

Decolonization and Democratic Reasoning

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“Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world.”

– Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind*

DECOLONIZATION IS A SEEMINGLY abstract theoretical term with a concrete historical origin. In Todd Shepard’s words, it was “invented” in the crucible of the Algerian War of Independence to describe a two-sided process in which Algeria gained its independence from France and France redefined its own national political identity in a more exclusionary way.¹

Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and others suggested that the liberation of colonized people also could lead to a transformation of the colonizer. Shepard quotes from Sartre’s 1961 preface to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*: “we, too, people of Europe, we are being de-

colonized...let us look at ourselves, if we dare, and see what it makes of us” (p.10). According to Shepard, however, decolonization in practice did not have this kind of positive effect on the colonizers; instead, the term was used by Charles de Gaulle, who was forced to accept Algerian independence, to erase the memory of colonial violence, and to limit political citizenship in France based upon race and ethnicity (p.77).

In this article I explore decolonization in Mali, another former French colony in West Africa, where it represents the emergent way Malians have “perceived themselves and their relationship to the world”: partly divided geographically between North and South, partly unified religiously within a moderate Islamic faith, but still struggling to maintain control over new forms of political power as citizens with a single national identity over their differing ethnic identities.²

“Decolonization as democratic reasoning” replaces colonial forms of perception by shifting attention to how formerly colonized peoples think about the challenges they face and the local resources—language, culture, and tradition—they can enlist to meet them. In Mali, “decolonization as democratic reasoning” is taking shape through a hybrid process of “nongovernmentality” and “dialogue and reconciliation.”

I. NONGOVERNMENTALITY

Rather than focusing on the usual questions about the state, its power, and its influence that typically occupy the attention of international relations specialists, there is another way to tell the story of decolonization that puts citizens at the center. Gregory Mann has given us one version of citizen-centered decolonization, which he calls “nongovernmentality.”

In *Empires to NGOs*, Mann looks beyond the familiar political formations that came into being at the end of colonial rule—new nation-states and ex-empires—to consider newly transnational communities of solidarity and aid, social science, and activism. In the two decades immediately after independence, precisely when its states were strongest and most ambitious, the postcolonial West African Sahel became a fertile terrain for the production of new forms of governmental rationality realized through NGOs. “I term this new phenomenon ‘nongovernmentality,’ and argue that although its roots may lie partly in Europe and North America, it flowered, paradoxically, in the Sahel.”³

Thinking nongovernmentally in general began in 1946. According to Mann, the object of this form of practical reasoning is society, not the state. Its initial focus was on the pre-Independence hierarchical relationships between Malians who occupied different roles under French colonial domination. Gradually, this gave way to other non-state and long-standing conflict relationships across Sahelian state borders,⁴ and between clients on one side and humanitarian NGOs and human rights activists on the other. The alternative is a more democratic hybrid form of practical reasoning through dialogue and reconciliation, grounded in local traditional beliefs and practices and assisted in limited ways by locally run NGOs.

II. DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

Dialogue is not a means to reconciliation. Rather, dialogue and reconciliation are complementary sides of a way of reasoning collectively that potentially leads to a more inclusive democracy.

Let me begin with a few provisional definitions. Dialogue refers to the fact that democ-

racy requires that individuals engage in honest conversation with one another across their differences. Reconciliation refers to how the parties to serious dialogue approach one another when their past differences have led to deep conflicts and violence.⁵ With these definitions in mind, we can outline the complementary process of dialogue and reconciliation in politically fraught situations.

Political Recognition and Political Forgiveness

Political recognition requires the willing cooperation and mutual understanding of all parties if a continuing cycle of violence and revenge is to be avoided. This was the challenge facing the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.⁶ Charles Villa-Vicencio, a leading member of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, stresses this new way of seeing what is at stake and for whom: “Reconciliation involves broadening the lens of peace building to find a way to move beyond a preoccupation with ‘me and my future’ to ‘us and our future.’”⁷

To achieve this future-oriented collective identity requires the difficult process of collective forgiveness. In a predominantly Muslim country such as Mali, Muslim principles can provide a political conception of forgiveness.

Russell Powell argues, “unlike the unilateral command to forgive in the Christian Gospels, the Qur’anic command to forgive is rooted in a vision of justice that requires reciprocity. In imitation of the Prophet, believers should forgive those who have not asked for forgiveness—even enemies.” The Qur’an describes believers as “those who avoid major sins and acts of indecencies and when they are angry they forgive.” We will forgive you now, whether you ask for it or not, because we realize that sooner or later we want you to forgive us, whether we

are wise or mature enough to ask for forgiveness ourselves.⁸

Political forgiveness does not preclude imposing sanctions. Unlike moral and religious forms of forgiveness in which there is a forgiver and the forgiven, reciprocal political forgiveness may include other alternatives to retribution such as restitution or reparations that do not depend upon individual guilt. They are forward-looking sanctions designed to repair the institutional damage that has been done.

Knowing Forgetting

The second facet of “reasoning through dialogue and reconciliation” is a kind of “knowing forgetting.” Unlike retributive justice (“an eye for an eye”), dialogue and reconciliation require that we recognize that however grievous the harm that has been done, there is no equivalent punishment that can be exacted. In fact, the greater the harm, the more absurd it is to think that by imposing a seemingly identical harm on the perpetrators, one has somehow righted the wrong.

“Knowing forgetting” does not mean forgetting the past completely, but rather remembering the past without letting it define our collective future options and choices completely. According to Albert Camus, one remembers so that one’s options are not restricted to being either an executioner or a victim.

Apology and Acceptance

Once initial political recognition, political forgiveness, and knowing forgetting have been thought through, one must decide when it is appropriate to demand an official apology even when one has forgiven in the political sense. In such cases an apology can restore confidence and trust. The next question then becomes what degree of leniency should be shown.

Should full amnesty be granted? Should reparations be paid or compensation be given?

These are complicated political judgments that will vary from case to case. As suggested above, they do not depend upon individual guilt. They are matters of shared and collective responsibility. In some cases, political forgiveness will be enough to allow “knowing forgetting” and political reconciliation to begin. In other cases, apology, acceptance, and limited amnesty may also be needed in order to sustain dialogue and reconciliation.

In other words, “democratic reasoning through dialogue and reconciliation” must begin with political recognition, political forgiveness, and an awareness that it is up to us how much the past will determine our future choices. Then, depending upon the particular situation, additional steps such as apology and acceptance, compensation, and reparations may be needed.

Responsibility

Whether they have been the victims of past acts of violence or alleged perpetrators, at a crossroads as significant as the one that Mali now finds itself, both sides have to seek political forgiveness, agree to forget knowingly what would otherwise unduly constrain them, and, where appropriate, accept apologies and consider leniency in order to move the process of dialogue and reconciliation forward. This is what is meant by reciprocity in the Qur’an. In Mali, this Islamic interpretation of reciprocity is particularly important, if dialogue and reconciliation are to be successful. But in addition to religious beliefs, traditional languages are also a critical part of decolonization as “democratic reasoning.”

In the language of the *bamana* people (bamanankan, the most commonly spoken language in Mali) the word for crossroads is

dankun, symbolized by the footprint of the dove: “X.” *Dankun* refers to a place in a forested area where the human world and the spirit world meet. It is in such a place that acts of self-sacrifice for the sake of others can occur. That is, where “us and our future” take precedence over “me and my future.”

Mali has entered such a crossroads in which what might otherwise feel unfair to those who believe they have suffered most must be understood in terms of “us and our future” as a people. Without this kind of reciprocity, the danger of falling back into civil war and brutal reprisals is all too real. Decolonization in this context means learning how to think through the process of dialogue and reconciliation in this complex way.

III. HYBRID DECOLONIZATION

Since 2004 I have been involved in a series of peacebuilding projects in Mali; and since 2012 these projects have become more focused on dialogue and reconciliation in the complex sense described above. They bring together a partnership between several Malian community organizations, international NGOs, the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (RCAH) of Michigan State University, and the Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB).

Right to Play (RTP) and the International Sports Alliance (ISA) are experienced INGOs led by a Malian staff that use sports and other games to help young people solve social problems and conflicts. RTP has a special emphasis on increasing the participation of young girls in civil society and public life by building confidence and competencies through sports. ISA has had a measurable impact on the development of young people in poor countries, including Mali. Both RTP and ISA have de-

veloped extensive “train the trainer” sessions (that include apprentices from ULSHB) so that they can adapt the picture books and the Peace Game (described below) to the specific situations they face in their villages. In addition to the problem of displaced ethnic groups that is pictured in *Ben Sigili/Faire la Paix*, the other three picture books deal with problems of youth poverty, the obstacles to education that young girls face, and the traumatic stress disorder of families that have been involved in military conflict.

The purpose of this partnership is to develop young leaders and resilient communities in which peace education is an integral part of schooling and civil society. The partners are doing this through a formative and community-based program of classroom activities, local recreation programs, neighborhood cultural activities, arts workshops, and civic dialogues. The classroom activities include the use and creation of challenging written materials in multiple languages, performance-based activities, and an active learning pedagogy. The cultural activities include sports and games, visual arts, performing arts, music concerts, and creative writing projects. Together these discursive practices embody the meaning of dialogue and reconciliation: political recognition and political forgiveness, knowing forgetting, apology and acceptance, and responsibility.

Arts and Humanities

The Malian NGO Institut pour l'Education Populaire (IEP) oversees its own multilingual and interdisciplinary K–9 community school, the Ciwara School. This has been the site for the creation and implementation of the first set of project materials (the picture books and the political simulation). Teachers from IEP and the Ciwara School, working closely with faculty and students from the Michigan State University Residential College in the Arts and Hu-

manities, also have developed a series of active learning techniques for music, dance, theater, comic art, and fabric art to help students and teachers interpret and apply the stories in these picture books to their own lives.

The dilemmas in the four peacebuilding picture books were written by IEP teachers and illustrated using local fabric and traditional iconography. One book, *Ben Sigili/Faire la Paix/Building Peace*, deals with the issue of displaced persons through dialogue and reconciliation. There is an audiobook version of *Ben Sigili/Faire la Paix* and now a video animation that is allowing teachers, coaches, and community organization leaders to use this book in more remote villages in Mali without an internet connection. One of the other books, *Koroboli/LeDefi/the Challenge*, tells the story of a young girl forbidden to attend school by her parents who need her to work at home. With the help of another girl who gives Fatoumata the courage to argue with her parents, she finally does attend school but discovers that after years of absence she faces another challenge. She is initially unable to keep up with the other students; the challenge continues.



On this page, Fatoumata looks on enviously as the other schoolchildren play a letter game together.

Sports and Games

In conjunction with the picture books, IEP teachers and students have developed a political simulation game, the Mali Peace Game, in which students learn how to use the practical reasoning skills they have been introduced to in the classroom through the picture books and in related co-curricular activities. The Peace Game revolves around a series of crisis scenarios written by the teachers, mirroring crises that they, their students, and their families have experienced since the 2012 coup d'état. These crises include environmental crises such as droughts and famines, labor crises such as strikes, refugee crises, and civil war. Students study the crises in their classes and then work through the scenarios in the simulation. The goal of the game is not for one side to prevail against others through violence but rather to find a path through dialogue and reconciliation, so that the conflicts between and within their fictional countries can be transformed non-violently and in a way that the least advantaged countries are not further disadvantaged by the compromises and negotiations that occur. Some of the main characters in the four picture books and the conflicts and dilemmas in the books are woven into the Peace Game.

It is through the Peace Game that the students, teachers, and adult audiences gain firsthand understanding of the constituent parts of dialogue and reconciliation. They learn what it means to be misrecognized and how hard it is to forgive. And in order to forgive, they learn that it does not require forgetting everything that has happened. And they learn that apologies can be hard to make but oftentimes just as hard to accept. Learning how to conduct this kind of demanding dialogue can be transformative, that is, it can prepare them to address the causes of their conflicts without resorting to violence.

In this photograph, the members of one of the four countries in the Peace Game prepare for a negotiation session with the other three countries over a specific crisis scenario. Each country has a Prime Minister who speaks for the country in plenary sessions, but also has members in other government and non-government roles who discuss the crisis with their opposite representatives in other countries.

Local Dialogue Forums

Local dialogue forums provide opportunities for participants to discuss critically their ideas and questions about peace and civic responsibility among themselves and across generational and ethnic lines. This is where the skills of dialogue and reconciliation that they have learned in their readings and in the political simulation are put into real life practice.

Students and teachers invite adults and other young people to reenactments of parts of the Peace Game and dramatizations of the picture books in order to engage them in dialogue. The picture books and the Peace Game are not didactic. The stories and crisis scenarios are open-ended and raise dilemmas for further discussion. As such, they prepare the young people for these local dialogues in which they take the lead in framing the discussions and prompting critical reflection and possibly reconciliation.



Most local dialogues will be conducted in a face-to-face format. However, in order to bridge the gap between neighboring communities that are at odds with each other, a form of virtual dialogue is also possible. One example is the Mobil Dialogue Center designed by the Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix (IMRAP), the Malian office of the international NGO Interpeace. By filming separate dialogues and then screening them for the neighboring community, this technology allows them to listen and respond to each other without experiencing the tension that face-to-face contact sometimes creates.

IV. POLITICAL REALISM

How realistic is this hybrid approach to decolonization that subordinates collaboration with NGOs and state educational institutions to the needs of community-based organizations?⁹ Is it possible to change how people think about their collective identities when they are living through violent conflicts in dire circumstances and are dependent upon NGOs to the extent that they cannot avoid thinking nongovernmentally? This is the challenge that Mann's analysis poses for any attempt to cultivate democratic reasoning in the context of nongovernmentality.



One might argue that instead of trying to facilitate participation in local dialogue and reconciliation conversations independent of NGO influence, why not acknowledge the depths of their self-interested conflicts and turn to states and powerful NGOs to stop the fighting and rescue the victims? Wouldn't that be more realistic and have a greater chance of achieving some form of peaceful coexistence based on pragmatic reparations and carefully meted out retribution?

This is precisely what most transitional justice efforts seek to achieve through criminal tribunals and truth and reconciliation commissions. Unfortunately, these measures by themselves have not been sufficient, and in some cases, they arguably have heightened the conflicts. While there is strong resistance to the International Criminal Court, national criminal tribunals have struggled with the large number of cases before them. In Mali, after the French-led intervention in 2013, their own Commission for Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation attempted to bypass the International Criminal Court by combining restorative and retributive functions in one body. The result has been disappointing. Inter-ethnic violence has increased alongside terrorist attacks and violence by peacekeepers themselves in some cases.

The alternative that I am recommending, more long-term and local peacebuilding projects, not merely criminal punishments and civil penalties, is designed to address the challenge of decolonization as a form of democratic reasoning. It is a hybrid in the sense that it combines INGOs such as RTP and ISA with professional mediation within the context of local democratic peacebuilding with the help of IMRAP to assist local civil society organizations like the Ciwara School and the IEP to scale out their work to other communities. Such longer-term projects will have to rely on local languages, customs, and culture at the same time that

they draw upon the expertise of organizations like RTP, ISA, IMRAP and university researchers.¹⁰

Is this realistic? The philosopher Raymond Geuss has outlined a conception of realistic political theory that defends a view of political realism that may help us answer this question.¹¹ Such a theory should be concerned with institutionalized power, specifically, who controls it, in whose interests it operates, and at whose expense. Realism must look beyond the rationales that people offer for these institutions in order to identify their real motivations. Although Geuss is somewhat skittish about what he pejoratively calls applied ethical theory, a realistic theory must also inquire into the legitimacy of these institutions. How are they politically justified, not just on paper but in action? For this reason, it is normatively very different from the more common understanding of realism in politics, *realpolitik*.

According to Geuss, a realistic political theory will have to be conceptually innovative and capable of "orienting" people towards one another so that they feel at home in their world. An example of the former was Hobbes's concept of the state. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes provided new language for talking about the new forms of power that were emerging in the 17th century. The concepts of nongovernmentality and decolonization could play a similar role today. They help us see the power of some NGOs to shape perceptions more clearly. Our partnership in Mali illustrates how some NGOs in alliance with community organizations can play a legitimate role in decolonization by facilitating dialogue and reconciliation in the multi-dimensional senses defined above while avoiding governmentality.

As opposed to orienting young people around state institutions that have been hollowed out and disconnected from the body politic by

non-governmental organizations, our Malian partnership is designed to empower young people as participants in local dialogue forums *where they can work with, not at the behest of or under the control of NGOs*. They become oriented toward one another as participants in more democratic local political society so that they are prepared for the challenges posed by state and international NGOs. ●



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Footnotes

[1] Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006). For an alternative, more complex and more global summary of decolonization, see Dane Kennedy, *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[2] According to the *Afrobarometer*, since 2011 just over 43–44% of Malians surveyed reported that they identified nationally as Malians and another 32–34% reported that they feel equally Malian and a member of an ethnic group. Only 14–20% over this eight year period in three *Afrobarometer* surveys reported that they felt either only members of their ethnic group or more ethnic than national in their political identity. <http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online>.

[3] Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.2. Van de Walle and Bratton themselves have studied the role of NGOs and citizens in democratic transitions. See Nicolas van de Walle, "Foreign Aid in Dangerous Places: The Donors and Mali's Democracy," Working Paper No. 2012/61, United Nations University, <https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/foreign-aid-dangerous-places-0> and the voluminous *Afrobarometer* public attitude surveys, 1999–2019, on democracy, governance, and society, <http://www.afrobarometer.org/> founded and directed by Bratton and his colleagues.

[4] For more details on the conflicts that have run through Northern Mali and across the Sahel prior to and before 1960, see Baz Lecocq, *Disputed Desert: Decolonisation, Competing Nationalisms, and Tuareg Rebellions in Northern Mali* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010).

[5] Peter N. Stearns, ed., *Peacebuilding Through Dialogue: Education, Human Transformation, and Conflict Resolution* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 2018).

[6] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), Chapter 7. Also, P. E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[7] Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Walk with Us and Listen: Political Reconciliation in Africa* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p.154.

[8] Russell Powell, "Forgiveness in Islamic Ethics and Jurisprudence," 4 *Berkeley Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Law* 17 (2012).

[9] On the importance of "local realities" and hybrid models, see Alexander Laban Hinton, ed., *Transitional Justice: Global Mechanisms and Local Realities after Genocide and Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

[10] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language and African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1986).

[11] Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).