

Disarming Narratives

From Harm to Healing

Ali Moussa Iye

Political anthropologist,
founder of Afroprospectives

KEYWORDS

dominant narratives
decoloniality
Eurocentrism
cartography
General History of Africa
healing
reparation

This article examines how grand narratives — the ideologisation and instrumentalisation of myths for political and economic ends — have served to justify conquest, slavery and colonisation. The author argues that the singularity of European narratives lies in their reliance on science and on a globalised economic system, and illustrates their cognitive hold through the example of map projections. Drawing on UNESCO's *General History of Africa*, he calls for the deconstruction of inherited paradigms and vocabulary as a precondition for healing, reconciliation and the invention of alternative narratives.

Narratives are like entities with their own history and trajectory; like rumours, they sometimes go beyond the control of those who have created them. The ability to invent mythologies and tell narratives about the past and the future is perhaps what most distinguishes humans from other living beings. It is this capacity that has been the driving force behind the human extraordinary adventure.

Narratives have a history, too

Mythologies and legends have been first used to define our response to the mystery of creation, death and transcendence but also to explain our place in the universe, and our ontological relationship with other living and non living beings. While myths generally are preoccupied to give meaning in what is happening in the Heavens, narratives are mostly interested in what is going on on Earth. In most cases, they try to justify hierarchies, and relationships of domination and exploitation between individuals and groups within and between human societies. Narratives are in a certain way the ideologization and instrumentalization of mythologies for socio-political and economic purposes. Religion, philosophy, education and cultural expressions have been used to tell narratives that have changed the course of human history. The myths of “God’s chosen people”, of “King embodying the will of God”, of Superior Castes entrusted with a particular mission or of peoples destined to serve their rulers are part of these narratives.

The effectiveness of narratives lies in the fact that they offer a framework for explaining the complexity of reality and responding to the search for certainty. But where the use of narratives is most strategic is in situations of conquest, dom-

ination and exploitation, and in situations where the dignity, freedom and other basic human rights are violated.

For many observers of the European history, the 16th century was a turning point in the way that Great Narratives were constructed. The European conquest of the rest of the world that begun at that period was called the 'Century of Great Discoveries'. A century that resulted in genocide for the indigenous inhabitants of the "New World" and enslavement for the African peoples.

Singularity of dominant narratives

Europeans have introduced three innovations in the development of great narratives:

- A theory of humanity, the *Humanism* of the so called Century of Enlightenment, which places mankind at the centre of the creation and the Europeans at the centre of this centre and as the pinnacle of human evolution
- A theory of the universal, the *Universalism* of the same Century of Enlightenment, which transformed European particularism into universal model and made the historical trajectory of Europeans the only path for human development
- The establishment of an economic system that made the race for profit as the main driving force of human development

But the ultimate singularity of European narratives was the use of science to demonstrate their pertinence and legitimacy and impose themselves as incontestable facts. Scientific discourse, based on the belief in objectivity, experimentation and the search for truth, i.e. the immutable laws of the universe, nature and society became a powerful means to impose these narratives. It has the particularity of disqualifying all other forms of knowledge as mythologies, beliefs and superstitions, succeeding in dethroning spiritualities and other intelligibilities and explanations of the world. Who could resist this epistemology of truth and knowledge liberated from myth and superstition? How can we not succumb to stories that have been carried by the power of images: painting, photography and above all cinema and television?

Look at how Western films, the stories of cowboys and Indians, have changed guiltiness by transforming exterminated peoples into barbaric villains who enjoyed massacring the poor European settlers who came to develop these wild regions. Hollywood achieved the double feat of making a lot of money while turning Indian victims into white men's killers.

Generally speaking, narratives have a limited lifespan and are changed after major socio-political, economic or environmental upheavals. This was the case with the narratives of ancient empires such as the Egyptian, the Mongol, the Roman, the Muslim empires, to take just a few examples. By claiming their scientific foundation, European narratives have succeeded in disqualifying all other competing narratives, which have been relegated to the category of traditional beliefs. Moreover, the fact that these narratives have been supported by an economic system that has become global has reinforced their legitimacy and durability.

Maps and worldviews

To understand why it is so difficult to free ourselves from these narratives that literally shape our view of the world, let's take the example of maps. The most common map that we still use today is known as the *Mercator projection*. Created in the mid-sixteenth century, this map illustrates the Eurocentric vision and embodies the great narratives of the "Age of Discovery". Europe, placed at the centre, appears much larger than its actual geographical size. The Mercator projection, for example, makes it appear that Greenland is more or less the same size as Africa, whereas the African continent is in fact 15 times larger (see map).

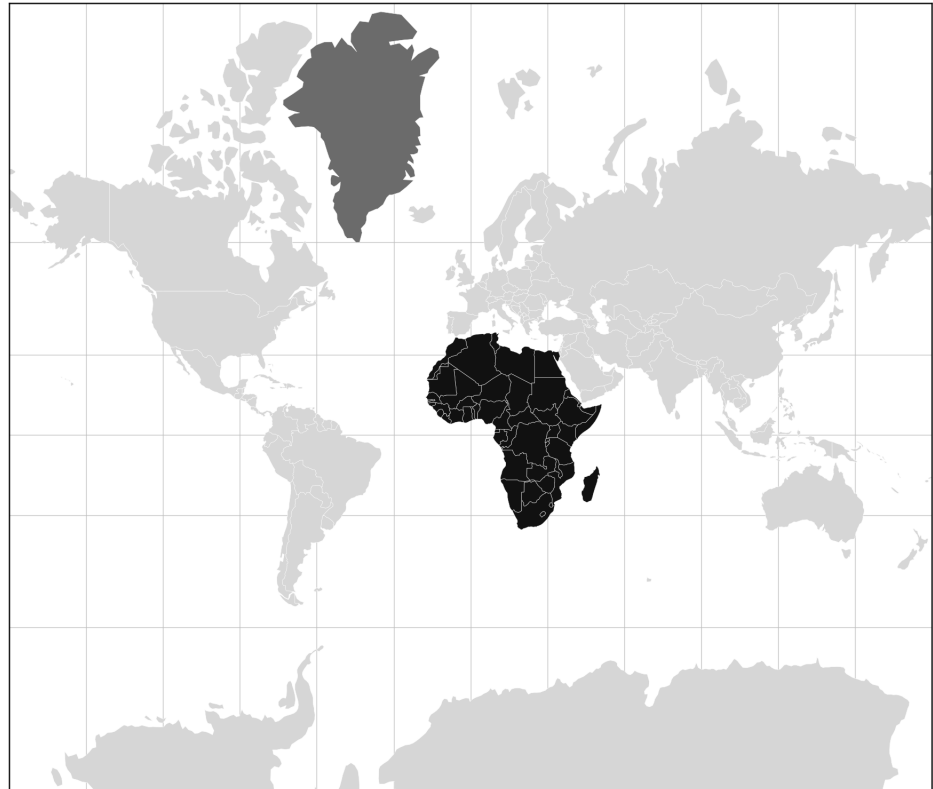


Figure 1. Mercator projection (mid-16th century). Africa (black) and Greenland (dark grey) appear to be of comparable size, although Africa is in fact fourteen to fifteen times larger.

The map known as the *Gall-Peters projection*, drawn up at the end of the 19th century, is considered to be more accurate and gives us another dimension of the continents (see map).

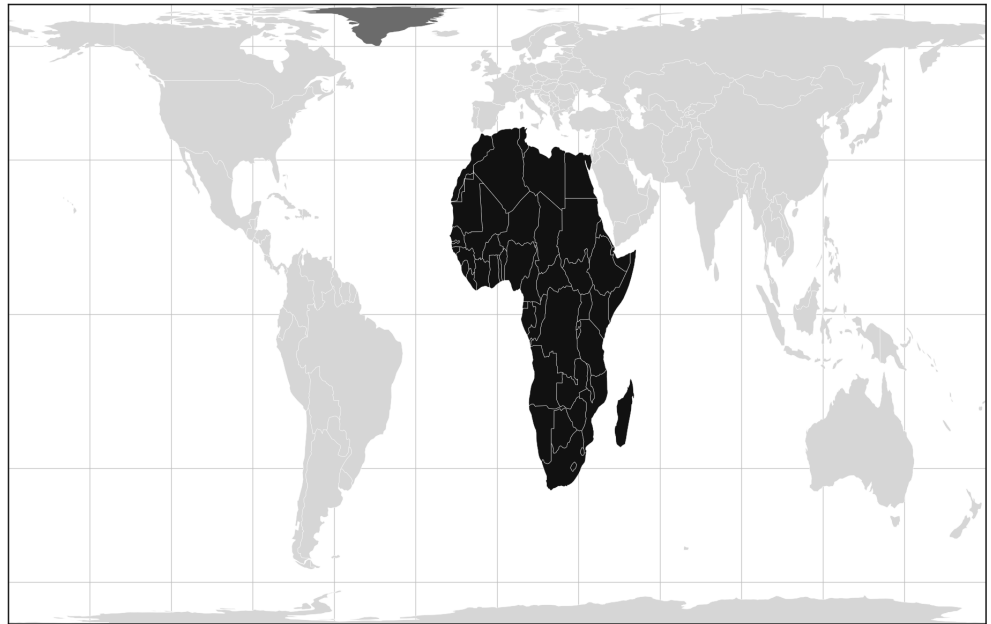


Figure 2. Gall-Peters projection: surface areas respect the true proportions of the continents.

In 1979, the Australian Stuart McArthur made two changes to the Gall-Peters projection, literally overturning the Eurocentric representations of the Mercator projection. Firstly, he changed the orientation of the map: North was placed at the bottom and South at the top.

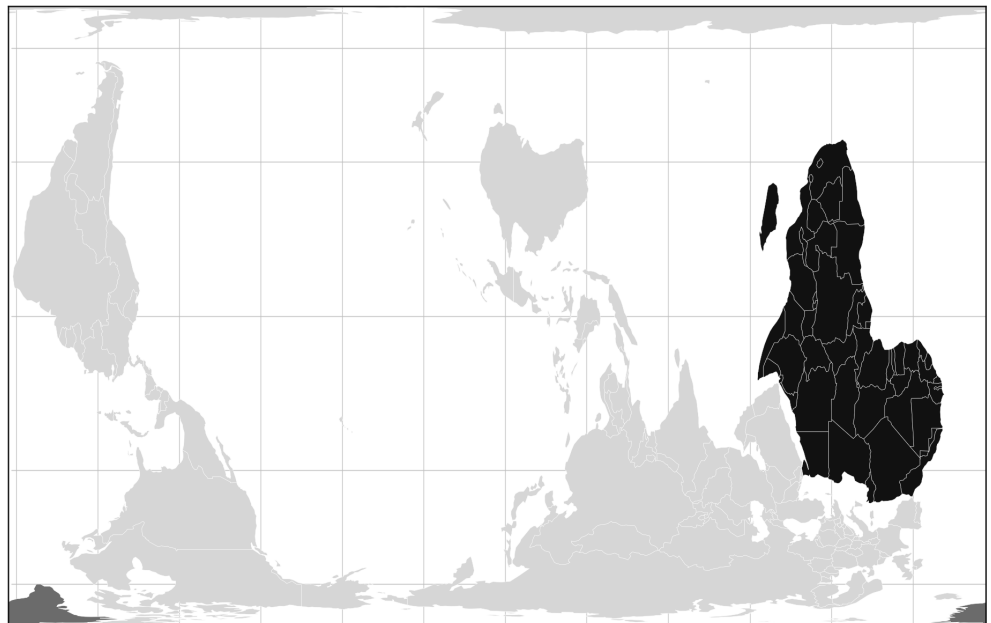


Figure 3. Stuart McArthur's reversed map (1979): South at the top, framing centred on Australia.

A map called *AuthaGraph*, created in 1999 by the Japanese Hajime Narukawa, provides another representation that is considered to be the most realistic to date, since it best represents the distances and size of each country.



Figure 4. AuthaGraph projection by Hajime Narukawa (1999), considered the most faithful to areas and distances.

Let's finish this world tour with the *Hao Xiaoguang* projection, which was adopted in 2013 as the official map of the People's Republic of China. With its new vertical projection, this map illustrates a vision of the world centred on China.



Figure 5. Hao Xiaoguang's vertical projection, official map of the People's Republic of China since 2013.

None of these maps is cartographically neutral, and each embodies specific geo-political narratives and visions. These maps blur our representations of the world's geography and disrupt our personal projections in space. They invite us to ask ourselves some disturbing questions. Why is the Mercator projection, which is the least reliable, still used everywhere? Why are maps considered to be more accurate not adopted, at least by the peoples who have suffered from the biases of these cartographic representations?

It is the same discomfort that we feel when we are confronted with perspectives and paradigms that turn upside down the perspectives and paradigms to which we are accustomed. What we see when we change our epistemological and paradigmatic glasses destabilises us because we do not like changing our certainties. This is one of the reasons why Euro-centric narratives have continued to prevail in the world since the sixteenth century, despite the end of slavery and colonisation and the emergence of other powerful nations with their own narratives about their trajectories.

Deconstructing to repair

Without a systematic process of questioning and deconstruction, these narratives will continue to discourage honest and calm dialogue between peoples in order to transcend the traumas and wounds of the past. The reaction of labelling as “wokism” any critical approach to the narratives and language inherited from the injustices of the past is nothing but a headlong rush. It does not help to initiate a debate that is so necessary for peace, reconciliation and healing in our multicultural, post-slavery and post-colonial societies.

To engage in this dialogue, it is important to understand and be aware of the cognitive implications of dominant narratives. Narratives are not just stories we tell ourselves to glorify ourselves and justify our rights over others and over nature. They also involve a whole process of reasoning that structures our thinking and our cosmovision through the perspectives, categories, paradigms and language we use.

This is what prompted us to develop a glossary listing these cognitive biases, as part of the second phase of UNESCO’s General History of Africa project, which I have the honour of directing for a while. Rather than drawing up a long list of terms to be decolonised, which would be endless, we have opted to define a methodology for critical analysis that makes it possible to identify problematic perspectives, paradigms, concepts and terms and to find more appropriate equivalents for them.

Among the perspectives carried by Eurocentric narratives that deserve to be deconstructed because they convey problematic geopolitical implications are the following:

- the *exceptionality of Europe*, born of the Greek miracle, a civilisation that is said to have emerged spontaneously on the shores of the Aegean Sea, without reference to the influence of Egypt, although this was clearly reported by the Greek authors themselves in their writings.
- The ‘*Century of Enlightenment*’, whose contribution to humanity would have conferred on Europeans the right to be the most qualified to speak in the name of universalism, humanism and human rights;
- *Europe’s Civilising Mission* which, despite its excesses, would have opened up new horizons for the other peoples of the world by connecting them to the general movement of progress;
- *Capitalism and liberal Democracy*, seen as the engine of modernity, itself a symbol of human progress and the least worst of choices for humanity, which in any case no longer has any other choice than learning to assimilate and adopt them.

The language we use to describe the world is the product of the narratives we have been inculcated with. Most of the dominant discourses, whether scientific, literary, media, educational or technological, inherited from the history of slavery, colonisation or contemporary geopolitical domination, have been embedded in language. Cinema, literature, the media, museums and school curricula continue to forge this vocabulary, which supports and reproduces the dominant narratives.

General History of Africa: another narrative of the continent

Transforming the narratives, which perpetuate the colonialities of power, knowledge and being, requires a critical and axiological analysis of the terminologies used. This is the effort that the authors of the eight Volumes (soon to be 11 Volumes) of UNESCO's General History of Africa have made to challenge the dominant historical narratives and the language used.

Over 350 historians and other researchers have undertaken remarkable work over more than 35 years to rectify the distorted image of Africa's past and cultures, to dismantle racial prejudice against people of African descent and to rigorously deconstruct a number of paradigms about Africa:

- The *paradigm of the separation* between Black Africa and North Africa, delimited by the great Sahara desert, which has never been a barrier but rather a living space of contact and exchange between the peoples of the north and south of the continent.
- The *paradigm of a continent as a receptacle* for the influences of other civilisations; in fact, the most ancient civilisations, including ancient Egypt, found their origin and inspiration in the African peoples themselves.
- The *paradigm of a continent frozen in its traditions* until the arrival of Europeans: in fact, Africa has its own chronology that demonstrates the continuous changes it has undergone since the creation of its first civilisations.
- The *paradigm of an isolated continent*, constrained by tropical forests, the Sahara and the oceans: in fact, Africa was in contact with Asia, the Middle East, Europe and even the Americas very early on, before the arrival of Europeans.

Imagining alternative narratives

Transforming dominant narratives is a prerequisite for any process of dialogue, healing and reconciliation. We cannot heal if we continue to use the same language that has caused harm. We cannot heal if we continue to remain within the same paradigm and perspective that generated the language that dehumanised human beings. We cannot fight racism and discrimination without changing the vocabulary through which racial prejudice is expressed.

This is not a question of changing semantics, but of ethics, justice and reparation. Healing from the traumas of the past means emancipating ourselves from the narratives that perpetuate them and the terminologies that recall them.

But the problem facing all those of goodwill is that we cannot change these narratives and terminologies without changing the system that produced them and continues to generate them structurally. So, we are faced with a structural and systemic problem.

Deconstructing the dominant narratives therefore calls for a multidimensional combat that is not only epistemological, philosophical and conceptual, but also political, socio-economic, cultural and educational. All the public spaces in which nations develop and express their narratives are challenged by this struggle.

Any attempt to transform the dominant narratives requires us first and foremost to deconstruct the myths and founding principles of the system of predation that promotes the dehumanisation of humans and the instrumentalization of nature, namely the capitalist system built on a racial order that itself rests on narratives justifying the hierarchy of individuals, races and cultures.

This process of transformation must be undertaken not only by the peoples who suffer the legacy of injustice, but also by the descendants of those who benefited from slavery and colonisation. It is a struggle that cannot be avoided in any serious project aimed at facilitating social justice, reconciliation, collective healing and common well-being.

It is a struggle that we must wage together to imagine alternative narratives that are not based on paradigms of domination, exploitation and hierarchy. Alternative narratives to restore our humanity, reconnect it to the rest of creation and to what lies beyond us and define new utopias for our human societies undermined by nihilism.

How to cite this article: Moussa Iye, A. (2023). "Disarming Narratives: From Harm to Healing." Article, *Afrospectives*, June 2023.