

Libraries in the age of technocoloniality

Keynote by

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The concept of coloniality was proposed in the early 1990s by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano to refer to the powerful political, economic and cultural logics that supported (and still support) colonisation. Coloniality is structural and persistent; it goes beyond colonialism (the political dimension of colonisation) which ended with independence and wars of liberation. Today, we continue to live in a heterogeneous set of colonialities known as the colonial matrix of powers whose main components are: control of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality, knowledge and subjectivity (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, Palmieri 2018, Maldonado-Torres 2007, Quijano 2000; Escobar 2004). Technocoloniality then refers to the set of logics of coloniality induced by technology (Mboa 2020a). In this text, we will approach library through the prism of technocoloniality. On the one hand, I will describe how this techno-coloniality manifests itself in libraries; on the other hand, I will present one of the main consequences of this techno-coloniality within African universities.

Manifestations of Technocoloniality in Libraries

According to Thomas Mboa (2020a), the different modalities of technocoloniality are : technology transfer, techno-utopian discourse and neo-capitalist practices.

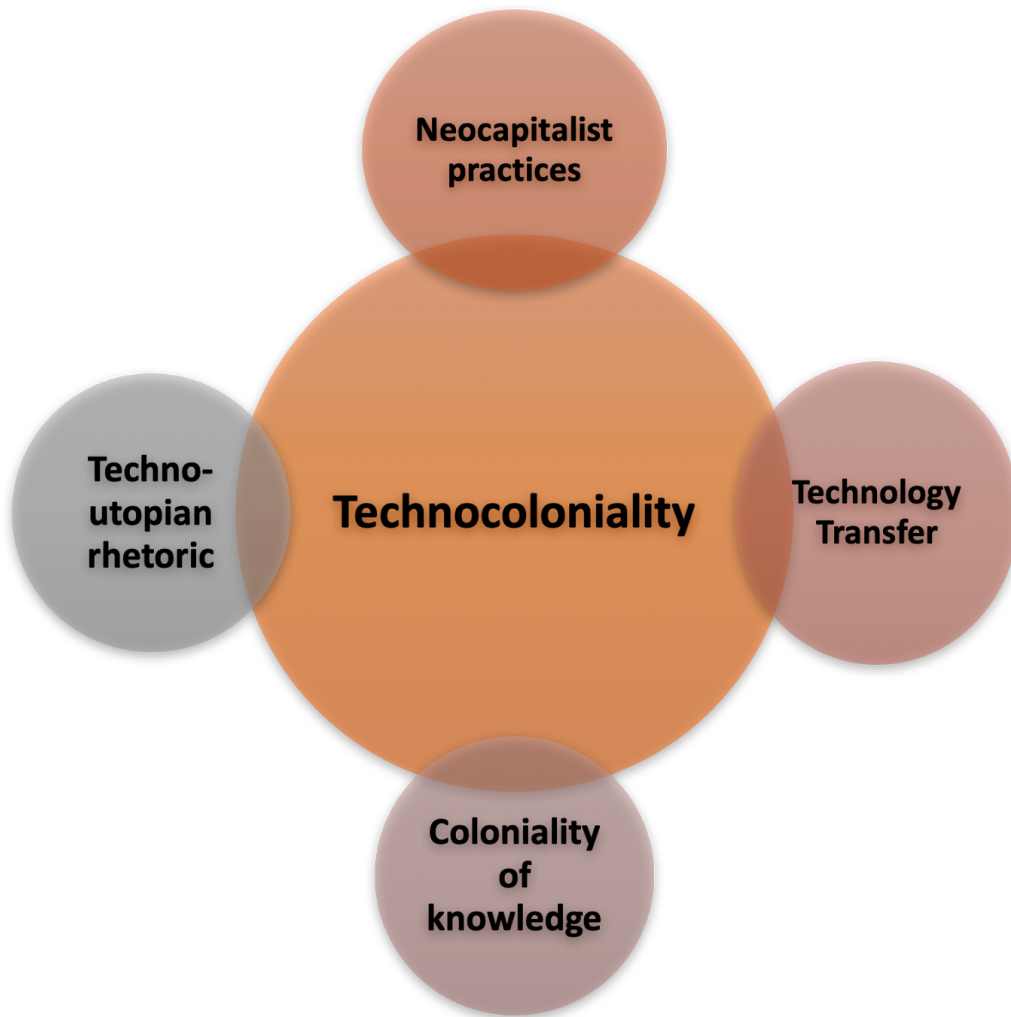


Figure 1 : The Four dimensions of technocoloniality (source : Mboa 2020)

Coloniality of knowledge

The coloniality of knowledge is the imposition of Western global history on non-Western peoples; this results in the subalternisation of local historicities (Escobar 2004, 217). Through the coloniality of knowledge, the crucial question of how Western modernity has spread by displacing other cultures, subordinating others and colonising the imaginary of colonised peoples is addressed. This coloniality is kept alive in books, in academic performance criteria, in cultural models, in common sense, in peoples' self-image, in self-aspiration and in many other aspects of our lives (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243).

The coloniality of knowledge can manifest itself in three different ways: the coloniality of being, colonial difference and Eurocentrism. The coloniality of being refers to the ontological dimension of colonisation. It critically addresses the encounter between the coloniser and the colonised (Escobar 2004, 218) and highlights the realities of dehumanisation and depersonalisation experienced by the colonised (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 257). Colonial difference refers to the cultural dimension of the subalternisation process that takes place in the colonial matrix of powers, highlighting the persistent cultural differences that exist today within global power structures (Escobar 2004, 18). Eurocentrism is the approach to knowledge based solely on the experience of Western history, dismissing any idea of the existence of non-Eurocentric epistemologies or currents of thought (Escobar 2004, 218). Eurocentrism is thus an epistemic hegemony that privileges Western knowledge and cosmology over non-Western knowledge and cosmologies.

In the case of universities, we will see that the majority of scientific resources, codes, designs and projects come from the North and are generally written in English. And the ecology of knowledge on the Internet, as well as the trajectories of circulation of resources, show that they are largely dominated by the North and disseminated in a unidirectional way. Damen (2019) puts it well in his blogpost

Access to most scientific journals is generally arranged through electronic subscriptions via so-called 'Big Deals' between universities and large publishers. Other ways include separate subscriptions with publishers and scientific organisations. Books are acquired through more diverse routes: buying access to e-book collections from publishers (Springer, Elsevier, Brill, etc.), via library approval plans with brokers (Gobi Library Solutions, Erasmusbooks), by specific orders from library staff to publishers and by receiving gifts.

Technology transfer from North to South

The transfer of technology from the North to the South is a perfect example of a vehicle of knowledge coloniality. In this case, the coloniality of knowledge often manifests itself through isomorphism, which designates the adoption in Africa of forms structurally similar to those of the West (Shrum and Shenhav, 1995). This isomorphism would be part of a logic of universalising Eurocentric science in the name of modernisation, without being relevant to the needs of African countries (Felwine Sarr 2016, 39; Shrum and Shenhav 1995, 631). This isomorphism is present in the way libraries (traditional, smart, digital) are designed in Africa; in strict compliance with Western standards, management, acquisition and classifying processes.

Hence the call to resist made by Shrum and Shenhav (1995, 628), warning the countries of the South against adopting technologies from elsewhere, which would not be without consequences, notably a form of dependence: “imported scientific ideologies and technological artifacts from industrialized countries are said to generate debilitating dependencies”. In other words, the adoption of a technology is never neutral “When you are diffusing and transferring technologies, you are also diffusing different cultural practices, because the technologies are not value neutral or ideologically neutral “ (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2018, 5). Furthermore, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon urges against the creation of institutions and societies that are inspired by the countries of the North, as such imitation is an obscene caricature (Fanon et al. 2010).

The techno-utopian discourse

The techno-utopian discourse is part of the rhetoric of modernity described in the colonial matrix of powers. According to Mignolo and Walsh (2018, 110), modernity refers to a coherent set of diverse discourses, originating in Western cosmology. In terms of technology, narratives of modernity consistently celebrate

the idea of novelty and its associated concepts of revolution and innovation (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 140). Sismondo (2004, 139) says in this regard that 'Technology was symbol of Europe's modernity, and was something that Europeans could generously take to the rest of the world'. The techno-utopian discourse usually takes the form of techno-solutionism, which refers to the view that technology can unilaterally solve difficult social problems (Lindtner et al. 2016, 1390). This is the case today with digital libraries, which seem to be sacred, as they would put an end to several barriers impossible to overcome by physical libraries. However, no mention is made of the technical constraints, the dependence on certain infrastructures and service offers.

Pratiques néocapitalistes

In the past few years, advances in information and communication technologies have contributed to a tenfold increase in the production of collective knowledge, thus opening the way for very insidious but powerful practices of capitalism that exploit free information on the Internet to the detriment of the communities and individuals who produce it. This is the result of the share, cognitive capitalism arising from the excesses of the sharing economy (Moulier Boutang 2007, 2008).

These manifestation of technocoloniality in libraries are vehicle for a new form of knowledge subalternisation, whose consequences include epistemic alienation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

Epistemic alienation in African Universities

We can define epistemic alienation as the distortion of one's native way of thinking, and of seeing and speaking of one's own reality. In Africa, this cognitive distortion is led by the adoption (unconscious or not) of Eurocentric philosophical, sociological, and historical thought—used to speak of, to describe, and to study African realities. Epistemic alienation is symptomatized by

epistemicide: destruction of local epistemologies that are replaced, in this case, by a Western paradigm (Mboa 2020b).

The African university system is one of the main causes of epistemic alienation because these institutions simply replicate Western universities, without any effort to contextualize missions, curricula, and structure. And indeed, these postcolonial universities are still dependent on the West; this dependence can be economic, scientific, or related to the language of instruction. On economic dependence, Piron et al. (2016) consider that postcolonial scientific research remains fundamentally outward facing and organized to meet a theoretical, scientific, and economic demand of the center of the system. In other words, the fact that African policy makers do not always prioritize research funding in their countries makes them dependent on the scientific agendas of donors, most of whom are from the North. Okune (2019) confirms this by saying:

Existing scholarly infrastructures continue to enable and in fact re-entrench what Paulin Hountondji called ‘extroverted scientific activity’, where researchers on the African continent investigate subjects which are of interest first and foremost to a Western audience. Hountondji argued that while academic work can meet the theoretical needs and questions of the Western academy, it does not serve the societies within which the science is conducted.

Extended to equipment, documentation, and scientific paradigms from the North, this dependence profoundly affects the African researcher’s way of thinking. And current OA policies are not helping to change this situation, because many of them are international and shaped for Western contexts. There are a few true and effective African OA policies, which are not just replications or extensions of Western OA policies. But this situation would be a little different if government economic policies were to financially support common thinking on how to find solutions to local problems.

A scientific dependence is visible in the way in which Western authors and materials are frequently cited in scientific papers, theses, and dissertations produced in African universities. It would be an exception, even a miracle, for knowledge produced in African universities to be widely adopted in the West.

However, we should not place the entire blame for this situation on Western people, systems, and countries. This situation may be the responsibility of the local researchers themselves, due to their lack of OA literacy and practices. We can point the finger at librarians, who are not advising their institutions of current OA practices and the necessity to establish OA policies or infrastructures, such as institutional repositories and open journals. We can also put the blame on leaders of academic institutions who do not prioritize OA in their policies. We could also blame the editors of local journals for allowing their titles to die out. In addition, promoters of local journals need to be trained and supported by decision makers and OA policies.

On the matter of language, it must also be recognized that African researchers face a real dilemma. All have a first African language, with English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese being only secondary languages. Therefore, Africans feel obliged to undertake the difficult exercise of translating their thoughts into the colonial languages imposed in academic curricula. Added to the above, the inherent looseness of translation lends imprecision to the dissemination of African knowledge within a context dominated by Eurocentrism and English as the *lingua franca*. This linguistic distortion contributes to the marginalization and denial of African languages and fatally to their linguisticide. This is another epistemic alienation that the current practices of scholarly communication and OA promote. Julia Schoneberg (2018) puts it very well in these terms:

Translations make knowledge available to Eurocentric-dominated realms that they wouldn't otherwise appear in. Also, publications receive less recognition if not published in (mostly) English "high-ranked" journals and publishers. Vernacular language is rarely acknowledged as "academically relevant."

While there are celebrated cases, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who chooses to write in his native language, who reads and how many people can read these languages? Indeed, African researchers face the difficult choice between sacrificing the relevance of their ideas in the local community, for the visibility that writing in English provides; or the opposite.

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