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Centering Global Humanitarianism in Africa

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"Global humanitarianism" is both the complex of actors, organizations, and institutions that work on relief and development aid issues, and the conceptual, epistemological, and cosmological-religious frameworks of knowledge and ethics from which they emanate. I call in this article for (re)centering global humanitarianism in Africa. Drawing from the work of African scholars, I argue that such centering is crucial for learning from African structures of knowledge and religious-cosmological relations how to foreground issues of ontological wholeness in ways that reconfigure purported humanitarian objectives. Such centering also has material and representational goals, i.e. to staunch the failures of the current dominance of programs governed by neoliberal metrics of alleged "success," and to reverse the racialized hierarchies of representation of African and non-African actors and organizations.

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Centering Global Humanitarianism in Africa

In this contribution, I call for centering "global humanitarianism" in Africa. I take global humanitarianism to include what Alex de Waal in 1997 termed "the humanitarian international"; i.e., "the transnational elite of relief workers, aid-dispensing civil servants, academics, journalists and others, and the institutions they work for" (de Waal, 1997/2006, xv). But in my reading, the term global humanitarianism comprises considerably more than De Waal's definition. The term refers not only to a geographic positioning, but also a conceptual, epistemic/epistemological, and cosmological-religious one. It refers not only to the myriad organizations (International Nongovernmental Organizations–INGOs–, Nongovernmental Organizations –NGOs–, Faith-Based Organizations–FBOs–, Intergovern-mental Organizations–IGOs–, states, major donor foundations) and people within them who engage in humanitarian relief and longer-term assistance, but also the knowledge structures from which they come and which provide their operating and organizational ethos and the practices they export around the globe, including throughout the African continent. These knowledge structures are currently modernist in the sense of including a belief in and commitment to a) the value of linear progress, b) metrics and programs to achieve pre-ordained results, and c) technical and scientific forms of accessing problems and solving them. They also tend to include an acceptance (though sometimes grudging) of nation-state and international organization authority, and a belief in and commitment to the universal observance of human rights (though the particulars might be contested). Finally, they are both secularist in their primary self-awareness and yet predominantly Christian in their historical evolution. Each of these features shapes important aspects of the humanitarian international today.

Aligning with the purposes of *Global Africa*, particularly to "(re)problematize global challenges and their governance from Africa," there are at least three critical reasons to reconfigure and re-center global humanitarianism in Africa. Instead of beginning with the problematic aspects of humanitarianism, I start with the most important rationale, which is cosmological-religious, ontological, and epistemological. Drawing on the rich multiplicity of African worldviews, ways of being, and ways of knowing; of relationality between giver and recipient, and the human and non-human, of cosmologies that reconfigure temporality and prioritize wholeness, is critical for reconfiguring the humanitarian enterprise to achieve its purported objectives. In this sense, African worldviews and spiritualities raise up modes of knowing and relating between humans and among them and non-humans that center ecological healing, which must be central to current and future humanitarian goals, and that correspondingly downgrade market-based developmentalism, which from this perspective has caused enormous harm. In other words, they completely reverse the current knowledge hierarchy present in developmentalist humanitarianism, providing new ways of understanding humanitarian buzzwords such as "partnership," "sustainability," and "resilience." In doing so, they reconfigure conceptions of healing, health and well--being—the core of humanitarian objectives—that do not rely exclusively on externally imposed onto-epistemologies (Phiri and Nadar, 2006; Ogunnaike, 2020). They also connect with similar cosmologies around the globe, including Celtic, Arctic, Latin American, and South and East Asian cultures and religions.

Recentering exposes the second and third rationales, each of which reveals the weaknesses of the current humanitarian system. As numerous African and African-diaspora scholars have documented, ignoring and

downgrading African cosmologies, religious traditions and practices was accomplished through colonial and mission violence, which structured African economic and political/legal relations and cultural and religious relations, respectively, to reflect the dominant interests and cosmology of the metropole (for powerful perspectives on this history, see Rodney, 1972/2018; Fanon, 1961; Phiri and Nadar, 2006; Mbembe, 2001; Mamdani, 2018, among numerous others). Yet most commentators across "the Great Aid Debate" (Gulrajani, 2011) note that humanitarian (including development) practices emanating from the metropolitan cosmology and onto-epistemology have not "solved poverty," created sustainable livelihoods, or engendered durable peace within or between some African states. In fact, according to Tim Murithi (2009), the result has instead been "aid colonialism"; i.e., a perpetuation of external control through aid programs.[1] Moreover, numerous former aid workers and scholars from the global north itself have lamented the lack of genuine partnerships in aid decision-making, beginning with the crafting of Requests for Proposals for funding (RfPs) and extending through aid implementation (Autesserre, 2014; Barnett, 2017; Fassin, 2012; Fast, 2017; Johansson, 2018).

Instead, what Tanya Schwarz and I call "donor proselytism" (Lynch and Schwarz, 2016) continues to reinscribe a progressivist, linear temporality, privileging the search for project success through questionable metrics instead of egalitarian and equitable support of humanitarian projects. Donor proselytism "entails pressures to acquiesce in particular kinds of ideological commitments and practices on the part of NGOs." However, instead of requiring people to participate in "prayer meetings as a condition for receiving aid," donor proselytism promotes neoliberal goals and methods (Lynch and Schwarz, 2016). Such methods are "preached," inculcated and, more importantly, required as "best practices" for professionalism and accountability. Yet, in many of my own interviews, FBO and NGO representatives in Kenya, Cameroon, and South Africa discussed the negative implications of donor proselytism, including but not limited to spending inordinate amounts of time on filling out reams of paperwork to document the kinds of measures required by donors, whether or not such metrics could demonstrate that aid recipients were better off as a result of assistance (e.g. Lynch, 2011a).

There are, however, some counterexamples to this kind of micro-control. The most prevalent, perhaps, is the tendency of numerous groups "on-the-ground" to reconfigure aid projects to ensure formal accordance with donor reporting while creating openings for other ways of carrying out projects (e.g. Reiling, 2017). Another more recent potential trend, apparently arising from the intersection of COVID-19, the Movement for Black Lives, and research showing positive outcomes for direct cash transfers, concerns awarding very large grants to cross-cutting groups of practitioners (and sometimes academics) over a significant period of time in order to provide necessary resources for deep reimaginings of "intractable" issues (e.g. global racial oppression to inequitable global relations to climate change), and allow greater flexibility for adjusting programs mid-course. The recent RFP by the Kellogg Foundation is a case in point: it states, "the systems that perpetuate inequity and injustice have been generations in the making. Racial Equity 2030 is a chance to reimagine and to build a future where equity is realized" (Racial Equity, 2030). The sums provided are considerable (USD 20 million over 10 years for the final three-to-five grantees), but the idea remains relatively unique among foundations. The process is also contested, however, for perpetuating "meritocratic decision-making [that] derives from market

[1] My definition of "humanitarianism" has consistently referred to both emergency relief and longer-term projects for what has become known as "development," – including infrastructure, education and health care. Terms such as "peacebuilding," therefore, are also included. My definition is expansive for practical, ethical, and epistemological reasons. Practically, most (though not all) organizations that engage in emergency relief also run development projects to varying degrees (e.g. Oxfam, World Vision, Save the Children, Episcopal Relief and Development, Caritas, etc.). Practically and ethically, emergency and development aid can be at cross-purposes (e.g. bringing in massive amounts of food from the outside to combat famine undermines the ability to (re)establish food sources internally, and vice versa). Ethically and epistemologically, the division between "emergency relief" and "development" is a technocratic one, which divides up suffering and poverty into categories that work primarily for donors instead of recipients, and perpetuate knowledge hierarchies prioritizing efficiency and often-contradictory metrics.

approaches" instead of a movement-building approach (see, for example, Bezahler, 2020).[2] Despite attempts to reconfigure projects according to emerging needs, or to provide large and small cash transfers, therefore, funders generally continue to perpetuate unequal power relationships between donors and recipients. Recentering humanitarianism in Africa, including its cosmological, religious, and onto-epistemological contributions, can demonstrate how and why these relationships are unproductive and need to be reversed. Resources should be provided long-term, in a completely transparent manner, and given without strings as part of comprehensive mechanisms of reparations. In such a construct, healing the world would feature cosmologically innovative projects whose "success" is difficult to measure in conventional ways.

The third reason for recentering humanitarianism within Africa is intimately connected to the other two, and concerns the issue of representation of aid recipients and aid givers, combined with the operating yet implicit definition of humanity itself on the part of actors in the humanitarian aid complex. Historically, beginning at least with the work of Frantz Fanon, the degrading of African personhood by colonial and missionary actors has been exposed and criticized. Humanitarianism today, it might be reasonable to assume, should by definition rectify the damaging modes of thought and the practices connected to them that constituted colonial forms of "aid," which created and maintained new forms of subservience. But to date, humanitarian organizations continue to prioritize forms of knowledge production that continue to patronize recipients at best, perpetuating reconfigured colonial-era representations into the present (e.g. Fassin, 2012; Ngugi, 2012; Kemedjio, 2009).

Here again, African scholarship and systems of thought regarding the "human" are leading the way in refocusing our knowledge of humanity, humane relationships, and therefore humanitarianism. The feminist work of the Circle of Concerned Women African Theologians ("the Circle"; Mombo, 2003), the contextual work of South African theologians, the recognition of concepts of Ubuntu; Ukama, and terenga (Murove, 2009); philosophical work on the human (e.g. Grovogui, forthcoming), and the leadership of African healers through PROMETRA and IGOs (https://prometra.org/; WHO 2013), provide numerous sources, in addition to the memories, rituals and practices of communities across the continent (e.g. Ngugi, 2012). Such systems of thought, once again, generally posit holistic relationships with non-human entities. It is increasingly evident that such relationships are crucial for both human and non-human survival (see, for example, the August 2021 Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Representation, therefore, has both onto-epistemological and material repercussions.

It has become both fashionable and necessary in the western academy (beginning with anthropology but also now including interpretivist political science) to state one's positionality in writing about North/South or indeed almost any kind of intersectional relationships, primarily in order to acknowledge scholars' situatedness and reject the illusion of objectivist social science. I write this from a positionality as a white, western, cisgender female international relations scholar of humanitarianism, religion and ethics, whose major focus in this piece concerns the intersection of these issues in relations between African states and societies and those of the global north. Why do I write at all? one might ask. I do not write to "lead" the discussion of recentering humanitarianism in Africa, nor to create a grand theory of African humanitarianism, neither of which are for me to do. Instead, I am motivated by longstanding connections with African scholars and students, and by decolonial moves in the academy, to assert the duty of scholars like myself to highlight and follow the path set by our continental peers in our own work, and where possible, do our part along with them to connect it to other humanisms and holisms (e.g. Celtic, Arctic, First Peoples) where our own positionalities and/or research leads.[3] Such work can contribute to recentering humanitarianism on the continent as well as to decolonizing

[2] Bezahler notes, however, that Kellogg initiative has been exemplary in terms of transparency, although all information and applications are in English, which, she notes, can prevent knowledgeable groups from applying. (Full disclosure, I am a participant in this process as part of an applicant team).

[3] There are numerous resources on development and humanitarianism in different parts of the continent (indicated by my own visits to Makerere in Uganda, U. Ghana in Legon, Wits in Johannesburg, UCT in Cape Town, not to mention CODESRIA in Dakar, among many

the academy and shifting our understanding of "the global," by showing how ontologies and epistemologies long ignored by western "modernity" are in fact present in all areas of the world.

In this piece, I employ the term "cosmology" to refer to an understanding of the multidimensional "place" of beings (human and non-human) in the universe. This is close to but not entirely synonymous with the term in astronomy, which refers to the study of the "origin and evolution of the universe." In my reading, however, cosmology connects to ideas about such origins and evolution, but also to religious "traditions"; i.e., ideas about the proper relationship of beings in the universe to each other. Thus, cosmological perspectives are generally constitutive of religious ones (using an expansive conception of religion). They are also intimately related to questions of ontology and epistemology— what kinds of "being" (and "beings") are seen to matter in the world for the relationships we study, and how we go about studying them; i.e., what forms of knowledge instantiate our processes of knowledge-gathering and interpretation of evidence from the world. Some cosmologies and religions, in particular, might include understandings of beings and ways of knowing them that move across immanent and transcendent worlds, that prioritize one or the other, and/or that posit hierarchical or non-hierarchical relations between humans and among them and non-humans (animals, planets, fire, water, air, spirits). Cosmologies and religious traditions can also be hybrid or syncretic. As a result, what is often posited as a strong distinction between "modern" onto-epistemology and "indigenous" ones can instead be seen as a multi-faceted range of syncretic possibilities.

Cosmological and Onto-Epistemological Openings and Mandates

We are now in an historical moment in which Global South thinkers are reconfiguring onto-epistemologies, including pushing forward theology allegedly "from the margins" (see De La Torre and Floyd-Thomas, 2011; although perhaps we should actually say this is from a reconfigured core, given my previous assertion?) and forcing openings to cosmological perspectives that provide an alternative to what has become known as (western) modernity. While such thinking never stopped (e.g. Oduyoye, 2001; Ela, 2005; Martey, 2009), it is increasing in prominence (see, for example, Bongmba, 2020; Opongo and Bere, 2021; the dialogue between the Religion and Theology Programme at UKZN and African Initiated Churches— AICs). Given the self-questioning of many white people in the west, prompted by the global Movement for Black Lives (MBL) and the racism laid bare by current and former authoritarian governments in the U.S., Hungary, the UK, Poland, and Brazil, among others, more western scholars are using this moment to investigate their own disciplinary histories and biases.

This is, therefore, a potent moment of challenge for modernity in its progressivist guise. There is a profound questioning of numerous facets of western modernity, emanating from its very bowels. In the United States, for example, the triumphalist narrative of conventional American history as liberative and rights-giving has been shaken to the core, coalescing around The 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones, 2019), published in August 2019 by *The New York Times.* This project reconfigured United States history to begin not with the American Revolution of 1776, but instead with the arrival in 1619 of the first enslaved people on the shores of the state of Virginia. Since 2019, almost every school district in the country has been moved to act; either to institute curricular changes to incorporate (rather than ignore) the progression and multi-layered institutionalization of systemic racism from the era of colonization to the present; or to engage in vociferous debate about whether and how to teach slavery, the genocide of indigenous peoples, and ongoing structures of systemic racism. Some state legislatures, in significant denial and backlash, have forbidden the teaching of the 1619 Project, folding it into their

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others) – some of which have not been easily available in the U.S. or Europe. The same is true (from my personal experience) in the Arctic (based on a sojourn as a Fulbright Scholar in Finland). African and western scholars who are able to navigate between the continents are positioned to highlight such resources for trans-continental audiences.

misrepresentation of "critical race theory" as a created phantasm of "reverse racism" (Schwartz, 2021; Baker, 2021).

The recognition of systemic racism has also hit home in some mainline Christian churches, especially during 2020. In particular, mainline Christian organizations in the U.S. are acknowledging their role in the violence of colonialism, and some are attempting to figure out possible reparations. Zoom study groups and webinars on the "Doctrine of Discovery" flourished. This 15th century doctrine, propounded by Pope Alexander VI, relied on the concept of "terre nullius" in combination with racially and religiously-determined hierarchies of classifying people, to give European colonizers the "right" to conquer and colonize non-Christian territories, and eradicate, enslave or forcibly convert indigenous populations around the world. The doctrine was an essential foundation for legitimizing the trans-Atlantic slave trade in nascent "international law," and was integrated into U.S. law through the Johnson v. M'Intosh U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1823, becoming a primary basis for U.S. expansion across the continent. It thus institutionalized anti-Black and anti-Indigenous white supremacy, and justified both political and religious violence against non-European, Christian "others."

Activism against the doctrine coalesced in the early 2010s, when Indigenous groups in the United Nations' Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues called on the UN to repudiate the doctrine and "investigate historical land claims" (ECOSOC, 2012); and the U.S. Episcopal Church's General Convention passed a resolution renouncing the doctrine in 2009 (*Indian Country Today* called it "a first-of-its-kind action in the Christian world," Toensing, 2009). The Catholic Church has not rejected the doctrine, asserting in the 2012 Indigenous Issues Forum that, according to the 1537 Papal bull and other decrees in 1741, "indigenous peoples and others that were to be discovered by Christians were not to be deprived of their liberty. They could enjoy liberty and possession of their property." Lucas Swanepoel, the Holy See's representative, also noted that Vatican II condemned "the forced conversion of non-Christians," and that the Catholic Church "had always sought dialogue and reconciliation" with indigenous peoples globally (ECOSOC, 2012). Not all Catholic sources have been so accommodating, however. The *National Catholic Reporter* (a major U.S.-based Catholic media source), for example, ran a five-part series in 2015 that was highly critical of the doctrine and its implications for Indigenous peoples in the Americas (Rotondaro, 2015).

Since the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and numerous others in 2020 galvanized the global Movement for Black Lives (MBL), the doctrine and the churches' longstanding complicity in racism in the U.S. has become the basis of community, parish-level self-questioning in some mainline U.S. churches.[4] At the same time, "secular" development discourse is also changing, at least theoretically. "Decolonizing" development" has become the most recent discursive trend. The influential UK-based Development Studies Association (DSA) began a study group in September 2020 focused on "decolonising development." According to the DSA, "When 33% of UK, 32% of Japanese, 30% of French 27% of Dutch respondents respectively report that they think the countries they formerly colonised are 'better off' for being colonised" (YouGov Poll, 2020), there is a timely need for critical discussions on the ways in which history influences contemporary conceptions of power and nation (https://www.devstud.org.uk/studygroup/decolonising-development/).

Still, at present there is a large gap between these processes of reckoning and their translation to a) cosmological and onto-epistemological openness, and b) conceptualization and implementation of actual humanitarian programs. Self-examination by churches, NGOs and FBOs, academics, and donors needs to include open exploration of alternative cosmological-religious ways of accessing and being in the world.

A look at several prominent NGO and FBO sites (including Catholic Relief Services – CRS –, Episcopal Relief & Development – ERD –, Lutheran World Relief – LWR –, Mennonite Central Committee – MCC –, American Friends Service Committee – AFSC –, Médecins sans frontières – MSF –, and Oxfam), demonstrates that only the

[4] For example, the "Becoming Beloved Community," taking Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words as a point of departure, has become a program taking place throughout the U.S. Episcopal Church. https://www.episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community/.

MCC and the AFSC have begun to examine the meaning of colonial and mission histories for their work. The MCC's staff is undergoing a year-long exploration of *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church's Complicity in Racism,* by Jemar Tisby (2019); and the site features a webinar from the Anabaptist movement, "Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery" (https://dofdmenno.org/), although the rest of the site features the conventional relief and development appeals and stories. The AFSC does not include an explicitly-historical self-examination on its site, but its central focus is on economic and social justice (which is fairly unique among humanitarian groups), and includes support of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and a call to dismantle systems of white supremacy (https://www.afsc.org/newsroom/we-wont-stop-until-we-dismantle-whole-racist-system).

Reckoning with racism in the colonial and missionary past as well as the humanitarian present tends to open up questioning about the colonial and missionary onto-epistemologies that supported such constructs. The next step is asking what "alternatives" might exist, which can lead to more cosmological/religious openness. Figurative as well as literal recentering is an important part of this process. But it is also important to understand the depth and breadth of failure in the current humanitarian system.

Failing and Flailing Humanitarian Goals

The relative lack of historical self-interrogation by NGOs and FBOs is interesting because, as numerous scholars/former aid workers themselves have noted, "religious" and "secular" humanitarian projects, including their developmentalist components, frequently fail (Anyidoho, 2012; Johansson, 2018; Fast 2017; Autessere, 2014; Ager and Ager, 2015; Lynch, 2015, 2016; Fassin, 2012). Scholars and activists from the west/Global North attribute these failures to several causes, including the industry norm of elevating "technical" over "local" knowledge (Autesserre, 2014), the problem of not listening (Johansson), the unwillingness to share decision-making and authority (Fast), and the secularist biases of the humanitarian industry (Ager and Ager, 2015), which preclude understanding the importance of spirituality and other non-physical needs of aid recipients.[5] These authors elucidate significant elements of the problem. In addition, however, the western aid complex of activists and scholars needs to acknowledge the ontological, epistemological and cosmological failings of a desire to aid others that is divorced from historical, racist, and intersectional reckonings, and that still remains far too closed to relational and holistic ontologies that diminish or reject progressivist temporalities. These progressivist temporalities, in turn, are constitutive of neoliberal, market-based "donor proselytism," that prioritizes measures of efficiency and success. At the same time, the humanitarian desire of westerners – i.e., to aid others who are suffering or otherwise in need "elsewhere" (e.g. Malkki, 2015)— reinforces hierarchies between those who are givers versus those who are receivers, the worlds of immanence versus transcendence, and "world religions" (in the Weberian sense) versus "indigenous" or "traditional" ones.

Demonstrations of such binaries and temporalities remain typical of the NGO/FBO websites noted above (with the exception of the AFSC). This is the case even as community/grass-roots/"local" partnerships have become one of the most significant claims of NGOs and FBOs – such attempted partnerships are also regularly criticized for falling well short of the mark (Johansson, 2018). NGO and FBO sites are always forward-looking in ways that slide over the specifics of how past injustices were created, promise community-based programs, and provide metrics of success. Oxfam's "What We Believe" page, for example, explains: "The way we see it, poverty is solvable— A problem rooted in injustice. Eliminate injustice and you can eliminate poverty. We're not saying it

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[5] I note that one innovative response to these problems, "How Matters," was created by Jennifer Lentfer to counter the aid world's search for "silver bullet sollutions." at http://www.how-matters.org/about/. Lentfer is currently involved in organizing the Healing Solidarity Collective, for aid workers to recognize and find ways to heal the harms done by aid organizations, and also to assist in healing the trauma of the range of actors in the aid world. https://collective.healingsolidarity.org/.

will be quick or easy, but it can be done" (https://www.oxfamamerica.org/about/what-we-believe/). Injustice is named, but not given any specific history in this rendering. CRS and ERD link their work to "lasting change" and "authentic, lasting results," respectively. CRS states, "We put our faith into action to help the world's poorest create lasting change," prominently displaying the words "faith.action.results" (https://www.crs.org/about/mission-statement); while ERD's work focuses on "three life-changing priorities [children, women, climate] to create authentic, lasting results" (https://www.episcopalrelief.org/). Such statements assuring donors of results are typical. LWF goes further, however, in promising "to help people build self-sufficiency and create new community-owned approaches to problem-solving that will last long after our projects end" (https://lwr.org/about-lwr). Most groups provide metrics of specific numbers of people served at various places on their websites, but MSF's homepage features running total numbers of outpatient consultations, malaria cases treated, patients admitted, and countries in which it operates (88) (https://www.msf.org/). While MSF (as well as the other organizations) do provide critical care, it is also evident that consultations and patients admitted do not tell us anything about the health of the people served post-admittance.

These examples suggest that the neoliberal and progressivist bases of the aid world are highly entrenched and also extremely multifaceted. This means that, while in many respects they are deeply contested by African participants and observers, they are also frequently accepted and observed by groups on the continent. Numerous layers and tentacles result in a wide range of perspectives co-existing on how to do humanitarianism in Africa. African as well as western scholars, African as well as western-based aid organizations, and African as well as western aid workers may all express conflicting sentiments regarding metrics, buzzwords (capacity-building, sustainability, partnership), and the phenomenon of "dependency."

As a result, one might ask what difference it makes if global humanitarianism continues to be centered in the west, as has been the case for generations, as opposed to in Africa? There are certainly similarities in humanitarian sensibilities across continents. Listening to Kenyan, South African, and Senegalese as well as California students in my online course, "Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa" for the past two years, as well as in work co-editing the CIHA Blog (www.cihablog.org) and interviewing humanitarian workers across the continent for my own research, confirm this wide range of perspectives. Recentering humanitarianism in Africa would of necessity take into account these multifaceted commitments to aspects of contemporary humanitarianism, including its dominant neoliberal, metric-based assumptions; challenges to these assumptions and the practices imposed on those who carry them out as well as those who receive aid; and re-visioning of the religious cosmologies and onto-epistemologies accessed by populations on the continent to understand relations among beings on the planet. In addition, the overarching concept shaping humanitarian funding distribution and related practices would need to emerge from a radically-reversed giver-recipient relationship.

(Mis)Representation and Reversing the Lens

More specifically, such a reversal in perspective leads to the third rationale for centering humanitarianism *in* Africa, and accords with a powerful perceptual construct articulated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In his 2009 book *Something Torn and New*, as well as his comments at a 2009 conference at the University of California, Irvine, Ngugi called for reversing our understanding of who is the giver and who is the recipient in the aid relationship between the west and Africa. "In my view, Africa is always giving, literally" (UCI, 2009). "[T]he continent's relationship to the world has thus far been that of a donor to the West. Africa has given her human beings, her resources, and even her spiritual products through Africans writing in European languages. We should strive to

do it the other way around" (*Something Torn and New*, p. 128). Ngugi's call is primarily for Africans to reclaim memory (especially through the use and appreciation of African languages); i.e., to move away from "the European post-renaissance memory and seize back the right and the initiative to name the world by reconnecting to our memory" (*Something Torn and New*, p. 130). Re-membering, in this sense, is both a physical and a metaphysical act. It is knowing that colonizers took great care to dis-member resisters and destroy sacred sites, and that missionaries actively suppressed religious rites and languages, physically punishing students who used their languages in missionary schools (Ngugi, 2012).

This third rationale for recentering global humanitarianism in Africa, therefore, concerns the need to reverse the centuries-long dehumanization of African peoples and personhood via practices of discourse and representation from the "age of exploration" on the continent to the present. Such dehumanization, as we now know, was accomplished through the creation of hierarchical racial categories that placed Africans at the bottom, and through belief in religious hierarchies that placed "modern" or "world" religions over "primitive" (read indigenous) ones (as in Weber, [1920]1993). Ngugi, in other work, has spoken of the need to excavate and remove the ways in which such dehumanization was internalized by African peoples as the need to "decolonize the mind" (Ngugi, 1986). Taken together, the dehumanization of African peoples combined with the realization of Africa and Africans *as givers* and westerners *as receivers* requires the current, dominant perception/representation of the relationship to change radically, and become recentered in the continent itself.

Eileen Wakesho and Omaymi Gutbi (2018) point out that Africa's giving to the west continues through illegal extraction. In 2015, the UN issued a joint report with the African Union (AU), which calculated "that USD 60 billion leaves Africa illegally each year", did not, however, include ongoing "legal" expropriation and extraction in its calculations.[6] The intersection of illegal and legal forms of extraction/depletion of the continent's resources depends on greed (the antithesis of the humanitarian impulse) in the service of racist representations of the human. The humanitarian response provides care instead of greed, but also a softer version of similar racialized representations to construct African peoples as passive victims in need of external knowledge and expertise (Kemedjio, 2017).

Critiques of how African aid recipients are represented abound, not only in print (see numerous contributions to the CIHA Blog, for example), but also in videos. The South African/Norwegian group Radi-aid has created a series of brilliant parodies of racialized and victimizing assumptions behind western aid to the continent (https://www.radiaid.com/). Other videos make fun of white westerners' tendencies to photograph themselves amidst African children (Barbie Savior), and NGOs' tendencies to decide what African societies want or need (My Aid Life). In my classes on humanitarianism, I frequently begin with videos from the 1984 Band-Aid concerts in the UK and US. These concerts, held to raise money for the victims of famine in Ethiopia, drew almost all of the leading rock musicians from both countries (the first Radi-Aid video represents a spot-on, comical role reversal of these concerts).

The concerts' primary branding featured a guitar configured in the shape of the entire African continent, even though the famine took place in its northeastern edge. US students are frequently embarrassed and some are horrified when asked to reflect on the video clips. Yet, similar concerts were reprised in 2014 to raise funds for those suffering from the Ebola virus. Despite a more informed round of criticism of the 2014 effort (Adewunmi, 2014), however, NGO and FBO websites today tend to feature a combination of passive (through frequently smiling) African aid recipients, in combination with statements about community empowerment. The overall message continues to reinforce representations reflecting epistemological, racial, and cosmological-religious hierarchies that place westerners in the position of knowledge and power-holders who come to help the less fortunate without any attention to prior history or any examination of onto-epistemological assumptions.

[6] http://www.cihablog.com/african-correctives-to-european-narratives-about-migration-and-the-refugee-crisis/.

Concluding Points

I have argued that global humanitarianism needs literal and figurative recentering, from the West to Africa. In this construct, recentering is both a physical/geographic and an authoritative/ontological enterprise, with epistemological and cosmological ramifications.

I have not attempted to develop an alternative cosmology or onto-epistemology for global humanitarianism here, although I have suggested that African conceptions of temporal, spiritual and material holism are critical. Nevertheless, it is important not to romanticize alternative ways of being, just as it is important to recognize the imbrication of different epistemologies in the current humanitarian international. Recentering is not a discrete event, in other words, but a recognition of past and present harm along with a commitment to gaining understanding of new possibilities for mutual care and healing.

How is the construct outlined here similar to or different from other conceptualizations of onto-epistemological pluralism, such as "multiple worlds" (Agathangelou and Ling, 2009), "the pluriverse" (Escobar, 2018) or "Ch'ixi" (Scauso, 2020)? Each of the latter informs the need to level, in a sense, the cosmology of modernity to become simply one of many, elevating other kinds of onto-epistemologies and relationalities to become equals. But the construct I sketch also emanates from the recognition and observation of numerous hybrid and syncretic onto-epistemologies across the African continent (as well as elsewhere in the world), and their infusion into humanitarian discourse and practice. Recentering humanitarianism in Africa, in this sense, takes the complexities of contemporary humanitarianism as they are, but exposes and elevates the hidden layers of the cosmological palimpsest on the continent as humanitarian sources and resources, for African and western societies as well as for those across the globe.

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