

## Online Article

# Can Online Platforms Be *e-Pana-Africana Liberation Zones* for Pan-African and Decolonization Debates?<sup>1</sup>

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has come with its demands, threats, and opportunities for African intellectuals, artists and activists within the continent and in the diaspora. It was around March 2020 when people from many parts of the world woke up to the realization that this was not the ‘usual’ business of epidemics. Unlike previous epidemics like Ebola, this pandemic has been borderless, and contrary to prevailing assumptions, has not spared the Western world. Governments issued orders requiring institutions of higher learning, businesses, and other establishments to halt their brick-and-mortar *modus operandi* and thus thrust them into the throes of the ‘new normal,’ which meant adopting more digitized approaches to work. Virtual spaces such as webinars and podcasts have since gained noteworthy prominence and emerged as sites of learning and interdisciplinary debates on Pan-Africanism and decolonization.

African intellectuals’ debates on decolonization have existed in symbiotic relationship with historic moments of crisis and change. Each stage of the decolonization project has featured prominently in writings of African intellectuals and thinkers at different historic moments of transition. From Pan-African ancestors such as W. Du



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Bois, Sylvia Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire in the diaspora, to those on the African continent such as Kwame Nkrumah, Miriam Makeba, Wangari Maathai, and Julius Nyerere, these public thinkers have argued for political and epistemic freedom for African peoples around the world.

This essay builds on previous works, many still yet undigitised that examine the contributions and debates by various African thinkers on the theme of pan-africanism and decolonization. They include works by intellectuals like Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani (1994), Molara-Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Thandika Mkandawire (2005) Mahmood Mamdani

(2016), Francis Njubi Nesbitt (2007) Amina Mama (2004), Toyin Falola (2001), Nicholas M. Creary (2012), and more recently Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Sylvia Tamale (2020). It examines the opportunities and challenges that recent developments in online self-organizing present as they unfold in this historic moment.

The recent surge of ‘epistemic dialogue’ using online platforms as a space for protesting and advancing debates and works on decolonization amongst African thinkers is vital. This is a historic moment. It is defined, in addition to the Covid-19 pandemic, by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that have burgeoned in the virtual space and fast-tracked many conversations and gheraos such as the #RhodesMustFall campaign against white supremacy that are potential [catalysts for decolonization](#), notwithstanding existing obstacles. Does the surge in the organizing of virtual events on these themes present an opportunity for younger and future generations of Africans whose lives are increasingly dominated by online content? This reflection seeks to provoke debate on what these historic events of 2020 portend for the future of debates on Pan-Africanism and decolonization.

Using the ‘[African Orature tradition](#)’ approach, à la Micere Mugo, I analysed several platforms ranging from webinar and one-on-one interviews, to seminars and conference-type meetings I attended virtually during this period. Mugo asserts that ‘African Orature tradition’ allows for a speaker to use both memory as well as inscribed text in sharing knowledge. She encourages audiences to actively participate through dialogue and manifest response in knowledge processes. She contends that where progressive intellectuals are involved in liberative exchanges against colonialism and oppression, they can create ‘Pana-Africana Liberation zones.’ Using a few examples of mostly Anglophone webinars organized during this COVID-19 crisis period, I investigate to what extent these increasingly popular platforms can become what, in modifying Mugo’s phrasing, I call ‘e-Pana-Africana liberation zones.’

I will use ‘e-Pana-Africana Liberation Zones’ to explore the meaning of these new online spaces that are being used to share ideas of liberation for African peoples on the continent and in diaspora. I will use the phrase ‘African thinkers’ to encompass artists, writers, scholars, and activists whose works speak to the ideals of Pan-Africanism and decolonization. Following this introduction, the essay explores and reviews selected webinars that offered critical reflections from African scholars on various themes such as gender and class as they relate to Pan-Africanism and decolonization. These webinars include several that brought together intellectuals (artists, activists and writers) to dialogue and debate using the ‘African Orature tradition’ of speech, text, and memory. I then examine what

this spike in the use of e-Pana-Africana liberation platforms might mean for the advancement of debates and works informed by Pan-African and decolonization ideals. I end by outlining a few challenges that require reflection on the future of African thinkers in relation to their role in circulating such ideas in an increasingly connected and digital world.

### **Creating e-Pana-Africana Liberation Zones during the COVID-19 crisis and BLM protests**

In March 2020, the magnitude of COVID-19 and its ripple effects, to use the words of poet Euloge Ishimwe, “[woke many of us in the embrace of panic.](#)” In a [keynote](#), Yvonne Owuor later made manifest the economic logic of this COVID-19 panic. In 2017, she explained, certain wealthy countries invested in oversubscribed ‘pandemic bonds’ in order to profit in case of health crisis emergencies and mass deaths then projected to occur, in the event of a pandemic, specifically in Africa and Asia. The persisting colonial lie that commodifies suffering by those in formerly colonised territories and the lust for profit emanating from such suffering informed the panic that caught these wealthy countries, as the rest of the world, off-guard when the pandemic did come. Against all such expectations, the COVID-19 crisis has registered record deaths in those wealthier European and North American countries compared to African ones. For once, African societies did not need [saviours](#), yet western scientists have continued to be blinded by that colonial lie, ignoring the opportunity to learn from African experiences.

In response to the panic, debates have emerged and circulated quickly, including not just misinformation about the contagion but also its social, political, and historical ramifications. Some commentators have [imagined](#) a new world order, but have often failed to acknowledge African peoples’ agency, especially that of its intellectuals, in the creation of that future. It was the murder of George Floyd and the upscaling of BLM protests in its aftermath that reinvigorated critical reflections on questions of race, inequality, injustices, the leadership crisis, and the fight against white supremacist ideals all around the world. The BLM protests of 2020, the most wide-spread recorded in recent times, created an incentive for progressive thinkers everywhere who were already providing sober analyses for policymakers and the general public. However, it did not take long before African thinkers became more visibly prominent in the debates, amplifying social ills that this crisis has brought to surface in many societies around the world. Many of them seized the opportunity, effectively organising to deploy virtual platforms such as webinars to respond and offer possibilities of imagining a decolonized future informed by Pan-African ideals.

My attention was first drawn in this regard in March 2020 as I read historian Paul Tiyambe Zeleza [caution](#) thinkers to avoid falling into the trap, in such moments, of becoming “...fear-mongers and sceptics.” Rather, he urged them to understand that “the role of progressive public intellectuals is to provide sober analysis” in such a crisis and panic-filled moment. The clarity and challenges of what was unfolding in this crisis

[featured](#) prominently in another forum, where anti-corruption activist John Githongo interviewed leadership and security scholar Fummi Olonisakin in April 2020. In her memorable reflection, she convincingly argued that such a global crisis is a moment of reinvention of individuals and societies, regardless of whether those driving the reinvention are leaders or followers.

The urgency and importance of the moment was also expressed in an [open letter](#) addressed to African politicians and institutions, signed mostly by African researchers in and outside Africa, urging these leaders and institutions to use this moment to advance decolonization and liberation ideas for those who need it most. Then, as BLM protests went global, many other African intellectuals, artists, writers and activists flooded the internet with short and long pieces on online platforms with similar analysis. These include platforms offered by academic institutions such as [African Leadership Centre](#) and the [University of Cape Town](#) as well as online intellectual spaces like [The Elephant](#) and [African Argument](#), all who had Africa-focused virtual COVID-19 series of one kind or another.

In addition, a range of other self-organized webinars on all kinds of platforms and multilingual sites, many then translated into podcasts for further dissemination. Some examples of these virtual meetings, that encouraged dialogue over monologue, and allowed thinkers to use text and memory in different ways to advance debates on liberation heroes and sheroes especially those previously ignored or marginalised in Pan-African and decolonization discourses, follow.

[ZoomNaZu](#) hosted a debate in July 2020 with Tanzanian journalists, scholars and members of the diaspora, on the question of the exclusion of certain historical figures who have contributed to African peoples' liberation. They argued that certain actors, especially women, such as Esther Mwaikambo, and Mwalimu Nyerere's assistant Annar Cessam, have been deliberately erased or ignored due to their gender, class, race, and/or ethnic affiliation. In the same vein, Pan-Africanist and lawyer Brian Tamuka Kagoro in conversation with performance scholar and oratorist Mshai Mwangola would [question](#) why we talk so much about founding fathers as if founding mothers were not present or active in the liberation struggles. In both discussions, the speakers used these opportunities to bring back these names and their works from the archives to public memory and centre their contributions to the liberation struggle.

Ideas in these online platforms recall previous intellectual work that examines women's contribution to Pan-Africanism and de-colonization. Namely, the works of Hakima Abbas and Amina Mama [urge us to learn](#) the accurate history of the liberation of African peoples which is inclusive of women liberators and their stories. Zaline Makini Roy-Campbell's [paper](#) provides accounts of some of the women who were engaged in Pan-African discourses and their contribution, while Patricia McFadden [writes](#) that African women were "at the cutting edge for the emergence of a different politics on the continent, which can lead to all citizens living the wholesome lives promised by the extraordinary moment of change that independence provided"(2).

Similarly, we have Micere Mugo's [poetry](#) or, more recently, Kathleen Sheldon's [paper](#) on the history of African women and their contributions to the Pan-Africanist thought. Despite these works and numerous others, these women liberators have been generally side-lined in academic curricula on Pan-Africanism and decolonisation in African higher education institutions. This is the "colonized curriculum" that social and political commentator, scholar Wandia Njoya, [argues](#) maintains an anti-intellectual culture inherited from 'colonial rule and post-independence autocracy', one that affects society negatively even in times of public health crisis, and prevents the youth from learning, as Cassandra Veney argues in [her](#) essay, how inequality affects their societies based on their race, gender and class.

Thus, many activists, artists, scholars and other participants have turned these platforms into to e-Pana-Africana zones to change and voice these injustices. So it is now much easier for most people with internet access to be educated on the rich history and presence of [African feminist](#) actors, when engaged in an online conversation featuring thinkers from different backgrounds speaking to different struggles by women like host Aisha Salaudeen and panellists Stella Nyanzi, Mona Eltahawy and Minna Salami. An interesting development has seen academics consciously using these spaces to achieve particular goals, such as amplifying new books or even holding virtual book launches. For example, feminist researcher Sylvia Tamale has used [webinar](#) focused on her recently published [book](#) on decolonization and Afro-Feminism, in which she examines and documents African women's



contributions in order to bring these experiences to a broader public audience. These platforms also facilitate the democratisation of conversations hitherto reserved for particular communities, as is demonstrated by [a forum](#) in which feminist scholar Awino Okech speaks to Black peoples' inter-connectedness. Originally intended for a particular academic community, Okech's elaboration of the philosophy that guided political freedom liberators such as Amilcar Cabral or Thomas Sankara – “a revolution was empty if it did not have an accompanying revolutionary theory” – is now accessible to the general public. Thus, Okech's discussion on the importance of methodology, and the theories that shape what we know, learn or teach about the history of Pan-Africanism and decolonization, and her call for solidarity between struggles for liberation across societies in the Pana-Africana world immediately transcends the boundaries that often separate academic and activist spheres.

This is crucial as a pathway towards transformation in the coming post-COVID-19 era, a moment that will require renewed centres of knowledge. This does not mean that e-Pana-Africana liberation zones will occur in isolation from the work ongoing elsewhere such as is detailed by a number of African intellectuals. Godwin Murunga's pandemic season [keynote lecture](#), that reiterates the vital importance of a decolonial transformation agenda in higher education in Africa, builds on previous arguments of thinkers like [Tade Akin Aina](#), [Ibrahim Oanda](#), and [Karuti Kanyinga](#), who have previously outlined how such transformation can occur. This moment also offers the opportunity

for many more inter-generational conversations, that allow emerging scholars to engage with more established colleagues regardless of location, as is seen in [Wale Ismael](#) and [Leonide Azah Awah](#), or in this intergenerational [discussion](#) honouring the Pan-Africanist and Mozambican liberation hero, Samora Machel.

The above examples have generally focused on the continent, but let me note that if we are to take the call for solidarity as central to Pan-African ideals, the mapping of how similar ideas of liberating knowledge zones have also unfurled in the diaspora is also an important aspect of this work. The conversations between [Olivia Rutazibwa](#) and [Paul Gilroy](#) as well as between [Funmi Olonisakin](#) and [David Olusoga](#) historicising these liberation struggles in African diaspora epistemic communities are apt examples. These two exchanges examine and expand contemporary debates on decolonization, and explore how deliberate forgetting of colonial atrocities affect Afro-diaspora communities. Both imagine and articulate a vision of Pan-Africanism and decolonization that is inclusive and informed by intersectional approaches across Global Africa. Here too, these are not new conversations, but advance existing thinking on Pan-Africanism and decolonization, such as that expounded by [Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem](#) in his writing and lifestyle, or by Horace Campbell as traced through his work on [Rasta and Resistance](#). The virtual conversations not only do the work of adding to decolonized knowledge that is creating liberated zones in universities and in the communities, they also amplify that which already exists in non-digitalised formats.

### **Online platforms as “e-Pana-Africana liberated zones”?**

Among the many ways in which online platforms can and have transformed discourse on Pan-Africanism and decolonization, these three are of particular interest in this present moment.

One, webinars expand the opportunities for self-organisation by communities invested in engaging in and influencing knowledge production on Pan-Africanism and decolonization. Meetings on these issues have previously often been held at expensive and/or exclusive locations that make it difficult for a significant cohort of interested peoples in Africa and in the diaspora to participate. The conversations discussed above were accessible to more people online than they would otherwise have been. This is important especially because they showcased a range of voices, both seasoned and emerging, in conversation on advancing Pan-Africanism. In general, they also modelled the ‘African orature tradition’ approach, that is encouraging dialogue with and amongst participants through the use of text, memory, and speech in a way that is not always the norm in such conversations. These virtual, self-organizing tools and platforms have facilitated the ability for more African intellectuals to respond and offer analyses during the COVID-19 crisis and the BLM protests that have centred African communities. They have increased the reach of such intellectuals, making their ideas more manifest in the global public sphere on topics on which most were previously side-lined and/or marginalised.

Two, online platforms provide great channels to make ideas

mobile. The examples surveyed in this paper show mobility of liberation ideas across generations, geographies, and linguistic communities. This is especially important for ideas otherwise marginalized in non-virtual forums due to power struggles in various knowledge production spaces and the inequalities in the convening power of different institutions. Webinars allow ideas to travel from archives and offline texts to public reach and memory, therefore making them more accessible to a broad range of audiences. Given the technological appeal, webinars have the potential to attract African youth to engage with old and new ideas previously unbeknownst to them, or that would have otherwise not interested them. At the same time, they make it possible for African intellectuals to influence those, especially youth, who cannot access the spaces, such as universities, where they teach or disseminate research. They also facilitate access for those outside designated disciplinary-focused spaces. In a sense, they represent a reincarnation of the square as a site of public education that Eric Williams famously held at Woodford Square in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

Three, online events have the potential to fast track ‘Epistemic Freedom’. In his response to [Kwame Nkrumah’s](#) famous words “seek ye first the political Kingdom...”, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that Africa’s contemporary struggles should be ‘to first seek [Epistemic Freedom](#)’ as part of our decolonization journey. Thus, these virtual platforms can function as the much-needed e-Pana-Africana liberation zones that will foster cross-generational epistemic dialogue that allows for equal opportunity to dialogue and

advance ideas and action on the Pan-African and decolonization agenda in Africa, the diaspora, and globally.

Yet for these online platforms to fully become e-Pana-Africana liberation zones, African thinkers must confront certain limitations.

First, with the exception of a few platforms such as a few of those mentioned above, almost all online events surveyed used platforms owned and controlled by Western private companies to host and / or disseminate this content. In other words, they are generally not African owned. Although we have seen some African (in terms of ownership and / or control) platforms emerge both in the continent and in the diaspora during COVID-19 crisis, Western-owned spaces remain more pervasive, and have become popular and are used by both African intellectuals and audiences without much thought. This is mostly because of a lack of widespread awareness of African innovations, and internalised colonial assumptions that technology advancement or quality should always come from, or be provided by, non-Africans. Yet we know African entrepreneurs have created virtual conferencing platforms based in and out of Africa such as Gumzo or e-kwokwu, as well as African intellectual platforms such as those mentioned above. Supporting African-owned and run knowledge and technological platforms should be vital for those who are interested in advancing ideas of Pan-Africanism and decolonization. Otherwise, there is a risk that Western companies could own and archive the data from these ideas, and for different reasons restrict or minimise their visibility and influence.

Second, although these virtual spaces have proliferated and given a broader audience the ability to engage in these discourses, we cannot ignore that the platforms come with accessibility issues as well. They are costly for most African youth and other people who cannot afford the internet or electricity, whether these be in Africa or elsewhere. Even within the surveyed webinars, it is evident that comparatively few had been hosted or organized by Africa-based intellectuals or institutions, particularly during the survey period when the African higher education sector in general saw the closure or limitation of the activities of many institutions, and the impact of worsening financial constraints in general. In informal conversations with colleagues in Kenya, the DRC, Uganda, Ethiopia, and other countries on this topic, it became clear that the closure of intellectual institutions and / or slowing down of activities therein continues to affect scholars, artists and other thinkers in Africa, many of whom have been forced to turn to other occupations to secure their livelihood. Several have not embraced online engagement as an alternative. It is also important to note that languages such as English or French dominate on these platforms in comparison to the indigenous African languages spoken by millions more Africans. Low digital technology proficiency also remains a big challenge amongst the African societies who need these ideas and knowledge most.

Finally, the use of virtual platforms can increase surveillance of African intellectuals and forums by hostile states, a development that has led to self-censorship by many working in politically sensitive contexts. These virtual spaces are also vulnerable to hacking or [internet shutdowns](#) by individuals and

institutions hostile to their use as emancipatory spaces, as witnessed in some forums particularly earlier in the season, when attacks would be launched with racist slurs and abuses akin to bullying.

It is my hope that this reflection will catalyse more discussion on what the consequences of these two global events – the Covid-19 pandemic and the BLM protests – are for the advancement of Pan-Africanism and decolonization discourses and futures.

## Notes

1. The author is grateful for questions and discussions with students and faculty from Princeton African Studies program, University of Pretoria and Edinburgh African studies where the author gave lectures online using some ideas used here. The author is thankful to questions and feedback from participants in these forums.
2. David Mwambari is a Lecturer in African Security and Leadership Studies at The African Leadership Centre (ALC) in the Faculty of Social Science & Public Policy at King's College London (UK). He is a by-fellow at Churchill College Cambridge University for academic year 2019-2021 and a recipient of a Meaning-making Research Initiative (MRI) grant at The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Senegal.

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