistemology but rather arises from a genuine intercultural dialogue. Thirdly, pluriversality is not an expression of a global consensus, but rather emerges from a genuine dialogue that acknowledges the quality of different values arising from our various cultural diversities.²⁹ In short, to take pluriversality seriously is to appreciate a functional intercultural life where “a pluriversal ethics addresses the question of how to cultivate a practical ethic of coexistence and collaboration with others in an ontologically plural and radically hierarchical world.”³⁰ Therefore, achieving a genuine intercultural ethics imposes on us an ethical obligation to embrace a decolonial ethics that should ultimately merit a decolonized pluriversality. The dialogue between the colonized and the colonizers must be bidirectional.

²⁹ Pluriversality informs us that there are pluriversal values achievable through a genuine dialogue across cultures. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*; Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, ed. A. A. Vallega, trans. E. Mendieta, C. Pérez Bustillo, Y. Angulo, and N. Maldonado-Torres (Duke University Press, 2013); Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” 380–397; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “The Decolonial Mandela: Embodiment of Peace, Justice, and Humanism,” *Journal of Developing Societies* 31, no. 3 (2015): doi.org/10.1177/0169796X15590326; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “From a ‘Terrorist’ to Global Icon: A Critical Decolonial Ethical Tribute to Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela of South Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 6 (2014), doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.907703.

³⁰ Hutchings, “Decolonizing Global Ethics: Thinking with the Pluriverse,” 115.

From Decolonial Ethics to Theo-Ethics

We have broadly proposed decolonial ethics as a steppingstone towards a productive pluriversal dialogue that ultimately gives birth to intercultural pluriversal ethics. For Dunford, “An exhaustive and definitive statement of decolonial ethics . . . would be impossible, for decolonial ethics has emerged from, and must remain open to being shaped by, *dialogues amongst millions* of grassroots actors and activists.”³¹ A genuine pluriversal dialogue would fulfil the noble vision of a decoloniality that is not based on some “virtue of an already-existing universality that can be articulated from one particular place, but on the basis of resonances amongst, translation across and the construction of common understandings amongst multiple positions.”³² Such pluriversal dialogues overcome modern epistemic coloniality and come to value “a world in which other worlds are possible . . . a world in which multiple cosmovisions, worldviews, practices and livelihoods co-exist.”³³ By respecting intercultural resonances, we would be opulently appreciating how to pluriversalize pluralistic understandings and rich cultural experiences, for instance of “medical pluralism” and “human rights,” instead of relying solely on the universalized Western interpretation. In this sense, then, decolonial ethics (i.e., a decolonized pluriversal dialogue) would broadly mean “working toward a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ, which is what modernity/coloniality does and, hence, where decolonization of the mind should begin.”³⁴

Moreover, in characterizing the genuine relationships of a decolonized dialogue, scholars like Maldonado-Torres propose that such relations in which “the de-colonial turn highlights the epistemic relevance of the

³¹ Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” 381, emphasis added.

³² Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” 390.

³³ Dunford, “Toward a Decolonial Global Ethics,” 380–381.

³⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007): 459.

enslaved and colonized search for humanity,” should “become the norm rather than the exception.”³⁵ It is therefore supremely important to engage the colonized at the same level as the colonizers, so the dehumanized among them aren’t reduced to subhuman levels in any desired intercultural relationships.

If we are truly working towards a genuine intercultural ethics, an ethics that requires a decolonized pluriversal dialogue, we cannot presuppose functioning integral relationships. I wish to elaborate how the contribution of the African culture to establishing such relationships, and therefore a genuine intercultural dialogue, can come from the theo-ethical understanding of contextual experience. This experience can become a source for a decolonial dialogue. It is based on the African view that everything is related. We can say these relationships reverence a kind of theo-ethic—faith in God’s immanence within relationships—that “is grounded in radical interconnectedness of existence, the perennial fact that everything is everything through everything, that existence is co-substantively bestowed upon everything by everything. . . . This also means that everything is creatively constituted by relations, and that nothing pre-exists relationships, including God (God is eternally relational).”³⁶

Theo-Ethics as a Process of Healing and Reconciliation in Genuine Intercultural Ethics

In pursuit of a theo-ethics that advances cooperative relationships of mutual coexistence, we ought to briefly understand healing and reconciliation in African human communities. Firstly, for Bantu, when *muntu* (an individual) is sick, the relational community is similarly sick, signifying that if *muntu* desires healing, the community too desires

³⁵ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2008), 7.

³⁶ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 42. I think of a theo-ethics as a cosmic-spiritual (religious) ethics that unendingly embraces intercultural *relations* with God at the apex. See also page 44.

healing—along with reconciliation, since both experience frailty jointly. And since sickness concerns the living community members directly, *muntu* necessarily needs physical and psychological healing through confessions of guilt which are embedded in the rites of reconciliation.³⁷ The aim is a newly re-energized interpersonal coexistence of both the individual and the relational community. Secondly, reconciliation presupposes the spiritual community which includes former and future human beings and the divine.

However, it is a contemporary moral challenge to accord Western life with a theo-ethics in an African sense, since in the West there are less associations with the spiritual realm. Most Bantu would connect a fruitful reconciliation with a communicative life of dialogue between God and *muntu*, which shows the relatedness of all forms of life: “God, divinities, ancestors, the living and yet-to-be-born and every created thing—visible and invisible are present. It is a radical awareness that the presence of one is the presence of all. You kill one, you’ve killed all. It is the capacity to recognize and affirm the intrinsic value of all things.”³⁸

Because of this relatedness, the African dialogue-oriented communicative ethics cannot reduce *muntu*’s healing and reconciliation only to a philosophical discursive ethics.³⁹ Given that the theo-ethical attitude is indispensable to any pursuit of intercultural ethics from an African viewpoint, an African would, for example, expect healing not only of her body but of her totality.⁴⁰ Since African disease etiology is

³⁷ Bénédet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. B. McNeil (Crossroad, 2001), 47. Originally published in German under the title *Wider den Universalanspruch westlicher Moral* (Herder, 2000).

³⁸ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 52.

³⁹ See Bujo, *An African Ethic*, 48; Bénédet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue Between North and South* (Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 38. Originally published under the title, *Die ethische Dimension der Gemeinschaft: das afrikanische Modell im Nord-Süd-Dialog* (Universitätsverlag Freiburg/Schweiz, 1993).

⁴⁰ See Godfrey B. Tangwa, *African Perspectives on Some Contemporary Bioethics Problems* (Cambridge Scholars, 2019), 65.

understood as a communal, moral, and spiritual issue,⁴¹ an all-inclusive healing and reconciliation essentially aims at an integrative life, which cannot happen without God. It is why a theo-ethics of healing and reconciliation reestablishes the broken relationships—not only with the living community, but also with the spiritual community of the ancestors. According to African medical anthropology, one can trace one's suffering to one's own incorrect behavior in relation to a deceased family member, necessitating one to responsibly confess their guilt and be reconciled with the family for the healing process to be successfully completed.⁴²

In contrast to the theo-ethics of the colonizing cultures, the African approach to theo-ethics deeply fosters reconciliation with the “community of victims”⁴³ or the “victimized of history” by spiritually reestablishing memory of the ancestors. Here, integrative healing and reconciliation, as understood by the colonized Bantu, includes the invisible world of those who were victimized in the past and forgotten, while the colonizers seem to forget the communicative ancestral bond with the victimized of the past. Therefore, it is clear how the victims of the past are so vital to an African theo-ethics, which takes a different moral approach to achieve genuine intercultural ethics, since a Western approach to ethics scarcely integrates the victimized of the past and their lively communicative action with the contemporary living community.

A concrete instance of theo-ethics, of reconciling the community of victims with the victimizers, is in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's approach in “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (TRC). For Tutu, there is “no future without forgiveness,” since true healing and reconciliation cannot deny the victimized of the past.⁴⁴ The commission followed the apartheid period in South Africa, where the colonizer's humanity was perhaps as dehumanized as that of the colonized.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Bujo, *An African Ethic*, 97; Laurenti Magesa, *What Is not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Orbis Books, 2013), 93.

⁴² Bujo, *An African Ethic*, 46. See also Bujo, *Ethical Dimension of Community*, 183–185.

⁴³ Bujo, *Ethical Dimension of Community*, 32.

⁴⁴ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Rider, 1999), jacket.

⁴⁵ Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 35.

In Tutu's interpretation of the African theo-ethic, postcolonial reconciliation reunites both the colonized and the colonizers, where the colonized forgive the colonizers, and the latter fully acknowledge the past ills committed.⁴⁶ If we recall what gave birth to the "National Unity and Reconciliation Act" of July 26, 1995, which initiated the TRC led by Tutu, its mandate of reconciling the oppressed and the oppressor is firmly stated in chapter 2 of the Act—"Objectives of the Commission": "§3(1) the objectives of the Commission shall be to promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past by . . . (c) establishing and making known the fate or whereabouts of victims and by restoring the human and civil dignity of such victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims, and by recommending reparation measures in respect of them."⁴⁷ Here Tutu leads South Africans to realize how a genuine intercultural life rests on a theo-ethics of bringing together the victimized with their victimizers without alienating themselves from their spiritual attachment to ancestors. This is valued since it brings relational peace to hurt or injured intercultural relationships with the ancestral past, enabling a healed present and reconciled future. Michael Battle concludes:

There can be no peaceful presence as long as the spirits of the dead are not laid to rest. Therefore many relatives of murdered or disappeared persons ask the TRC to help them get back from the police the remains of their loved ones in order to bury them in a decent and dignified manner. . . . This is the way in which harmony between the generations is restored and maintained. The bringing home of the one who is lost,

⁴⁶ Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues, "Towards a Tutuist Ethics of War: Ubuntu, Forgiveness and Reconciliation," *Politikon* 45 (2018), 432–433.

⁴⁷ Tutu, *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995 (South Africa)*, Government Gazette 16579 (vol. 361), July 26, 1995.

even the one who is guilty, *to the place of the ancestors is a vital aspect of the peace of the living.*⁴⁸

An African approach to theo-ethics includes the injustices of the historical past. It holds those responsible for the unethical past accountable. Unlike a Western approach to theo-ethics, an African approach encompasses not only reconciliation and taking responsibility for past injustices but also acknowledging the inappropriate actions of one's ancestors and demonstrating a readiness to admit these wrongs.⁴⁹ Such a theo-ethic, as noted already, is well portrayed in the TRC, which united the victimized (the colonized) and victimizers (the colonizers), exhorting them to pay attention to their historical wrongdoing before embracing a reconciliation that never called for the ill-treatment of victimizers. It is such a theo-ethical reconciliation that avoids the continued recurrence of horrific injustice and rectifies the circumstances without necessarily punishing the victimizer.

Spirituality, Theo-Ethics, and Intercultural Decolonial Ethics

Therefore, intercultural decolonial ethics “should be understood as an action of recovering spirituality, meaning and values in everyday interactions, exchanges and encounters among the masses,” and it does this by “recovering both the active and passive *vital force* as an African *force of life* primed to act relentlessly in history, not because we were once enslaved and colonized, but because . . . everyday expressions and everyday encounters are means of *becoming*.”⁵⁰ Decolonial spirituality respects passive and active vitality in every social-intercultural construct. This vitality is intrinsically interwoven with the present-past-future realities as new

⁴⁸ Michael Battle, “A Theology of Community: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu,” *Interpretation* 54, no. 2 (2000): 173–182, 180, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Bujo, *An African Ethic*, 43–44.

⁵⁰ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 47.

beginnings,⁵¹ and can be increased or decreased in intercultural relationships. This can be compared to the paradoxical relationship of God—the ultimate vital force in the African thinking system—with creation as clear in Philippians 2:6. In an intercultural theo-ethics, we are upholding the divine-community mystery relationship—i.e., the community understood as divine liminality, being unified with God, though not equal with God and never God at all.⁵² Correspondingly, in seeking a solution towards functional decolonized intercultural relationships, we ought to know that

decolonisation does not only take place in academic offices or fallisms, because it is about transformation in collective thinking and modification in people's everyday social actions . . . it is an everyday gesture from below. Decolonial gestures are about everyday life as it unfolds. . . . Decolonial spirituality arises from a collective emancipatory consciousness wrought by indignation and genuine commitment to becoming authentic humans and it is possible only by mutual recognition of each other. . . .⁵³

Affirming the intrinsic value of all things is core to cultivating a functioning intercultural relationship. And since life is mutually animated by all, it is unbecoming to forget, for instance, the spiritual presence of our ancestors, who walked this world. The ancestors are the original custodians of the world and are the architects of the knowledge and unifying spiritual-belief systems that have been systematically marginalized or totally destroyed by colonialism.⁵⁴ In African encounters, the goal of healing is *wholeness*—since everything shares in divine life—and we turn to this to address the continuous ache caused by colonality. This explains why African rites and rituals, for instance, are cosmological events in which the totality of creation must always be present. Even African greetings, to take

⁵¹ Kaunda, "Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures," 54.

⁵² Kaunda, "Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures," 55.

⁵³ Kaunda, "Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures," 48.

⁵⁴ Maistry, "Threats to Decolonial Immanent Ethics," 26.

a simpler example, open up liminal sites to promote a genuine life of theo-ethics and so decolonial spirituality, since they foster exchange, intra-active experience, intra-action, and intercourse of life itself.⁵⁵ Here wholeness must incorporate the indigenous understandings of life, of both spiritual and social relatedness—i.e., it must address the actual histories wounded by coloniality and the totality of authentic experiences of the colonized, as well as of the colonizers and their broader community members like the ancestors.

Conclusion

In proposing a genuine decolonial ethics, intercultural ethics must, first of all, shun all false binaries like the *developed West* versus *primitive Africa*, an all-powerful Global North and a toothless Global South. Secondly, Africans must reclaim their functional participation in intercultural ethics by transcending discontent and victimhood.⁵⁶ Thirdly, intercultural ethics must appreciate *critical intercultural universalism* as a necessary ingredient of the needed decolonial turn, a turn by which genuine intercultural ethics has to welcome the pursuit of both indigenous values—for instance, by not lowering the status of African values within their own history—and universal mutual goals without absolutizing any (and also without prioritizing the universality of Western values). I have suggested a “decolonial ethics” that embraces a theo-ethical approach, as both a means for Africans (the colonized) to genuinely outgrow past colonial fears and move on, as well as other global Western partners (former colonizers) to cultivate some humility, to learn from other cultural values and so desist from offering their particular cultural ethics as the standardized—through recolonization, neocolonialism, and so on—universalized approach. We must do this if we are to achieve a genuine intercultural ethics permeated with theo-ethics.

⁵⁵ Kaunda, “Sawubona: A Theo-Ethic for Everyday Decolonial Gestures,” 51.

⁵⁶ Táfàwò Olúfẹ̀mí, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (Hurst & Company, 2022).

I have suggested that a genuine intercultural ethics should appreciate intercultural pluriversality as a critical tool towards decolonial ethics. Intercultural ethics should critically define epistemic substitute approaches to colonial ethics. Moreover, intercultural pluriversality should critically question the consequences of coloniality and consequently empower developing decolonial ethics with a new inclusive ethics delinked from purportedly universal systems. Rather, if we are to learn anything, these practical values should be developed from an uninterrupted genuine intercultural dialogue that respects the quality of our multiple rich differences, and a dialogue that genuinely offers something more than a mere alternative to modern coloniality.



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