

The Embodiment of the Indigenous People by European Travel Writers at the Cape Colony, Southern Africa

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Abstract

This article analyses how European travellers depicted the bodies of indigenous people in their travel narrations. Three travel writers, Peter Kolb, Anders Sparrman and Sir John Barrow, were selected to investigate how the bodies of indigenous people were perceived at the Cape Colony. Grosfoguel's theoretical framework of the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being was used to ground and investigate the coloniality of the body in the Colony. The findings suggest that the portrayal of indigenous people's bodies by Europeans in their travel accounts has connotations of racial stereotypes, which are characterised by a colonial power matrix of subjugation, hierarchisation, Eurocentrism, dehumanisation and objectification of indigenous people. European travellers used the notion of Eurocentric power, the epistemology of the West and the degradation of "being" to depict the bodies of the indigenous people.

Keywords: indigenous people; coloniality of power; coloniality of knowledge; coloniality of being; European travellers; Peter Kolb; Anders Sparrman; John Barrow

Introduction

The recent past has been characterised by concerns raised about practices and politics through which powers and society regulate human bodies. Ample evidence has consistently revealed that the human and especially the female body has been subject to various socio-political, cultural, economic and historical forces (Brownmiller 1975; Davis 1983; Dworkin 1974; Griffin 1978; 1979). A number of feminist scholars (e.g., Fausto-Sterling 2000) agree that greater attention should be paid to the ways in which

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culture, science, politics, and art shape the body (Bordo 1993; Dietz 2003; Moi 1999; Price and Shildrick 1999).

In her discussion on body politics, Butler (1990, 177) correctly argues that “the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface, whose permeability is politically regulated.” Further, she (1990, 92) contends that “the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations.” Bodies are sites of social and political constructions of differences (Foucault 1980; Luker 1985; Roberts 1997; Turner 1996). There are huge implications when the body is subjected to systematic power and social regimes such as government regulation, where bodies are expected to behave in a socially and politically accepted manner.

A significant corpus of research has reconceptualised the body from a purely biological form to a historical construction and medium of social control (Bordo 1993, 181). Attention has been devoted to the deconstruction of the body as portrayed from a socio-political point of view. While the primary focus has been “body politics”—the objectification of the female body, violence against women’s bodies, familial relationships, deployment of female bodies, sex/gender distinctions (Bordo 1993; Young 1980; 2002)—less attention has been paid to the portrayal of the body through the lenses of *power*, *knowledge* and the notion of *being*. The portrayal of indigenous people’s bodies by European travellers using Grosfoguel’s (2013) perspectives of power, knowledge and “being” has seldom been interrogated in the historiography of South Africa.

The aim of this article is to explore how the concepts *power*, *knowledge* and *being* can contribute to an understanding of how European travellers, in particular, Peter Kolb, Anders Sparrman and Sir John Barrow, portrayed the body of indigenous people during the colonial period at the Cape Colony. The three selected writings come from the period during which the Colony was under the jurisdiction of the Dutch East India Company (1652–1795) up to the end of the 20 transitional years of interim British and Netherlands governments respectively (1795–1815). These writings, which fall within the 18th century, are associated with European commercial and territorial expansion.

The literature on the Cape Colony is of particular interest because it was one place where scientific travel and the shifting relations of contact played themselves out conspicuously (Pratt 1992, 39). The Cape of Good Hope was a location in Africa that Europeans could access. The Colony was a pivotal stopping point for all travellers on their way to the East. It was therefore common for travellers not to depend on the spoken word or hearsay but to record everything they experienced, as their seniors expected of them. Travellers were to take cognisance that events that took place at the Cape Colony did not represent timeless conceptual structures, ready to be filled with empirical content, but were activities carried out in particular contexts for particular purposes.

Theoretical Framework

In the section below, I use the decolonial theoretical framework of Grosfoguel (2013) to critique how colonial power, epistemologies of differences and colonial regimes portrayed indigenous people's humanness. These categories will be discussed under the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being.

The Coloniality of Power

Body politics, as used in this paper, refers to the practices and policies through which power is marked, regulated, and negotiated on and through the body. Shang (2016, 144) suggests that power relations involve relationships between bodies, namely, their "strengths and frailties; their contextual myths and stereotypes; their pleasures and pains; their honour and shame; their sustenance and diminution." The body is an elementary symbol in the creative thinking of cultural, socio-economic and political power. In most cases political systems use various bodies and their proximity to power to distribute resources.

The concept the "coloniality of power" is used in this context to deconstruct power relations of the body during colonialism in southern Africa. Quijano (2000) defines the term "coloniality of power" as racial and epistemological hierarchies that are entangled within structural hierarchies such as global capitalism. The body may be used by those in power to presence domination or subjugation without essentialising independent experiences. In the colonial empires, where the calibration of difference was paramount, race, body shape and social status acquired hierarchical significance. The selling and buying of slaves during the 18th century exacerbated the objectification and commodification of the body (Smallwood 2007, 34). Over time, these transactions/trade created a societal structure that equated the value of human life with a market value.

This resulted in a rigid structural system which laid a foundation for those in power to objectify bodies for future use in slavery. In her discussion on enslaved women and body politics, Camp (2002) argues that enslaved people were made to suffer domination through the body in the form of exploitation, physical punishment and captivity. By depriving humans of their dignity, respect, and basic human rights, colonial powers made sure that they created and maintained the inferior slave subject. In some instances, these "bodies" were non-compliant and they were often referred to as "lazy natives" (Barker 1978; Curtin 1973).

Subsequently, the body of indigenous people was reduced to an object which satisfied the economic and political agenda of the colonial powers. Camp (2002, 538) supports the notion that the body provided a "basic political resource" for struggles between the dominant and the subordinate. In her book titled *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (1972) acknowledged that embodied subjects are situated within an environment; these bodies are located, categorised and observed from outside and they are a supplement of the personal experience of the observer. Subjects are interpreted through the schema of the

observer which is Western and predominantly male and supremacist. In this article, I use the concept of the coloniality of power to understand how travellers in southern Africa portrayed the embodied subjects within their environment and how power relations played out in their narrations.

The Coloniality of Knowledge

There is a growing body of research on what is considered legitimate knowledge (Akena 2012). European colonisers defined Eurocentric knowledge as legitimate knowledge and this formed the foundation for it to be used to dominate and subjugate indigenous knowledge. The object of promoting Eurocentric knowledge systems in Africa was to relegate indigenous people to the realm of “otherness” or “thingness” (Mbembe 2015). Mpfu (2013, 109–110) argues:

The coloniser does not only distort the history of the colonised, slaughter their knowledge systems and empty their heads of self-confidence and their hearts of the emotional stamina to live without colonial domination. But he goes ahead to manufacture accusations and labels against the colonised, among many of the accusations are—laziness, drunkenness, backwardness, propensity to violence, dirtiness, stupidity, ignorance, bad luck and spiritual damnation—all of which require the coloniser to intervene and save the colonised from the abyss of many “lacks” and “deficits” that bedevil him and his lot.

Grosfoguel’s (2013) study of the coloniality of knowledge seeks to understand how colonisation influenced different areas of knowledge production. Akena (2012, 600) cautions that to understand the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge, decolonial scholars need to examine the relationship between the knowledge producers and their social, economic and political circumstances within the colonial context.

The Coloniality of Being

According to Mignolo (2007, 242), the coloniality of being responds to the “need to thematize the question of the effects of coloniality in lived experience and not only in the mind.” It is about human ontology (Wynter 2003, 257–337), restoration of denied self-pride and sovereign subjectivity (Blyden 1967). The coloniality of being can be summarised as follows (Mignolo 2007, 256):

The coloniality of Being appears in historical projects and ideas of civilization which advance colonial projects of various kinds inspired or legitimized by the idea of race. The coloniality of Being is therefore coextensive with the production of the color-line in its different expressions and dimensions. It becomes concrete in the appearance of liminal subjects, which mark, as it were, the limit of Being, that is, the point at which Being distorts meaning and evidence to the point of dehumanization. The coloniality of Being produces the ontological colonial difference, deploying a series of fundamental existential characteristics and symbolic realities.

The process of racialisation did not only promote hierarchisation, but it created a racialised *being*. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) points out that the White races claimed complete *being* for themselves and Africans were pushed into a continuous state of *becoming*—a state of incompleteness. Coloniality of being helps us understand how indigenous people were objectified, commodified or “thingified.” Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014, 199) reiterates that “coloniality of being is about denial of the very humanity of African people, their inferiorisation and dehumanisation.”

Methodological Approach

In this study, content analysis is used to collect and analyse data. Krippendorff (2012, 1) defines content analysis as “an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent.” Babbie (2001, 304) defines content analysis as “the study of recorded human communications” which in essence is “the process of transforming raw data into a standardized form” (2001, 309). Erlingssona and Brysiewicz (2017, 95) caution that content analysis is not linear, but it is a reflective process. They also point out that researchers should ensure that their assumptions, opinions, and personal beliefs do not unconsciously influence the analysis process.

According to Rourke et al. (2001, 12) content analysis “begins with the compilation of selections of transcripts or entire transcripts into text files.” The first travel narrative selected was that of Peter Kolb, a German, who resided at the Cape from 1705–1712. His book, titled *Caput Bonae Spei Hodiernum*, received more attention when compared to other travel works (Good 2006) and gave a “different” perspective of the social and cultural life of the Khoikhoi while providing a comprehensive description of the life of Europeans at the Cape Colony. Kolb lived at the Cape Colony “longer than almost all of the authors who wrote about the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (Good 2006, 72). The second traveller, Dr Anders Sparrman, a young Swedish medical practitioner, visited the Cape of Good Hope in the late 18th century. Sparrman was the first traveller to give an extended and readable account of travels into the interior of the Cape between 1772 and 1776. His preface asserts that his travel accounts relied on “pure sources of truth” and that he was a man of “much real knowledge and genuine learning” (Sparrman 1975, 28). In this article I use two of his volumes: *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic Polar Circles, around the World and to the Country of Hottentots and the Caffres from the Year 1772–1776* edited by V. S. Fobres (first volume reprinted in 1975 and the second volume in 1977). The third traveller, Sir John Barrow, was born in the English hamlet of Dragley Beck, near Lancashire, and was a colonial official in the service of the British who occupied the Cape from 1795 until 1804. The publication focused on in this article is *An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797–1798* (Barrow 2003).

Content analysis processes are represented as three main phases: preparation, organising and reporting. In the preparation stage I read and reread how the three European travel writers described indigenous people, in general terms, in their writing. This gave a general understanding of the main points or ideas they were expressing. Then I divided

the texts into smaller parts, namely, meaning units (Cavanagh 1997). Cavanagh (1997) advises that one needs to decide on what to analyse before selecting the unit of analysis. Robson (1993) and Polit and Beck (2004) point out that the unit of analysis may include a letter, word, sentence or a portion of pages or words. According to Gillham (2000, 71), the “essence of content analysis is identifying substantive statements—statements that really say something.”

The unit analysis of the three narratives was coded according to the following clusters: physical appearance of men, physical appearance of females; clothing; traditions and rituals; culture and religion; practices in the family or community. For example, a text that introduced a custom or told a story about indigenous people’s customs was coded as “custom.” In some instances, certain units/texts had more than one code. A text that described female/male attire, for example, was coded as “clothing.” The process of selecting codes was guided by the aim of this research (Robson 1993), that is, how the concepts *power*, *knowledge* and the notion of *being* can contribute to an understanding of how selected European travellers, in particular, Peter Kolb, Sir John Barrow and Anders Sparrman, portrayed the body of indigenous people at the Cape Colony during the 18th century.

The second phase of content analysis (organising) includes open coding, creating categories and abstraction. Titscher et al. (2000, 58) contend that “the core and central tool of any content analysis is its system of categories: every unit of analysis must be coded, that is to say, allocated to one or more categories.” In this phase I used open coding. Notes and headings were written in the margins while reading the text (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Headings written in the margins were used to generate categories. The next step in this phase was to collapse similar or dissimilar categories into broader higher order categories (themes). Further I used abstraction, which is a process of formulating a general description of the research topic through generating categories (Robson 1993). Every unit of analysis must be coded, that is, allocated to one or more categories. For example, the codes (i.e., origin of indigenous people, physical appearance, cultural practices, indigenous people’s intelligence) were grouped together to form the main categories (themes): (1) practices through which power is marked, regulated and negotiated on and through the body of indigenous people, (2) religion, physical features/character and cultural practices and how the body was portrayed to promote a particular and biased epistemology, and (3) physical appearance/features, rituals and clothing used to portray the “being” of indigenous people (see Table 1). The third phase of content analysis is reporting. In this phase I used excerpts from the three narratives as raw data which is triangulated by integrating different material or sources.

Table 1: Relationships between themes and categories

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>
1. Practices through which power is marked, regulated and negotiated on and through the body of indigenous people	Origin of indigenous people, physical appearance, cultural practices, indigenous people's intelligence
2. How the body was portrayed and seen to promote a particular, biased epistemology	Religion, physical features/character and cultural practices
3. How the body of indigenous people was portrayed to promote a notion of "being"	Physical appearance/features, rituals and clothing

Background to the Travel Writers

Over 100 travel narratives were produced between 1652 and 1719 and referring to all the travel accounts is beyond the scope of this paper. For many years, geographers and ethnographers have made use of travel sources in the belief that travel writers produced accurate first-hand accounts of places they visited and the information they gathered may be regarded as primary sources (Guelke and Guelke 2004). Although modern ethnographers argue that travel writers viewed the world through their own cultural and perhaps political filters, most agree that "empirical" information may be extracted about the localities and the information they provide. More importantly, one is able to analyse what a travel work indicates about the author's circumstances, the power relations implicit in the production of travel texts and the consequences of discursive practices. Further, scholars of geography, history and literary studies agree about links between narratives of travel and the making and the unmaking of the empire, the imperial "self" and "other" (Adams 1962; Batten 1978; Pratt 1992; Regard 2009).

Colonial writers wrote within a specific political and historical context. Europeans typically depicted Africans as barbaric, naked savages, lacking human characteristics such as speech and reason, devoid of religion, practising cannibalism and involved in unrestrained sexual promiscuity (Penn 2012, 171). When Europeans arrived in Africa, they used "epistemic strategy" (Grosfoguel 2007, 214) or "enunciative modalities" to construct a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge. Foucault (1980, 154) describes this kind of subjugation as "'power through transparency': the reign of opinion, after the late eighteenth century, which could not tolerate areas of darkness and sought to exercise power through the mere fact of things being known and people seen in an immediate, collective gaze." Most narrators come from the West and their readership was in the West. They were directly or indirectly influenced by biases, prejudices of the

West and they shared certain ideological premises with the West despite criticisms they levelled against the colonial project. It is from this context that travel narratives should be understood.

The first selected traveller was a German named Peter Kolb, who dwelt in the Cape from 1705–1712. The writings of Kolb were influenced by the hybrid of the pre- and post-Enlightenment period as well as numerous other authors. The European perceptions of, for example, the Khoikhoi were influenced by European ideas about Africa and Africans. Sparrman was well acquainted with other parts of the world (the Antarctic, New Zealand, and the islands of the South Seas) and his portrayal of Africans should be understood in relation to other Africans, Asians or Ottomans. Sparrman was inclined more to encyclopaedist rationalism than Christian orthodoxy. The third traveller, Sir John Barrow, was a colonial official in the service of the British admiralty, a post he held for 40 years. Most of his travel accounts were influenced by on-the-spot observation which combined both the historical and political contexts. It is in this context that Barrow and (incidentally) Sparrman were extremely critical of the Dutch colonists at the Cape (Persson 2019).

Dynamics of the Body and Coloniality of Power

The origins, physical appearance and cultural practices of the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Cape have been a subject of serious debate for centuries at the Cape Colony. By the late 16th century, many writings about indigenous people of the Cape Colony were produced by European travellers. The history of the Khoikhoi or Khoi featured prominently as compared to that of other indigenous people, that is the San and the Black Africans. Most European accounts reported on indigenous people's physical appearance in terms of their nakedness, ugliness, blackness, humanness and their alleged cannibalism (Penn 2012, 175).

Contrary to most travel writers (Merians 2001; Scapera 1933), Kolb's book, entitled *Caput Bonae Spei Hodiernum* (1719), provides a detailed discussion of how human the Khoi were when compared to the negative aspects of customs stressed by other authors. However, although Kolb often defended the Khoi in terms of their cultural practices and their intelligence, he maintained that they constituted an inferior species to Europeans. He explains the origin of the Khoi as follows (Kolb 1968, 30):

In their customs and institutions, they cannot be said to resemble any People besides the Jews and Old Troglodytes ... A far probability lies on the side of the Troglodites.

This implies that despite parallels that Kolb made between the Khoi and the Jews, in his view the former were more accurately associated with the Troglodite species—a cave dweller (a derogatory concept comparing apes with ancient peoples). As an Enlightenment advocate, Kolb was comfortable with connecting the origin of the Khoi to the Troglodites, a brutal people resembling beasts and without principles of equity or justice.

The same sentiment is shared by Barrow (2003, 283) in his encounter with the San and he observes:

In their general physical character, they [San] bear a strong resemblance to their Pigmies and Troglodytes, two tribes who are said to have dwelt in the neighborhood of the Nile. The character drawn by Diodorus Siculus, of some of the Ethiopian nations, agrees exactly with that of the Bosjesman [Bushman]. A species of brutality is stated by him to prevail in all their manners and customs; their voices were shrill, dissonant, and scarcely human; their language almost inarticulate; and they wore no clothing.

The extracts above confirm the notion that European travellers named numerous indigenous people across Central Africa “Pygmies” and “Troglodytes”—terms which have currently acquired negative connotations. A troglodyte is a member of a prehistoric race or a person that lived in caves or holes or a nonhuman ape. Pygmies were identified with monstrous peoples of Africa and India. They were small, ugly, wild, weak and feeble-minded (Dan 2014, 42) and specialised in hunting and gathering (Turnbull 1961). The idea of the Pygmy may be traced as far back as the Egyptians in the years 2278–2184 BC (Kidd 2009, 401). Aristotle later located Pygmies in a position lower than the rest of man on a promising version of the Great Chain of Being (a hierarchical structure of all matter and life prevalent during medieval Christianity which was believed to have been decreed by God), depriving them of conceptions of their own identity. What can be generalised from Europeans’ portrayal of the physical appearance of indigenous people is the idea that these people were constructed as different and positioned as the “Other.” Ballard (2006, 133) contends that “Pygmies have long served, both in Western imagination and in Western science, as a sheet anchor for racial hierarchies and for putative sequences of human and social evolution.”

On his way across Sneeuwberg Mountains, Barrow (2003, 234), met the San. His encounter and their cultural practices made him introduce ideas of “otherness.” He explains (Barrow 2003, 234):

In these mountains, and in the country immediately behind them, dwells a race of men [San], that, by their habits and manner of life, are justly entitled to the name of savage—a name however, of which, it is greatly to be feared, they have been rendered more worthy by the conduct of the European settlers.

The word “savage” has been used to signify people who live in a primitive condition in the wilderness and it also referred to humans who behaved in a cruel and aggressive way, like a wild beast (Sinclair 1977, 2). Within a 19th-century epistemological context, the word “savage” was also part of the lexicon of stadial theory, with “hunter gatherers” referred to as “savages,” pastoralists referred to as barbarians and the next rung in the hierarchy were agriculturalists (Jacques 2008).

The physical encounter between Barrow and the Khoi, in the excerpt above, portrayed a particular kind of categorisation, which includes comparison, differentiation,

hierarchisation, homogenisation and exclusion from other citizens of the Cape Colony (Young 1990, 126). Such an encounter resulted in the construction of binary oppositions that placed the European people as the epitome of knowledge, power and strength while the indigenous people were projected as ignorant, weak and naïve. This binary opposition based on physical appearance was confirmed by Barrow during his encounter with the San across the Sneeuwberg Mountains. Further, Barrow (2003, 150) deduced the following:

The ancient manner and primitive character of this extraordinary race of men are, no doubt, much changed since their connection with the colonists; and the nearer they are found to the capital and the parts most inhabited by Europeans, the less they retain of them.

In the statement above, Barrow explains that the contact and proximity of the San with the Europeans led them to change their ancient and primitive cultural practices, which suggests that European cultural practices were superior to those of the indigenous people. In his book titled *Early Civilization*, Alexander Goldenweiser (1922, 117–18) defines the term “primitive” as being small, isolated, etc., but he also equates it with the term “inferior.” Goldenweiser (1937, 47) laments that White civilisation failed in either leaving indigenous primitiveness alone or pulling it to its own level.

Sparrman could certainly be regarded as one of the travellers who believed in European ideas of different gradations of “savageness.” He criticised one of the colonists for marrying “an ugly sooty mulatto” (Sparrman, 1977, 287). Sparrman (1977) goes to the extent of vilifying indigenous people’s intellect and degrading their self-confidence. He explains (Sparrman 1977, 80):

When, for instance, anything remarkable happens, a Hottentot [Khoi] endeavours to avoid, if he can, mentioning it for some days; and when at length he does speak of it, it is with a kind of circumlocution, or, as the colonists call it, with a *draij* [a turn or bend, hence not straight to the point], a sort of twist or winding. And indeed, for the most part, the Hottentot comes out with his intelligence so late, that instead of being of any use, it serves only to vex one.

The physical appearance and the stature of the Khoi as compared to that of Europeans compelled Sparrman (1975, 181–85) to compare the intellect of the two groups. In the statement above, Sparrman questions the intellect of indigenous people. However, the indirectness of Khoi discourse when asked a question cannot be used to determine quality of cognition. The intelligence of the Khoi is also questioned by Kolb (1968, 98–99) in his reference to the Khoi practice, the honouring of the *mantis* (insect):

The Hottentots likewise adore, as a benign deity, a certain insect peculiar, ‘tis said, to the Hottentots countries. This animal is of the dimension of a child’s little finger; the back green; the belly speck with white and red ... To this little winged deity, when ever they set sight upon it, they render the highest tokens of veneration. And if it honours, ...

a kraal with a visit, the inhabitants assemble about it in transport of devotion, as if the Lord of the universe was come among them.

Kolb's assertion above confirms the superior position occupied by Europeans as missionaries, economists (traders) and thinkers, all positions that wielded power and authority over indigenous people. Further, it suggests that the Khoi were naïve and lacking in worldly intelligence.

European travellers insisted that indigenous people constituted an inferior species to Europeans and hence could be denied constitutional equality. Indigenous people's bodies were instrumental in defining who they were and what they were capable of doing. The categorisation of inhabitants of the Cape Colony as masters and servants created a rigid structural system which hierarchises certain bodies at the expense of others.

Kolb (1968, 38) states:

They [Khoi] make excellent servants, and perhaps the faithfulest in the world. And the Europeans at the Cape, who entertain a great number of 'em, are so fond of 'em in this capacity, that they are loth to part with 'em.

Kolb saw the physical appearance of the Khoi as an appropriate qualifier to become "excellent servants." However, the notion that the Khoi can be excellent servants was problematic in that it suggests that they could be easily acculturated and assimilated into the dominant Western "civilised" society. In Kolb's writing, dominant racial orientations of the body of indigenous people affect his approach to how the Khoi do their work. He states (Kolb 1968, 321) the following:

The vice of the Hottentots that first strikes the eye of an European is their laziness; that which there is certainly nothing so shocking of the kind under the sun. Of this reigning vice their minds as well as their bodies are the chained slaves. Reasoning, with them, is working; and working, the capital plague of life.

In his analysis of the economic life of the Khoi, Kolb condemns the Khoi for not working the long hours of the European peasant (Kolb 1968, 321–23).

Thus, Kolb remained faithful to his Christian philosophy. The notion that indigenous people, in some cases referred to as "savages," were lazy and suitable to be used as slaves, was influenced by preconceived notions of racialism and subjugation evidenced by most travel writers of the time. Although the Khoi (and San) initially refused to become slaves and servants for the colonisers, they were placed under unbearable subjugation and were incorporated into colonial society as low-status servants—something that Kolb accepted in his report of the relationship between the Khoi and those in power. It must be noted that Sparrman adopted a humane position on some of

the social ills that colonists inflicted on indigenous people. He spoke explicitly against slavery and its consequences (Sparman 1975, 200).

The issue that the different races were separate species and the practice of slavery may be explained in terms of 19th-, 20th- and 21st-century scholarship of polygenesis which started gaining traction in the 1850s (Knapman 2016; Young 1995). This scholarship advocates the notion that as a separate species, Europeans enjoyed individual rights which they did not share with African or Asian peoples. Some scholars of polygenesis hold the view that this theory explains both human differences and why some societies advanced and others did not (Knapman 2016, 910). Further, polygenesis advocates hierarchical differences among the various species of humans. To a varying degree, polygenesis proposes the superiority of White races over darker-skinned races. Indigenous people's physical appearance, customs and beliefs were used to justify their subjugation as slaves. Many studies have demonstrated the interconnections among polygenesis, imperialism and slavery (Desmond and Moore 2009; Knapman 2016). The monogenesis scholars argue that as one broad family, all humans share a common ancestor and should therefore have the same rights to equality.

The description of indigenous people by Kolb, Barrow and Sparman has connotations of racial stereotypes. A fundamental imperative of the matrix of power during the colonial rule was to promote the idea of race as a mental construction and a colonial domination grounded in Eurocentrism. Indigenous people were perceived as animal-like, implying that they were phylogenetically lower than Europeans, amoral and governed by feelings rather than reason (Finzsch 2005). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009, 5), leading African decolonial theorist, argues that the encounter between indigenous people and Europeans was characterised by "dismemberment," which he defines "as an act of absolute social engineering." In his seminal novel titled *Osiris Rising*, Ayi Kwei Armah (1995, 112) correctly observed that there is a need for Africans to turn their "dismembered continent into a healing society, Africa." Césaire (1972, 21–22) noted that these societies were "drained of their essence and life, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out."

Dynamics of the Body and Coloniality of Knowledge

When European travellers arrived in Africa, most did not even consider that the people they encountered had their own epistemologies that were different from theirs; in fact, most believed indigenous communities had no culture or religion at all. Europeans believed in a superior culture/religion of the West and the "inferior" culture/religion of indigenous people. European travellers also believed in the notion of distinctive cultural identity. In his travel into the interior, Kolb (1968, 94) states:

But it does not appear, that they [Khoi] have any institution of worship directly regarding the supreme God. I never saw, or could hear, that any one of them paid any act of devotion immediately to him. I have talked to them roundly on this head; and endeavor

to make them sensible of the folly and absurdity of neglecting his worship, while they worship what they call Gods that are inferior to and dependent on him.

Further, Kolb (1968, 105) argues:

Never certainly were there, in matters of religion, so obstinate and so infatuated a people. Stiff as are the Jews, many of them have submitted to the yoke of Christ and died under it; but I never heard of a Hottentot [Khoi] that died as a Christian. Some Hottentots in the hands of Europeans, have dissembled a procession of Christianity for a while; but have ever renounced it for their native idolatries, as soon as they could get out of their hands.

The statements above vividly suggest that in terms of religion, the Khoi people had no legitimate religion. Kolb (1968, 96–97) admits that the Khoi attached a special significance to the moon. The new and full moons were important times for rainmaking rites and dancing. The moon was perceived as the physical manifestation of a supreme being associated with heaven, earth and especially rain. Devotion to the Khoi God was accompanied by shouting, screaming, singing, dancing and prostration on the ground and these body formalities were regarded as unintelligible (Kolb 1968, 97). Indigenous people were faced with what Dotson (2014, 115) refers to as “epistemic oppression.” This oppression hinders one’s contribution to knowledge production, resulting in “epistemicide”—killing of one’s knowledge and self-worth. Barrow celebrated the conversion of the San to Christianity which he suggested was a superior religion or knowledge system as compared to traditional spiritual practices. He (Barrow 2003, 353) argues:

On Sundays they all regularly attend the performance of divine service, and it is astonishing how ambitious they are to appear at church neat and clean. Of the three hundred, or thereabouts, that composed the congregation, about half were dressed in coarse printed cottons, and the other half in the ancient sheep-skin dresses ... The deportment of the Hottentot during divine service, was truly devout ... The female sung in a style that was plaintive and affecting; and their voices were in general sweet harmonious.

Sparrman and Barrow failed to recognise the notion that different indigenous nations have their own religious institutions and sacred practices which are grounded in indigenous epistemologies. Sparrman (1975, 201) maintains:

Without doubt, the Bishie-men [San] have been a long while in a savage state, and many of them are now brought into a still more miserable situation, since the Christians have invaded their country, and pursue them with chains and fetters into their deserts. In so savage a state, they probably neither have or ever had, manners or customs different from those few I have already mentioned or may describe in the course of this work.

With respect to religion and language, the Boshie-men agree in a great measure with the more civilised part of their nation, or the Hottentots [Khoi] properly so called. These are not sensible of the existence of any Being, who is the origin and ruler of all things.

One can safely assume that “mimicry” was used to imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of the Europeans. In his article titled “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817,” Homi Bhabha (1985) cautions that the English Bible and Christian gatherings concealed particular enunciatory conditions that deployed “natives” to destroy native culture and religion. Mimicry is seen as an opportunistic pattern of behaviour where one hopes to have access to that same power oneself. While copying the behaviour or dress of the European, one has to intentionally suppress one’s own cultural identity (Bhabha 1985). Barrow (2003, 163) shares the same sentiments that the San had no religion, that is, a religion in terms of what is regarded as a religion by Europeans.

Christianity or Pietism (an influential religious reform movement that began among German Lutherans in the 17th century which emphasised doctrine and theology over Christian living) was the dominant religious epistemology of the three travel writers. In his seminal work on “culture and hybridity” Bhabha (1985) explains that the question is not that much focused on who is converted to a particular religious belief system, it is about how different belief systems, in this case indigenous knowledges, interact with other cultural-religious frameworks. These “intersections” were generally imbued with unequal power relations.

This epistemology was promoted at the expense of indigenous people’s culture and spirituality. One striking observation prevalent in the accounts made by European travellers was their accompaniment by indigenous people who acted as interpreters, collaborators or informants. In his encounter with the Khoi, Kolb (1968) mentions four indigenous companions who accompanied him. As travellers reported the physical bodies, culture and religion of indigenous people, nothing was said about the perceptions and beliefs as told by indigenous people themselves. Indigenous people’s cultural practices were pushed to what Grosfoguel (2011) refers to as “the barbarian margins of society.” Dei (2006, 6) posits that indigenous epistemologies represent a “speaking back to the production, categorisation and positions of cultures, identities, and histories.”

Dynamics of the Body and the Coloniality of Being

Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007, 242) cautions that the concept of the “coloniality of being” responds to the question “of the effects of coloniality in lived experience and not only in the mind.” Travellers’ narrations of the physical body of indigenous people at the Cape communicated various dehumanising ideologies. The Eurocentric lens they used to portray the body of an indigene comprised a bundle of “Western prejudices” which were informed by discursive terrains of racism, dehumanisation and commodification. One such prejudice was how the body of an indigene was objectified.

This is evident in how Barrow defines the body of the San. Barrow (2003, 276) depicts the San as amongst the ugliest of all human beings as follows:

The face [of a San] is in general extremely ugly; but this differs very materially in different families, particularly in the nose, some of which are remarkably flat and others considerably raised. The colour of the eye is a deep chestnut: they are very long and narrow, removed to a great distance from each other; and the eyelids at the extremity next to the nose, instead of forming an angle, as in Europeans, are rounded into each other exactly like those of the Chinese, to whom indeed in many other points they bear a physical resemblance that is sufficiently striking.

In the description above, Barrow explains how ugly the San were physically. Physical features (e.g., the eye, eyelid and the nose) of the San are compared with those of Europeans. Barrow creates thus a binary which proposes that indigenous identity has to match that of White identity for the former to become human. This comparison insinuates the notion that indigenous people were subhuman.

Kolb (1968, 52) explains that their *worst* features were ‘their large flat noses, and their thick lips, especially the upper most, in which however, they resemble but the generality of Negroes.’ As a proponent of the Enlightenment era, Kolb was aware of the distinctions made between Negroes and Europeans. In his book entitled *History of the Indian Archipelago*, Crawford (1971, 79) contended that historically Europeans were superior to Negroes and the latter consistently lived “in the lowest and most abject state of social existence.” This comparison implies that the body of indigenous people resembled that of incomplete humans.

Europeans had a tendency to associate the body of indigenous people with their intellect. In his travel into the interior, Kolb (1968, 97) further questions the Khoi’s cultural practices. He maintains:

And their behaviour at those times is indeed astonishing. They throw their bodies into a thousand different distortions; and make mouths and faces strangely ridiculous and horrid. Now they throw themselves flat on the ground, screaming out a strange unintelligible jargon. Then jumping up on a sudden, and stamping like mad (insomuch that they make the ground shake) they direct [yell], with open throats, the following: *Mutschi Atzé*, that is: I salute you; you are welcome. *Choraqua-kahá chori Ounqua*, that is: Grant us fodder for our cattle and milk in abundance.

Kolb describes the active (as opposed to the lazy) body in terms of “distortions,” “ridiculous” and “horrid.” These rituals are misunderstood and disqualified and suggest that the activities the Khoi engaged in were uncivilised and at a very low level of humanity.

Another prejudice that European travellers used to demean indigenous people was their garb. In the British Empire, nakedness or “unclothedness” acquired hierarchical significance. Lack of clothing, as understood by colonisers, connoted primitiveness and

savagery among indigenous people. The clash between “clothedness” and “unclothedness” or nakedness was evident in the writings of the three travellers. Kolb (1968, 155) explains:

Instead of the tail worn by men, the women had a sheep’s skin that entirely covers the posterior part of the body from the waist to the calf of the leg, and just wide enough to strike the exterior part of the thigh. The rattling of this hard and dry skin announces the approach of the Hottentot lady long before she makes her appearance. The rest of the body is naked.

The Khoi woman, often depicted nude or partially clothed, in the excerpt above is presented as an immodest person capable of engaging in illegitimate sexual activities. Kolb suggests that this kind of clothing and the rattling noise it makes calls for attention of other people. McClintock (1995) explains that colonial discourses of clothing worked in tandem with the sexual grammar of the colonial encounter.

Sparrrman (1975, 185) shared the same sentiments as Kolb and mentioned the following about the garb of the Khoi:

The Hottentots, with their skins dressed up with grease and soot, and *bucku*-powder, are by this means in a great measure defended from the influence of their air, and may in a manner reckon themselves full dressed. In other respects, both men and women appear quite undressed; indeed, I may say naked, except a trifling covering, which they always conceal certain parts of their bodies.

The statement above shows how Sparrrman, inclined to rationalism and Christian orthodoxy, used his philosophies to ground the depiction of clothedness for the Khoi in terms of morality. African garb was not worthy enough to be worn in public places and indigenous people were dehumanised when they did so.

Barrow (2003, 276) explains how San women dressed:

Their only covering was a belt of springbok’s skin, with the part that was intended to hung before cut into long threads like those before mentioned to be worn by some of the Hottentot women; but the filaments were so small and thin that they answered no sort of use as a covering; nor indeed did the females, either old or young, seem to feel any sense of shame in appearing before us naked.

The Cape Colony travellers discredited the dress of indigenous people and regarded them as uncivilised. Any reference to clothedness in a British context, however, began with Christianity, which was a defining principle of civilisation. Christianity, civilisation and clothing were three important dimensions of the ethos of the missionary project. The unclothed African female body was portrayed as the “unclean” African body (Burke 1996) and the “unwell” African body (Vaughan 1991) was a body that needed intervention.

Interestingly the representations of male and female Khoi were distinguished from each other—particularly in relation to colonial interpretations of their dress. The women are given more sexualised renderings than the men. On the surface, representations seem similar (both are described as “undressed”)—but women are portrayed as more overtly sexual beings: their dress/undress reflects this and by extension signifies their “immodesty.” This represented a typical colonial motif.

The lack of clothing, as described by European travellers, was not only regarded as a sign of lack of civilisation, but also that they were primitive, as asserted by Torgovnick (1990, 228) when she argued that “within Western culture, the idiom ‘going primitive’ is in fact compatible with the idiom ‘getting physical.’” Primitiveness meant that indigenous people were not only unschooled but were unselfconscious and lacking in shame and propriety. The scantily clothed indigenous people were stigmatised, dehumanised, and objectified. Their culture, clothing or its lack were seen as epitomising the absence of civilisation. Their “being” was compromised as a result of their physique and clothing or lack thereof.

Conclusion

I argued at the beginning of this article that the body has been subject to various socio-political, cultural, economic, and historical interpretations. While considerable attention has been paid to the deconstruction of the body, I point out a need to understand how this deconstruction is made using Grosfoguel’s (2013) lens of power, knowledge and the notion of “being.” This is important because “body politics” has been focused primarily on the feministic tones of objectification of the female body.

While this article does not offer a conclusive answer to the question of “body politics,” it gives a fresh perspective on how the concepts *power*, *knowledge* and *being* can contribute to an understanding of how European travellers, in particular, Peter Kolb, Anders Sparman and Sir John Barrow, portrayed the body of indigenous people during the colonial period at the Cape Colony.

The article raised important questions about how power is negotiated on and through the body of indigenous people. The three travel narratives portray the physical appearance of indigenous people as particularly distinctive. This distinction advocated hierarchical difference with the notion of the existence of a binary between superior and “inferior” people. Cultural differences, physical appearance and belief systems were also used to portray Europeans as superior and powerful people.

I have also argued in this article that the concept of the colonality of knowledge helps us understand how the body of indigenous people was portrayed by European travellers. Indigenous people used their physical bodies to perform their cultural and religious activities. European people’s culture was regarded as “pure” and “superior” whereas that of indigenous people was regarded as “impure” and “inferior.” The notion of differentiating epistemologies on the basis of “indigenouness” or “Whiteness” was in

line with the colonial project of civilising inferior cultures. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o (2012, 38–39) states that “the colonial process dislocates the traveler’s mind from the place he or she already knows to a foreign starting point even with the body still remaining in his or her homeland.”

Using Grosfoguel’s lens of power, knowledge and “being,” my findings suggest that the portrayal of indigenous people’s bodies by European travel writers (Peter Kolb, Anderson Sparrman and John Barrow) has connotations of racial stereotypes, which were characterised by subjugation, hierarchisation, Eurocentrism, dehumanisation and objectification of indigenous people. I argue that cultural, philosophical, political and religious backgrounds may have influenced these writers. Most of the 15th- and 16th-century narratives written about indigenous people were negative and often portrayed indigenous people as savage, ugly, naked and barbaric.

This article confirms that the coloniality of power, knowledge and being are fundamental in undoing colonialism and in taking forward the decolonisation project. Decolonial scholars need to revisit, reimagine and redefine spaces where colonialism took place (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). A decolonial framework of the coloniality of power, knowledge and being may be of use in trying to understand these colonialities.

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