Online Article

The Unholy Trinity of African Historiography: The Colonial Meridian and the Captivity of African Historical Time

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Introduction

On what historical, philosophical or epistemological grounds must the African past become intelligible through the categories 'precolonial', 'colonial' and 'postcolonial'? What makes European colonial conquest the privileged reference point for naming the histories of societies whose transformations extend across millennia? And when does the colonial, whether affirmed, repudiated or endlessly rediscovered as coloniality, cease to adjudicate the African past and present?

The 'Colonial Meridian', as described here, offers a point of departure for these questions (Abdullah 2026). It draws attention to the authority of the colonial encounter in the organisation of African historical time. *I propose to call its familiar three-fold expression 'the Unholy Trinity of African Historiography'*. The phrase is deliberately provocative, but the issue it names is precise. The original sin is not the recognition of colonialism as a consequential historical process. It is the promotion of colonialism into the principle by which African historical experience is divided, classified and made legible. *The precolonial anticipates it, the colonial embodies it and the postcolonial extends its authority beyond the formal end of occupation*. Apparently distinct periods remain dependent upon the same reference.

The argument is not simply that European scholars devised categories that African historians subsequently inherited. Nor does it rest on the assumption that every use of those categories is illegitimate. Historians cannot work without temporal distinctions, and colonial conquest did reorder institutions, economies, political authority and social relations. The question concerns the movement from a useful chronology for particular inquiries to an encompassing grammar of African history. At that point, colonialism ceases to be one object of explanation and becomes the authority that determines the terms of explanation itself.

This distinction also complicates the familiar remedy of decolonisation. If the problem is the colonial's presumed sovereignty over historical meaning, the demand to decolonise African history may reproduce the very dependency it seeks to escape. *The colonial remains the indispensable adversary, and the decolonial becomes intelligible principally through its negation. The task, then, is neither to forget colonialism nor to proclaim its end. It is to ask why African historical processes should be required to pass through the colonial before they can count as history*.

The Unholy Trinity and the manufacture of historical time

The precolonial is the most revealing member of the trinity because its chronological reach is almost limitless. It stretches back from the onset of European occupation to encompass antiquity and all the intervening centuries. Ancient Nubia, Aksum, the empires of the western Sudan, Great Zimbabwe and the commercial and intellectual worlds of the Swahili coast become inhabitants of a single period. They are grouped together not by a shared historical rhythm or an internally

coherent sequence of transformations, but by their position before a later European event.

The irony is fundamental: a vast historical past is named in anticipation of a future that its inhabitants neither knew nor awaited. The inhabitants of medieval Mali did not experience their world as precolonial. Their political institutions, trading relationships, Islamic scholarship, ecological circumstances and struggles over authority belonged to historical processes whose significance did not derive from an eventual European conquest. The retrospective label may be convenient when a specific study compares institutions before and after occupation. As the dominant designation for an entire past, however, it converts diverse histories into the prehistory of colonialism.

The colonial seems more definite, yet its chronological coherence is also unstable. European commercial enclaves, conquest, settler expansion, administrative occupation and indirect rule appeared at different moments and in different combinations. The nineteenth-century partition was momentous, but it neither inaugurated every European entanglement with Africa nor produced one uniform colonial experience. Formal independence likewise arrived unevenly, and settler colonial formations followed distinct and often longer trajectories. Even as a strictly chronological designation, the colonial resists a single continental beginning and end.

Its more serious problem is conceptual. The colonial is treated as the decisive rupture in African history, the event that gives the preceding and succeeding eras their names. Colonial conquest was indeed violent and transformative: it reordered territorial jurisdiction, taxation, labour, property, political legitimacy, education and access to resources. No serious historiography can set these transformations aside. Yet their significance does not establish that European occupation should supply the master chronology for every African society or every historical question. *Colonialism can be indispensable as an object of investigation without becoming the sovereign principle that organises investigation.*

African societies did not suspend their own histories under colonial rule. Religious movements, political initiatives, conflicts over generation and gender, changing patterns of production, artistic innovations and intellectual controversies were neither wholly authored by Europeans nor invariably reducible to relations with them. To write these histories exclusively as resistance, accommodation, collaboration or adaptation may restore African agency while keeping the colonial encounter at the centre of the narrative. The protagonists change; the plot's organising time remains intact.

The postcolonial completes the circular structure. *If the precolonial names Africa through what had not yet occurred, the postcolonial names it through what has supposedly ended*. Political independence provides an intelligible boundary for certain inquiries, but the category readily becomes indefinite. *How long must a society remain postcolonial*? A century after independence, will its transformations still be identified primarily as colonial afterlives? The issue here is not whether the consequences of conquest persist; they demonstrably can. *It is why that persistence should be presumed to define the whole of the present.*

Thus, the trinity does not merely sequence time. It gives colonialism an unusual power over historical naming. *Before it, African history is precolonial; during it, colonial; after it, postcolonial.* The apparent movement forward leaves the same referent untouched. *The issue is not the word 'colonial' in isolation, but the epistemological arrangement that makes the colonial the measure of all three periods.*

The temporal problem is also a problem of scale. A periodisation that appears plausible for the history of a particular colonial administration may become misleading when projected onto a continent. The conquest of one territory cannot be made the chronological destiny of another. Yet the familiar triptych moves effortlessly between the local and the continental, obscuring the very differences that historical inquiry should recover. Its apparent simplicity is purchased at the cost of historical specificity.

Nor are its three terms symmetrical. The precolonial may cover millennia; the colonial may designate several decades; the postcolonial has no agreed terminal point. Their unity is therefore not a unity of duration or comparable historical content. It is a unity of reference. The colonial supplies the axis along which radically unequal stretches of time are arranged. This asymmetry reveals why the problem cannot be settled merely by adjusting dates. The issue is the principle that makes the divisions seem natural.

Historical legibility and the authority to periodise

Periodisation is never simply the placement of dates along a neutral line. It selects what counts as a rupture, which continuities matter and which events warrant the authority

to divide historical experience. A chronology of dynastic succession, a history of agricultural transformation and a history of religious institutions may assign different boundaries to the same centuries. Each periodisation is an argument about historical significance. The central issue here is not whether historians should periodise but whose transformations their periodisations privilege and what those choices permit us to see.

The Unholy Trinity is powerful because it can appear merely descriptive. Its categories organise course titles, research fields, survey histories, archival expectations and the division of scholarly expertise. A student can be invited to study precolonial political formations, colonial domination and postcolonial state formation as though these were the natural compartments of the African past. Yet such compartments can predetermine the questions asked. An institution that spans conquest may be fragmented across three literatures; a social transformation that began before occupation and continued afterwards may be narrated as three different phenomena.

This is a problem of historical legibility. V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* (1988) exposes the conditions under which Africa has been constituted as an object of knowledge; Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000), from another historiographical setting, interrogates the conversion of European historical experience into a universal measure. African institutions and practices become visible within an intellectual framework that has already assigned them a position relative to Europe's conquest. The framework can accommodate criticism of European violence and celebrate African resistance; neither operation necessarily unsettles the chronology itself. Indeed, the recovery of agency may leave untouched the assumption that African history becomes most intelligible when organised around the moment of its encounter with European power.

The asymmetry becomes more visible when African historiography is read beside histories of Britain, France and the United States. This is not because historians of those societies avoid periodisation or ignore decisive ruptures. Quite the contrary: industrialisation, revolution, slavery, civil war and empire furnish some of their most powerful chronological markers. The difference is that these ruptures ordinarily coexist with other frameworks and do not claim an exclusive right to name the entire historical experience of the society in question. The key comparative question is not whether European or American history is divided into periods. It is why a single encounter with European power should so persistently organise the historical narration of Africa.

British history provides an instructive starting point. The Industrial Revolution transformed production, urban life, class relations, imperial commerce and the possibilities of political mobilisation. Yet Britain's past is not conventionally divided in its entirety into preindustrial, industrial and postindustrial history. E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) places historical actors, experience and the making of class at the centre of an account of industrial transformation; Linda Colley's *Britons* (1992) traces national identification through war, religion, empire and political contestation. These works differ profoundly in focus, but neither requires every aspect of British history to be assigned its meaning through one industrial threshold. Their chronologies are constructed around the historical problems they pursue.

The asymmetry becomes still more revealing when slavery and imperial plunder enter the frame. Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) placed Atlantic slavery and colonial accumulation in a consequential relationship with British capitalism; later scholarship has debated the nature and extent of that relationship. The point here is not to resolve those debates, or to pretend that empire was external to Britain's making. It is precisely the reverse: Britain's entanglement with slavery and empire is central to many accounts of its development, but British history is not habitually assigned the all-encompassing labels preslavery, slavery and postslavery. *The society whose imperial expansion supplies the organising event of African historical time does not usually surrender its own entire chronology to that expansion.*

France complicates the comparison rather than invalidating it. The Revolution of 1789 is so powerful a rupture that French historians regularly distinguish the Ancien Régime from revolutionary and postrevolutionary France. François Furet's *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1981) demonstrates how profoundly the meaning and temporal reach of the revolution have been contested. Yet French historiography also moves among histories of monarchy, republicanism, labour, religion, empire, gender and intellectual life. The revolutionary divide is influential, but it remains an object of argument rather than a compulsory explanation for every transformation.

Moreover, the story of France cannot be isolated from the colonial world: C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and Laurent Dubois's *Avengers of the New World* (2004) compel the history of revolution to confront Saint-Domingue and the agency of enslaved people. The comparison therefore concerns the plurality and contestability of historical frames, not an imagined national history generated entirely from within.

American history makes the difficulty sharper still. Its vocabulary includes pre-Columbian, colonial, antebellum, postbellum, Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction. These are not innocent categories: pre-Columbian names Indigenous histories through European arrival, and antebellum can make the Civil War the destination of a much longer past. The American case thus displays some of the very temporal distortions at issue. But those terms coexist with other periodisations and have themselves been challenged. W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) and Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* (1988) recast the Civil War's aftermath through emancipation, labour, citizenship and Black political struggle. Indigenous-centred histories, including Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (2014), challenge the presumption that Columbus or the settler state supplies the natural beginning of historical narration. These works do not escape all problems of periodisation; they show that the organising chronology is open to dispute.

Nor should the comparative claim be exaggerated. British history can be triumphalist, French republican narratives can obscure empire, and United States history has often displaced Indigenous peoples and African Americans from the centre of its story. In each setting, struggles over whose agency counts have reshaped the discipline. Precisely for that reason, the comparison is productive. It does not place European or American historiography on a pedestal. *It asks why African history should be denied the same possibility of competing chronologies, self-criticism and narratives organised around different social actors and historical problems.*

The crucial issue is not the purity of internal or Indigenous agency. Industrial Britain was constituted through global commerce and imperial relations; the French Revolution was entangled with Atlantic slavery and colonial rebellion; the United States was shaped through Indigenous dispossession cum genocide, transatlantic migration and racial capitalism. No society authors its history in isolation. Yet the historical agency of these societies is not generally exhausted by their exposure to a single external event. Their pasts can be narrated through transformations that emerge from the questions being asked, even when those transformations are transnational. *Why should the narrativisation of Africa be different? If industrialisation does not exhaust British historical time, revolution does not exhaust French historical time, and civil war does not exhaust American historical time, colonial conquest cannot simply be assumed to exhaust African historical time*.

Frederick Cooper's *Colonialism in Question* (2005) warns against allowing expansive concepts to substitute for historically specific explanations. The distinction between colonialism as a historical relationship and colonialism as an epistemological authority is therefore indispensable. A historian investigating a land dispute may find colonial legislation decisive to the distribution of rights and obligations. Another examining the transformation of a religious community may find longer histories of scholarship, trade, conversion and local contestation more explanatory than the colonial boundary. Neither should be compelled to include or exclude colonialism by principle. Its relevance must be demonstrated by the historical problem and the evidence.

Nor does this critique require a fantasy of an untouched African past. African societies have long been constituted through interactions with one another and with wider worlds. The Sahara, Indian Ocean, Atlantic and Nile were spaces of movement, exchange, coercion and intellectual encounter. The issue is not the presence of external influences but the elevation of one external encounter into the privileged chronology of a continent. *To reject the Colonial Meridian is not to assert an isolated African essence; it is to reject an inherited hierarchy among historical relationships.*

An alternative cannot simply be a singular African Meridian. Africa does not possess one homogeneous historical rhythm that can replace the colonial triptych. Different regions and societies have experienced distinct, overlapping transformations in political authority, ecology, labour, mobility, religion and intellectual life. Their histories may converge at some moments and diverge at others. A more rigorous historiography would allow temporal boundaries to emerge from these processes rather than impose a common continental threshold in advance.

What is at stake, then, is not a claim that only Africans may write African history, or that knowledge must be authenticated by origin. At stake here is a methodological cum epistemological question : by what right does a framework claim to organise the object it studies? The burden of justification rests with the periodisation, not with the historical experience that exceeds it.

The authority of a periodisation is often reinforced through repetition rather than explicit defence. Generations of scholarship can inherit the same division because it offers a familiar way to organise evidence and communicate with other historians. This institutional durability should not be confused with explanatory adequacy. Categories can remain useful for cataloguing books and structuring courses while failing to illuminate the historical relationships under investigation. The fact that a division is conventional is a reason to examine its assumptions, not evidence that those assumptions have been vindicated.

The decolonial impasse: Negation as dependence

The critique becomes more demanding when the language of decolonisation is itself subjected to scrutiny. It is tempting to conclude that the remedy for colonial historical time is to decolonise it. But that answer may concede the central point: colonialism remains the necessary referent around which the intellectual task is defined. *If colonialism has been granted the power to name African history, the act of naming a project decolonial does not by itself revoke that power.*

Aníbal Quijano's formulation of the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000) distinguishes the termination of formal colonial administration from the persistence of hierarchical arrangements of race, labour, knowledge and authority. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni has made the enduring structures of coloniality central to influential arguments about Africa's political and epistemic condition (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). These approaches have genuine explanatory ambitions. Independence did not automatically dissolve inherited inequalities, institutions or systems of knowledge. The objection is not that such continuities are fictitious or unworthy of study. It concerns the point at which coloniality becomes an encompassing premise rather than a historically testable account of particular relations.

When coloniality is presumed to organise the African present as a whole, the colonial acquires an almost inexhaustible life. Where an institution persists, that persistence may confirm coloniality. Where it changes, the change may be interpreted as coloniality's adaptation. Where actors contest domination, their actions are named decolonial resistance. These interpretations may be illuminating in particular settings. Yet if every possible historical outcome can be accommodated within the same explanatory language, the framework risks becoming difficult to delimit by evidence. It begins to decide in advance what historical inquiry ought to establish.

This is a paradox of negative epistemological dependence. The decolonial opposes the colonial while continuing to derive its principal orientation from it. The past is recovered from colonial distortion; the present is decoded as coloniality; the future is imagined as emancipation from its grip. *Colonialism becomes simultaneously the problem, the explanatory key and the condition of the solution. Opposition, however emphatic, does not necessarily amount to epistemological departure.*

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò enters this conversation not as an arbiter standing above the decolonial debate but as an interlocutor who unsettles some of its habitual assumptions. In *Against Decolonisation*: *Taking African Agency Seriously* (2022), he questions the proliferation of decolonisation as an all-purpose intellectual and political prescription. The objection is not that colonial domination lacked force, nor that its effects evaporated with independence. It is that the language of decolonisation can displace the substantive work of asking what Africans have done, what they are doing and what projects they might undertake on terms not exhaustively furnished by the colonial encounter. Read alongside Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Táíwò thus helps clarify a disagreement over the reach of colonial explanation rather than supplying a final answer to it.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's insistence that coloniality outlives colonial rule directs attention to structures that political independence alone cannot dissolve. Táíwò's insistence on African agency warns against treating the persistence of those structures as a sufficient account of African intellectual and political life. Neither proposition simply cancels the other. Structures endure through institutions and unequal relations; agency is exercised under constraints and through inherited materials. The issue becomes whether a theory of endurance can recognise transformation without always redescribing it as coloniality, and whether a defence of agency can take the weight of history seriously without making colonialism its necessary point of depar-

ture. The productive tension lies in these questions, not in the selection of a winning philosopher.

Quijano complicates the exchange further. His 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000) was not originally offered as a period label for Africa; it was an account of the constitution and reproduction of modern hierarchies on a global scale. Its travel into African debates can illuminate connections among racial ordering, political economy and knowledge. Yet conceptual travel is never innocent. An account developed from one constellation of histories does not automatically become the grammar of another. What must be demonstrated is not merely that African societies were drawn into imperial modernity but how particular relations were constituted, reproduced, modified or broken in particular places. Without that historical labour, coloniality risks functioning as a general atmosphere rather than a discriminating explanation.

This is why the encounter among Quijano, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Táíwò matters to the Unholy Trinity. The first two make the persistence of colonial power difficult to dismiss; the third makes the intellectual costs of an indefinitely decolonising vocabulary difficult to ignore. But the argument developed here is not reducible to either pole. *The Unholy Trinity asks a prior question: why should the dispute over colonial persistence and decolonial emancipation become the obligatory frame within which African history is discussed?* A historian can acknowledge continuing colonial relations without treating every present institution as their expression. Equally, a historian can affirm African agency without requiring every initiative to demonstrate emancipation from an inherited colonial condition. Both possibilities depend on loosening the monopoly of the colonial as the explanatory referent.

The distinction also guards against an easy caricature of decolonial scholarship. To say that a conceptual vocabulary remains relationally tied to colonialism is not to show that its empirical claims are false. Coloniality may explain a great deal in one inquiry and very little in another. Nor does a critique of decolonisation licence complacency about inequality or historical violence. The problem is the elevation of a useful critique into a compulsory ontology. *The more capacious the language of coloniality becomes, the greater the need to specify its limits. The more forcefully agency is invoked, the greater the need to show how that agency is historically constituted rather than simply celebrated.*

The decolonial can therefore function as the Unholy Trinity's fourth term. This is not a claim that Quijano and Ndlovu-Gatsheni simply repeat colonial scholarship. Their work contests imperial hierarchies and makes significant arguments about structures that outlast occupation. *The criticism is narrower and more demanding: a conceptual framework may challenge colonial power while preserving the colonial encounter as the privileged condition of intelligibility. It may be politically oppositional and epistemologically dependent at the same time.*

The difficulty is particularly visible when African intellectual traditions are valued chiefly because they resist European knowledge. A philosophical argument need not be anti-European to matter. An institution need not prove its survival of colonial conquest to warrant investigation. A political imagination need not declare itself decolonial to be historically consequential. To make resistance the principal measure of significance is to install the colonial antagonist at the centre once more.

Nor would a new category such as 'postdecolonial' resolve the problem. It would extend the series of prefixes without displacing the governing noun. The issue is not the absence of a sufficiently radical label. It is the expectation that African history must perpetually account for itself through colonialism and its negation. Coloniality should be investigated where its workings can be specified and demonstrated. It cannot be an ontological presumption about African existence.

The three thinkers should therefore converse within the argument rather than become its sovereign authorities. Their disagreement is evidence of an unresolved problem in the conceptual organisation of African history and African studies, not a substitute for investigating that problem. The point is not to install Táíwò where Quijano or Ndlovu-Gatsheni once stood. Such a reversal would merely exchange one philosophical magistrate for another. It is to resist the assumption that any of them can legislate in advance the temporal coordinates of African historical experience. *The authority to periodise must be earned in the encounter with historical evidence.*

A further consequence follows for the meaning of intellectual emancipation. If a scholarly intervention is judged primarily by how thoroughly it rejects colonial categories, colonialism remains the benchmark against which achievement is measured. If, conversely,

it is judged solely by its assertion of African initiative, the complexities of domination may be understated. Neither test is adequate on its own. The relevant point here should be what an inquiry enables us to understand that would otherwise remain obscured: the processes it reconstructs, the relationships it establishes, the distinctions it preserves and the assumptions it makes available for criticism. *Historical understanding is not certified by a prefix.*

There is a further difference between exposing a colonial genealogy of knowledge and establishing the continuing colonial character of every claim. The former asks how particular institutions, archives and classifications acquired authority. The latter can become a sweeping judgement that displaces the more difficult work of specifying historical mechanisms. A concept's genealogy does not settle its present explanatory value; nor does a declared decolonial purpose guarantee freedom from inherited assumptions. What matters is whether a framework permits its own central claims to be challenged by the histories it purports to explain.

Beyond the colonial tribunal

When, then, does colonialism cease to adjudicate African history? The question cannot be answered with a date. A declaration that Africa has finally entered a new, noncolonial epoch would reproduce the logic under criticism by naming another period in relation to the colonial. Nor can the answer be the dismissal of conquest's continuing consequences. Such dismissal would substitute an ideological prohibition for historical inquiry.

The distinction is between colonialism's historical significance and its presumed epistemological sovereignty. Its significance may be profound and enduring; its right to organise every historical question is unearned. It ceases to adjudicate when its explanatory relevance must be argued rather than assumed. The historian may then investigate political authority, intellectual movements, agrarian relations, cultural production or social conflict without first asking whether the phenomenon is precolonial, colonial, postcolonial or decolonial.

This is not a demand for historical purity or a retreat into an imagined authentic African time. It is a demand for explanatory plurality. Historical processes should generate their own questions and provisional chronologies, subject to evidence, disagreement and revision. Colonial conquest may emerge as a decisive rupture in one inquiry, a secondary influence in another, and an inadequate boundary in a third. The choice should be the result of investigation, not its precondition.

The implications are substantial. A history of intellectual authority might follow debates across centuries that conventional periodisation divides. A study of ecological adaptation might identify turning points unrelated to European occupation. A history of land and labour might show colonial legislation intersecting with older practices and newer struggles in ways that resist a single break. In each case the aim is neither to minimise nor to magnify colonialism but to locate it precisely among the processes that made history.

This approach also alters what it means to recover African agency. *Agency is not merely the capacity to respond to European domination. It includes the capacity to constitute institutions, contest social relations, formulate ideas and transform historical circumstances that cannot be reduced to a colonial encounter. To restore Africans as actors while retaining colonialism as the compulsory plot is only a partial revision of historical knowledge.*

The Unholy Trinity thus names an epistemological captivity rather than a simple terminological error. Its hold survives because the colonial is repeatedly treated as the condition that makes African historical phenomena intelligible. The language of decolonisation may weaken colonial hierarchies while leaving that condition intact. *A genuine departure is not achieved by declaring oneself beyond colonialism. It begins when the colonial is no longer the compulsory tribunal before which African historical experience must appear.*

Such an approach also makes room for disagreement within African historical thought. No single archive, language, community or intellectual tradition can claim to supply the definitive chronology of the continent. Competing accounts of a transformation may produce competing temporal boundaries. That is not a defect to be overcome by another master framework, it is part of the discipline's critical vitality. The historian's responsibility is to make the grounds of periodisation explicit and to remain answerable to the evidence, rather than to a prefabricated moral or political vocabulary.

Conclusion

The precolonial, colonial and postcolonial form an Unholy Trinity, not because colonial conquest was inconsequential but because the three categories grant it a remarkable authority over historical time. *The precolonial names an immense past by reference to a future conquest; the colonial makes conquest*

the master rupture; the postcolonial consigns subsequent history to its aftermath. Decoloniality, when treated as an encompassing condition, may add another term to the same structure, defining African thought and possibility through the colonial's continuing presence.

The task is not to erase colonialism from African history. *It is to return colonialism to history: to investigate its violence, institutions, transformations, and legacies without permitting it to dictate in advance the categories through which all African experience must be understood. The African past did not await European conquest to become historical. The African present does not require coloniality to become intelligible. The African future does not require decoloniality to acquire the capacity for transformation.*

Perhaps the absurdity of an interminable historical condition was captured more incisively in Congolese political humour than in the elaborate theoretical architectures of African/Africanist scholarship. Mahmood Mamdani, drawing on the late Congolese intellectual Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, recounts a question asked in Mobutu's Zaire. It should have the final word:

'When will this independence end?'

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