Islam and Decoloniality

Dr Syed Mustafa Ali

The Open University
s.m.ali@open.ac.uk
Background

Exploring entanglements of race, religion, computing, information, technology, and power

Acknowledgements
History

• **Towards** an Islamic Decoloniality
  • Euro-Arab Foundation
    • Granada, Spain (2014)

• **Further Towards** an Islamic Decoloniality
  • Ibn Khaldun Institute of Social Sciences
    • Kerala, India (2015)

• **An Introduction** to Islamic Decoloniality
  • ‘*Decolonise Not Diversify*’ festival
    • Birmingham, UK (2016)
Outline

1. Coloniality
2. Decoloniality
3. Islam
4. Islam and Coloniality
5. Islam and Decoloniality
“The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought.”

*The Question Concerning Technology* (1977)
“Originality consists in nothing other than decisively seeing and thinking once again at the right moment of vision that which is essential, that which has already been repeatedly seen and thought before.”

In The Beginning...
Colonialism

“With the conquest of the societies and the cultures which inhabit what today is called Latin America [in 1492 CE], began the constitution of a new world order, culminating, five hundred years later, in a global power covering the whole planet. This process implied a violent concentration of the world’s resources under the control and for the benefit of a small European minority – and above all, of its ruling classes.”

Quijano (2007)
Colonialism

• 17th century
  • French colonial empire and the Dutch Empire, as well as the English overseas possessions, which later became the British Empire; Danish colonial empire and Swedish overseas colonies

• 18th early 19th centuries
  • German colonial empire and Belgian colonial empire
  • Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 CE

• Late 19th century
  • The ‘Scramble for Africa’

Colonialism as a project of European political domination involving settlement *formally* ended with the national liberation and independence movements of the 1960s
Colonialism has ended. *Or has it?*
Postcolonialism

• Ongoing legacy of colonialism in contemporary societies in the form of social discrimination that has outlived formal colonialism and became integrated in succeeding postcolonial social orders

• Practices and legacies of European colonialism in social orders and forms of knowledge
1. Coloniality
Coloniality (of Power)

- A **matrix** that operates through control or hegemony over the following practical domains:
  - **Authority** (political administration)
    - Nation State
  - **Labour** (production and exploitation)
    - Capitalism
  - **Sexuality** (personal life and reproduction)
    - Nuclear family
  - **Subjectivity** (world-view and interpretive perspective)
    - Eurocentrism

Colonial Matrix of Power

- Global class formation
- International division of labour of core and periphery
- Inter-state system of politico-military colonial administrations
- Global racial/ethnic hierarchy
- Global gender hierarchy
- Sexual hierarchy
- Spiritual hierarchy
- Epistemic hierarchy
- Linguistic hierarchy
- Aesthetic hierarchy
- Pedagogical hierarchy
- Media/information hierarchy
- Age hierarchy
- Ecological hierarchy
- Spatial hierarchy

The **racial/ethnic hierarchy** of the European/non-European binary transversally reconfigures/inflects **all other** heterarchically-entangled global power relations, i.e. **race / racism as structural organising principle**
Coloniality (of Power)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPACE (Geography)</th>
<th>Core (Europe)</th>
<th>Periphery (Non-Europe)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TIME (History)</td>
<td>Human (Civilized)</td>
<td>Sub-Human (Barbaric)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tradition (Static)</td>
<td>Modernity (Dynamic)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BEING (Anthropology)
Forms of Coloniality

1. Systems of hierarchies

2. Systems of knowledge

3. Systems of culture
Systems of Hierarchies

• Systems based on *racial classification* and *difference*

• Race / Racism / Racialisation as involving

  1. **Exclusion**
     • in groups/outgroups, self/other, us/them etc.

  2. **Hierarchy**
     • superiority/inferiority, dominance/subordination, being/non-being etc.

  3. **Naturalization**
     • Depoliticisation / decontestation of (1) and (2)
2. Decoloniality
What is Decoloniality?

• Critical thinking emerging in the colonies and ex-colonies

• Highlights racial discrimination

• Focus: “epistemic [but also ontological] decolonization”

Decoloniality and ‘Border Thinking’

• **Geo-politics** and **body-politics** of knowledge

  *Concrete* (material, embodied, particular, raced) vs. *abstract* (immaterial, disembodied, universalizing, de-raced) epistemology

• **Thinking from the margins** (borders, periphery) and **in terms of** marginalised knowledges

• **Where, When, Who and How of Knowledge**

---

29/11/2016
Decoloniality and ‘Epistemic Delinking’

• **Disengage** from the ‘obligation’ to see the world according to the *ethnical experiences hidden behind* the epistemic *universality* of the *hubris of the zero point* (i.e. the Eurocentric postulate of an objective ‘view from nowhere’ = ‘view from everywhere’)

• Decolonial thinking as the *pluriversal* epistemology of the future – an epistemology that de-links from the *tyranny of abstract universals*

Universality as Pluriversality

• “A truly universal decolonial perspective cannot be based on an abstract universal (one particular that raises itself as universal global design), but would have to be the result of the critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic / ethical / political projects towards a pluriversal as opposed to a universal world” (Grosfoguel 2011, p. 3)

• “Decolonization should aspire at the very minimum to restore a reality where racialized subjects could give and receive freely in societies founded on the principle of receptive generosity” (Maldonado-Torres 2010, p. 114)
What is Decoloniality?

“It is not an interdisciplinary tool but, rather, a trans-disciplinary horizon in which de-coloniality of knowledge and de-colonial knowledge places life (in general) first and institutions at the service of the regeneration of life.” (Mignolo 2010, p. 11)

3. Islam
What *is* Islam? Other ‘answers’ – Islam *as...*
What Islam is not

• Islam is not a religion
• Islam is not a culture
• Islam is not a civilization
• Islam is not a tradition (discursive)
• Islam is not a tradition (religio-legal)
• Islam is not a nomocratic order
• Islam is not a language
• Islam is not a master signifier
Methodology

- Linguistics
  - Grammar
  - Etymology
- Hermeneutics
  - Semiotics
    - Intra-/Extra-‘Textuality’
  - Semantic mapping
    - Synchronic
    - Diachronic
- Phenomenology

Like most of the Qur’anic key-terms, *islām*, or at least its verbal form *aslāma*, has its pre-Islamic history. In *Jāhiliyyah* the word meant “giving over” in general. To be more precise, *aslāma* means that a man gives over something which is particularly dear to him, precious to him, something which is difficult or painful for him to abandon, to somebody who demands it. This precious something may be his own self, which is of course, in most cases, the most precious possession a man has in his hand; (in which case it means naturally total submission, self-surrendering); it may also be somebody else, one of his dear friends or his tribesmen (in which case it would mean betrayal). In any case the basic meaning is that of giving over one’s precious possession to somebody else.

What Islam is

BORDER
Boundary Barrier Between

Cosmology and Existential Orientation (3:83)

ISLAM

PROCESSUALITY
Verbal Noun in Form IV (verbal force, no tense)
(13:17) (17:81) (21:18)
(34:49) (41:53) (42:24)

TRANSACTION
Asymmetric Exchange (Dīn)
(3:19) (3:85) (5:3)

29/11/2016
What Islam is

- Islam is an existential power-transaction (Arabic دين Dīn)
- Basic senses:
  1. Indebtedness / requital
     - Dīn etymologically related to dayn (debt)
  2. Submissiveness / obedience
  3. Judicious power
  4. Natural inclination or tendency (custom, habit)

GOD (Master) Dīn HUMAN (Slave)

The Existential Debt

• “The nature of the debt of creation and existence is so tremendously total that man, the moment he is created and given existence, is already in a state of utter loss, for he possesses really nothing himself, seeing that everything about him and in him and from him is what the Creator owns Who owns everything”

• “Seeing that he owns absolutely nothing to ‘repay’ his debt, except his own consciousness of the fact that he is himself the very substance of the debt, so must he ‘repay’ with himself, so must he return himself to Him Who owns him absolutely. He is himself the debt to be returned to the Owner, and ‘returning the debt’ means to give himself up in service to his Lord and Master.”

4. Islam and Coloniality
‘Big Bangs’ of Race and Religion

- **1095**: ‘Big Bang of **Religion**’
  - Launch of Crusades by Pope Urban II

- **1453**: Fall of Granada
  - Columbian Voyages of Discovery
  - Columbus as ‘crusader’

- **1492**: ‘Big Bang of **Race**’
  - Fall of Constantinople to Ottomans

- **1550-1551**: Valladolid Debate
  - Las Casas vs. Sepulveda

- **1798**: Napoleonic invasion of Egypt

---

**Colonialism / Coloniality**
Entanglements of Race and Religion

• Race and religion are thoroughly entangled, perhaps starting with a shared point of origin in modernity, or in the colonial encounter. If this is the case, religion and race is not just another token of the type ‘religion and,’ not just one approach to the study of religion among many. Rather, every study of religion [or race] would need to be a study of religion and race. (Lloyd 2013, p.80)
Race / Coloniality as (Onto-)Theology

“I will speak of race creation (an act of anthropic gods) and of racial constitution. Race creation emerges out of the creations – the fabrications – of real social actors in their constructed reproductions and transformations of established discursive formations and expressions. These creations are products of actual relations: It is real people, after all, who express themselves by means of a discourse or set of discourses, who make meaning and history.

These social (self-)creations come as though given, fixed from on high, seemingly natural phenomena imposed almost unchangingly upon an innocent and so non-responsible social order. Racial constitution is what gives one racial identity, what makes one (up as) a racial member, what inscribes one racially in society and in the law and identifiably gives substance to one's social being.” (p. 83)

White Supremacy as ‘Second Creator’

“Today, at least in the Western world, it is neither graven images nor idols that pose the greatest challenge to God’s monopoly on divinity; it is false *mysterium tremendum*, second creators and the socio-political reality these produce. As such, it is against these, and not against idols, that modern men and women are likely to find the deepest meaning and resonance in Islam’s foundational principle: ‘There is no god except God (*lā ilāhā illa Allāh*).’ And, on this understanding, the proper response to the problem of human contingency is not to seek to overcome it but to resist and oppose false *mysterium tremendum* and ‘re-creation’, *both as subjects and as objects.*” (p. 182)

Coloniality / Racism as Theomorphic Projection

CREATOR
GOD

HUMAN
CREATION

SECOND CREATOR(S)
HUMAN

CREATIVE ACTION OF
ANTHROPIC GOD(S)

SUB-HUMAN
SECOND CREATION

29/11/2016

37
5. Islam and Decoloniality
Islam and Decoloniality: Precedents

1. Critical Muslim Studies (CMS) – Salman Sayyid
   • Decenring Eurocentrism via a post-positivist / anti-foundationalist, post-Orientalist and decolonial approach; ‘clearing’ and ‘dreaming’

2. Decolonial Islam – Hatem Bazian
   • DuBoisian ‘Double Consciousness’ and decolonizing the Muslim mind

3. Islamic Theology of Liberation (Esack, Ramadan, Prado, Lamrabet)

CLAIM: (1,2) focus on decolonization from the position of a colonised Muslim subject and/or subjectivity framed in political terms; (3) tend to focus on theological and ethical issues
A (Critical) Reflexive Engagement

• The ‘and’ in ‘Islam and Decoloniality’ appears ‘innocent’

• It appears to function as a ‘mere’ linguistic device (conjunction)

• Yet what if this linguistic function masks – intentionally or otherwise – the operation of something else?

• The conjunction is a relation

• Is power embedded in this relation?

• How is this power directed?
“A spiritual-political project aimed at resisting, undermining and eventually replacing the contemporary Eurocentric world order with a multiversal or pluriversal system informed by an Islamic perspective.”

Islamic Decoloniality – Methodology

- A commitment to **re-centring the Qur’an**, not as a ‘text’, but as a ‘**Living Law**’ and **criterion** where emphasis is placed on the **dynamic and regulatory** (as in normative) aspects of The Qur’an, but also its plenitude vis-à-vis possibilities of meaning

- Constructing – or perhaps **extracting** – an alternative ‘**vocabulary**’ (lexicon etc.) **from The Qur’an** for **thinking through** the decolonial project **from the relational ‘between’ that is Islam as existential transaction**
Islamic Decoloniality – Theses

1. Islam **rejects** supremacy of any form
   (2:257, 16:36, 28:83 etc.)
2. Coloniality is a **form** of supremacy
3. Therefore, Islam **rejects** coloniality
4. Islam **cannot** be colonial; it is **essentially** decolonial
5. Islam is **contingently** decolonial
   • Islam **manifests** its decolonial essence **when** coloniality appears
6. Islam **cannot** be **colonised**, but it can be **observed**
   (2:42, 13:17 etc.)
Islamic Decoloniality – Theses

7. One cannot understand the nature of such **obscurring** without understanding the nature of the (historical) ‘dynamic’ between *haqq* and *bātil*

8. This dynamic needs to be thought ‘outwards’ in terms set by The Qur’an
   I.e. **not** by thinking ‘inwards’ with reference to a dialectic such as Hegelianism, Marxism and/or their post-modern/post-colonial variants. Primarily this is because *haqq* ultimately / metaphorically has **no** opposite; *haqq* is foundational and permanent, while *bātil* is derivative and impermanent (13:17, 34:49) and the two do not stand in synthetic relation
   **NB:** Qur’an-outwards does **not** entail acontextuality, since the ‘textuality’ of The Qur’an has the same ‘signifying (*ayātic*) ontology’ as that within the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ realms (41:53)

9. There is **no** thesis – anti-thesis – synthesis dialectic at work (7:118, 17:81)

10. The ‘dynamic’ between *haqq* and *bātil* needs to be understood with reference to the phenomenon of ‘masking’ (*talbīs*) described in (2:42) and elsewhere

11. Coloniality should be understood as a form of ‘masking’

12. Decoloniality should be understood as a form of ‘unveiling’
Islamic Decoloniality – Epistemology

• Colonial cartography is **epistemic** (and ontological)
• Epistemology linked to the gaze / the eye under colonialism
• Blindness is a condition of the **heart, not the eye** (22:46)
• Therefore, the **heart** must be the site of decolonization
• Decolonization takes place in the **heart** (22:46)
• Decolonization involves a **call** from The Divine and a **possible response** by the human (8:24)
  
  However, the human also **calls** upon The Divine who **responds** and **calls** upon the human to **respond** (2:186)
• Human response to the Divine call transforms an **implicit existential** relationship into an **explicit existential** relationship
• This relationship centres on The Divine **not** the human
Why the need for an *Islamic* Decoloniality?

• Decolonial objective: forging a pluriversal **new humanism**
  • From Eurocentric ‘Man’-God to secular / ‘de-godded’ human being

(Fanon, Wynter, Gordon, Maldonado-Torres etc.)

• Is decolonial new humanism **compatible** with Islam?

• Is it – *can* it be – *Islamic*?

• Does the decolonial commitment to forging a new humanism itself need decolonizing?
  • ‘Post-secular turn’ (Asad, Mahmood etc.) / **post-‘de-godding’**
Coloniality and ‘the Islamic’

• Coloniality as ‘horizon’ (ontology, epistemology)

• Islamic as signifying an ‘othering’ by coloniality

• Islamic as body-political and geo-political

  • NB: theo-politics ‘masked’ / occluded / hidden in post-Christianity (‘secularism’, the ‘de-godded’ world)
Decoloniality and ‘the Islamic’

• Decoloniality as ‘horizon’ (ontology, epistemology)

• Islamic Decoloniality as signifying

  1. co-option of signifier ‘Islamic’ by Muslim ‘other’
  2. re-signification through re-alignment with Islam
  3. re-formation of decolonial project
A Word of Warning (from a Victim of Racism)

• “The challenge to religion ... is to make sure resistance remains a means rather than an end in itself and that it is exercised in consideration of goals that lie beyond self-serving quotidian interests. Otherwise, there is little that separates religion from secular movements and utopias.” (p. 171)

• “God, not ‘the man’, emphatically must occupy the centre of religious consciousness.” (p. 193)

• “A commitment to God-consciousness (taqwa) and personal piety will have to maintain their place above and beyond the revolt against ‘second creators’ and false mysterium tremendum.” (p. 197)
Islamic Decoloniality – An Application

• Rethinking the archetypal / mythopoetic origins of the phenomenon of **anti-blackness** and systemic **anti-black racism**: 
  “The *damné* or condemned ... is an embodied subject who is pinned down in hell in various ways including by virtue of **how it appears**. The very surface of this body, **the skin**, can serve as an immediate identifier”
  
  (Maldonado-Torres 2016)

• In this connection, consider the statement of *Iblees*, the ‘proto-racist’ / ‘proto-supremacist’, who only sees the **outward** of Adam and objectifies the latter, viz. “I am **better** than him / it [i.e. Adam]”

• Consider also the etymological and Qur’anic intra-‘textual’ relationship between *bashar* (as person) and *bashar* (as skin)