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TOWARDS A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO NEW ZEALAND'S COUNTERTERRORISM: AFROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVES

Shirley Achieng¹

New Zealand's counterterrorism approach, like that of many other postcolonial states, stems from models which continue to operationalise and legitimise colonial continuities. These models are predominantly underpinned by the events of 9/11. However, the devastating attacks in Christchurch in 2019 raised concerns about the way domestic terrorism has been conceived of by the security and intelligence communities in New Zealand. Debates have emerged on the efficacy of the Western-centric Global War on Terror (GWOT) narrative on terrorism and how it fits within the realities of New Zealand's counterterrorism context, given the country's national peculiarities and colonial history. Consequently, this article explores the GWOT ideology and attempts to expose terrorism as an ahistorical colonial concept. The argument is thus made for epistemic reconstitution and pluriversality of knowledges in how terrorism is understood and dealt with in the New Zealand context. In so doing, the article invokes decolonial thinking by drawing parallels between New Zealand's experience and the African colonial experience, by discussing decolonisation through the lens of Afrocentrism. Animating New Zealand's counterterrorism experience through the prism of Afrocentrism, therefore, the argument is made that the foundation of knowledge production in counterterrorism within New Zealand is profoundly colonial.

Keywords: counterterrorism, decolonial, epistemic reconstitution, coloniality, othering, Afrocentrism

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“Our minds must be ready to move as capital is, to trace its paths and to imagine alternative destinations.”¹

Introduction

Despite its representation as a low-risk country in terms of the terrorism threat, New Zealand’s counterterrorism approach is characterised by ambivalence. Even though prior to 9/11 several laws covering generic aspects of terrorism had already been enacted in New Zealand,² scholars such as Danny Keenan and Moana Jackson condemn the country’s approach as one that is seriously flawed given the uncritical response of the media and the high-handed actions of the New Zealand police to the terrorism threat.³

Although the events of 9/11 changed the trajectory of the practice of counterterrorism in New Zealand in many ways,⁴ with counterterrorism emerging top on the agendas of most governments around the world, colonialism had already set the parameters for how terrorism is handled. 9/11 was, in fact, an event that shaped and legitimised existing counterterrorism practices. Just as counterinsurgency narratives are intertwined with the politics of ignoring the place and voice of the colonised, the GWOT also ignores and minimises the rich histories and eclectic mix of positionalities around the world, by dealing with terrorism as though it were a universal concept. In essence, the GWOT meant the globalisation of counterterrorism, which in turn gave rise to a number of military interventions as states engaged in exaggerated threat assessments to counter terrorism.⁵ However, despite the United States’ determined resolve, the GWOT has yielded harsh lessons, especially for the non-western world. This is because being a universalist phenomenon, the GWOT advocates for the wholesale imitation of western counterterrorism models, thereby ignoring the place of other states’ cultures and their ways of doing things. In fact, as Prestholdt points out: “there is no single conceptualisation of terrorism as a threat that would motivate the world to action, but rather a multiplicity of conceptions of terrorism rooted in historical, political and cultural experiences of those in power.”⁶ Perhaps this explains why terrorism still lacks a substantive definition.⁷ Regardless, most states have maintained a Eurocentric focus in their counterterrorism approach, adopting pre-emptive, state-centric, response-based approaches,⁸ which critical terrorism studies scholars dismiss as problematic because of their lack of criticality.⁹

Looking at New Zealand’s counterterrorism approach, it is clear that just like many other post-colonial states across the world, the country continues to put in place imported western measures in line with international considerations¹⁰ because of the ethnocentric view that looks upon western modes of conflict as the universal standard. Without insinuating that all western counterterrorism measures are inefficacious or that everything Eurocentric must be set aside, the ensuing discussion asserts that the western counterterrorism paradigm must be re-imagined through the decolonial paradigm

because it may not be relevant for the non-western world. While acknowledging that decolonisation means different things to different people, this article looks at decolonisation through the prism of Manthala and Waghid in their 2019 work, *Decoloniality as a viable response to educational transformation in Africa*, where they argue that decolonisation is the critical study of all knowledge perspectives as legitimate and equal without privileging one knowledge over the other. According to them decolonisation, therefore, “is not an exercise of restoring an ostensibly pristine past. Rather, it is about a democratic open-endedness to knowledge and otherness without being restricted and governed by surreptitious categorisations of what constitutes an epistemological regulative benchmark epistemology.”¹¹ As such, this article considers decolonisation not as an event but as a continuous process.

Against that backdrop, this article contributes to the knowledge base that challenges the epistemic domination of western counterterrorism knowledge by envisioning pluriversality of knowledges in terrorism discourse. The analysis presented, thus, seeks to historicise New Zealand’s terrorism problem from the country’s perspective and explore how western conceptualisations of terrorism continue to pervade and influence local discourses. As such, Afrocentrism is invoked as a decolonising tool to show the need for rethinking and re-imagining the counterterrorism space. The core contributions of Afrocentrism are, first, to provide the basis for understanding some of the underlying assumptions about terrorism. Second, it provides the opportunity for reclaiming alternative ways of knowing that have been marginalised or completely excluded. Since Afrocentrism allows for counterterrorism to be envisioned from an African standpoint, this article attempts to capture dynamic and complex local situations that New Zealand can employ to revisit and re-imagine its own counterterrorism approach. The justification for this re-imagination is sufficiently reiterated by McCulloch, who states that in New Zealand’s counterterrorism case, “the facts on the ground do not fit those of 9/11.”¹² The process of re-imagination, therefore, involves the call for epistemic decolonisation, which Mitova defines as “a call to dismantle the western way of thinking and its self-arrogated hegemonic authority and to re-centre the knowledge enterprise onto the geo-historic here and now.”¹³

Consequently, this article analyses New Zealand’s counterterrorism approach using the Afrocentric decolonial research design. This design basically looks at knowledge from an African-centered perspective and draws from decolonial methodology which seeks to produce new knowledge about the ways through which colonialism has worked to subjugate indigenous people.¹⁴ Decolonial methodology offers the much-needed epistemic shift from dominant western-centric knowledge and counterterrorism narratives and demonstrates that pluriversality of knowledges is possible within counterterrorism. As a decolonial methodology, the Afrocentric decolonial design seeks to tackle colonialism epistemically by advocating for subject-to-subject relationships as opposed to subject-to-object relationships.¹⁵ The article thus explores New Zealand’s colonial

history, the impacts of 9/11 and the GWOT narrative within New Zealand's security landscape, and the othering nature of counterterrorism, drawing lessons from the Christchurch terror attack.

Approach

This article is informed by the Afrocentric decolonial design, which gives perspective to the hegemonic dominance of Western counterterrorism approaches in New Zealand. Even though based on African epistemology, this design is relevant to the New Zealand situation given the similarities between the country's colonial experiences and those of most African states. The design helps to reveal "the ways in which colonialism continues to operate and to affect lives in new and innovative ways as well as to show the unmitigated damage inflicted by past colonial practices."¹⁶ This design, therefore, offers a reconstructive process by looking at counterterrorism from the perspective of the colonised, in this case, Māori and advocating for alternative ways of dealing with terrorism. The core intent of Afrocentric decolonial design is not only to "reject the Eurocentric view that has become an ethnocentric view which elevates the European experience and downgrades all others,"¹⁷ but also to challenge the uncritical adoption of 'copy and paste' western counterterrorism templates that often produce counter-productive results.

Afrocentrism as a decolonising tool: A theoretical perspective

Drawing parallels between New Zealand's experience and the African colonial experience, decolonisation is discussed through the lens of Afrocentrism. Notably, it is almost impossible to discuss Afrocentrism without making reference to Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism is the mode of thinking that elevates the European experience as superior to all others.¹⁸ Contesting this school of thought, Afrocentrism advocates that African people must free themselves from the vicious psychological dependency complex that requires them to judge themselves using the west as a standard model.¹⁹ Importantly, however, Afrocentrism is not the opposite of Eurocentrism or a concept to simply make Africans feel good about themselves.²⁰ On the contrary, it is a perspective whose intention is not to occupy all space and time as seen in the case of Eurocentrism.²¹ Acknowledging the intellectual struggle between Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism, Hoskins asserts that:

African peoples, through their intellectual class action suit (Afrocentrism), are determined to take their minds back, to rescue their minds from the suzerainty of Eurocentric, miseducated control. Afrocentrism is the most potent weapon in the armoury of African peoples in this struggle...the visible message/dictum behind Afrocentrism is to tell African peoples that Eurocentric miseducation/Eurocentrism is not "the only shoe you've got." The Africa-centred curriculum/Afrocentric global re-education is the alternative shoe they've got now.²²

Afrocentrism's contemporary meaning was, however, not defined until the publication of Molefi Asante's widely cited work, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980). This book is considered Afrocentrism's founding work.²³ Primarily centred on conducting an investigation of the Eurocentric nature of knowledge, Asante set the basis for revolutionising how history and culture are approached.²⁴ Today, Afrocentricity is discussed all over the world as a formidable Pan-African force that cannot be ignored.²⁵ Afrocentrism challenges the orientation of history that is embedded in European historicism which marginalises the African subject. It demands that scholars place themselves within the African experience in order to make sense of their place in history.²⁶ As such, Afrocentrism is a concept that means African-centeredness.²⁷ This concept was created by Afro-American pioneers of Afrocentric thought namely: William Dubois, Anta Diop and Martin Bernal.²⁸ African-centeredness does not, however, mean confronting any person, but it is on the contrary, a resolute attempt to set the record straight.²⁹ In light of counterterrorism, Afrocentrism is employed as a decolonising tool to set the record straight, and to contest the footnote status accorded to the African by re-centring knowledge and exposing terrorism as an ahistorical colonial concept, embedded in the flawed GWOT narrative. This narrative, as argued in this article, is not only racist but also divisive in its application. In line with the Afrocentric perspective, the question of epistemic domination in New Zealand's counterterrorism landscape comes to light. Animating New Zealand's counterterrorism experience within the prism of Afrocentrism, the argument can be made that the foundation of knowledge production in counterterrorism within New Zealand is profoundly colonial.

Consequently, the most important question becomes: How can New Zealand's counterterrorism approach be re-envisioned from a decolonial perspective? This necessitates the compelling decolonial task of deconstructing and reconstructing power relations on different terms.³⁰ In the pursuit for decolonisation within counterterrorism, it becomes apparent that deconstructing colonial perspectives and de-linking from idealistic Eurocentric narratives about terrorism is key to achieving a pluriversity of knowledges. Drawing upon Afrocentric discourses championed by decolonial African thinkers, such as Ngungi wa Thiong'o and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, this article captures the voices of other non-western scholars, such as Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano, among others, who promote the historicisation and re-imagining of the non-western world. Collectively, their arguments constitute alternative knowledges aimed at deconstructing hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms. The reductionism endemic in the western counterterrorism paradigm, for example, engenders epistemic control over other knowledges rendering them to the periphery.

To contest the hegemonic dominance of Western thought in counterterrorism, Afrocentrism provides greater perspective on the complexity of the colonial experience. Even though there are arguments contesting where colonialism ends and coloniality begins, the claim that the colonial project ceases to impact the politically decolonised

country is to underrate the disruptive power of the colonial project. Accordingly, in order to overcome the disruptive legacy of colonialism, the intellectual landscape of the country in question must be decolonised.³¹ This argument resonates with Ngungi wa Thiong'o's work, in which he reflects on the African colonial experience. He states that "the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom."³² In a nutshell, Ngugi believes that colonialism had a profound impact on the African intellect and that this impact must be overcome through decolonisation. Afrocentrism, consequently, intends to overcome the disruptive intellectual impacts of colonialism by "relocating the African person as subject, thus destroying the notion of being objects in the western project of domination."³³ As such, the Afrocentric agenda advocates that knowledge must be examined from an African perspective and that Africans must take back their intellectual pride.³⁴ Afrocentrism, as theorised in this article, can also provide a useful perspective on the New Zealand counterterrorism experience.

Just like pioneer decolonial scholars, the argument is made for deconstructing the western epistemology within New Zealand's counterterrorism landscape and reconstructing the country's counterterrorism approach through the development of a decolonial approach. This epistemically de-links from western epistemological claims and constructions of terrorism. Epistemic de-linking, also referred to as 'epistemic disobedience' from western knowledge systems, envisages the act of 'de-linking' as the primary pathway out of coloniality.³⁵ Even though there are different forms of coloniality, the notion of coloniality that this article is concerned about is that which is centred on epistemology, which is the control of knowledge for the purpose of subjectivity.³⁶ It thus becomes apparent that the colonisers imposed their patterns of knowledge production, which later penetrated the psyches of the dominated in some of the worst cases of cultural colonisations.³⁷ Epistemic coloniality embedded in counterterrorism is seen in examples of domination, exploitation and oppression brought about by flawed counterterrorism strategies that do not resonate with people's cultures and histories. These flawed strategies take the form of imported approaches, such as those advocated by the GWOT, which are prescribed in a one-fits-all kind of way with no proper understanding of the complexities of the states in question.

Having already established the ubiquity of coloniality within western knowledge systems, there is no denying that "knowledge about terrorism travels in a unidirectional way."³⁸ That is, it travels from the western to the non-western world and not vice-versa. This kind of thinking can only be reversed through the deconstruction of dominant western ways of dealing with terrorism and reconstruction of other ways of knowing that have otherwise been excluded and marginalised. Indeed, states like New Zealand and many other African states have the capacity to produce counterterrorism knowledge that fit within the realities of their contexts.

New Zealand's counterterrorism approach - colonial perspectives

Although some would consider it arguable, it can be suggested that New Zealand's counterterrorism approach, just like that of many states in the African continent, is rooted deeply in colonialism. Counterterrorism, as manifested in New Zealand today, is however, not entirely the country's creation but can largely be attributed to the effects of colonialism and subsequently, exhibits many colonial continuities. For example, the *us versus them* duality often linked with the GWOT did not begin with 9/11, but was in place long before then. The argument is made that given the history of violence and the use of force against Māori during colonialism, there is a possibility that they were, and still are, seen as the "them" in New Zealand's security landscape. Simply put, counterterrorism, as manifested in New Zealand today, was arguably learnt from the colonial regime and the same colonial strategies are presently still in place within the country's counterterrorism landscape. As stated earlier, the GWOT narrative that is endemic in the country's counterterrorism architecture did not present a completely new way of dealing with terrorism but merely worked to legitimise existing colonial practices. To understand this, it is important to go back into the past because the past is an important element of the future and the present cannot be understood without any reference to the past.³⁹ Analogising the genesis of Africa's colonial experience, Chinua Achebe reiterates the importance of the past in reflecting the present by invoking an Igbo proverb: "a man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body."⁴⁰ Against this backdrop, to conceptualise how terrorism is understood in the New Zealand context, it becomes increasingly important to examine how certain issues were represented during the colonial period by "looking back."⁴¹ at the past.

While acknowledging the disruptive and devastating impact of colonialism within post-colonial states, it is also important to understand that "counterterrorism practices often occur under circumstances already existent, granted, and transmitted from a colonial past."⁴² Therefore, counterterrorism strategies within post-colonial states were developed and implemented through a particularly western gaze. This is the gaze that engaged in categorisations based on race and assumed the monopoly of naming. As Jackson reiterates, "colonisers have always presumed the right to name the people they wished to dispossess."⁴³ Māori fighting against colonial forces were labelled rebellious for fighting against an oppressive colonial regime.⁴⁴ Jackson asserts the label was later upgraded from rebels or savages to terrorists - a term he argues fits with unwarranted ease. Further, the law was used as an oppressive tool to quash dissent and legitimise oppression. For example, the Suppression of Rebellion Act 1863 was enacted for the colonising purpose of quashing Māori resistance and entrenching colonial order.⁴⁵ This connects with the African situation, where freedom fighters such as the Mau Mau of Kenya were branded terrorists,⁴⁶ and punitive laws used as instruments for control. The

Collective Punishment Ordinance (1909), for example, was used to force loyalty to the British colonial regime by penalising disloyal communities.⁴⁷ These arguments go a long way to show that counterinsurgency laws were formulated through a colonial gaze with the intention of ‘taming’ the colonised.

Discussing New Zealand’s counterterrorism approach without acknowledging the country’s colonial experience would be nothing short of engaging in an escapist project. The place of colonialism within New Zealand’s counterterrorism response cannot be ignored. It remains an unfinished part of the country’s history and reality, and still determines the course of the country’s trajectory.⁴⁸ Hill traces the origins of conceptualisations of terrorism in New Zealand and argues that “from the days of British interest in Aotearoa, the imperial priority was to ‘tame’ the new frontier.”⁴⁹ Exploring the relationship between policing agencies and Māori, for example, Hill asserts a relationship that is determined to control and tame, as it is fraught with force, suspicion and violence. As in many other post-colonial states, the policing function in New Zealand was essentially a political function because the police were not seen by the dominated population as impartial agents.⁵⁰ Similarly, in the African context, specifically looking at the Kenyan situation, the current coercive counterterrorism practice is not unique, as it was a learnt process from the colonial security forces who employed strategies of mass detentions, torture and even extrajudicial killings.⁵¹ Being a coercive force, colonial security forces were often deployed to suppress dissent.

It can be argued that the practice of using force in New Zealand did not spring up unexpectedly, but was, in fact, a product of the colonial project aimed at dealing with the problem of internal security as a result of Māori dissent.⁵² This explains why colonial policing concentrated their operations in areas dominated by European settlement⁵³. As Hill reiterates, from the earliest days of British interest in New Zealand, the central role of the police was to control the perceived ‘turbulent’ frontier.⁵⁴ As such, policing elements were mainly established to quash any form of Māori resistance. Accordingly, as Hill points out, after colonialism the element of ‘force’ was retained because it was geared towards dealing with Māori dissent.⁵⁵ The naming of the police as New Zealand Police *Force* was therefore not accidental. It mirrors the case of the Kenya Police *Force*; whose primary function was to protect the interests of the state. Much has not changed in the Kenya Police for instance, despite the word ‘force’ being replaced with the word ‘service’. These examples illustrate how policing agencies were, in fact, a significant instrument of colonial brutality, employed primarily to impose the will of the state upon the dominated population.⁵⁶ Ultimately, it becomes clear that modern institutions are often not necessarily completely separate from their past history.⁵⁷

When discussing coercive policing techniques employed against Māori, the concept of the ‘other’ comes up. Othering is the stigmatisation of certain groups of people based on power relationships.⁵⁸ This concept plays a major role in shedding light about colonial power structures that presented Māori as the ‘other’- inferior and incapable of govern-

ing themselves. According to Staszak, otherness is intrinsically an ethnocentric bias that arises from western thought. The logic of the other is based on the duality principle, specifically concerned with creating dichotomies of identities. Tracing the development of the construction of the African other, for instance, and cognizant that according to western thinking black represented dirt, while white represented purity, Meisendhelder cautions that such constructions were not innocent, but were, in fact, deliberate and asks some critical questions: “In what sense are Europeans white? Why aren’t they pink? Are Africans black? Why not brown?”⁵⁹ It becomes clear that the function of creating identity dichotomies was informed by the need to legitimise and maintain Europe’s domination.⁶⁰ In the case of Māori othering, Avril Bell gives an account of how it came about, stating that it began in 1642 when Abel Tasman made the first contact with Māori. She argues that, even though interactions between Tasman’s crew and Māori were at times friendly, “others resulted in conflict and death.”⁶¹

Traces of othering are still evident in New Zealand’s counterterrorism response, which arguably serves to produce moral panic around terrorism based on race.⁶² Examining the country’s anti-terrorist response of 15th October 2007, infamously known as ‘Operation Eight’, a disturbing revelation comes to the fore. First, the language used by the police commissioner to describe the raids speaks volumes. According to him, “*certain* individuals had been identified as posing a dangerous threat to New Zealand’s peace and security.”⁶³ The words ‘certain individuals’ signifies an element of othering. Second, the level of violence and hostility meted on the population during the raids raises questions about the aims of the operation, which has been described as not only racist, but also ill-advised.⁶⁴ Also, the fact that the police used the term ‘terrorism’ to describe the activities of those arrested, depicts how the element of othering intertwines with the terrorism discourse in New Zealand’s context. In McCulloch’s words, “the raids of 15 October 2007 in New Zealand, casts Māori as a kind of Arab ‘other’, giving our narrative its own *us vs them* twist.”⁶⁵

In the next section, the impact of the GWOT discourse in New Zealand’s counterterrorism landscape is discussed. The argument is made that the country’s counterterrorism approach is ostensibly fraught with some insidious elements of the 9/11 narrative, making it counter-productive.

GWOT narrative and New Zealand’s counterterrorism

Cognizant of the role of colonial continuities in how terrorism is dealt with in New Zealand today, the events of 9/11 not only legitimised these already existent forceful ways, but also led to a transformation of how terrorism was perceived and responded to.⁶⁶ According to Richard Jackson, after 9/11 terrorism became the most significant security issue that quickly informed anti-terrorism laws and strategies across the globe.⁶⁷ In New Zealand for example, the impact of the dominant GWOT narrative on the country’s counterterrorism response began to be felt long before the Operation Eight raids of

2007.⁶⁸ One year after 9/11, New Zealand enacted the Terrorism Suppression Act 2002, which was first invoked in the Operation Eight raids of 2007.⁶⁹ Further, examining New Zealand's history with terrorism reveals a country which "has had little reason to use the term 'terrorism'".⁷⁰ In fact, the 9/11 conceptualisation of terrorism is largely absent from the country's national story.⁷¹ Despite the bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior* vessel in 1985 and the hijacking of an Air New Zealand aircraft in Fiji in 1987, which were variously described (terrorism in the former, not so in the latter), but prompted little change in the manner in which it was viewed.⁷² The most devastating terrorism attack in the country's history occurred on 15th March 2019, which saw the massacre of 51 Muslims.⁷³

Even though terrorism is conceptualised differently depending on the positionality of different states, the GWOT limits counterterrorism response within the confines of 9/11. The GWOT's narrative is brazenly Eurocentric, with its articulation of a "stable, civilised West under threat from a dangerous and bellicose Islamic 'other.'"⁷⁴ The question of what constitutes terrorism consequently gets lost in the post- 9/11 chaos.⁷⁵ The pejorative stereotypes linked with terrorism have arguably contributed to the definitional quagmire the term faces.⁷⁶ The reverberation of this definitional challenge has been felt in many states like New Zealand where, despite enacting terrorism laws, the same laws have proven to be largely inefficient. The Solicitor General, for example, in reference to the Suppression of Terrorism Act, dismissed the Act as 'incoherent' and 'unworkable' and could hence not be used to charge the suspects of Operation Eight raids.⁷⁷ This is because the Act predominantly deals with threats posed by organised sophisticated terrorist groups and does not factor in those carried out by lone actors or those considered to be of 'low-sophistication.'⁷⁸

These accounts illustrate that counterterrorism laws, particularly the Suppression of Terrorism Act, need to be re-visited. Since this law is based on UK legislation, it could also indicate that it does not fit within the realities that New Zealand faces. This, therefore, means that there is need for making amendments to this law so it can be applicable to domestic terrorism. Linking this development to the Kenyan case, the Suppression of Terrorism Bill of 2003 and the Anti-Terrorism Bill of 2006 were defeated in parliament because most critics felt that the Bills did not present a home-grown solution to the terrorism problem in Kenya.⁷⁹ Besides, there is a tendency within mainstream terrorism discourse to label some groups as terrorists while excluding others, even though both of their actions can be considered acts of terrorism.⁸⁰ Also, scholars challenge how some victims of terrorism are classified as grievable,⁸¹ while others merely seen as collateral damage.⁸² Examining the Operation Eight raids, for instance, the following questions come to mind: did the actions of the New Zealand police amount to state terrorism? And if not, who then assumes the monopoly of defining what terrorism is, or is not? These complex questions remain unanswered.

Apart from privileging some narratives over others, the GWOT narrative has also continued the idea of dichotomising the world into *us versus them*. The evolution of *us versus them* narrative officially began during the communism age of the Cold war to the commencement of the war on terror,⁸³ and within this discourse *them* meant “specifically Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the enemies of civilization.”⁸⁴ The enemies of civilisation who were termed as backward and barbaric were considered a threat to western civilisation and values.⁸⁵ The binary logic of *us versus them* resonates with *good versus evil*, in which case “we (Americans) are the forces of goodness and *they* (barbarians) are the forces of darkness.”⁸⁶ Based on Bush administration’s emotive statements in the wake of 9/11, it becomes clear that the *us versus them* narrative was invoked primarily as a polarising lens through which terrorism could be dealt with through violent militaristic responses.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, Kellner cautions that the *us versus them* narrative is deeply problematic because it “legitimizes any action undertaken in the name of good, no matter how destructive, on the grounds that it is attacking evil.”⁸⁸ Mirroring the 9/11 *us versus them* narrative in the New Zealand context, the actions of the police during Operation Eight which included detaining people for hours, smashing doors and setting up roadblocks,⁸⁹ raise questions about whether Māori are considered the ‘them’ of New Zealand’s terrorism discourse. McCulloch affirms this argument, maintaining that “the American terrorism narrative of *us versus them* and *good versus evil* so quickly found its local counterpart in Māori.”⁹⁰ These arguments all form part of ‘othering’ discourses endemic in counterterrorism, as discussed in the next section.

The Othering nature of counterterrorism - lessons from the Christchurch terror attack

Since 9/11, Islam has emerged as one of the most misunderstood religions, particularly in the United States.⁹¹ Accordingly, the US’s harsh foreign policy towards predominantly Muslim countries, such as Syria, Iran and Yemen, among others, has been seen as a war against Islam.⁹² In addition, the western bias towards Islam is perceived as a manipulative tool employed by the west to justify their cause when fighting for their own political, social and economic interests.⁹³ In the aftermath of 9/11, Islam has been at the crux of much debate, with the religion being viewed from an antagonistic standpoint.⁹⁴ Both media and literature have played a significant role in framing Islam as an aggressive religion, choosing to deliver news in a reductive, one-sided, non-critical manner.⁹⁵ Majozī argues that this conceptualisation has its roots “in a racist and Islamophobic western epistemological narrative which seeks to create a ‘natural’ link between terrorism and Islam.”⁹⁶

Muslims, in general, have been portrayed by the media as destructive and violent ‘others’ determined to sabotage the peace and democracy of the west.⁹⁷ Said defines this portrayal as “a parody of how knowledge gets produced; the idea that Islam is medieval

and dangerous as well as hostile and threatening to ‘us’, for example, has acquired a place in the culture and polity that is very well defined.⁹⁸ This ubiquity of the construction of Islam as a terrorist religion must be challenged.⁹⁹ The othering of Islam has its roots in several discourses, such as the discourse of violence, colonisation and secularisation among others.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, the post-9/11 Islamic terrorism discourse embedded in the GWOT is the one which has been articulated far above others, depicting “western societies as gravely threatened by the murderous violence of the Islamists, and in effect, whiteness has been recast as vulnerable, endangered, innocent and the subject of the irrational hatred of this non-western Other.”¹⁰¹ This narrative of macho Muslims versus the feminised innocent west only aims at painting a terrifying picture whose end game is to justify the pursuit of aggressive militaristic policies.¹⁰² Given that since 9/11 terrorism has traditionally been associated with the Muslim ‘other’, or rather foreign threats, an increase in white supremacist attacks in recent years has challenged the notion of Islamic terrorism as advanced by GWOT.¹⁰³

Looking at the Christchurch attack, for instance, there appears to be a threat that emerges from white supremacy which has otherwise been ignored. In this attack, 51 Muslims were victims, which is dissimilar from the GWOT’s narrative whereby the west is always the target and victim of terrorism. Domestic terrorism, an area that is not captured under New Zealand’s terrorism legislation, is one that the country now finds itself grappling with. In fact, since the attacks, there have been inconsistencies in the manner in which terminologies are deployed to describe the attack.¹⁰⁴ For example, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has used the term terrorism and extremism interchangeably when referencing the Christchurch attack, without clarifying their definitions. Besides, the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack has mostly been referred to as a lone-wolf, right-wing extremist or white-supremacist,¹⁰⁵ but sometimes also as a terrorist. The Christchurch terror attack, thus, reveals the counter-productive consequences of the GWOT narrative that fuels Islamophobia and white supremacy in society.¹⁰⁶ Examining the use of language in New Zealand’s terrorism landscape reveals a scenario where terrorism and extremism are employed interchangeably, hence “creating confusion and directly influencing government and security agencies, as well as the media and general population.”¹⁰⁷ This confusion further creates a scenario where it becomes extremely difficult to draw the line between terrorism, extremism and attempted murder, as seen in the comparable cases of the Lynn Mall attack and the Dunedin Countdown Supermarket attacks of 2021, which were defined differently even though both involved brandishing of knives and stabbing of victims.

Against this background, it becomes imperative to state that the reconstruction of a new counterterrorism framework must serve the interests of the New Zealand people. The process of reconstructing counterterrorism involves invoking the spirit of ‘desprenderse’ a term coined by Anibal Quijano, which stands for epistemic delinking/epistemic disobedience.¹⁰⁸ Epistemic delinking involves adopting the much-needed decolonial

shift from western-centric counterterrorism narratives to more critical decolonial perspectives. This decolonial shift involves the debunking of terrorism as a product of coloniality, which as discussed in New Zealand's case, has exacerbated the relationship between security agencies and Māori. Also, it involves encouraging the pluriversality of knowledges by moving away from the dominating GWOT conceptualisations of terrorism that depict Islam as a dangerous religion associated with terrorism. Against this backdrop and in line with the spirit of 'desprenderse', Afrocentrism as a decolonising tool provides the much-needed epistemic shift from dominant western-centric counterterrorism narratives that are inefficacious for the New Zealand situation. As previously discussed, since New Zealand's history is embedded in colonial narratives, the country can learn from the Pan-African experience, by epistemically subjecting the colonial question to decolonial interrogation. This involves deconstructing colonial perspectives and sub-sequently de-linking from idealistic Eurocentric narratives about terrorism. This will help the country create a genuine possibility for pluriversality of knowledges in its counterterrorism landscape.

Conclusion

Having explored the extent to which New Zealand's counterterrorism approach is embedded in discourses of coloniality, as well as the broader western security and intelligence architecture which do not fit within the realities of its context, it becomes imperative to shift the geopolitics of knowledge systems from the dominant western epistemology, which not only pervades local discourses, but also encourages imitation of counterterrorism ideas. Consequently, knowledge must be examined from a decolonial perspective and a shift from the GWOT counterterrorism narratives invoked. Challenging the hegemonic production of knowledge in counterterrorism can only be accomplished by deconstructing terrorism as a product of coloniality and encouraging the pluriversality of knowledges in how terrorism is understood and dealt with.

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