Neo-Colonial Subjectivities in Resilience Praxis and the Urgency to Think 'Beyond Inclusion'

This article analyses how contemporary framings of resilience policies exude forms of neo-colonial governance and subjectivities grounded in modernist ideologies and ways of 'being'. Often seen as vulnerable and victims of climate change, Indigenous peoples have become targets for the making of resilience projects—aimed at securing and enhancing life itself. Indigenous people's knowledge, care and relational entanglements with nature and spaces have become attractive in climate science. Their epistemologies and ontologies of being rest upon deep understandings of natural ecologies rooted in culture, co-existence, and cosmologies of environmental management (Chandler, 2024). Despite these, local communities and Indigenous peoples are barely recognised in resilience policy design, and interventions focus 'almost exclusively on Eurocentric canonised modes of knowledge production' (Amo-Agyemang 2021, 3). Thus, while assuming universalist one-size-fits-all solutions rather than pluralistic diversity, extant resilience projects preclude the co-production of Indigenous people's knowledge and alternatively fundamental worlds and systems of power. Drawing from a Decolonising Resilience workshop and excerpts from my PhD fieldwork, I argue that this persists, in part, because of modernist systems of neo-coloniality embedded within discourses of resilience. Neo-coloniality, in this discursive sense, is deployed to expose the ongoing effects of colonisation.

Social and political exclusion which so profoundly affects Indigenous people and local societies is directly attributable to the effects of colonial conquest, subjugation, epistemic violence, established discrimination and contemporary racism. Modernist and neo-colonial persistence of such practices can be seen in the (re)production of Indigeneity as imposingly problematic, and local communities as 'at high risk' and demanding intensive interventions, policing, and governance (Gale and Bolzan 2013). Resilience building, therefore, becomes a site of power, modernity and colonial subjectivities entrenched in Eurocentric categories of 'truth.' Beyond simplistically 'including' Indigenous local peoples in policy, there is a need for decolonising methodologies to critique historicities of power and affirm Indigenous people's mastery and lived cultures of epistemic ideologies: as an alternative ontology to rethink the modernist hegemonic world order in critical climate adaptive governance. Decolonising resilience, or dismantling neo-coloniality, however, for both colonised and coloniser, involves a process of overturning the dominant ways of 'seeing' the world and interpreting realities in ways that do not replicate colonial values. This short article reveals why this is a crucial step to moving beyond Western paradigms of resilience rooted in superficial participation and inclusions which, in practice, reify existing power asymmetries and obfuscate historical trends of colonialism.

The Polarisation(s) of Resilience

In May 2024, I was invited to a research workshop on 'Decolonising Resilience' chaired by David Chandler (University of Westminster) and Jan Pospisil (Coventry University) at the University of Ghana, Accra. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the research project aims to facilitate the establishment of a Global South-based network of critical resilience scholars. The preliminary workshop brought together scholars from the LSE, Juba, Ghana and development agents at GIZ to discuss what it really means to 'decolonise resilience' in a modern world saturated with neo-colonial heritages and Western patterns of governance. A related aim was to broaden the epistemological and ontological critique of resilience, and to crucially reconsider the concept 'from the margins'. At the workshop, scholars and development agents revisited the slippery meaning of 'resilience', using discourses of Indigeneity to re-construct power dynamics of policy articulations. Although the debate engendered

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critical and genuine discourses on resilience, it was clear that they also came to establish, deconstruct, and (de)legitimise particular forms of resilience interventions.

Critical for the dialogue was the manifestations and essence of resilience which produced divergent views and philosophical contestations. On the one hand, resilience was seen as a necessary way to 'bounce back' after (climatic) shocks, which so happens to be the 'new' order of the day. Here, the concept was contextualised normatively: as a critical 'adaptation strategy' and livelihood-enhancing factor in its own right. For some attendants, rather than remain static and suffer the consequences and shocks of climate/environmental change, resilience, by its very nature, affords an opportunity to positively exploit valuable opportunities amidst complexities and recover rapidly. Resilience, in this frame of thought, is a substantial way to address uncertainties and support social life. As such, individuals, systems, and societies must become 'resilient' to the changing dynamics of the world.

On the other hand, other scholars criticised resilience approaches for entailing an epistemology of limited knowledge which espouses that crisis cannot be predicted in advance. Resilience, for this category, rejects perfection. This claim was, thus, consistent with Mark Duffield's postulation that resilience is 'a retreat from older ideals of perfect knowledge and modernist control, a rejection of approaches that seek to predict events and isolate threats through hierarchical chains of command'. What is more, resilience was critiqued for being overly pessimist and for abandoning any prospects of hope, security, and progress in the first place. This, therefore, leads to the general acceptance that certain, if not all, risks/crises are unpredictable and ultimately inevitable: implicitly shifting the discourse from attempts to control crises, complexities and 'risks' towards ameliorative procedures of (re)capacitating humans and systems to cope with, adapt to, and shape changes that humans are already experiencing. This new paradigm, for Tom Scott-Smith, therefore, prompts the indication that 'we live in a state of constant threat, which the state cannot control. Nations cannot hope to build security for their citizens, so they adopt the mantra of resilience instead'. The World Bank's paradigmatic definition of resilience building as essentially 'helping people to help themselves' was translated to denote a neoliberal, and somewhat neo-colonial, shift in responsibility from the state and international policymakers to local and Indigenous populations to better strive for themselves.

Despite the polarisations, one uniting force is the magnitude at which resilience interventions have been globally augmented, and most recently in the Global South albeit often constructed from the top. Donors are investing overwhelmingly in resilience plans, rationalising it as a 'new' way to cope with ecological precariousness and to secure livelihoods. However, policy discourses are embedded in power dynamics that gravitate towards the repressed role of local and Indigenous peoples and the established role of state agents and multinational elites who exercise power and autonomy over Indigenous people (Johnson et al. 2022). In Ghana, for example, elites and scientists are often seen as power holders with technical knowledge to devise adaptation and agricultural policies. This has engendered decades of criticism from farmers and local communities who such interventions are designed to serve; often replicating everyday forms of resistance. Here, the shift to local knowledge in policy is crucial—not stemming from any type of epistemological change, ontological systems of ways of knowing, or upon cultural differences, but upon pragmatism and common sense.

(Neo)Colonial Subjectivities in Resilience Policy Processes

Climate change is a complex, multidimensional issue and raises critical challenges that transcend disciplinary boundaries and spatial systems (Agrawal et al. 2012). However, in what they frame as 'disciplinary climate reductionism,' Mason and Rigg (2019) highlight how climate change research and policy are reduced and dominated by positivist scientific approaches that coin the terms for most climate change debates. Such positivist approaches facilitate an objective approach to climate change that reduces complex climate change problems and proposes solutions that are amenable to technical, linear fixes. In the recent decade, however, this paradigm seems to be sharply evolving: as formulations now appear to adopt a bottom-up *inclusive* whole-of-society approach to resilience.

My research has thoroughly investigated the systemic procedures that (re)shape resilience projects in vulnerable communities in Northern Ghana (resilience processes). Based on extensive fieldwork which began in 2022, I have teased out the rationales behind resilience interventions as well as the power and knowledge that facilitates them.

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Through ethnography and semi-structured interviews with farmers and development agents, I examined the knowledge and power that shape resilience initiatives, mainly the *Increased Resilience to Climate Change in Northern Ghana (IRCCNG) Project* (2016-2022) by the UNDP. The results show that vulnerability, low adaptive capacities, food insecurity, and water scarcity, inter alia, have been deployed as objectives to re-problematise and rationalise resilience planning in Indigenous communities. This has gained much currency, often working to obscure the agency, capabilities and environmental management approaches of Indigenous people. As Howitt rightly argues, labelling Indigenous people as 'dangerously vulnerable' reveals epistemic and power struggles stereotyping, oversimplifying, and marginalising diverse knowledges, cultures, experiences, insights, and lessons that might be learnt by engaging with these (Indigenous) peoples.

In Ghana, resilience policy processes have regularly engendered polarised opinions with divergent views and ideological contestations. In the case of the UNDP's project, for example, policymakers on one hand stressed a community-led project driven by the need to address climate change from the perspectives of the farmers themselves. They speak of 'Vulnerability assessments and Baseline studies' which began in 2011 to assess vulnerabilities, baseline conditions, and the socioeconomic challenges of Northern districts to make accurate decisions; and 'Stakeholder consultations' which engaged farmers, traditional leaders, local government agencies, and NGOs to identify priorities, ensuring the project is 'community-centric'. In sharp contrast, farmers feel the IRCCNG project's decision-making processes, structures of inclusion, and mode of implementation recycled the old frames of reference. Farmers claim their knowledges were severely marginalised and underutilised, largely because of a lack of representation in stakeholder meetings and institutional design stages. Farmers were sceptical about the opacity of consultation, underscoring that the intervention was designed and entirely implemented by a group of 'experts' and power holders, and they were only presented with the 'project plan' when the so-called stakeholder consultation meeting took place. Thus, supported by this vision, I contend that resilience policy processes are contexts where issues of power imbalances, knowledge production, and modern subjectivities are produced and resisted.

Oftentimes, decolonial thinkers tend to reduce the exclusion of certain local communities and/or Indigenous peoples in development policy to 'epistemicides'—that is 'killing and displacement of other knowledges' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019, 5). However, Mendoza, and recently, Chandler have argued that reducing existing discourses of coloniality to the level of epistemic binaries is innately problematic, underlining the urgency to critique Western hegemonic forms of coloniality of power and being. For Chandler, 'the "coloniality of knowledge" can just be understood as just one way of grasping the contemporary importance of coloniality'. By building up this relation, I succinctly deconstruct the obscure assemblages in which Western ideologies of resilience governance disrupt Indigenous ecosystems (coloniality of being); relegating complex multi-layered structures to a place of modern subjectivity and epistemic vilification (coloniality of knowledge); inextricably connected to subjects of modernity and forms of unequal power relations in the fields (coloniality of power).

My research hinges on how the 'coloniality of power', an ongoing form of power asymmetries co-existing between policymakers and local Indigenous populations in discourses of resilience. Power, in this milieu, becomes a device for (re)shaping the preferred rationalities of resilience projects, or what is held as inevitable logic within resilience building. This, therefore, justifies why projects get delivered 'on the grounds' irrespective of how poorly they are designed (Chandler, 2024). Sova et al. (2017) have underscored that climate change adaptation policies in Ghana are often designed and facilitated by experts who often see farmers and local Indigenous groups as less 'powerful' and 'influential'. This top-down authoritarian modus operandi often engenders project failures because local communities are left outside the discourse of power. No matter how much they are 'included' in decision-making, neo-colonial power imbalances tend to challenge any policy objectives towards building resilience for a sustainable future. Power asymmetries and the historical manifestations of (neo)colonialism suggest vital ways in which locals feel abandoned in development discourse. This absence of status and place poses negative impacts: as local communities do not see their priorities manifested in resilience projects and may reject certain projects as authoritarian and exclusionary.

Framings of power in climate resilience policy governance are constructive of modernist forms of coloniality of knowledge. This, thus, relates to far-reaching epistemological issues and the politics of knowledge

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production—encapsulating critical questions like 'who generates which knowledge and for what purpose?' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019, 16). My research reveals how scientific knowledge is privileged over local knowledge in the field of implementation. What the policymakers expressed in the interviews revealed how these non-vulnerable power holders identified a particular kind of knowledge that was valuable, introduced it, and utilised it. Hence, local communities' resistance to top-down projects epitomises how social exclusion and mistrust in climate change policy illustrates the post-colonial landscape of Ghana, nurtured over decades of technification, failed agricultural projects and stagnant development. Epistemic struggles of local (Indigenous) people elucidate how modernity in the context of resilience policy governance characterises a prevalent epistemological canonisation that universalises the 'truth regime' by elevating itself, beyond Indigenous knowledge, as the singular and objective truth (Foucault 2007). In this discursive framework, other local forms of truths, ontologies, practices, philosophies and 'voices' are marginalised, stifled, repressed, and essentially, relegated because they exist outside the borders of Western modernity (Escobar 2017).

The third critical aspect of these socio-political subjectifications is the 'coloniality of being', that is the remaking of Western subjectivities and questions of human ontology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2019). It is about re-problematising existing ontological ideologies of modernity, of a 'One-World World' of objective laws and principles, linear causality, and systems' unchanging features situated within a void of time and space. Modernist ontologies that drive contemporary resilience policy in Ghana tend to assume positivist or universal solutions applicable across multiple cultures. This, John Law powerfully emphasised, is 'catastrophic in North-South encounters. They reduce difference. They evacuate reality from non-dominant reals.' By doing so, the world is seen as a status quo or a given, casting a critical eye on local societies and indigenous ontologies while elevating technical, Western knowledge. According to Chandler, the coloniality of being is crucial to international governmental institutions based upon the premise that policy solutions can be re-contextualised and objectified across time and space. My research illuminates how elites often assume one-size-fits-all approaches without questioning difference, context and relations. Considering these questions undermines the legitimacy and power of 'experts' which is situated on rectification, subjectification and abstraction. As the analysis has sustained, the coloniality of being, complemented with the coloniality of power, and of knowledge in resilience is a problematic ground for policy articulations in the Global South: because it represents what James Scott in his seminal work *Seeing Like a State* calls a 'high modernist' authoritarian planning mentality that regularly fails and reproduces unintended consequences.

Thinking 'Beyond Inclusion' and Decolonising Subjectivities in Participatory Spaces

As (neo)colonial and modernist histories of climate change solutions coupled with decades of top-down resilience planning have not positively impacted Indigenous populations, there is a need to radically re-conceptualise linear approaches to resilience policy as part of a critical decolonial turn. Despite calls to rethink heterogenous experiences of ecological changes in local communities, the decolonising resilience scholarship has made limited advances in this framework. Decolonisation, to paraphrase Ndlovu Gatsheni, therefore, denotes a continuing philosophical, political, social and ethical project that aims to disrupt and interrogate the world from the perspectives of Indigenous people as well as other colonised populations, and re-construct the unequal knowledge production and power relationships that characterise the neo-colonial present in a post-colonial world.

In arguing for climate justice and just transitions in resilience solutionism, most scholars advocate for community participation and 'inclusion' to address social inequalities. Yet despite this appeal, Milgroom and Claeys (2024) have revealed how induced participatory spaces further subject local communities to epistemic violence and entrench authoritative power. Participation, in itself, must not be perceived as an end, equitable in operations, and productive in meaning. Instead, it should be seen as a medium through which power holders legitimise and regulate subsidies towards their own interests. In *Neoliberal Indigenous Policy*, Strakosch deemphasises popular claims that liberalism implies decolonisation, stressing, contrarily, that 'including Indigenous peoples as full liberal citizens entrenches rather than dismantles existing settler institutions and authority'. In most cases where Indigenous people are *included* in resilience policy planning and institutional structures, they are seen as a 'minority interest', with little power and influence to deconstruct those structures.

Calls to 'move beyond inclusion' were profound at the workshop with participants arguing, instead, for critical re-

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constructions of the hegemonic hierarchies that produce and entrench extant power asymmetries and epistemological rapture. This ensures decolonisation is not reduced to inclusion or participation tout court: but extends into the deep recesses of peripheral systems and instructs how resilience policy can be better augmented. My research, for instance, reveals how policymakers now tend to consult and include farmers and beneficiary communities in resilience planning. Yet, it seems to me that they do so to tick a political checklist and satisfy project requirements: as it is mandatory for funds and overall project approval. Despite being included in participatory spaces, epistemic and ideological violence manifest by the othering processes that portray communities as 'victims' and 'uneducated, where elites treat Indigenous peoples as if they knew better than them. Against reformations of decentralisation and local participation, locals feel positioned outside the corridors of power, lacking the rights, acceptance, and agency in resilience and development policy.

Beyond seeing decolonisation as de-imperialisation, decolonising resilience is also about ascribing 'agency' to the subaltern, the marginalised and the colonised. This entails seeing local communities and Indigenous peoples as agents but not passive subjects and objects of Eurocentric politics and resilience policies. It helps to deconstruct neoliberal policies that subjugate Indigenous peoples to Western interventions regardless of whether they take into account their culture and lived realities. For Chandler, decolonising resilience would also mean recognising 'difference' and a pluriversality of cultures rather than homogenising worlds—as has been the case for many development projects in the Global South. Chandler deploys Edouard Glissant's concept of opacity—'the fact that reality cannot easily be grasped or captured in reductionist and abstract ways' to underscore the relational and material understanding of the difference that difference makes. Raising the problem of opacity, Chandler asserts, necessitates the recognition(s) of cultural differences which tend to offer a non-essentialising ground to decolonise resilience and hold institutions and external projects to account.

In fine, reducing inclusion to decolonisation in resilience policy risks essentialising and expanding power imbalances within existing articulations. Decolonising resilience, I have suggested, proffers a non-homogenising ground to re-conceptualise and rethink (neo)colonial subjectivities and power imbalances in resilience policies. Yet, decolonising methodologies often neglect differences within Indigenous and local communities. Thus, a need for intersectional approaches to explore gender, class, race, power structures and relations within Indigenous communities: as this can avoid risks of maladaptation, the entrenchment of asymmetrical power relations and, thus, ensure that even the most marginal groups within Indigenous communities benefit from resilience programming.

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