Chapter 2: Decolonial African Posthumanism: Beyond the Eurocentric Human

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Beyond Western humanism

The trajectory of Western humanism, tracing its lineage back to the philosophical foundations laid by Aristotle, who posited Man as a rational animal (Kiel and Kreft 2019), and subsequently enriched by the Renaissance concept of 'Man as the measure of all things' (Braidotti 2023: 34), is one that has undeniably shaped the intellectual landscape of the West. However, beneath this overarching narrative, there lies a critical dimension characterised by a series of exclusions. These exclusions are multi-faceted, encompassing the marginalisation of women, minorities and those who did not fit within the Greek mould during the Aristotelian epoch, as well as the exclusion of non-Western voices during the zenith of Renaissance humanism. In essence, the very humanism that purports to celebrate the human condition has historically been guilty of drawing arbitrary boundaries around who qualifies as fully human. This unsettling paradox has been a focal point for posthumanist critique, which has diligently sought to unearth the ideological processes of exclusion woven into the fabric of humanism. Posthumanism, with its democratic and humanitarian aspirations, has ardently endeavoured to illuminate these exclusions and in doing so, has embarked on a quest to reimagine a more comprehensive and inclusive planetary perspective. In her book, *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti (2013: 1) makes it clear that:

> Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history. Not if by "human" we mean that creature

familiar to us from the Enlightenment and its legacy.

Despite its noble intentions, it is essential to underscore a conspicuous blind spot within the current discourse of posthumanism. While it vigorously interrogates the Eurocentric biases ingrained within humanism, it regrettably overlooks the existence of alternative forms of humanism that emanate from Indigenous cultures and repositories of knowledge, notably within the rich African thought. These Indigenous humanisms, borne out of distinct worldviews and experiences, stand as testament to the profound diversity of human experience and the multiplicity of ways in which humanity conceives of itself. Conversely, critical posthumanism,[1] instead of merely critiquing the Eurocentric order of knowledge from the periphery, should expand the scope of posthuman perspectives to encompass the valuable insights and alternative narratives that emerge from non-European contexts. This transformative agenda holds the promise of transcending the limitations of traditional Eurocentric posthumanism, thereby facilitating a more inclusive dialogue that acknowledges and engages with the myriad expressions of humanism across the globe. Because of these considerations, the purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, it aims to shed light on the historical exclusions within Western humanism, elucidating how these exclusions have shaped the intellectual traditions of the West. Secondly, it seeks to advocate for a broader, more inclusive posthumanism that actively incorporates non-European alternatives, notably those rooted in native and Indigenous cultures such as African humanism. By embracing this more expansive vision of posthumanism, we endeavour to foster a global, planetary discourse that reflects the true diversity of human experiences and aspirations, transcending the boundaries that have historically confined our understanding of the human condition.

Decolonial posthumanism

Decolonial (Mignolo and Walsh 2018) posthumanism serves as a critical and transformative framework, challenging established concepts of cultural monopoly and othering. Rooted in a commitment to acknowledging

1 Posthuman knowledge and the critical posthumanities.

and celebrating cultural complexity, this emerging paradigm seeks to deconstruct Eurocentric worldviews and colonial legacies, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive, equitable and pluralistic comprehension of human experiences. In essence, decolonial posthumanism stands as a multidisciplinary approach, transcending conventional boundaries within fields like anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies and critical theory. At its core, this approach challenges the hegemony of Western epistemologies, while forging novel pathways for knowledge production that respect and incorporate diverse cultural perspectives. Hence, decolonial thinking refers to 'the need to free people from the colonial matrix of power that holds on the three layers of coloniality: power, knowledge, and being' (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 254). Historically, Western cultures have often asserted their universal superiority, resulting in the marginalisation and homogenisation of other cultures, labelling them as "primitive", "savage" and "other". Decolonial posthumanism vehemently rejects this hegemonic stance, recognising that no single culture possesses a monopoly on knowledge, wisdom or truth. Instead, it advocates for a more inclusive worldview that honours diverse ways of knowing and being.

Within the colonial context, non-Western cultures were frequently depicted as the different other, reinforcing a divisive binary between the West and the rest of the world. Decolonial posthumanism endeavours to dismantle this binary by embracing a multitude of cultural perspectives, thereby dismantling hierarchical notions of self and other. A central tenet of decolonial posthumanism emphasises the significance of cultural complexity and heterogeneity. This principle asserts that human experiences and worldviews are multifaceted and cannot be reduced to simplistic narratives and 'single stories' (Adichie 2009). Cultural complexity, thus, recognises the richness of human diversity and the depth of cultural knowledge systems. Decolonial posthumanism fosters a pluralistic worldview that appreciates diverse ways of knowing and being, challenging the Eurocentric inclination to impose a singular, universal narrative. It celebrates the coexistence of multiple narratives and epistemologies, leading to a more profound understanding of the intricate configurations of human existence. This paradigm acknowledges the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life forms, whether human or non-human, advocating

for an ecological consciousness that transcends anthropocentrism. This perspective underscores the importance of considering the well-being of the entire ecosystem, particularly in addressing pressing global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

Decolonial posthumanism, as defined throughout this chapter, aims to reconfigure the epistemological order, promoting a more inclusive and dialogical approach to knowledge creation that encourages active collaboration and mutual learning. Within this paradigmatic dialogism diverse voices and perspectives are not only heard, but also respected. It calls for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and non-Western epistemologies in the global discourse. By engaging in this meaningful trans-dialogue, individuals from different cultural backgrounds can co-create knowledge that is not only more comprehensive but also enriched. To implement decolonial posthumanism effectively, it becomes imperative to revise educational curricula, ensuring they reflect a more inclusive and culturally diverse worldview. This revision includes the integration of non-Western philosophies, histories and perspectives into mainstream education, exposing future generations to a broader spectrum of human experiences and perspectives. This approach ultimately fosters a more empathetic and globally conscious society. Hence, decolonial posthumanism provides a robust framework for transcending the confines of cultural monopoly and absolutism through the embrace of cultural complexity and the appreciation of the richness of human diversity as well as the interconnectedness of all life forms, advocating for a more inclusive epistemological order. The omission of African ethics and philosophical perspectives from discourses within both humanist and posthumanist frameworks is noteworthy. The ensuing section undertakes an examination of avenues through which African ontological systems of thought can contribute to and enhance the ongoing dialogues within posthumanist discourse.

African metaphysics

In essence, the path towards a critical posthumanism (Callus and Herbrechter 2023) underscores the imperative of moving beyond

the dominant Western paradigm of humanism. This paradigm, while historically influential, is critiqued in this chapter for its ethnocentrism and its proclivity to universalise particular cultural and philosophical values. Consequently, the quest for a more inclusive and diversified posthumanist framework beckons scholars and thinkers to broaden their intellectual horizons and scope. A salient exemplar of such intellectual broadening is the exploration of African philosophies. These philosophical traditions, rooted in Africa's diverse cultures and histories, offer alternative perspectives on humanism that significantly deviate from Western normalcy. African philosophies encompass a plethora of epistemological and ontological viewpoints that challenge conventional Eurocentric conceptions of the human experience, conceptualising the human and human-nature relationships through the lens of African metaphysics, which may be defined as the African manner of perceiving, interpreting, and deriving significance from interactions among beings and the broader fabric of reality. This metaphysical perspective diverges from the Western metaphysical tradition (Lajul 2013),[2] which dictates that truth is attainable exclusively through criticality and rationality, relegating anything beyond the scope of human reason to a position of deficiency. This dichotomy is further explicated through the humanist axiom that asserts a humanistic idea of Man as the universal measure of all things (Braidotti 2023: 5), thus, dislodging and diminishing the influence of other entities, such as women, gods or nature. In contrast to this absolute, rationalistic worldview, African metaphysics acknowledges both the existence of realities that are empirically verifiable and those that transcend empirical validation. Consequently, a pivotal attribute of African metaphysics is the recognition of the inherent limitations of humanity and the intricate interconnections between human beings and other forces, encompassing the spiritual, the imperceptible and the natural realms.

A second notable characteristic of African metaphysics is its teleological nature, which entails understanding reality as a construct

2 Following Lajul (2013: 23), 'Western metaphysics considers only those realities that are logical, reasonable and comprehensible by our rational minds to fall under the scope of metaphysics, yet the scope of African metaphysics goes beyond that which is provable by our rational minds.'

that 'hangs together because of aims' (Teffo and Roux 2003: 192), with the metaphysical framework itself being propelled by intrinsic purpose. As posited by Lajul (2014: 21-23), a 'teleological metaphysics' implies the capacity to perceive meaning in the existence of reality, discern purpose in the world's existence and identify underlying consistent principles that maintain coherence between being and existence. In essence, all actions and phenomena within the African metaphysical framework are perceived as purpose-driven. Besides, African metaphysics embodies a holistic perspective, where reality is comprehended as a "closed system" in which every component is interconnected and influenced by any alteration within the system. This holistic approach extends to the principles governing the interaction of forces, which encompass the relationships between God and humankind, diverse human interactions, the interactions between humanity and animals and the interactions between humanity and material entities. In this comprehensive and interconnected view, African metaphysics emerges as a distinct and profound framework for understanding the fundamental aspects of human existence and its relationship with the broader tapestry of reality. Hence, as argued by Pancras Kaboha (1992), as cited in Lajul (2013: 22), Western metaphysics 'narrows the scope of metaphysics, while African philosophy has the potential to open the eyes of Western thinkers to the wider scope of metaphysics'[3]. Indeed, the primary objective of this chapter is to assert that any critical discourse on the posthuman condition ought to transcend the confines of exclusively Western conceptions concerning the human, identity and nature, thereby, embarking upon an exploration of alternative paradigms that have persistently proffered distinct avenues of humanistic inquiry. Kaboha further posits that knowledge acquisition encompasses not only the faculties of reason, but also extends to the corporeal and spiritual dimensions. The author notes, as cited in Lajul (2013: 26), that 'communicating with nature at times gives us knowledge that defies easy rational analysis'. Hence, the apprehension of reality is conceived as a holistic construct, irrespective of whether this reality pertains to the

3 Kaboha maintains that since the industrial revolution western philosophers from Hume to Wittegenstein started to exclude metaphysics and ethics from the domain of philosophy, leading to dialectical materialism and the denial of the soul in man (Cited in Lajul 2013).

material or immaterial realm, the visible or the invisible, the mundane or the celestial, the human or the non-human, the animate or the inanimate.

Indeed, African metaphysics does not preclude the acknowledgment of human agency; rather, it conceives the human as a pivotal constituent within a cohesive system that encompasses spiritual entities, ancestral influences, and the natural environment. Consequently, African anthropocentrism diverges from its Western humanist counterpart by virtue of its distinct emphasis on the interrelated triad of human-spirit-nature complementarity and interdependence. This unique perspective finds manifestation in various facets of African metaphysical thought, including conceptions of being, personhood, cosmology and ontology, as explicated in the subsequent section.

Being and personhood in African metaphysics

In the African ontological paradigm, it is a fundamental tenet that all entities and objects within the cosmological framework are construed as corporeal representations of distinct and dynamic forces. Within this worldview, there is a pronounced emphasis on the conceptual framework wherein the entirety of existence, spanning from natural phenomena to sentient beings, is comprehended and delineated through the prism of the vitalising forces that engender and propel them. The concept of being as force was initially expounded upon by Tempels, whose scholarship steadfastly asserts that which Western intellectuals identify as "being" is, in the African context, denoted as "force" by the Bantu people. Tempels (1998: 431) contends that:

> Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. When we say that "beings" are differentiated by their essence or nature, Bantu say that "forces" differ in their essence or nature. They hold that there is the divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human forces, animal forces, vegetable and even material or mineral forces.

This comprehension of the essence of being is more aptly exemplified through the African conceptualisation of non-human entities, particularly

the natural world. In this framework, nature is not merely personified through metaphorical interpretation, it is rather imbued with an intrinsic sentience, housing various potent forces. Therefore, European materialism, deeply rooted in the enlightenment era and modern scientific paradigms, is notably inclined toward an emphasis on a materialistic ontology. It frequently asserts that the fundamental nature of existence is firmly anchored in physical matter and the mechanistic principles that regulate it. In stark contrast, the African worldview, as exemplified by the Bantu ontology, is characterised by a more nuanced perspective that conceptualises reality as an amalgamation of both material and spiritual dimensions.

The African conceptualisation of being is rendered with greater precision when one scrutinises the intricate interplay between the human and non-human domains, in conjunction with the fusion of the physical and metaphysical aspects inherent to African ontological frameworks. This perspective notably diverges from the Western anthropocentric standpoint, which asserts the primacy of humanity as the ultimate yardstick for all phenomena. Nevertheless, it is crucial to underscore that this holistic perspective does not advocate for a post-anthropocentric perspective that marginalises the human subject. Instead, it underscores the interconnectedness of these forces with the human experience. In the words of Anyanwu (1983: 90), 'From the beginning of the world, it is assumed, there has existed a life force, created by one God which is always active, spread throughout the universe, dispensed to all animate-life forces, man, animals and the plants, sometimes communicated to things which we consider inanimate'. African ontology promotes the notion that entities exist in a state of harmonious and complementary interrelation, with the human being 'as a central agent in that harmony' (Lajul 2013: 27). In accordance with this line of reasoning, African thought places a pronounced emphasis on the interdependence and interconnectedness of individuals within their communal and societal contexts. It regards the individual not in isolation, rather as an integral constituent of a broader social tapestry, as eloquently encapsulated by the renowned dictum of Mbiti (1990: 102), "I am because we are."

While Western humanism is predicated upon a dualistic perception of

the human-nature relationship, one characterised not by complementarity, but by separability, the African comprehension of personal identity introduces an alternative framework for apprehending dualism as an essential constituent of identity. In this regard, an individual is fundamentally composed of both a "material" component and one or more "spiritual" aspects. In the broader context, there is a consensus that an individual transcends mere corporeality; there exists an immaterial dimension intrinsic to the human persona. In addition to the conventional body-soul dualism, certain African perspectives delineate the human entity within a three-dimensional (triadic) framework, comprising the corporeal, the spiritual soul and the heart as constituent elements.

Conclusion

African philosophy and metaphysics offer rich and profound insights that challenge the dominant Western paradigms of humanism and posthumanism. By integrating these perspectives, posthumanist discourse can transcend its Eurocentric confines, fostering a more inclusive and globally relevant understanding of the human condition. The holistic and interconnected worldview of African metaphysics, with its emphasis on the interplay between the human, the spiritual, and the natural realms, provides a valuable framework for addressing the complex and multifaceted challenges of the posthuman era.

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