

Escaping the Violence of nomenclatures : *We need new terms and new philosophical postures for the now*

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One of the subtle political issues minorities and marginalized people(s) contend with is that of the violence of nomenclatures. It is the right of any group of people to retain the agency to define what they want to be called, where they are and where they want to be. In the absence of this agency and political will, subaltern peoples spend their energy and resources oscillating between political and philosophical spaces that they cannot define but instead are defined for them by others. Ayi Kwei Armah in an article entitled '*Who are the Ancient Egyptians*' argues that "our continent today staggers under Imposed Identities of colonization that have the capacity to generate serial catastrophes"¹. Around the 1970's the Indigenous people of North America as a step towards retaining their cultural agency adapted the name "First nations people(s)". They did this while contesting the projected signifier "Indian". First nations peoples refer to themselves by this umbrella term, but in respect of their diversity still use their particular ethnic names to identify themselves such as Blackfoot ,Cree , Algonquin, Mi-kmaq' and several others.

People connected to Africa need to rethink and challenge certain names and signifiers that they have come to associate with themselves. Amongst the most problematic names we are burdened with are the terms '*African*', '*Black*'. There is a vast lexicon of several violent (violent in the sense that most of these are imposed) names that are associated to this continent in question and its people. The etymology of some of these names is colonial and some were designed to frame to our zeitgeist(s) for instance, '*Post-Colonial*, '*De-colonial*' and others. As long as we use and accept these definitions on ourselves and our times then we shall remain pawns in this neo-colonial chess game. A look at history will reveal that certain signifiers we have appropriated and accepted are foreign to us and because of this we have fallen into the trap of those who seek to define and control our destiny. We find ourselves in theoretical playing fields where we cannot make rules, and because we don't make the rules, we are relegated to occupy ceremonial philosophical postures that make the colonial and race dialogue interesting but beyond interesting, these postures achieve very little in terms of political and cultural agency. Noam Chomsky once said

"The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allowing very lively debate within that spectrum – even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate."²

We have become players in a colonial discourse which very much looks like a call and response economy of identities. Ngugi in his 1986 book '*Decolonizing the mind*' argues against the use of a borrowed language and advocated for cultural agency by turning to indigenous languages in literature. The thinking behind his call is to reject exogenous naming and codification and resort

¹ The new African Magazine issue 450, April 2006

² Chomsky N, The common good, p43, 1998

to endogenous agency of naming ourselves. In *Zezuru*³ language we have a proverb that says “*tamba tamba chidembo muskwe ndakabata*” which translates to a picture of a skunk frantically trying to move forward but cannot because its tail is caught in a fix. This seems like the current situation with so called “African Philosophy” I struggle to write the word African I often think of going back to using *Kemet* the Ancient name for Egypt which is mostly translated land of dark-skinned people, but for the purpose of making a point I shall retain the word Africa to define the continent in question.

By ‘We’ I refer to all people(s) who associate their origin with the largest continent on earth the one that has come to be known as ‘Africa’. By ‘We’ I do not wish to impose a monolithic bracket to define everyone that is associated with the continent, I merely wish to loosely suggest a community. The origins of the name Africa remains debatable and cannot be directly linked to any of the Indigenous dialects or philosophies that occupy this geographical space. At this moment in history we have become proud of a name that was projected on us, by colonizers and slave merchants who were malevolently disposed towards us as peoples. A number of historical narratives attribute the naming of the continent to Romans around 146 BC with the earliest Roman colony after the demise of Carthage (Modern day Tunisia) during the third Punic wars. Another narrative links its projection to Leo Africanus the Roman historian who tries to connect the word to Greek origins. The closest account to home would be: the name is a derivative of the North African Berber people called the “Afri”. However, some authors such as Martin Meredith, in his Book, *‘The wealth of Africa, a 5000-year history of wealth greed and endeavor’* uses a different name for the Berber tribe.

The violence of nomenclatures is a grave fundamental predicament that is often dismissed as unworthy of academic consideration. Our Philosophers and academics are so bewitched by the western modes of text-centric pedagogy that they are busy chasing rats while the hut is on fire. There is a ‘Zezuru’ Proverbs that says “*Kupedzera museve kunana Dhimbha, hanga dzichiuya*”, A loose translation would describe a hunter in the process of impatiently wasting arrows on small prey while ignoring the fact that larger prey follows smaller prey”. It is often a question of misplaced priorities and gravitation towards funding and patronage by our academics that is the cause of distraction. Some of the most illustrious books to be written by African philosophers are funded by former colonizers and they write such dense and alienating theories that only their funders can read. They become the ‘*Doctores*’ as in ‘Spartacus blood and sand’, high ranked, accomplished and decorated gladiator slaves who do their masters bidding with such precision in both worlds (the master’s and the slave’s).

What is common in the above-mentioned narratives is that the origins of the name by which our continent is known by are not endogenous rather the name it was violently projected and unfortunately, through the sands of time got accepted without contestation. That leads us to the first challenge with foreign terminology that is adopted into culture in the absence of critical consideration. Let’s call this situation Identity projection complex, I’m convinced that this is the foundation of a philosophical dissonance between ‘what we are called’ and ‘who we are’, the gulf created by this dilemma becomes the liminal space which allows the malady of colonization

³ Meredith, Martin. *The Fortunes of Africa: A 5000-Year History of Wealth, Greed, and Endeavor*. PublicAffairs, 2014.

to exist in a host without being detected. The question is how do we close such an old and complex gap? how do we address this dissonance, how do we get new names, how do we reclaim agency in this liminal space ?

In an interview Achille Mbembe calls “Africa” a Geographical mistake”. By this he refers to the arbitrariness surrounding the naming, governance and political origins. Having said so we need to challenge this colonial signifier that most of us have grown to love. In the manner of a crocodile we have simply swallowed without chewing. What then shall we call this massive expanse of complexity? This continent of more than 3000 ethnic groups and more than 2000 distinct languages that constitutes almost 1/6 of the world’s populations? Often-times when the term Africa is used both in Academia and in Art circles it attempts to homogenize and simplify this diverse and dynamic space all into one governable blob. In most cases the continent in question still represents the other with a capital ‘O’ and according to Edward Said this is a product of ‘alterity. This construction of the other is what writers like Yambo Ouologuem urges us to resist. In his book *Le Devoir de violence: Bound to violence* he describes a type of Africa that is forged by culture brokers and comprador intelligentsia in cahoots with a colonial and capitalistic market. The word Africa like many other projected ones stems from the colonial privilege of naming without being named. Both the Identity and the size of the continent are issues that should be contested. The true size of the continent as we know it is still a subject of debate, recent studies propose the continent in question as being the largest in the world. In 2010 Kai Kruse a designer and an author published a map ‘That is called ’[The true size of Africa](#)’ that proves the fact of the continent being 14 times larger than it appears on a two-dimensional map. Kruse contests a mathematical process called *Mercato projection*⁴ this process exaggerates the area of land masses towards the poles and dwarfs the ones at the center. Kruse devised a puzzle to show the true relationships among land masses. The result is that the continent known as Africa is overwhelmingly bigger than what we historically assumed.

The question is why is all this important ? why do we need to change the name of a continent? or to contest its size as we have been made to believe. Is it not because both projections share the same colonial origins and intentions of continued exploitation?

Many would remember a classic example of lazy categorization in the creation of the African Pavilion at the 52 edition of the La Biennale di Venezia (Venice Biennale) in 2007 this pavilion was then dubbed “Check List Luanda Pop”. As to the success of this pavilion it remains questionable as suggested by some writers who called it “a curatorial blend of conceptual laziness and inchoate ambition familiar from Njami’s deeply flawed 2005 touring show ‘Africa Remix’. This geographical homogenization and violent categorization of the continent is reminiscent of an arrogant and unrepentant colonial West that is reluctant to accept the complexity of a continent they once pillaged, whose only interest is to control through reductive naming and according to Mhoze Chikowero, ‘colonial witch crafting’ Which is an act of epistemically poisoning others. In this and many other cases the artist was/is subjected to the violent conundrum of choosing ‘to be or not to be’ in this game of fools where most ‘African’ curators, I argue play the role of house boys for the master’s bidding. The filmmaker and theorist John Akomfrah called this reductive homogenization, “a prime example of the hubris of

⁴ Is a cylindrical map projection presented by the Flemish geographer and cartographer Gerardus Mercator in 1569.

overcompensation'. The place of the Artist in this cultural economy is a brutally difficult one since the inception of the Institution of the curator who in most cases and not all is a culture broker/salesman disguised as an intellectual and theorist or as Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to such a group as the

“Comprador intelligentsia a relatively small, Western style, Western trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery, In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they represent to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world ,for each other and for Africa”⁵

These culture brokers usually hide under several garments of university degrees most of which are obtained in scripto-centric western forts of colonial pedagogy and culture. The question is where is the power of this office located? The artist has suffered brutally under this office from being coerced to represent and extrapolate faulty ideals of “Africanism(s) and other types of erroneous *isms* that have no benefit to the masses they claim to represent. This has led the artist to be alienated from his/her immediate communities to serve some distant master who uses the services of a curatorial oligarchy to keep the chaotic world of the artist separate from the pristine world of the client located somewhere in the western context of colonial wealth and *museumysticism*. What is the difference between this current curatorial institution and the local elite oligarchy that sold slaves to slave buyers on Goree island and other ancient African coasts during the transatlantic slave trade? How about comparing some of these unscrupulous individuals to the so-called post-colonial butcher leaders of countries in so called Africa who are puppets of the West...yes how about that?

The question is are we really in the “post” of the colonial project? or are we in a make-believe paradise created for us by mercenary cultural theorist, at the service of the phantoms of their colonial masters. The burden to process and mediate these questions falls heavily on the artist. If you tell me that the artist is not subjected to both external and Internal epistemological violence you are either un-empathetically ignorant or complicit in the colonial capitalist project. I know this sounds very sensational and non-academic, but it's necessary sometime to muddy the pristine, colonial halls of academia with a touch of untamed sensation

The second signifier that is highly problematizable and warrants scrutiny by the artists and the public is that of Post-colonialism(s), In this bracket I will also include de-colonialism(s), and all the *isms* that are associated with colonization and all those that mistletoe themselves on our beloved continent. Postcolonial, decolonial theory in context of the continent known as ‘Africa’ is even more disturbing since it assumes the monolithic signifier ‘Africa’ which is a colonial construct and a projection of a colonial identity. In the Art and humanities world, the term African art is loaded with connotations of “naivety rawness arbitrariness, facticity”(Mbembe 2006). It is a fragmented category and at close scrutiny is not part of the contemporary art dialogue as we are made to believe but represents that which is the ‘Other’ alterity at its best .The philosophical underpinnings of this term is not to be ignored it is highly problematizable

⁵ Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (01 1991): 336-57. doi:10.1086/448586.

and represents logical inconsistency in a western world that professes diversity and inclusion and claims to be advanced socially. If the “African” artist is not being used to create a contrast of what is not, he/she is existing as a spectacle, or as scientific anthropological material to be studied this positioning is highly problematic especially in the light of complicity by artists and institutions from the continent who willingly participate in these western hegemonic and schadenfreudian structures without questioning or challenging them.

Raphael Chikukwa the Chief Curator of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe and the curator of the first ever Zimbabwean Pavilion at the La Biennale di Venezia (Venice Biennale), in 2012 is on record for saying “For a long time we have been passengers on our own ship”⁶ This was a bold-statement in reclaiming cultural agency and finding local voices in global dialogues. This statement though is just a beginning and a call to agency, I argue that we cannot continue to make such bold statements while we are still paying our hard earned and much needed national fortune to pay for pavilions in Western art contexts such as the Venice Biennale where we have very little cultural agency to contribute to the rules. We need to continue to build our own modern art, cultural structures and critical forums on that represent our values and visions however conflictual they are. If this is not the case then we are making a lot of noise in another person’s ship and very soon their tolerance will run out and we will find ourselves overboard and marooned on islands of bitter criticisms of the West and its art and cultural structures.

At the moment our activism, protests and resistance postures are tolerated in Western structures because they are entertainment. There is nothing as emasculating as allowing an angry native artist to vent his anger in the presence of the oppressor. This reminds of the words of Noam Chomsky on how to intelligently keep people obedient by providing a limited spectrum of opinion. The western art market is indeed a controlled environment that is safe and the native artists actually gets paid to protest against it, in its confines, and after all it makes the guilt-ridden oppressor look good as an inclusive party who is opening up to the mistakes of the past .The place of the ‘African’ artist is *always a tricky negotiation of Western imperial structures. It reminds one of the Canadian First nations Author, Thomas King, in His 2014 Book “The Inconvenient Indian. He shows how protests can be canonized and aestheticized when he discovered that he had become a spectacle in Caucasian circles, he recalls a poster of his event that said come “hear it from the Indian himself, refreshments will be served afterwards”*. At this point activism is tolerated and becomes attenuated in a space where the activist has no power to make tackle rules or the agency for change.

I understand, support and participate in transformative ideas associated with Post-Colonization, De-colonization etc., but these schools of thought pose philosophical problems in that their names and structures are rooted in colonialism as an ideal. As ideas that are reacting to colonization they depend on the stimulus of colonization for their survival. In other words, they are products of the very thing they are fighting. They are ‘Philosophical Frankenstein's’ who have no place among the living. Just as blackness is a product and a reaction to whiteness. These

⁶ "How a Historical Art Conference in Africa Was Restaged: Contemporary And." How a Historical Art Conference in Africa Was Restaged | Contemporary And. <https://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/how-a-historical-art-conference-in-africa-was-restaged/>.

ideas exists more as Eurocentric constructions with roots in Edward Said's 1978 essay *Orientalism*, these 'isms' therefore validate the colonial experience as the most important fact about the countries involved. What about the pre-colonial provenance? What about Indigenous way of self-definition and governance? Both de-colonial and post-colonial theories begin at the point that assumes the end of the era of colonization but is there really an end to the subject in question?

Another violent name worthy of contestation is 'Blackness'. I ask what were we before we were black? Blackness was constructed as an Antithesis to whiteness. Should we be studying blackness then, should we be even wasting time trying to define it? If we want to study anything I think it should be Whiteness and how to deconstruct its poisonous assumptions of superiority and privilege. The possessiveness of whiteness formulated the 'white race' which was never a normal nor a natural entity, but is instead a social category constructed and maintained since the late 1600s in America.

What were we before we were black? How did we define ourselves before somebody called it to our attention that we were non "White"? should an identity be constructed on the foundation of a reaction to a stimulus? will that identity not therefore depend on that same stimulus for its growth development and definition? In this case the stimulus is an erroneous Aryan and Eugenic perception of "othering" that has been the root of some of the most catastrophic man-made disasters in the history of mankind.

When our ancestors in Zimbabwe encountered the first caucasian of Portuguese descent in the 16th century and later the British in 1890 their definition of him was not "white" neither was it based on color. One of the earliest definitions of the Caucasian were *Vasinamabvi* (those without knees). This name was a simple description of the settlers who wore long trousers which covered their knees (so their knees were obscured from vision). It is safe to say that phenotyping was never part of our ancestral philosophy. The other early name is *Vabvakure* which is simply translated the one from far away. As conflicts arose because of the greed and arrogance of colonizers other names evolved to fit the usurping attitude of the settler and among them were *Madhunamutuna* which means ghosts or an apparitions that disturbs the peace.

In 2016 Artist Marianetta Porter presented an exhibition entitle 'Color code' in which she explored the complexities associated with the term black (legal, social, racial). In an interview she mentions that the idea to explore blackness came about from a quote by Cixous: "*I say blackness and not: black. Blackness isn't black. It is the last degree of reds. The secret blood of reds. There are so many blacks... Twenty-four, they say.*"⁷ Here Cixous's words refer to the darkness in Rembrandt's painting, *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1654). Marianetta goes further to refer to the principle of simultaneous contrasts where no color is pure or true but is read only in relation to another color. By this the artist deconstructs the house of cards on which race politics is founded upon causing us to question racial signifiers of color. Another Artists Lina Iris Viktor in her work refers to black "not as a color but as a value", and "the full absorption of light"⁸.

⁷ Cixous, Hélène. *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*. Routledge, 1998.

⁸ "The Artist That Paints With Gold." YouTube. March 29, 2017. <https://youtu.be/n54CPUlbpq?t=33>.

These are some of the few artists who are contending, resisting and negotiating the violence of nomenclatures.

It is only at later stages of the colonial project when Aryan and Eugenic Ideologies became adapted do we see names denoting skin color such as *Murungu/Mlungu*, *Muchena*, *Mukiwa* the names were a result of consistent social engineering towards a socio-cultural and economic subjugation on the indigenous peoples in Zimbabwe. Words like *Vatema* translated black later became common as faulty identity structures of definition. The current idea of 'blackness' is a trap and an albatross that depends of a phenotypical stimulus of Aryan and Eugenic origin. The Xhosa in south Africa had earlier names for the Caucasian which did not reference color as a point of definition *Ondlebe zikhanya ilanga* is one of the earliest description of the Caucasian settler and its loosely translated the one through whose ears you can see the sun. This is a rather interesting description of a fellow human being without phenotyping. I think it's time to radically challenge these matrices of violent naming.

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