Zulu cultural villages and their political economy: a decolonial perspective

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Abstract

Zulu cultural villages in South Africa seek to represent, through physical structures and stage plays, a set of what are supposedly ‘real’ material and socio-cultural practices of actual lived experience of a ‘Zulu’ identity. The cultural villages are quite popular with both local and international tourists but, in spite of their popularity, the villages currently face a barrage of criticisms that range from accusations that they represent myth instead of culture to accusations that their exploitative political economy serves as a modern medium of neo-colonial relations. These scathing criticisms are not without merit in reality but their major problem is that they treat cultural representation of ‘Zulu-ness’ in the villages and their political economy as exclusive of one another. In this paper I seek to reveal how the imaginations of Zulu identities through both physical portrayals of ‘Zulu-ness’ and the associated narratives are inseparably intertwined with the exploitative political economy of the villages and reproduce one another within what Grosfoguel (2007) referred to as an entangled package of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation of non-European peoples by western colonisers and/or their descendants. I deploy the case study of the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park to reveal how the images of ‘Zulu-ness’ and the political economy of the villages are two sides of the same coin as well as part of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies of colonial forms of domination and exploitation.

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Introduction

The political economy of Zulu cultural villages in post-apartheid South Africa represents a microcosmic picture of the interplay of politics, economics, culture and race within what Grosfoguel (2007) referred to as an ‘entanglement’ of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies of colonial forms of domination and exploitation. Thus, in spite of the advent of postcolonial dispensations in the developing world, it is quite disturbing that many of the indigenous peoples of the Third World are still languishing in abject poverty due to neo-colonial forms of domination. Indeed, in many postcolonial states of the developing world, the problem of poverty among indigenous African communities is not merely a product of failing economies but of unequal distribution of wealth. Thus, for instance, in the case of South Africa, the problem of inequalities of distribution within the economy was characterised by former South African President Thabo Mbeki as ‘two nations’² in one country. He was describing how the minority white population that constitute a mere 20 per cent of the total population of the country control at least 80 per cent of the economy while the remaining majority black population own just below 20 per cent of the national economy. Such situations provoke the fundamental question of whether the anti-colonial struggles that were waged against colonial domination during the period that was popularly referred to as the ‘colonial era’ really brought about a truly postcolonial world or whether they merely ushered the peoples of the Third World into what Spivak viewed as ‘a post-colonial neo-colonialized world’ (1990: 166). I argue that business entities such as Zulu cultural villages microcosmically represent – through their political economy and constructions of identity – neo-colonial relations of power that were historically justified on the grounds of cultural differences and projected as a natural given.

Representations of African identities and their political economy in the colonial power matrix

The symbiotic relationship between the imagined of Zulu identities through the constructed cultural villages and the political economy of the villages can be articulated through Quijano’s

(1991, 1998, 2000) conceptual framework of the ‘colonial power matrix’. According to this conceptual lens, the present world system is a historical-structural heterogeneous totality with a specific power matrix that affects all dimensions of social existence such as sexuality, authority, subjectivity and labour. This means that the present forms of colonial domination in fields such as identity construction of subalternised communities and distribution of economic resources are part of what Grosfoguel referred to as an

entanglement … of multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies (‘heterarchies’) of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation where the racial/ethnic hierarchy of the European/non-European divide transversally reconfigures all of the other global power structures. (2007: 217)

Zulu cultural villages are a microcosmic picture of these heterogeneous and multiple global hierarchies mentioned above; they reproduce the colonial power matrix as much as they are produced through it. The skewed political economy of the cultural villages that favours the ‘white race’ and the negative imaginations of Zulu identities in the constructed images of the villages are not only part and parcel of the ‘entangled package’ of racialised multiple and heterogeneous global hierarchies but are also two sides of the same coin.

To those scholars who have sought to diagnose the problem of enduring colonial domination in its various guises in the Third World in the age dubbed the ‘postcolonial dispensation’, the main problem is that the true nature of colonial domination was misunderstood by the very people who waged struggles against the system. According to Grosfoguel, ‘the most powerful myth of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world’ (2007: 219). This mistake of reducing the problem of colonial domination to an issue of power contestation over juridical-political boundaries of states in national liberation and socialist strategies of anti-colonial struggles has led to the myth of a ‘postcolonial’ world. Thus it is within this false premise of a ‘postcolonial’ world that, though ‘colonial administrations’ have been entirely eradicated in developing states and independent statehood celebrated throughout the Third World, the non-European
people are still living under what Grosfoguel refers to as ‘crude European/Euro-American exploitation and domination’ (2007: 219). This means that the concept of colonialism, which became the basic template of anti-colonial struggles throughout the Third World, was from the outset too simplistic to deal with the complexity of colonial domination whose architecture boasted heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years (Grosfoguel 2007). Rather than remain trapped within purviews of colonial domination that were espoused in the limiting critique of ‘classical colonialism’ that tended to underpin the ideology of nationalist and socialist anti-colonial struggles throughout the Third World, progressive scholarship by Latin American scholars such as Quijano (1989, 1993, 2000; Quijano and Wallerstein 1992) and Grosfoguel (2002, 2007) has called for an understanding of colonial domination through the conceptual lens of ‘coloniality’.

The concept of coloniality, unlike the critique that underpinned classical colonialism, unveils the mystery of why, after the end of colonial administrations in the juridical-political spheres of state administration, there is still continuity of colonial forms of domination. This is mainly because the concept of coloniality addresses the issue of colonial domination not from an isolated and singular point of departure such as the juridical-political administrative point of view but from a vantage point of a variety of ‘colonial situations’ that include cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression of subordinate racialised/ethnic groups by dominant racialised/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations (Grosfoguel 2007: 220). This holistic approach to the problem of colonial domination allows us to visualise other dynamics of the colonial process which include among them ‘colonization of imagination’ (Quijano 2007), ‘colonization of the mind’ (Dascal 2009), and colonisation of knowledge and power. These dynamics of colonial domination enable us to grapple with longstanding patterns of power that were and are ‘maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of people, in aspiration of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243). Thus, Maldonado-Torres’s position concurs with that of Quijano, who states that ‘coloniality operates on every level, in every arena and dimension (both material and subjective) of everyday social existence, and does so on a societal scale’
These conceptual lenses are quite useful in revealing ‘coloniality’ in its various forms in the images of Zulu-ness that are displayed in the cultural villages and the making of the political economy of the villages in many ways.

Figure 1: A signpost for Phezulu Safari Park depicting a crocodile
(Photo: the author)

Re-living colonial domination at the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park
During the period of my field study at the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park, I noted that the signpost located about 4 km from the site of the village was inscribed with the words: ‘Phezulu Safari Park’ but next to these words was a picture of a crocodile (see Figure 1). As I
already knew from the literature on Zulu cultural villages that there are members of Zulu communities who perform Zulu culture before an audience at Phezulu Safari Park, it was surprising that in this signpost there was no hint that human beings are part of the tourism package. The signpost and many others gave the impression that Phezulu Safari Park, which undeniably began only as a crocodile farm, has more to do with animals than human beings.

Near the gate by the entrance to the farm where the cultural village is located, I noted that the wall was decorated with pictures of animals and birds, and again there was no hint of the existence of humans in the cultural village (see Figure 2). It was only at the entrance of the village itself, where I encountered a display of craft objects depicting ‘nude’ human beings together with animals (see Figure 3), that I began to have a hint that, indeed, there might be a cultural village with live human beings on the farm. What became significant about these initial observations – from the signposts by the side of the road to paintings by the gate of the farm and craft displays at the entrance of the village itself – is the story that one can deduce about the construction of the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park. One could not resist the feeling that animals were placed above human beings in the construction of Phezulu Safari Park.

By displaying what are supposedly Zulu identities alongside animals, both in pictures and in the actual lived experience of human beings and animals that are found side by side in the establishment, Phezulu Safari Park can be seen as primarily intending to appease those tourists who are steeped in myths about Africa as a place of savage animals and primitive peoples who, in the context of Victorian prudence, were stereotyped as undressed and bare-breasted. Thus, as Pieterse (1992: 113) asserts, in constructions of Africans as savages in nineteenth-century European iconography, Africans were sometimes represented both as animals and with animals, brought together in a single picture.
The construction of Phezulu Safari Park can also be seen in the context of a safari perspective on Africa which tends to marginalise people and make wild animals the centre of attention. According to Pieterse (1992: 113), the safari perspective on Africa, as displayed and advertised in western iconography, creates an image of Africa as a world of nature, not as a cultural or human-made world. Thus, the construction of the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park is based on those structural orders of dominant imperial and colonial knowledge about African identities and, as such, the village can be read as perpetuating stereotyped images of Africans as ‘noble savages’ with nothing, living harmoniously with nature and accumulating no material goods.

Figure 2: A wall next to the farm gate decorated with pictures of animals and birds

(Photo: the author)
The cultural side of the story of Phezulu Safari Park has implications for the political economy as much as the political economy of the village sustains the continuity of these negative cultural displays of Zulu identities. According to Pieterse, ‘in cognitive psychology stereotypes are taken to be schemas or sets which play a part in cognition, perception, memory and communication’ and ‘though they may have no basis in reality, stereotypes are real in their social consequences, notably with regard to the allocation of roles’ (1992: 11). What this means is that stereotypes tend to function as self-fulfilling prophecies whereby social reality ends up endorsing the stereotype by modelling itself upon the stereotypical social representations – a kind of typecasting from which it can be difficult to escape.
In the construction of the cultural village of Phezulu Safari Park, members of Zulu communities perform Zulu culture before tourists dressed in animal skins which leave their bodies half naked. These cultural performers are poor members of the indigenous Zulu communities who are employed by the ‘white’ owner of the cultural village to provide cheap labour by entertaining predominantly white tourists. As the poor members of Zulu communities play the role of workers and entertainers in the construction of Phezulu Safari Park, the lion’s share of the tourism income goes to the ‘white owner’ of ‘Zulu culture’. Members of Zulu communities are forced to display ‘Zulu culture’ as a result of dire socioeconomic circumstances that were caused by white imperial and colonial practices in the motherland. This means that the members of the Zulu communities who perform what is supposedly Zulu culture continue to remain poor and, therefore, perpetually compelled to perform negative and stereotyped images of their ‘self’ identities.

The selection of objects and themes for display in the construction of Zulu cultural villages also perpetuates the cultural order and reproduces racially stereotyped images of black African identities. Thus, for instance, the brief appearance of a traditional diviner (sangoma) in the cultural displays of the villages is deliberately conducted to cater for western tourists who are fascinated by ‘witchdoctors’ and ‘black magic’ in the ‘dark continent’, whereas the performance of warrior dances and displays of traditional weapons are meant to nurture the popular image of the Zulu as a ‘savage people’, both feared and admired (Marschall 2003: 113). These images of black African identities can be seen to be translated into a racialised hierarchical division of labour. According to Pieterse (1992) the characteristic roles that were assigned to blacks in western society during the construction of stereotyped racial images in the past were those of servants, workers and entertainers. These occupational role allocations, which formed in America around the seventeenth century and were transferred to Africa, have been in existence for so long that they now seem to reflect a ‘natural’ order. Thus, the stereotyped racial role allocations of the past are now shared by many black people themselves and, as such, they are no longer contestable.
The performers in the cultural villages can be seen to embrace this construction of the black race as entertainers in discourses of racial identities. In an interview a performer in one of the cultural villages vehemently argued that ‘there is no Zulu who does not know how to sing and dance. Singing and dancing is in our blood’ (performer, 2011). What the performer did not realise was that beyond their grounding in the notion of race (or ethnicity), what is common in all racialised stereotyped roles is what Pieterse refers to as a ‘pathos of inequality’ (1992: 51). Thus, while performers are playing their role as entertainers, the white entrepreneurs also take their positions as owners of cultural tourism businesses and the tourists also take the position of victors of civilisation who enjoy the exoticism of the ‘spectacle’ of the Other. As ‘noble savages’ these black entertainers, who at some cultural villages are represented with animals in a single space, tend to be satisfied with ‘nothing’ or tips as they are perceived to be living harmoniously with nature and accumulating no material goods.

As coloniality affects the modern subject at every level and every day, at the level of knowledge production its most destructive strategy for its victims is the epistemic strategy of hiding the ‘locus of enunciation’ of the speaker by claiming non-situated-ness, universality and a God-eyed perspective of knowledge. This ‘point zero’ (Castro-Gomez 2003) strategy, according to Grosfoguel (2007: 214), enables coloniality or western modernity to conceal itself as being beyond a particular point of view, that is, the point of view represents itself as being without a point of view. This strategy is very effective simply because one can be socially located on the oppressed side of power relations but be epistemically thinking like those in the dominant positions. In such a scenario, the oppressed people can be found directing much of their energies to propping up structural orders that perpetuate their own oppression. In Phezulu Safari Park, the modestly educated tour guide from the Zulu communities whose role was that of ‘cultural broker’, interpreting what is being performed by his colleagues before the tourists, seemed quite convinced by the negative portrayals of pre-colonial Zulu people as witches. Thus in one of the tours, the ‘Zulu’ guide ‘thanked’ the colonialists for bringing light to the ‘Zulu witches’. He claimed ‘colonialism has transformed them into peace-loving people who humbly believe in Christ’. The performances of Zulu culture also featured an acting ‘Zulu boy’ eating raw meat before the tourists. These examples
illustrate that some members of Zulu communities, particularly those who have attained western education, have come to view their culture through the eyes of their colonisers.

Members of Zulu communities who have come to view their past in a negative light are now suppressing any positive suggestions about the search for equality between races. This connects well with their lack of ambition, as they view their economic exploitation in the villages as naturally given and therefore beyond contestation. In this way, the inferiority that the Zulu performers display in the cultural field is transferred to the inferiority that they have come to experience and accept in the economic sphere. Thus, when I teased one of the performers about how he feels to be an actor of his culture but earn less that his white manager, he argued that he does not have a problem with the status quo because whites are natural managers and blacks are naturally workers. He argued that even in the Bible there were slaves and masters so all these roles were God-given. This clearly shows that cultural representations such as Zulu cultural villages can be used as rituals of dominance where the cultural displays serve to remind the blacks that they are inferior to the white race.

References


