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## EXPLORING THE MULTIPLICITY OF COLONIALITY: A FOCUS ON THE AGENCY OF INTERNET PROSUMERS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH.

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### Introduction

To the common critique that scholarship on decolonization focus more on the problems of coloniality without providing solutions, a considerable number of scholars from the Global South have responded with research and literature which demonstrate the unique ways in which the “other” can speak back to these power inequalities. Schoon et al. (2021) call for the “Positioning of African Digital Experiences as Epistemic Sites of Knowledge Production” as opposed to privileging Global knowledge flows from the West. Chasi (2018) demonstrates how research methods originating from the West can be appropriated and adapted to the unique African contexts.

While these scholarships make robust contributions towards the decolonization project, and provide the literature within which this paper is situated, they somewhat fit into the limiting unidirectional approach in which hegemony is seen as originating from the North-West while sources of resistance as rising from the Global South, and specifically in the Africa imaginary. Such an approach, I argue, not only silences the complex ways in which users/prosumers in the margins interact with media technologies including the internet, but also hinders “complete” decolonization of coloniality in all its forms (of power, knowledge and being).

It is these complexities that this paper focuses on, in particular, the ways in which the margins conform to and/or jointly with the coloniality actors perpetuate the hegemonic nature of the internet and what that then means to the decolonization process. To support this argument, the paper presents part of the findings of my PhD study which explored power struggles in two purposively selected political WhatsApp communities in Kenya. The communities, *East Asembo Development Forum (EADF)* and *Kabula Forward (KF)* are imagined around the notion of place where both East Asembo and Kabula are wards (smallest administrative units in counties) in Siaya and Bungoma Counties in Western Kenya.

Of interest is the “group formation” convention and mobility affordance of WhatsApp technology which allows the existence of digital citizens and ‘subjectivities’

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who have to negotiate their identity and participation 'between and betwixt' two worlds; that of the physical which places them in either the local or translocal and that of the virtual which makes them citizens of both.

*Question is, how does the combined agency of the technology and human actors in the process of the said negotiations contribute to (de)coloniality?*

### **Theoretical framework and methodology.**

In line with decolonization discourses' emphasis on multiplicity of knowledge production and meanings, this paper theoretically engages with the concept of hybridity as a dialectic construct understood both as mode of colonial resistance for the Subaltern (Bhabha, 1994) and as an intercontextual theory in which the concept is understood as communicative practice which could as well act as a site of hegemony (Kraidy, 2002). Hybridity in this paper is used to capture how the complexities of social technological practices of actors in a digital environment blur the margins between hegemony and resistance, including how certain concepts take up multiple meanings in the WhatsApp communities studied.

The study used the netnography method which in the spirit of decolonising epistemologies, recognizes multiple realities and ways of knowing. Consequently, both the human and material components of WhatsApp technology contribute to the discourses of the WhatsApp communities, informing a multimodal data collection. The data set included for analysis focused on discussions posted online between August 2017 and December 2018. Data was collected through background listening, semi-structured interviews, and Focus Group Discussions. In the case of diaspora members, online interviews via WhatsApp were conducted. For interviews 2 main administrators (founders) selected, 6 most active and 6 least active members (frequency determined by Group Wize app), 4 diaspora members and 3 individuals who left the communities were purposefully selected. Six members each for the two focus group discussions were recruited voluntarily.

Texts were first exported from WhatsApp to an excel sheet then mined randomly by entering certain key words including 'participate', 'local' and 'diaspora into it. In the second phase the data that fell within discursive moments was purposefully selected guiding the selection of interview participants. Discursive moments were identified as those which tangible action like when members had to decide on a matter.

A Discursive Material Analysis (DMA) in which metaphors (operating at an ontological level) were used to read both the materiality of the WhatsApp technology and participants' discussions as text.

### **Findings.**

The major finding in this article is that hybridity in its multiplicity, is celebrated in these WhatsApp communities less as a form of resistance to coloniality but more through discourses of capitalism, exploitation and marginalization which perpetuate

coloniality instead. For instance, hybridity in the composition of the members of the WhatsApp communities given where they are physically based as 'locals' and translocal (diaspora) nor the different subjection positions of ordinary citizens and political leaders do not contribute to diversity in voices. In the discourses defining participation, participants gave little importance to whether members' discussions meaningfully contributed to the goal of the communities, that is holding their political leaders accountable and demanding development. Rather participation was metaphorically substituted with "giving"- materialism and commodification.

Since those in the diaspora are more economically empowered than those in the local, they made more monetary contributions to *harambees* (fundraisers). Consequently, 'diasporans' views on issues was more respected, not because of merit, but simply because they give more money. Further, the juxtaposition of the urbanite against the 'diasporan', marginalized the urbanite who was constructed by the local as "struggling economically" and therefore had nothing worth "giving." In the participant's parlance, their "absence" from their rural homes was not "felt." In these communities, presence in culturally important events such as burials, is seen as meaningful participation. This absence can however be forgiven if one makes a monetary contribution toward these "projects".

Therefore more monetary contribution translated to "quality" participation, a continuity of discourse of capitalism which marginalize those not materially endowed. However, subject positions' power hierarchy kept on flipping depending on context. For instance, given their physical presence, the locals were more knowledgeable on 'going-ons on the ground' as compared to the 'diasporans'.

Additionally, the WhatsApp technology only affords participation to the extent that one has access to the internet. The political elite took advantage of this as they provided a constant supply of data bundles for their proxies, posing as part of the ordinary citizens, while pushing the selfish agenda of their masters, maintaining the status quo.

Strategies to subvert surveillance, such as use of pseudonyms, were frowned upon as hindering participation instead of providing a safe environment. Anonymous participants were treated suspiciously and accused as either "not belonging" by virtue of not hailing from the physical spaces the online communities are imagined around or as government spies. They were forced to either identify themselves or face expulsion from the communities.

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