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Decolonising intercultural theology and research: What role for cultural outsiders?

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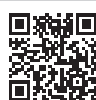

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This article addresses some reasons and requirements for intercultural theologising as boundary-crossing interaction to be decolonised and hold decolonising potential itself. Decolonialism being concerned with both those in 'marginalised' and in 'privileged' positions, this article focusses on some of the latter's challenges, responsibilities and opportunities. Grounding the argument in writings of scholars from disciplines like linguistics, cultural anthropology, decolonial studies and various strands of theology both from the Global South and the Global West, epistemological motivators for a decolonising theology will be sketched in the first step. The second step involves a consideration of an appropriate methodology called 'chosen vulnerability'. Central to it would be the learning and using of vernacular languages in order to move towards cross-cultural understanding from emic perspectives. In step three, an attempt at implementing such will be portrayed that was a core component of a recently completed interdisciplinary PhD project. Based on contextual learning of isiXhosa, several church-related concepts in English and isiXhosa were investigated and compared in a subsidiary study. The findings are used to illustrate how chosen vulnerability can enable humble contributions to decolonising theologies. This is achieved through emic approaches and perspectivism.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article raises awareness for sometimes hidden epistemic inequalities and suggests ways in which those in relative cultural-linguistic power can reduce the imbalance. This is of relevance primarily to intercultural theology. In turn, such insights from intercultural theology can benefit academic research in cross-cultural contexts in general.

Keywords: intercultural theology; research methodologies; epistemologies; coloniality of knowledge; REACH SA/CESA; decolonising theology; chosen vulnerability; cultural linguistics; syncretism; perspectivism.

Introduction

> People want to interpret Christianity by standards of exegesis and doctrine familiar to them, something that the Christendom model of the church warranted. World Christianity, by contrast, must be interpreted by a plurality of models of inculturation in line with the variety of local idioms and practices. (Sanneh 2003:35)

The discourse on decolonising academia, education, the sciences, theology, among others, frequently returns to the issue of structural inequalities in the area of epistemologies. Philip la G. du Toit (2023) even points out that a postcolonial critique of Western epistemological perspectives does not live up to its supposed nature if it does not inherently abandon or at least relativise the very epistemologies it seeks to re-evaluate. It is striking, though, that the dominance of global languages like English or the potential of indigenous languages in reducing epistemic inequalities is given little attention in this regard. The requirement of submitting the manuscripts for this topical collection on decolonialism *in English* – understandable as it might be – is an ironic illustration of at least a part of the problem. Santos (2016) claims:

> … that the language that dominated the colonial or imperial contact zone […] is responsible for the very unpronounceability of some of the central aspirations of the knowledges and practices that were oppressed in the colonial contact zone. (p. 232)

Irrespective of the degree to which we agree with him, the question needs to be asked how coloniality can be challenged that is linked to the supremacy of English and the imposition of outside cultural-linguistic categories. In our case, this refers both to academic contexts and the

Note: Special Collection: Decolonialism in Theology today.

practice of intercultural theology which are often based on world languages. Intercultural theology in this article shall refer to 'theological interaction' by those identifying as Christians or Christ-followers (Paas 2017:137), who have their roots in various 'cultural, religious, societal, and other contexts' (Wrogemann 2021:3). We deal, therefore, with the practice of a 'boundary-crossing', 'in-between theology' (Wrogemann 2021) that 'interweaves the subject areas of mission, culture, and religions' (Wrogemann 2021:4).

This article deals specifically with the place of cultural outsiders of Eurocentric[1] heritage in both intercultural theologising and research, and the question under what conditions they can play a constructive role for the ambiguous goal of decolonising theologies. This refers to the decolonisation of theologies as well as to attaining theologies with decolonising potential. The first section on 'epistemological motivators' considers cultural-linguistic insights that provoke (further) decolonisation, followed by stimuli from the field of intercultural theology. Building on this, the second part will be concerned with adequate methodologies that might be able to contribute to decolonising theologies in practice and research. The concept proposed will be that of 'chosen vulnerability'. The third major section consists of a cultural-linguistic case study that illustrates one way of implementing such in research in intercultural contexts. It will be concluded that gaining emic perspectives through vernacular languages can create a basis for constructive, non-domineering intercultural engagement. The inevitable perspectivism this entails can be harnessed for greater equity.

Epistemological motivators: Why is decolonising theology necessary?

Cultural-linguistic impetus

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, a prominent representative of the school of (de)coloniality, differentiates between three core areas of coloniality, namely, the colonialities of power, of knowledge, and of being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:11f). The epistemic inequalities that are the focus of the coloniality of knowledge cannot be appreciated without reference to language systems and hierarchies of languages. A 'repair' of the broken post-apartheid society cannot simply rely on dialogue, hold Erasmus and Garuba. With respect to 'the politics of language', they suggest that, instead, 'repair is the *foundation* for intersubjective dialogue' (Erasmus & Garuba 2017:350, [*author's own emphasis*]).

Languages that became globalised through colonial expansion like French, Spanish or English have been appropriated the world over. On the one hand, there is agency involved in such processes, for example in the conscious adoption of English for the resistance against colonialism (Brutt-Griffler 2002:65) or when people use English to – mostly unconsciously – 'encode and express their own cultural conceptualisations and worldview' (Sharifian 2017:178).[2] On the other hand, the widespread use of such global languages in certain contexts also entails 'that epistemic authority is removed from speakers of other, non-metropolitan languages' (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021:20). Language is tied up with how people conceptualise, respond to and inhabit reality, that is 'culture' (see e.g., wa Thiong'o 1986:15), to the extent that Michael Agar coined the term 'languaculture' (Agar 2002:60). An understanding of the 'cultural other' that reaches a certain depth would require familiarising oneself with the respective context *including* its language. Translation alone, even if it appears plausible, is regarded as inadequate for achieving cultural insider perspectives (Spivak 1993:191ff).

It is in the absence of familiarity with the 'languaculture' of the other or in the ignorance of the 'ontological inseparability between ways of languaging and ways of living and knowing' (Veronelli 2015:122) that the coloniality of language can manifest itself. An apparent 'universality of European knowledge' was achieved through a form of '[*t*]ranslation [*that*] selectively "re-wrote" indigenous knowledge in idioms that made available to colonizers powerful frames for making sense of, interacting with and managing worlds of difference' (Stroud & Kerfoot 2021:23). This was enabled by a modernist perception of languages as abstract systems (Veronelli 2015:119) which ignored that language cannot be 'a neutral medium for the transmission and reception of pre-existing knowledge [*but is instead*] the key ingredient in the very constitution of knowledge' (Jaworski & Coupland 2014:3). The implicit universalism that was part and parcel of Western epistemologies amounted for Santos to a 'production as absent' or 'non-existent' of that which did not fit the 'exclusive canons' of 'modern science and high culture' (Santos 2016:172). He makes a case for acknowledging 'the incompleteness of all knowledges' (Santos 2016:189), which matches Viveiros de Castro's proposal of perspectivist translation or 'equivocation' (Viveiros de Castro 2004:5–7). This is a form of translation that is rooted in the acknowledgment of different ontologies, of different 'worlds'. It brings to light ambiguity and difference, rather than implying similarity or sameness. Viveiros de Castro (2004) suggests:

> To translate is to situate oneself in the space of the equivocation and to dwell there. It is not to unmake the equivocation [*since this would be to suppose it never existed in the first place*] but precisely the opposite is true. To translate is to emphasize or potentialize the equivocation, that is, to open and widen the space imagined not to exist between the conceptual languages in contact, a space that the equivocation precisely concealed. […] To translate is to presume that an equivocation always exists; it is to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocality – the essential similarity – between what the Other and We are saying. (p. 10)

Colonialist racism tends to subjugate difference and impose a distorted version of it while liberal non-racialism denies difference (Erasmus 2017:200). On the contrary, presuming equivocation for Viveiros de Castro recognises

1. In this article, I understand Eurocentric or Western to refer to (post-) enlightenment theological and philosophical traditions that are rooted in Western Europe and have – often through settler colonialism – taken hold in North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, among others.

2. Cultural conceptualisations refer to aspects of human cognition like categories, schemas or metaphors that are shared at the level of 'cultural' or speech communities but are *heterogeneously* distributed (Sharifian 2003:190f).

that difference exists. Because of different ontologies at play, however, we are often not able to fully grasp and to define it. And yet, we are invited to acknowledge it, even to be curious about it as long as our curiosity refrains from being intrusive. Appreciating such difference which can be expressed as well as concealed by a shared language can lead to encounter on more equal terms. In this way, epistemic inequalities would be challenged that can – for example through intercultural use of the dominant language – be constitutive even of relationships that are deemed to be based on equality.

Impetus from intercultural theology

Just as languages used to be – or, oftentimes, still are – taken as abstract, a-contextual systems, so too can (systematic) theologies be conceptualised as a-cultural or transcultural that can or should be shared cross-culturally, thereby producing as inferior or absent indigenous ways of knowing. The intrinsic connection of a language with 'culture', with a context, is instrumental in this. Tshehla (2003) asked:

> Why, when I am being trained to work among Basotho, should my studies be entirely in English? Why is it nobody's concern whether or not I can 'translate' my theological training into a medium that my people can relate to? How shall I appreciate and preach from the Sesotho Bible and worldview when all I have consulted in my theological reflection [*and theorizing*] is a plethora of foreign commentaries? (p. 178)

John Flett wrote extensively on the question of what the imagined apostolicity – the unity of the Church in time and space – is based on. Considering the spread of Christianity across the globe, he made it clear that '[*i*]t is not possible to disentangle Christianity from its cultural form, because it is not possible to have a language-less Christianity, a Christianity without a community' (Flett 2016276; see also Roxborogh 2014:4). If this is not recognised, 'Christian' language or cultural forms that differ from Christian tradition that is regarded as normative may be perceived as illegitimate or distortion of the gospel. Recognising it, on the other hand, does not automatically validate all cultural phenomena as (potentially) Christian. Rather, it points to the need of evaluating the Christian identity of an expression of 'faith' from within the framework of the culture that gives it meaning – a point we shall return to in the following section. Hence, we are reminded by Lamin Sanneh (2003:53), that 'conversion puts the gospel through the crucible of its host culture, but Europe is not host to Africa in the things of God'.

Flett observed that pertaining to Western churches' perceptions of and relating to churches in the South, Christian unity is often imagined based on a 'cultural overlap between the churches of the West and wider world Christianity', the extent of which, he suggests, is in fact far more limited than envisioned (Flett 2016:163). Since apostolicity is here based on the 'expectation of a dominant cultural form' (Flett 2016) or 'the supposed a priori universality of the church as experienced in the West', diversity, then, 'is cherished to the extent that it reinforces and does not intrude on the specific Western cultural heritage of the universal church' (Flett 2016:182). Flett regards such perceptions as rooted in an inadvertent understanding of the (Western, Protestant) Church having its own culture. The transmission of faith cross-culturally then amounts to a 'catechism into the Christian *habitus*'[3] (Flett 2016:175, [*emphasis original*]), 'a form of cultural proselytism' (Flett 2016:177; see also Walls 2004:6). Flett (2016) concludes:

> … that the dominant ecumenical model for apostolicity, that of cultural continuity, mandates colonization […] with all that this entails for uneven power relationships, paternalism, building relationships of dependence and, finally, maintaining a state of Christian infancy. (p. 181)

In contrast to this dilemma but in line with Flett's general argument, Mika Vähäkangas emphasises that in light of 'the social and religious reality of many religions and truth-claims' (Vähäkangas 2020:6), '[*there can be no universal theology*] as all theology is crafted in context' (Vähäkangas 2020:49; see also Tennent 2007:258). Vähäkangas, while acknowledging his own postmodernist position, distances himself from absolute relativism. Along with – or as part of – tradition, he does recognise the biblical text as well as Christ as central to Christian identity. To him, it is clear, though, that the translatability of the gospel that Sanneh (1989) brought to attention, does not refer merely to the Bible itself 'but that Christian faith can find its concrete forms, become Christianity, within different cultures' (Vähäkangas 2020:173, see also Flett 2016:273). For Vähäkangas, who uses the terminology of syncretism in its neutral, non-pejorative form, this implies that 'Christian theology must embrace the idea of the syncretistic nature of Christianity and thereby theology itself' (Vähäkangas 2020:8). Incarnation being a central aspect of Christian doctrine in most parts of Christianity (Vähäkangas 2020:119), the connecting with and taking root in local contexts would inevitably lead to a form of mixing (see also Roxborogh 2014:4). What enabled, especially Protestants to reject syncretism as illegitimate while being open to or encouraging expressions of faith inspired by indigenous cultures, is, in Vähäkanga's eyes, the misleading separation of culture from religion (Vähäkangas 2020:144). Having explained how religion and culture are 'intrinsically interwoven' (Vähäkangas 2020), he concludes that 'both translatability and the syncretistic nature of Christianity are dimensions of the contextuality of Christian faith and theology' (Vähäkangas 2020:145).

In a similar manner, Bediako rejects the charge of 'illegitimate syncretism' levelled against African indigenous churches. He writes that 'the clue to the persistence of the traditional world-view lies in the spiritual churches' vernacular hearing and perception of the Christian evangel through the vernacular Scriptures' (Bediako 1995:66). These intrinsic connections between culture and religion and the resulting syncretistic nature of Christian faith are discussed by Jim Harries as well, examining them in the context of both African traditions and Western evangelicalism. In the case of the former, Harries shows that biblical interpretation tends to follow prompts given by reality perceived through local eyes – in particular

3. According to Bourdieu, 'the habitus, as the Latin indicates, is something *non-natural*, a set of *acquired* characteristics which are the product of social conditions and which, for that reason, may be totally or partially common to people who have been the product of similar social conditions' (Bourdieu 2016:45 [*emphasis original*]).

through the cultural-linguistic concepts available to people. This may 'confirm and strengthen the hold of […] indigenous beliefs over people's contemporary lives' (Harries 2017:246), for example 'that misfortune arises from the breaking of taboos' (Harries 2017:248). He puts such views down to prominent 'monistic' understandings of the world which 'do not separate the spiritual from the material' (Harries 2017). Regarding Western evangelical Christians, Harries suggests that because of its entanglement with the enlightenment tradition and Western modernity, Western Protestant Christianity has had to shape its identity and epistemologies in relation to scientific worldviews. This, according to Harries, is exemplified for example by apologetics drawing on science to defend the rationality of the Christian faith or by struggling to make sense of the nature of biblical 'miracles' (Harries 2017:251, 255). He explains how, in the last 50 years, Western evangelicals became aware of the dualistic nature of their own faith tradition and recognised it as a truncated form of what ought to be – and once was – an all-encompassing expression of Christianity.[4] Ironically, though, and echoing Du Toit referred to in the introduction, their attempts to move beyond a 'merely' spiritual understanding of the gospel were themselves rooted in the very dualism they were trying to overcome, writes Harries (2017):

> Holistic gospel represents a dependence on dualism as a means of producing holism insofar as the non-spiritual products and thinking that are to supplement monism in places like Africa arise from the very dualistic West; that is, 'holistic' or 'integral' gospel tends strongly to be gospel plus aid from the West. (p. 254)

He concludes that 'syncretism' both in the West and in Africa should be recognised as transiently legitimate in the sense that it is both an inevitable outcome of Christianity having to be contextual and always open to be regarded as 'theology (or orthodoxy) in process' (Harries 2017:258). There remains therefore a tension. On the one hand, there is the necessary appropriation of the gospel on particular, local terms. On the other hand, not every form of syncretism will be regarded as appropriate, even for members of the local community (Roxborogh 2014:6), as the *Deutsche Kirche* in Nazi Germany, apartheid theology in South Africa or the current support for military imperialism by the Russian Orthodox church give evidence to.

What is important to us in respect of the consideration of decolonising theology is the following: both the transmission of the gospel and the possible challenging of instances of it that are regarded as misguided inculturation need to happen from the inside, endogenously, based on the cultural-linguistic concepts and categories available to a given community that allow it to make sense of its message (Bediako 1995:210). Not appreciating that '[*p*]eople receive new ideas only in terms of the ideas they already have' (Sanneh 2003:42) and imposing truths that require a severing from local traditions rather than taking root *in* them, leads to 'replacing what is there with something else' rather than conversion (Sanneh 2003:43). This would appropriately be referred to as coloniality. Challenging it requires both awareness of the above as well as a methodology that takes the plurality of contexts into account.

Methodological drivers: What might decolonising theologies look like?

Surely, the dismantling of coloniality – be it in (intercultural) theologising, in secular society or in academia – cannot be achieved simply by seeking (in Willie James Jennings' terms) 'cultural intimacy and joining'. Colonial structures of inequality can be constitutive of the relationships under (re) construction, as was shown with respect to epistemic inequalities produced by the use of a global language. If this is the case, the risk is that the process will result in a 'kind of joining that is assimilationist and that created what Walter Mignolo, following the insights of Frantz Fanon, termed the "colonial wound"' (Jennings 2010:114). As we have seen, the coloniality of knowledge – including in the realm of intercultural theology – results from and is perpetuated by the ignorance of the 'ontological inseparability' of language and culture and the concomitant reliance on the assumed universality of global languages like English. If we take the epistemological motivators for decolonising theologies as starting point, what would it take to find ways of relating that remedy patterns of unhealthy foreign dominance?

It seems clear that a theologising that is being decolonised and can itself be a decolonising force needs to begin with an acknowledgment and embracing of difference. At times, its existence and nature may be more, at other times less, obvious. In the intercultural contact zone, one key question will be to what extent the language used allows difference to come to light or, conversely, causes it to be concealed. For ministry workers and researchers of Eurocentric background working in African contexts, this may mean using an African language which 'makes possible a [*culture's*] genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next', in the words of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986:15). According to Harries, this would prevent a state where 'true African contexts and thinking continue[*s*] to be hidden' (Harries 2017:258). This thought is reflected also in Tshehla (2002:19).

An acceptance of difference will need to be followed by engaging it in appropriate ways. As was already indicated above, appropriate will be deemed that which manages to relate on the terms of the other. This would avoid 'cultural injustice', that is requiring people 'to submit to the burdensome condition of suspending – or more permanently surrendering – what they naturally take for granted, and then to begin to depend on what someone else takes for granted' (Kwenda 2003:70). Harries calls such *emic* approaches of engagement which work 'from the inside, on the basis of understanding, on the side of those who have a grasp of pre-existing perceived realities' (Harries 2017:258). Similarly, Vähäkangas sees in emic approaches the scope for a 'limited normativity'. It would take into account 'the

4. This process was significantly influenced by theologians from the Global South, writes Timothy Joset in the chapter 'When the South Comes North: The 1970s' (Joset 2023:91–108).

pluralistic context while not necessarily applying relativistic principles within the theological system itself' (Vähäkangas 2020:142). It thus holds the possibility of entering 'the language game of the other providing the community in question the possibility of accepting or rejecting the challenge' (Vähäkangas 2020:165). Vähäkangas suggests this as an adequate way of engaging in the current pluralist context, enabling fruitful intercultural – and, by implication, interreligious – interaction, while leaving the onus of 'constructive theologizing for the community' in question (Vähäkangas 2020).

For those raised and trained in systematic theologies with universalising tendencies that were described and critiqued in the section on intercultural theology, the question may be how to entertain such open dialogues 'on the terms of the other' without betraying one's own convictions and values. It may help to realise that it is not one's ontology that is being relativised. Rather, it is different epistemological and ontological systems that force – or invite – one to reconsider how the truths one is committed to might be expressed in the context of a different ontology. Communicating based on the cultural-linguistic terms of the other may make it nigh impossible to say what one has taken to be self-evident on one's own terms. Such is the nature of languages, or, languacultures. However, accepting what others take for granted does not have to mean giving up one's own convictions. Important is a posture that acknowledges the existence – and by implication, dignity – of the other's cultural cognition. This can be referred to as epistemological humility or, in Jennings' terms, 'missional cultural submission': 'The act of translating is the unrelenting submission to another people's voices for the sake of speaking with them. Yet it is precisely this submission that is denied in the overarching colonialist process of translation' (Jennings 2010:148). This missional cultural submission resonates with Wrogemann's concept of 'association from a distance', an essentially 'self-depowering and […] decolonial way of building relationships' (Grohmann 2023:211). In the face of 'various churches lead[*ing*] the Christian life in fundamentally different ways', Wrogemann suggested it 'could serve as a model that combines the issue of ecumenical "unity" with the value of enduring plurality' (Wrogemann 2016:381).

Of course, relating in this way, be it in cultural-linguistic or theological terms, can be experienced as threatening. The equivocation Viveiros de Castro speaks of based on Amerindian perspectivist anthropology, refers not just to different ways of viewing the world but to the possibility of 'the world' *being* different for those holding these perspectives (Viveiros de Castro 2004:11). It is such perceived incommensurability that he understands as a justification for comparison, for study, for the quest to understand. However, Viveiros de Castro suggests that with equivocation, the value lies not in discovering similarities, even if these mean we notice mutual misunderstanding between different groups of people. He holds that '[*t*]he crucial point here is not the empirical fact that misunderstandings exist, but the transcendental fact that it was not the *same* misunderstanding' (Viveiros de Castro 2004, [*emphasis original*]). Stroud and Kerfoot (2021:37) pertinently observe that '[*o*]ne of the consequences of equivocal translation – not necessarily understanding the other, not being able to assume knowledge of the other – is uncertainty and vulnerability.' In other words, seeking to encounter others on their terms may lead to a destabilising of what one has always taken for granted oneself. Acceptance of the other, communication, emotional security as well as inner spiritual resources are suggested by Whiteman (2024:173 f.) as having the potential to attenuate such stress that results from deep cross-cultural engagement.

Regarding theologies that are being decolonised and hold decolonising potential themselves, I have so far argued for the need to move towards an understanding of and communication with the other based on emic perspectives. In a last step, we will look at how the uncertainty and vulnerability that Stroud and Kerfoot referred to may be used constructively for our ends. I will call the concept I am herewith proposing 'chosen vulnerability'. Chosen vulnerability acts upon the realisation of difference by seeking exposure to the life-worlds of the others and by becoming vulnerable to them. First and foremost, it takes seriously the different cultural-linguistic 'worlds' by committing to learning and using the language(s) of a certain speech community. Because languages are part of people's lived realities, the learning would ideally take place not in a conventional classroom setting but relationally. Despite its potential for profound learning of cultural conceptualisations, this 'vulnerable' approach comes at a cost. Especially in cases where language ideologies like 'Anglonormativity' (Christie & McKinney 2017:166) have created chasms between the high and low values associated with certain languages, the learning and using of a language of lower status may not always be understood or appreciated by people. In particular, one may meet such resistance where people hope their desire for *impucuko* (isiXhosa, translated e.g. as 'advancement', 'progress', 'civilisation' or 'development' [cf. Sigenu 2021]) to be realised, among other means, through acquiring a good grasp of a high-status language (Kamwangamalu 2003; Kinzler, Shutts & Spelke 2012:226).

Choosing vulnerability might also include avoiding contexts where supposed meta-languages like English are used that hinder rather than facilitate growing in awareness of cultural conceptualisations.[5] This may have its own repercussions or consequences, but open up potential for further growth and more equal intercultural togetherness and collaboration. In many African contexts, trying to get exposure to communities where one indigenous language is dominant, those of relative privilege may have to spend significant time where there is economic hardship, sometimes also violence and crime. Choosing vulnerability is therefore a holistic practice that can find motivation in examples of sacrificial love in the Scriptures.

And lastly, if vulnerability is to be embraced rather than overcome, it would require a presence in such contexts that does not build on the *sharing* of privilege, as if buying entry into

5. This paragraph touches on ideas first formulated in Grohmann (2024:8–9).

a certain social setting. Rather, it would involve a learning of what relating means if one *gives up* privilege and starts to rely on the other: becoming a guest instead of offering hospitality, accepting to be taught instead of being a teacher, seeking to understand rather than offering 'superior' knowledge. Such a positionality of chosen vulnerability – 'positioning [*oneself*] as a needy patron' in patronage cultures (Davis & Dale 2024:66) – can be considered an adequate methodology both for intercultural theological practice as well as for research that involves crossing cultural-linguistic bounds.

Towards decolonising research and intercultural theology: A case study

Based on the above, what could an approach look like practically that intends to contribute to decolonising both intercultural theology and academic research? The preceding thoughts are not just theoretical explorations but concepts that I have been seeking to 'inhabit' for several years. Therefore, I am going to use some of my own choices, experiences, research approaches and findings as illustration for one way of implementing chosen vulnerability.[6]

The isiXhosa concept study as part of a larger research project

What I am going to present here as an example of an attempted outworking of chosen vulnerability was a subsidiary part of my interdisciplinary PhD project. Through the latter, and using ethnographic methods, I sought a better understanding of white people's approaches to post-apartheid reconciliation in an increasingly multiracial suburban church in Cape Town. This was of particular interest because of the high commitment of the church to building a 'reconciled', multicultural community, on the one hand, while all this took place against a backdrop of 'white dominance' in respect of language, cultural practices, theology and place, on the other. The research question on how white people in this congregation imagined and practised reconciliation, sought to shed light on how coloniality was perceived and dealt with in such an environment (Grohmann 2023:11f).

Because of an awareness of linguistic inequalities, I included the learning of isiXhosa as the black South African language most spoken in the Western Cape province in my research project from an early stage onwards. This learning plus regularly spending time in an isiXhosa-based African Initiated Church (AIC) in a local township enabled a growing awareness of cultural-linguistic differences. I ended up studying the semantics of three isiXhosa-English pairs of terms that were relevant to my main, multiracial research site. This subsidiary study allowed me to 'showcase some examples of how the sole reliance on English at [*the*] church risks overlooking conceptual differences in cross-cultural communication which has a bearing on the continued "white dominance" even with respect to certain church practices' (Grohmann 2023:159).

6.At the time of my PhD project, I was still lacking this terminology. In spite of a long journey of intense engagement with Jim Harries' writings on 'Vulnerable Mission' (see e.g., Harries 2011, 2013, 2019, 2021, 2023), it has only been recently that I started to develop and flesh out the concept of *chosen vulnerability*.

Research methods and design

Apart from learning language with an approach that was 'primarily sociocultural in nature' (Brumleve & Brumleve 2019:157), I attended a congregation of the AIC St John's Apostolic Faith Mission in Langa, Cape Town for eight services over a period of 9 months. I visited this church alongside the attendance of gatherings at my main research site not because I had the idea of the isiXhosa-English concept study already clearly in my mind; this only emerged as the research project progressed. Rather (Grohmann 2023):

> … to better appreciate the influence of [*Western*] English languaculture on the multicultural context at [*my main research site*], I needed to also expose myself to a context where the same was absent. (pp. 159–160)

I found this context in a township congregation that boldly 'integrate[*d*] traditional African worldviews and Christianity' (Grohmann 2023:160). It enabled me to gain a better understanding of the way culture, language and theology are intertwined.

At St John's, I used participant observation during the Sunday services as well as intentional but informal conversations with the pastor outside of these gatherings to reflect on and seek clarification relating to my observations. I was aware that my understanding was going to be limited, on the one hand, from a cultural-linguistic point of view and my still rather early stages of language-learning. On the other hand, from conversations and Linda Thomas' ethnographic study of another St John's congregation (Thomas 1999) I knew that a lot of the healing rituals and personal accompaniment of people was bound to happen outside of Sunday services at times and places which I was unable to attend.

The motivation behind consistently exposing myself to this church in a sociocultural environment rather foreign to me was not just the 'collection of data' – a term that could well conceal that I was doing research involving human beings endowed with dignity and agency. Rather, I felt compelled to follow up on the inkling I got from studying coloniality and possibilities of its dismantling. If I wanted to undermine the power structures I sought to critique but that I was embedded – and perhaps complicit – in myself, I needed to explore what 'becoming vulnerable' might mean in this concrete South African reality. An extract from my research diary hints at the emotional cost of this endeavour (Grohmann 2023):

> I chose to regularly spend time in [*the township*] for my research purposes, relying solely on a black language and without offering any financial incentives to the church or individuals. […] These two convictions, together with my limitations in the grasp of the language, left me in a place of utter vulnerability. I had nothing to offer to people except my sincerity and my willingness to integrate to the best of my (in)ability. This made me dependent on their kindness and their patience with me. […] Remaining faithful transpired to be a huge challenge. […] each and every point of contact so far has been marked by cross-cultural stress: 'my impression is that all my interaction with St John's so far is always a striving for establishing trust between them and me.' (pp. 163–164)

My exposure to these social settings by participant observation as well as the conversations I held in both research fields contributed to the selection of three distinct concepts to be studied. Four isiXhosa home language speakers from different social, gender and denominational backgrounds agreed to be interviewed by me to explore the meanings and usages of the terms in question in isiXhosa dominated contexts. This enabled an approximation of an emic perspective which – together with the etic perspective of observation – was well-suited to identify, analyse and understand cultural conceptualisations. Once the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, I clarified certain terms and phrases with the help of my language tutor. All of that as well as the thematic analysis of the data were done using isiXhosa. There was also an element of verification involved in the study. Contrary to what had been suggested by some, however, 'the findings of this isiXhosa concept study needed to be evaluated [*not by isiXhosa home language speakers but*] by members of the target audience, which happens to be English speakers rooted in Western ontological traditions' (Grohmann 2023:168) and well acquainted with isiXhosa.

In writing up the findings, I worked on the premise 'that equivalence in meaning will often not be achievable and "translations" will of necessity have to be understood as approximations' (Grohmann 2023:166). In order to highlight this 'equivocation', that is, that isiXhosa concepts because of a different system of categorisation hardly find accurate expression in English (cf. Sharifian 2003:198), I used a lot of isiXhosa words in the otherwise English text. For better readability, though, for those unfamiliar with isiXhosa, I stuck to retaining the infinitive form of the verbs I investigated.

Results

The findings will be presented in an abridged form of varied length. They include motivation, analysis and conclusions.

On *ukushumayela* or 'to preach'

The congregation where the main part of my field research took place belongs to the Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church of South Africa (REACH SA[7]). While REACH SA in its handbook holds that the practice of preaching in church services is reserved for men, it also affirms a high regard for its female members and their giftings (REACH SA 2023:15f). At my main research site, women played an integral part of church services including by giving testimonies. At St John's, though, *ukushumayela* was not only a communal activity, it also involved both men and women. Moreover, what appeared to be a giving of testimonies was also referred to as *ukushumayela*. With this concept study, my aim was 'to find out whether *ukushumayela* is generally understood as not being restricted to Bible exposition, in which case the REACH SA policy of excluding women from preaching might be based on a Western English understanding of the term "preaching"' (Grohmann 2023:174f). It required me to also enquire about the understanding of *ukungqina* [giving testimony].

The research participants largely agreed that *ukushumayela* referred to '"*[k]ukuthetha ngelizwi likaThixo*" ["to speak about the word of God" – Babalwa]' (Grohmann 2023:175). Two out of four regarded *ukungqina* as essentially the same practice as *ukushumayela*. The other two subsumed *ukungqina* under *ukushumayela* depending on '"whether they open the Bible or not" *("ukuba bavule ibhayibhile na" – Siyabonga*)' (Grohmann (2023:176). The two men saw no gender-based restrictions on the practice of *ukushumayela,* while the two women understood it as a men's task, at least as long as men are present. Regarding *ukungqina*, only Nonceba from the Methodist church […] said that this practice was reserved for men in services attended by everyone; women were allowed to *ukungqina* when they were on their own. The others all held the view that it was everyone's right to *ukungqina* (Grohmann 2023):

> *… wonke umntu uvumelekile ukunika ubungqina ecaweni ngoba na … noba ndim ndingumntu ongumama uThixo uyandenzela izinto ndizibone, so ndinalo ilungelo lokunika ubungqina ecaweni* [… every person is allowed to give a testimony, because I as a woman have seen things that God did to me, so I have the right to testify to that at church - Babalwa]. (p. 177)

Apart from slightly diverging understandings as to the essence of *ukushumayela* and *ukungqina* as well as the associated gender roles, it became clear that the semantic gap between the two concepts was much smaller in isiXhosa than the corresponding gap between 'to preach' and 'to give testimony' in Western English: '*Ukungqina* in a church context seems to constitute at least a subcategory of *ukushumayela*, so that *ukungqina* can often be referred to as *ukushumayela*' (Grohmann 2023:177). Conversely, in Western English, they tend to remain distinct. This becomes even more significant if one considers that in various translations of the isiXhosa Bible, the term *ukushumayela* is frequently used in places as well where English Bibles use the term 'prophesying', for both men and women. Restricting the practice of preaching to men while allowing women to testify therefore appeared to be based on a theological resolution of the issue that 'only makes sense in white-dominated English-medium churches such as in the REACH SA denomination'; 'separating [*ukushumayela* and *ukungqina*] according to gender does not seem to make as much sense in a Xhosa-dominated context' (Grohmann 2023:178).

On *ukuthandaza* or 'to pray'

I had observed that at the multiracial and theoretically multilingual church, prayer never happened simultaneously, and it almost exclusively took place in English. One reason given for the latter was that it might be difficult for people to assent to a prayer by another person if the content remained unintelligible to them. In contrast, at the isiXhosa-based St John's congregation, prayer tended to be practised simultaneously in the form of 'mass prayer'. My objective was to clarify the meanings associated with *ukuthandaza*

7.REACH SA was formerly known as CESA, the Church of England in South Africa.

across denominational backgrounds and to understand, to what extent 'prayer' practised at my main research site could be regarded as an equivalent of *ukuthandaza* (Grohmann 2023:169f).

On the one hand, prayer was portrayed as a personal way of relating 'to *Thixo* or *Nkulunkulu* (words that are usually translated as "God")' (Grohmann 2023:170), and it was acknowledged that at times it may be important to hear what others are saying:

> In the case of the apparently common practice of simultaneous *ukuthandaza*, everyone agreed that it was not just impossible but also not necessary to hear what other people are saying. This comes with the understanding that *ukuthandaza* here is about one's personal communication with Thixo […]. Simultaneous *ukuthandaza* means the performance of one's personal communication with God as a communal practice. Although here it is considered utterly unimportant for others to understand what I am saying, this form of *ukuthandaza* appears to be an integral component of collective worship. (p. 171)

It became clear that despite *ukuthandaza* [prayer] having both personal and communal aspects, divergences in meaning and practice were at least partly due to expressions of Christianity in vastly different ontological contexts. The traditional evangelical orientation of white people at my main research site was that prayer was to build up the community – hence what individuals said needed to be heard and understood. In many contemporary African Christian contexts, however, community appears to be 'taken as a given and […] everyone is part of [*it*]. It cannot be joined and does not need to be sought for its own sake […] (Kroesbergen 2019:15)' (Grohmann 2023:173). It was further acknowledged that reconciling the different ways of practising *ukuthandaza* [prayer] might actually present churches with the challenge of having to bridge cultural and religious divides. However, using languages besides English and finding ways to include 'mass prayer' could make room for more cultural diversity (Grohmann 2023:173–174).

On *umtshato* or '(starting a) marriage'

This third pair of terms dealt with the issue of possibly accepting the practice of *ilobola* as a legitimately Christian way of starting a marriage. During my field research, the predominantly white eldership at the multiracial church had concluded that it was indeed acceptable and did not have to be followed up by a church ceremony (Grohmann 2023:178f). Intriguingly:

> [*i*]n order for [*this*] custom [*of ilobola*] that is culturally foreign to a traditionally white, Western church context to be accepted then, it needed to be translated into terms and categories that make sense to this context. In this case, it meant defining a practice as wedding that, from an emic perspective of this [*Xhosa*] culture, is not. (Grohmann 2023:183)

The significance of this case study

This isiXhosa-English concept study did obviously have its limitations in scope and depth. Nevertheless, it allows us to see what it might look like to 'choose vulnerability' for the sake of engaging in decolonising research and intercultural theology as a cultural outsider who is rooted in Eurocentric traditions. The study sought to enter into and hold out the tensions of entertaining the possibility of equivocation. It did so by taking steps towards gaining emic perspectives on issues that had been defined in a certain way in a multicultural context dominated by Western English and reformed theology. 'Listening' to the other went beyond mere conversations. On the one hand, it was based on cultural-linguistic terms of Xhosa people. On the other hand, it included tentative exposure to sociopolitical realities experienced by many Xhosa people in Cape Town as well as contexts that were governed by Xhosa sociocultural norms.

In respect of decolonising intercultural theology, the study contributes to an increased awareness of existing structures of coloniality where, for example, prayer or preaching follow certain assumptions that are not biblically neutral but infused by cultural-linguistic presuppositions and orientations. The perspectival nature of the study holds the potential for those who in South African contexts count among the historically privileged to better understand the nature of coloniality and encounter ways of engaging in decolonising practice themselves.

Conclusion

How – if at all – might Eurocentric cultural outsiders be involved in decolonising theologies? This article indicates that in the encounter of people from differing 'languacultural' backgrounds, the vernacular can play a crucial role in reducing the colonising effect of supposedly transcultural languages like English. 'Culture', after all, 'is not what "they" have; it's something that fills the spaces between you and them, and the nature of that space depends on *you* as well as *them*' (Agar 2002:135 [*emphasis original*]). Using people's own languages based on a growing understanding of the contexts they are rooted in, enables this space to be recognised and to not be misconstrued.

Of course, it needs to be asked whether a *perspectival* solution to coloniality can be regarded as a solution at all. Is there not a danger that my perspective as an outsider, not necessarily being shared by cultural insiders, can again come to dominate discourses and practices? While this concern is legitimate, fears may be allayed. Perspectival contributions, to warrant the use of the term, would have to be aware of their *non*-universality. This is arguably of great importance for those of us who imbibed universalism from an early age, encouraged by supposedly superior Western/secular knowledge and a seemingly universal language. Perspectivism, however, quickly loses the risk of domination and can effectively counter epistemic inequalities if it has to bow to the terms of relating and the categories available when using the vernacular. In this way, it seeks to humbly contribute to theologising from below.

The role of cultural outsiders who relationally manage to gain emic perspectives can thus be a double one: because of choosing vulnerability in engaging the 'cultural other', they can offer contributions to insider discourses that ask for acceptance based on their coherence with local cultural-linguistic terms. They would therefore be decolonial in nature. Moreover, because of the insights gained in this way, they can play a mediator role between their host and their home community, equipping and advocating for further vulnerable – and thus decolonising – intercultural engagement, be it in the practice of theology or academic study.

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Author's contribution

M.G. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany, and ethics consent was received on 15 April 2019. The ethics approval number is FSV 19/23. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants and are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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