

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON DECOLONISATION OF AFRICA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstract

This study focuses on Afrolinguacultural decolonisation, that is, the application of language and culture as veritable instruments of decolonization, emphasizing their role in reclaiming African identity and countering the lingering effects of colonialism. Decolonisation of Africa is a task that requires conscious and conscientious efforts as well as commitment from African scholars at home and in diaspora. Decolonisation of Africa goes beyond the attainment of political independence and delves into the restoration and revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures. This paper highlights the importance and inevitability of indigenous languages in fostering cultural pride and shaping identity, as well as the challenges faced in their revitalization, such as the dominance of former colonial languages. It also examines the resurgence of traditional practices, the promotion of indigenous knowledge systems, and the role of literature and media in changing the narratives. This study, which employs the method of critical analysis, considers a review of government policies and international collaborations aimed at supporting multilingualism, cultural and ethnic diversity. It further illustrates successful efforts in cultural and linguistic revival, providing insights into the strategies and challenges therein. The conclusion underscores the significance of cultural pride and self-determination in achieving a comprehensive decolonisation, and calls for sustained efforts among Africans by way of African philosophical cum anthropological ecumenism.

Keywords: African anthropological cum philosophical ecumenism, African identity, Afrolinguacultural decolonization, Cultural revitalization, Indigenous languages.

Introductory Discourse

Decolonisation is a multifaceted process that goes beyond the attainment of political independence from colonial powers. While the end of colonial rule is a significant milestone, decolonisation also encompasses the reclamation of cultural, linguistic, and intellectual identities that were suppressed or marginalized during colonial era. This broader understanding of decolonisation acknowledges the deep-seated impact of colonialism on the social, cultural, intellectual, and psychological fabrics of colonized societies. Decolonization involves “the cultural renaissance of a people who have been oppressed”ⁱ and the re-establishment of a society’s indigenous cultural and intellectual systems. It is important to note that the process of decolonisation involves dismantling the hierarchical structures and ideologies imposed by colonial powers, which often prioritized European cultures and languages over indigenous ones. These structures were not only political and economic but also cultural and intellectual, leading to a pervasive sense of inferiority among the colonized peoples. Decolonisation, therefore, requires a re-examination and affirmation of indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge systems, which are essential components of a people’s identity and worldview.ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, in the process of decolonisation, language and culture are not only imperative, but indispensable. Language and culture are crucial elements in shaping identity and consciousness. They serve as vehicles for transmitting values, traditions, and knowledge from one generation to another. In the context of African societies, indigenous languages and cultures play a vital role in expressing unique worldviews and experiences. They encapsulate the collective wisdom and heritage of communities, providing a sense of belonging and continuity. As Fanon argues, “the imposition of colonial languages and cultures often leads to a crisis of identity, where the colonized individual is alienated from their heritage and

compelled to adopt the culture and language of the colonizer”ⁱⁱⁱ. The loss, or marginalization of indigenous languages during the colonial period disrupted the transmission of cultural knowledge and values. Colonial education systems often prioritized European languages, downplaying indigenous languages to the private sphere, and associating them with backwardness. This not only diminished the status of these languages but also contributed to the erosion of core values, cultural practices, and knowledge systems. Language is not merely a veritable instrument of communication, it is also a repository of a community’s history, culture, traditions, and values. The revitalization of indigenous languages is thus integral to the broader project of cultural decolonisation, as it enables communities to reconnect with their heritage and assert their identity.^{iv}

This study, therefore, explores how language and cultural revitalization contribute to decolonization efforts in Africa. It examines the role of language and culture in reclaiming African identities and countering the lingering effects of colonialism. Through the analysis of various initiatives and strategies for revitalizing indigenous languages and cultural practices, the study seeks to highlight the significance of these efforts in the broader context of decolonisation. It further addresses the opportunities and challenges associated with these processes, considering the complex realities of the 21st century Africa. In this connection, one of the primary objectives of this research is to demonstrate how the revival of indigenous languages can foster cultural pride and enhance social cohesion. The use of indigenous languages in education, media, and public life not only preserves these languages but also validates the cultural knowledge they embody. The study further explores the importance of cultural institutions, such as museums, cultural centers, and festivals, in promoting and preserving cultural heritage. These institutions serve as spaces for

the celebration of cultural diversity and the transmission of traditional knowledge.

Another significant aspect of this study is a critical examination of intellectual decolonisation, which involves challenging the dominance of Western epistemologies, which is in itself epistemic injustice, and reasserting African philosophical and anthropological knowledge systems. This includes, but not limited to the decolonisation of academic curricular and the promotion of African intellectual traditions in diverse fields of study. Highlighting the contributions of some African scholars, writers, and artists at home and in diaspora, this paper underscores the importance of intellectual sovereignty and the need to develop a more inclusive and representative body of knowledge, and call for African philosophical cum anthropological ecumenism.

Colonial Languages and Cultural Imposition: A Historical Overview

The colonization of Africa by Europe, which began in the late 15th century and continued until the mid-20th century, has profound and far-reaching effects on the continent's languages and cultures. European powers, which includes but not limited to Britain, France, Portugal, Germany, Belgium, and Spain imposed their languages and cultural norms on the African territories they controlled. This imposition was a fundamental aspect of the colonial project, or agenda, which aimed not only to exploit the economic resources of the continent but also to civilize the so-called "barbaric" native populations.^v Unfortunately, the supposed civilization became counter-productive, as what Africans hold dear to themselves like language and culture were dismantled as fetish and barbaric.

Colonial authorities established education systems that prioritized European languages, particularly English, French, and Portuguese as the medium of teaching and learning. This decision was often justified on the grounds of facilitating administration and trade, as

well as providing Africans with the skills necessary to participate in the global economy. However, the imposition of European languages served a more insidious purpose: it acted as a tool of cultural domination and control. By promoting European languages, colonial governments sought to create a class of African elites who were culturally alienated from their communities and more aligned with colonial interests.^{vi} This mechanism of cultural, intellectual, and linguistic domination has not left African till date.

Similarly, the impact of linguistic and cultural imposition was, and, is still enormous. Indigenous languages were often stigmatized and associated with backwardness or primitiveness. This stigmatization led to a decline in the use of these languages, particularly in formal and public settings. Moreover, the dominance of European languages in education and administration created barriers to social and economic mobility for those who were not proficient in them. As a result, many Africans were forced to abandon their native languages and cultures to succeed in the colonial system.^{vii}

On the other hand, the suppression and marginalization of indigenous languages and cultures during the colonial period contributed to a significant relegation of African culture. This process involves a deliberate devaluation and destruction of indigenous cultural values, expressions, beliefs, and practices. Colonial authorities often dismissed African cultures as primitive and inferior, promoting the adoption of European customs and values as a marker of civilization^{viii} and at best describe African culture as fetish. This cultural imperialism was reinforced by colonial education systems, which often excluded, misrepresented, or completely jettisoned African history and culture. Some other worrisome aspects of downplaying of African cultural heritage was the disruption of indigenous knowledge systems. African societies had rich oral traditions that transmitted knowledge, history, and values through storytelling, music, dance, and rituals. However, the

colonial emphasis on written knowledge and European cultural norms undermined these traditions. Indigenous knowledge was often disregarded or dismissed as superstitious, while European scientific and cultural paradigms were presented as universally valid and superior.^{ix} This superiority and inferiority mindset about the relationship still lingers till this contemporary era. The marginalization of indigenous languages further exacerbates discarding of African culture. Languages are not just vehicles of communication; they are also carriers of culture and identity. The decline of indigenous languages led to the loss of traditional knowledge, as many cultural practices and concepts were inextricably linked to specific linguistic expressions. This loss was particularly manifested in the areas of spirituality, medicine, and social organization, where indigenous languages encoded complex systems of meaning and practice.^x

In addition to these structural impositions, manipulation and downplaying of African culture was also perpetuated through coercive measures. In some cases, colonial authorities actively suppressed cultural practices they deemed threatening or subversive. For instance, traditional religious practices were often banned, and practitioners were persecuted. Similarly, traditional leaders and institutions were undermined or co-opted by the colonial administration, further eroding indigenous cultural and political systems^{xi} making them non-functional, and where they function, ill-functional. The legacy of this cultural undermining continues to affect post-colonial African societies. The dominance of European languages and cultural norms persists, often at the expense of indigenous languages and traditions. However, there has been a growing quest and movement to reclaim and revitalize these marginalized cultures and languages. This process of cultural revival is an essential aspect of decolonisation, as it seeks to restore the dignity and identity of African peoples and challenge the lingering effects of colonialism.

The Quest for Regaining Indigenous Languages and Culture

Language is a fundamental component of cultural and personal identity, serving as a tool for expressing a community's values, history, and worldview. It is through language that individuals connect with their root, heritage, and assert their cultural uniqueness. In the African context, indigenous languages are deeply intertwined with the identities of the people who speak them. They carry the collective memories, traditions, and knowledge of generations, encapsulating the essence of what it means to belong to a particular community or ethnic group.^{xii} The erosion of indigenous languages during colonial rule was not merely a loss of communication tools but an abysmal and profound disruption of cultural identities. As colonial languages were imposed and prioritized, indigenous languages were marginalized, leading to a detachment from ancestral traditions and a sense of cultural dislocation. The regaining or reclaiming of indigenous languages is, therefore, a crucial aspect of decolonisation. It involves not only the revival of these languages but also the reaffirmation of the identities and cultural values they represent. Language reclamation allows communities to resist assimilation into dominant cultures and reassert their unique identities among other things.

On the other hand, the establishment of cultural institutions such as museums, cultural centers, and festivals plays a crucial role in celebrating and preserving African heritage. Museums and cultural centers serve as repositories of historical artifacts, artworks, and records, providing a tangible link to the past. They also act as educational hubs, offering programs and exhibitions that highlight traditional practices and histories. Similarly, festivals, create dynamic spaces for the celebration of cultural diversity, showcasing music, dance, food, and crafts. These events not only promote cultural pride but also attract tourism and foster intercultural exchange understanding and dialogue^{xiii}.

Some of the Efforts, and Challenges to the Renaissance of Indigenous Languages and Cultures in Africa

Across Africa, initiatives of diverse nature have been undertaken to promote and preserve indigenous languages. These efforts ranging from grassroots movements to government-led policies, international collaborations and dialogues. A key strategy in language revitalization is the incorporation and encapsulation of indigenous languages into the formal education system. This includes, but not limited to developing curricular in these languages, training teachers who are fluent in them, and producing educational materials. For instance, countries like Ethiopia and Tanzania have implemented bilingual education programs that incorporate indigenous languages alongside official languages like Amharic and Swahili, respectively.^{xiv} From another perspective, media and literature also play a crucial role in language revitalization. The production of literature, films, music, and other media in indigenous languages not only preserves the languages but also promotes their use in everyday life. Radio and television programs in indigenous languages help reach a broader audience, especially in rural areas where these languages are still spoken.

Essentially, the digital revolution has opened new avenues for language preservation, with websites, apps, and social media platforms being used to teach and promote indigenous languages.^{xv} In addition to these efforts, cultural organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been instrumental in promoting indigenous languages. These organizations often organize language classes, cultural festivals, and workshops that celebrate and teach traditional languages and customs. They also engage in advocacy work, advocating for policies that support the recognition and protection of indigenous languages. For instance, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), an African Union institution, works to promote linguistic diversity and

multilingualism across the continent^{xvi} by encouraging the use of indigenous languages across Africa.

Despite these efforts, the revitalization of indigenous languages in Africa faces significant challenges. One of the primary obstacles is globalization, which often promotes the dominance of widely spoken languages such as English, French, and Portuguese. These languages are frequently seen as gateways to economic opportunities, leading to a preference for them over indigenous languages. This trend is exacerbated by the prevalence of these languages in education, business, and media, further marginalizing indigenous languages.^{xvii}

Another significant challenge is the mismanagement of resources available for language revitalization. Training of teachers, developing educational materials, and creating media content in indigenous languages require significant financial and human resources. Many African countries, grappling with economic constraints, may struggle to allocate sufficient funds to these initiatives, and when the funds are allocated, they are often mismanaged. Moreover, there may be a shortage of proficient speakers and educators capable of teaching these languages, especially in regions where language transmission has been disrupted.^{xviii}

Misguided understanding of modernity, progress, and social status is also a key factor among the challenges to the revitalization of indigenous languages in Africa. The dominance of colonial languages also poses a cultural challenge. In many African countries, speaking a colonial language is associated with modernity, progress, and social status. This perception leads to a devaluation of indigenous languages, especially among younger generations who may prioritize learning a global language over their mother tongue. Changing these attitudinal narratives requires

a concerted effort to raise awareness about the cultural and identity values of indigenous languages and to promote them as viable and valuable means of communication.^{xix}

The Pathways and Strategies to Achieving *Afrolinguacultural* Decolonization

Afrolinguacultural decolonisation is a construct of four concepts, namely: Africa, language, culture, and decolonisation, which I coined as one of the efforts in recapturing of the fading glory of the African continent. It is the application of language and culture as veritable instruments of decolonization, emphasizing the role of language and culture in reclaiming African identity and countering the lingering effects of colonialism. *Afrolinguacultural* decolonization can be achieved, among other things, through intellectual decolonisation by way of curricular reformation across institutions of learning in Africa to reflect African values, language, culture, identity, literature and media reformulation of government policies, legal reforms across to ensure functionality of law; and international dialogue, collaboration, and support.

The Inevitability of Intellectual Decolonization

In order to achieve decolonisation of African languages and culture, the need for intellectual decolonisation, employing African philosophical thoughts and anthropological insights is not only a necessary condition, but inevitable. Intellectual decolonisation in Africa involves reasserting African intellectual traditions and philosophies, challenging the dominance of Western cognitive postulates. African philosophy, encompassing both traditional and contemporary thoughts of the African people, has often been downplayed, marginalized, and indeed, misrepresented in academic discourses. Some of the philosophers of African descent like Kwasi Wiredu and Mogobe Ramose, and Julius Nyerere advocate for the recognition and integration of African philosophical frameworks, such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes

community and mutual respect, and Ujamaa which prioritizes the value of familyhood. These intellectual traditions offer alternative ways of understanding the world, prioritizing relational ethics and collective well-being over individualism^{xx} that is symbolically embedded in the Western philosophy and thought pattern. Some of the various strands of intellectual decolonisation are discussed below.

Reformulation of Academic Curricular

One significant aspect of intellectual decolonisation is the reform of educational curricular to include indigenous knowledge and perspectives by reflecting the values, language and cultural identity of the African people. Integration of indigenous languages into formal education systems is a necessary condition for decolonisation of Africa. While some progress has been made in this regard, much work needs to be done. Governments and educational institutions, as a matter of urgency, have to expeditiously develop comprehensive language policies that support bilingual or multilingual education, ensuring that students can learn in their mother tongues alongside national or international languages. This approach not only promotes linguistic diversity but also improves educational outcomes, as students are better able to grasp complex concepts in their native languages. The colonial education system often presents a Eurocentric worldview, neglecting, downplaying, and misrepresenting African histories and contributions. Reformulation of curricular aims to rectify this anomaly by incorporating African literature, history, languages, and sciences into the education system. This process not only enriches the learning experience but also fosters a sense of pride and identity among students. Efforts such as the African Renaissance initiative seeks to create curricular that reflect Africa's diverse cultural heritage and intellectual achievements^{xxi} across diverse ages.

The Place of Literature and Media

The role of literature and media in the quest for *Afrolinguacultural* decolonization cannot be over-emphasized. Literature and media play a pivotal role in promoting authentic African stories and perspectives among the league of nations. African authors, filmmakers, and artists are increasingly gaining international recognition for their work, which often addresses themes of identity, colonialism, and cultural resilience. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o use literature to explore complex social realities and challenge stereotypes. Similarly, African cinema, represented by filmmakers like Ousmane Sembène and Wanuri Kahiu, offers powerful narratives that counter mainstream portrayals of the continent. These creative expressions are vital for reclaiming cultural narratives and asserting African voices in the global arena^{xxii} that has increasingly become competitive in the 21st century. African authors, filmmakers, and artists must continue to be supported in their efforts to tell authentic stories that reflect the diversity and complexity of African experiences. This support can come in the form of grants, publishing opportunities, and platforms that amplify their voices. By creating and promoting content in indigenous languages and from indigenous perspectives, these creators challenge dominant narratives and provide alternative viewpoints that enrich the global cultural landscape.

Reformulation of Government Policies

Government policies at both national and regional levels play a key role in promoting multilingualism and cultural diversity in Africa, and will be of great necessity in *Afrolinguacultural* decolonization. Some of the African countries have recognized the importance of embracing their linguistic diversity as a means of fostering national unity and preserving their cultural heritage. For instance, South Africa's constitution acknowledges eleven (11) official languages, reflecting its commitment to multilingualism. Ethiopia, on the other

hand, promotes the use of regional languages in education and public administration, thereby supporting linguistic diversity and cultural expressions. These policies not only validate indigenous languages but also aim to empower communities by allowing them to access government services and education in their mother tongues.^{xxiii}

Legal Frameworks: A Catalyst for *Afrolinguacultural* Decolonization

It is of importance to note that legal frameworks are catalytic as veritable mechanism of decolonisation. Legal frameworks are crucial for the protection and promotion of indigenous languages and cultural expressions. Some African countries have enacted laws to safeguard linguistic and cultural rights, ensuring that indigenous languages and traditions are not only preserved but also developed. For example, the Cultural and Linguistic Communities Act (CLCA) in Ghana provides for the establishment of cultural and linguistic boards to oversee the promotion and protection of the country's diverse cultural expressions. Such legal measures are designed to prevent the marginalization of minority languages and cultures, promoting inclusivity and cultural preservation.^{xxiv} Without encapsulating inclusivity and cultural reservation in their laws, countries of Africa will find it more difficult to advance the course for decolonisation of not only African language and culture, but holistic decolonization of the continent.

Establishment, Strengthening, and Renaissance of Cultural Institutions

The establishment and strengthening of cultural institutions such as museums, cultural centers, and archives are crucial and inevitability for renaissance in decolonisation of African language and culture. These institutions play a critical role in preserving and promoting cultural heritage. They serve as spaces for the collection, preservation, and dissemination of cultural artifacts and

knowledge. Furthermore, they can provide educational programs and resources that teach the public about indigenous cultures and histories, fostering greater appreciation and understanding of language and culture. Cultural institutions can also host festivals and events that celebrate cultural diversity, bringing communities together and showcasing the richness of their traditions.

Revival of traditional policies is also key in the cultural renaissance and decolonisation of Africa. Achieving cultural renaissance in Africa involves a concerted effort to reclaim and promote traditional arts, music, dance, and rituals. These cultural expressions are vital for maintaining the social fabric and collective identity of communities. Traditional arts, such as weaving, pottery, and sculpture can be revitalized through workshops, cultural exhibitions, and the patronage of local artisans. Music and dance, integral to communal celebrations and storytelling, are being preserved and adapted for contemporary audiences. This revival not only fosters a sense of pride and continuity but also provides economic opportunities for artists and performers.^{xxv}

Revitalization of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Indigenous knowledge systems encompass a wide range of traditional wisdom and practices in areas like medicine, agriculture, and governance. These systems are to be re-emphasized as valuable resources for sustainable development. Traditional medicine, for example, offers insights into the use of native plants and holistic healing practices. In agriculture, indigenous methods such as mixed cropping and water conservation have to be revisited for their environmental benefits. Additionally, traditional governance systems, which often prioritise community consensus and social harmony, are being studied for their potential to inform modern governance models.^{xxvi}

International and Intercultural Dialogue, Collaboration, and Support

In addition to domestic efforts, international and intercultural dialogue, collaboration, and support are essential for successful decolonisation. Many African countries face financial and logistical challenges in their efforts to revitalize indigenous languages and cultures. International organizations, NGOs, and foreign governments can provide valuable resources and expertise to support these initiatives. For example, they can fund research projects, cultural programs, and educational reforms. They can also facilitate exchanges and partnerships that allow for the sharing of best practices and innovations in language and cultural preservation.

International and intercultural dialogue, support, and collaboration with global organizations provide the necessary funding and expertise to implement language and cultural policies. Organizations such as United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the African Union (AU) have been instrumental in advocating for the protection of cultural diversity and linguistic rights. UNESCO's Endangered Languages Program (UELPP), for instance, provides resources and support for the documentation and revitalization of threatened languages. Additionally, international funding agencies and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often partner with local governments and institutions to develop educational programs, cultural initiatives, and research projects aimed at preserving and promoting indigenous languages and cultural heritage. These collaborations help mobilize resources and share best practices, enhancing the effectiveness of national and regional efforts^{xxvii} and by so doing, aid in advancing decolonisation of peoples.

Community Engagement and Participation

Community engagement and participation are crucial for the success of decolonisation efforts. Grassroot movements and local initiatives often drive the most effective and sustainable changes. Communities must be actively involved in the processes of language revitalization and cultural preservation. This involvement includes decision-making roles in policy development, program implementation, and resource allocation. By empowering communities to take ownership of their cultural heritage, decolonisation efforts can be more responsive to local needs and priorities.

African Philosophical Cum Anthropological Ecumenism

I consider it necessary to include African philosophical cum anthropological ecumenism in this study, as a veritable approach for decolonisation of the continent's language and culture. In one of my previous publications, I advocated for African philosophical ecumenism. It is a call to all African philosophers at home and in diaspora to consciously and conscientiously collaborate and corroborate, galvanizing and employing their philosophical arsenals to leverage on the gains already made in African philosophy for the advancement of African philosophy. For me, ...the attitude of undermining the efforts of African philosophers by fellow African scholars should be discouraged, rather the mindset should be that of African philosophical ecumenism where each scholar and school collaborate and corroborate with others to synergize for the advancement of thoughts and ideas that are indigenous to Africa, enrich and employ them in tackling problems that are facing Africa and still extend generous hands of assistance in tackling global challenges.^{xxviii} This mindset has to be employed in the quest of decolonisation of Africa from the perspective of language and culture. In this study, therefore, I call on African philosophers and anthropologists at home and in diaspora to come together in an interdisciplinary framework to unify their philosophical and anthropological insights for the realization of

African decolonization, not only from the perspective of language and culture, but the entire Africa: body, soul, and spirit. If this unification is achieved, decolonisation of Africa will definitely and definitively be a realizable dream, yes, it will simply be a question of time.

Conclusion

In this study, it has been established that for Africa to advance in all spheres of human endeavor, the decolonization of her language and culture is both necessary and inevitable. *Afrolinguacultural* decolonization plays a crucial role in the broader process of post-colonial self-determination and identity formation. In many African societies, the legacy of colonialism has left deep-seated scars, including the marginalization of indigenous languages and the downplaying of indigenous cultural practices. Reclaiming these vital aspects of African heritage, African communities can foster a renewed sense of pride and identity. The reassertion of indigenous languages, for instance, not only helps preserve linguistic diversity but also serves as a vehicle for cultural expression and continuity. When people speak their mother tongues, they connect with their ancestors' wisdom and traditions, which is a powerful source of cultural identity, resilience and pride.

Moreover, cultural decolonisation involves the revival and promotion of traditional arts, music, dance, and rituals, all of which are fundamental to the continents' advancement. These cultural expressions provide a way for people to celebrate their heritage and share it with future generations, ensuring that cultural knowledge is not lost. The revival of traditional practices also offers economic opportunities, as cultural industries can be developed to support local artisans and performers, thereby contributing to community development and sustainability. Cultural pride and self-determination are essential for post-colonial Africa to overcome the psychological and social effects of colonialism. When communities

embrace their cultural heritage, they build a collective identity that resists the homogenizing pressures of globalization. This collective identity strengthens social cohesion and solidarity, providing a foundation for collective action and political empowerment. It also challenges the lingering perception of African cultures as inferior or primitive, asserting African values and relevance in the modern world. In this way, language and cultural decolonisation contribute significantly to the broader struggle for political, economic, and social justice in post-colonial Africa.

African language and cultural decolonisation are essential components of the broader decolonisation process in post-colonial Africa. These efforts help restore cultural pride, assert collective identity, and promote self-determination. While significant progress has been made, there is still much work to be done. By pursuing strategies that integrate indigenous languages and cultures into education, strengthen cultural institutions, foster international collaboration, support creative expressions, and engage communities, post-colonial Africa will continue to advance the decolonisation agenda and build a more just and equitable future for the Africans of today and future generations.

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