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Towards a decentring of standardised peace mediation governance: a postcolonial reading of an interventionist travelling model in African contexts

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Abstract

Peace mediation has emerged as a guiding paradigm for global governance and a key tool in international peace diplomacy, promising conflicts transformation and security enhancement. However, international mediation approaches are deeply rooted in Anglo-Eurocentric politico-philosophical thoughts and *liberal* mediation theory, often overlook entrenched knowledge hierarchies, visible in peace mediation in African contexts. This article critically examines the African Union's peace mediation frameworks, highlighting Anglo-Eurocentric path dependencies and standardised mediation instruments, drawing on examples from peace mediation in Sudan and South Sudan. It problematises de-contextualisation, de-politicisation, and de-pluralisation effects of standardised peace mediation governance, revealing how hegemonic assumptions and principles embedded in the travelling mediation model are translated into regional policies and practices. The study addresses the coloniality of knowledge and proposes angles for decentring and reimagining mediation as a decolonial device, integrating diverse conflict resolution knowledges.

Key words

Peace mediation; de/coloniality of knowledge; global legal pluralism; African Union; United Nations; Sudan; South Sudan; travelling model; translation

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Resumen

La mediación para la paz se ha erigido en paradigma rector de la gobernanza mundial y herramienta clave de la diplomacia de paz internacional, con la promesa de transformar los conflictos y mejorar la seguridad. Sin embargo, los enfoques de mediación internacional están profundamente arraigados en los pensamientos político-filosóficos anglo-eurocéntricos y en la teoría liberal de la mediación, y a menudo pasan por alto las arraigadas jerarquías de conocimiento, visibles en la mediación de paz en contextos africanos. Este artículo examina críticamente los marcos de mediación de paz de la Unión Africana, destacando las dependencias del camino anglo-eurocéntrico y los instrumentos de mediación estandarizados, a partir de ejemplos de mediación de paz en Sudán y Sudán del Sur. Problematiza los efectos de descontextualización, despolitización y despluralización de la gobernanza estandarizada de la mediación de paz, revelando cómo los supuestos y principios hegemónicos integrados en el modelo de mediación itinerante se traducen en políticas y prácticas regionales. El estudio aborda la colonialidad del conocimiento y propone ángulos para descentrar y reimaginar la mediación como un dispositivo descolonial, integrando diversos conocimientos sobre resolución de conflictos.

Palabras clave

Mediación para la paz; de/colonialidad del conocimiento; pluralismo jurídico global; Unión Africana; Naciones Unidas; Sudán del Sur; modelo itinerante; traducción

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1. Introduction

This article contributes to the Special Issue on *Decolonising Legal Pluralism, Decentring Epistemological Paradigms*, by focussing on internationalised and standardised peace mediation as a hegemonic, interventionist *travelling model*.

Mediation, understood as a consensus-oriented form of conflict resolution, has become a guiding paradigm of global governance. This is evidenced by increased regional and international interventions in a preventive or restorative manner, as well as processes of juridification and institutionalisation of mediation. The promises of mediation ranging from transforming conflicts, promoting peace and security to preventing humanitarian crises (Bush and Folger 2004, 13).

Critical studies have analysed mediation as a regulating process, emphasising the power dimension that is often obscured behind a "mediation myth" (Silbey 1993, 349–53). This myth is what Laura Nader (1993) refers to as "harmony ideology". Nader studied how the Zapotecs community in Mexico strategically present themselves as a harmonious community that resolves disputes internally to avoid state interference. This strategy enables them to align, adapt and reinvent local cooperative mechanisms in relation to state structures. It thereby serves both legal and political purposes. According to Nader, it is the interplay between local and national governance structures that provides the critical context for understanding dispute resolution practices (Nader 1993). Her research also challenges the common state-centred narrative of mediation as an "alternative" dispute resolution as it fails to acknowledge the interactions and interdependencies between different governance structures, often dichotomised as "state" and "non-state" or "judicial" and "non-judicial" dispute resolution. In many contexts around the world, various forms of local mediation and arbitration are also the norm rather than the exception. Thus, mediation needs to be considered in the broader frame of legal plurality to better understand the interplay, tensions, coalitions and blurred boundaries of different interacting normative orders and power dynamics.

Nader's observation can also be applied to the interplay between regional and international peace mediation. It highlights the interlinkages of different normative frames, the significance of power and relational adaptation strategies in dispute resolution. It draws attention to conflicting normative interests and political agendas that are hidden behind the "harmony ideology". The "harmony myth" obscures the diverse social functions of mediation. These functions include not only integration (peace-making, consensus-building), but also regulation (order-making, avoidance/prevention), behavioural control (by forcing communication and cooperation), innovation (in relation to established conflict resolution procedures) or socialisation (contributing to the creation of legal consciousness via mobilisation, legal education) (Seidel 2022, 394f). Accordingly, it illuminates the risk of submitting to an "ideology of harmony," as this can result in acquiescence to a "dominant legal ideology" (Benda-Beckmann v. 2008, 98), no matter if promoted by state or "non-state" actors. Consequently, there is a danger that the utilisation of mediation as a governance technology may result in its de-politicization (Bröckling 2015, 186).

This article takes a closer look at internationalised peace mediation, particularly its institutionalisation in the context of the African Union's peace mediation approaches, with a focus on entrenched asymmetric global power relations and knowledge

production. It draws on published research on peace mediation practices in African contexts, as well as on my own fieldwork conducted in the broader Horn of Africa, by providing examples from Sudan and South Sudan.

Analytically, this study engages with the key concept of legal pluralism, which emphasises the plurality of coexisting overlapping, hybrid and globalised legal orders (local-global nexus) generated by multiple actors with different sources of legitimacy – through the specific lens of peace mediation as a conflict resolution mechanism. As noted in our introduction to this Special Issue, legal pluralism as a holistic analytical concept has been compromised or co-opted as a normative political project by the broader "law and development" movement that feeds the reproduction of coloniality of power and knowledge. Coloniality highlights the entrenched patterns of power, thought and action resulting from colonialism that, in their various (re)configurations, continue to structure contemporary realities in formerly colonised and colonising societies. Coloniality has become an enduring influence on the political and legal structures – "an invisible power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design, which lies at the center of the present Euro-North American-centric modern world" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 488). This world ordering is rooted in a Eurocentric knowledge system that has disparaged and overshadowed, if not destroyed, the diverse (local) dispute resolution knowledges systems. Accordingly, also knowledge in social and legal studies including mediation theory share this colonial burden of "grand erasure" (Connell 2007, 46) "towards the experiences of people who, for a variety of reasons, do not form part of its definitional core sample" (Nicolas 2022, 69).

It has been demonstrated that what is often called "global legal pluralism" has merely replaced "the state" as an essentialist point of reference with regional or international governance institutions, reproducing colonial categories. Accordingly, internationalised peace mediation needs to be placed in the broader context of transnationalisation of law and the interaction between legal pluralism and legal globalization, in particular the politics of global legal pluralism. The umbrella term "global legal pluralism" is often utilised for the "production of legitimacy and authority into political capital" [producing] a re-emerging neo-colonial tendency to codify local norms into unified legal templates as a formal acknowledgement of the existence of plural legal conditions' (Benda-Beckmann and Turner 2020, 57). Transnational governance actors, such as the African Union (AU) or the United Nations (UN), have increasingly assumed responsibility for governance functions and conflict resolution. As a result, governance technologies such as peace mediation need to be critically revisited to explore the interconnected plural legal constellations and embedded unequal power relations.

Peace mediation will be specifically analysed through the lens of *travelling models* (Rottenburg 2009, Behrends *et al.* 2014, 1–2, 14). The term *travelling models* can be understood as

> any standardised institutional intervention (a public policy, a programme, a reform, a project, a protocol), with a view to producing any social change in the behaviour which relies "on a mechanism" and "devices" supposed to have intrinsic properties allowing this change to be induced in various implementation contexts. (Sardan *et al.* 2017, 74)

Peace mediation has become a standardised institutional intervention that promotes non-violent conflict resolution and t aims at producing social change in human

behaviour. Through repeated reference, "the practices come to be socially embedded procedures as the rational and legitimate way-of-doing-things-in-order-to-achieve-certain-aims, and as such they may become institutionalised as new and creatively adapted technologies of social ordering" (Behrends *et al.* 2014, 26). These institutionalised interventions migrate as selective discourses and synthesised models. Consequently, "peace management" does not arrive as a replica of the original but rather undergoes a process of transformation. During its journey, the international model interacts with different (sub-)regional, national and local legal conflict resolution traditions. Recipients use to adopt the model selectively, frequently masked by rejection or circumvention. The travelling model concept allows for examining what is occurring at the recipient site and the "forms of (re-)ordering resulting from this process" (Behrends *et al.* 2014, 1). This analytical perspective helps revealing "the many unexpected, invisible or perverse effects that result from the hegemony of the travelling models industry" (Sardan *et al.* 2017, 72).

To specifically grasp how internationalised ideas of peace mediation are put into practice, it is helpful to employ "cultural translation as a heuristic method" (Ramstedt 2017, 53). *Sociocultural translation* pays attention to *how* ideas about peace and mediation are internationally packaged and presented to foster shared beliefs and collective action. Moreover, a closer look at the mediation model itself, its principles and tools tailored to the recipients, allows to lay bare power relations. It also allows examining the actors involved in translating global models into local situations and retranslating local ideas into global frameworks.

By combining the analytical lenses of the *travelling model* and *sociocultural translation*, insights can be gained into *how* regional African peace mediation frameworks are influenced by international peace mediation models that gravitate towards the "global Souths".[1] It also allows examining the practices of transfer of conflict resolution mechanisms, with a view to identifying ways in which they exert a hegemonic force. This force is entrenched in the international legal order and in Eurocentric politico-philosophical thoughts, and in the "liberal" narratives of peace that frame assumptions and principles of mediation, visible in established concrete normative frameworks and mediation tools, as will be demonstrated further down below. By scrutinising how and by whom the global models of conflict resolution are translated, the study problematises the long-standing *culture of interventionalism* and *coloniality of knowledge* (Quijano 2000).

Considering the resulting power-knowledge hierarchies, this article problematises the transfer of peace mediation models and proposes angles for reimagining mediation as a decolonial device operating across diverse conflict resolution knowledges. The paper therefore critically engages with the implications of the travelling model of peace mediation in terms of its entangled ontological, epistemological and institutional dimensions. To facilitate a broader debate on the epistemological position of mediation as both a governance technology and a consent-oriented mode of conflict resolution, the underlying, often opaque impediments to conflict transformation will be elucidated, including the effects of neglecting legal plurality on the ground. This seeks to nourish a

[1] The term "Global Souths" is used in parentheses to indicate that countries and regions are grouped as epistemic entities to indicate their marginalised sociopolitical and economic position in international discourse in terms of theory formation and as places of knowledge traditions.

constructive discussion on the conditions under which mediation might unfold its potential to mediate the complex legal plurality. By way of illustration, the paper employs the example of mediation in the context of internationalised "peace building" efforts and humanitarian interventions. It demonstrates that internationalised and standardised peace mediation must first and foremost be understood in its socio-historical context, considering its colonial roots and path-dependencies in the continuing contexts of asymmetric global power relations and the hierarchical treatment of plural legal orders in post-colonial African states. Foregrounding peace mediation as a travelling model in this article, and by focussing on the power and knowledge nexus in both its theory and practice, we might better understand how coloniality shapes common understandings of peace mediation in plural legal constellations, and what decolonisation of legal pluralism might entail in this context.

2. The case of international peace mediation

Peace mediation has become a key device for responding to violent conflicts. Consent-oriented conflict resolution is now firmly entrenched in the toolbox of international peace diplomacy (Lethi 2019, 3). The global mediation market, also referred to as the "mediation industry" (Thomas 2016, 50), has grown rapidly, resulting in the proliferation of institutions. The array of competing mediation actors includes a diverse range of entities, including global governance institutions such as the United Nations (UN), (sub-)regional organisations such as the African Union or the *Intergovernmental Authority on Development* (IGAD), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and various private actors. The diversification of the mediation landscape does not necessarily correspond to a plurality of mediation approaches in practice. The field of peace mediation has been rather gradually juridified and standardised to regulate mediative practices. The regulatory effects of institutionalising peace mediation seem to be ontologically legitimised through international and regional politics and dominant Anglo-Eurocentric worldviews of peace and security.

Particularly in the post-cold war era, "intrastate conflict explosions in the Global South led to a spirited dependence by the international community on Western peace approaches embedded in liberal theories, chiefly democracy, and a free-market economy – believed to promote strong Weberian bureaucracies/institutions, good governance, and thus sustainable peace" (Paalo 2021, 2). It can thus be argued that mediation has become inextricably linked to the normative, politico-economic frameworks of what is commonly referred to as "liberal peace" (Richmond 2011), dominating discourse and practice of peace governance (Paalo 2021, 5). These approaches have been strongly criticised for their top-down structure, lacking "local legitimacy and an international-local peace building contract, reconciliation, dialogue and communication – indeed a discourse ethic of empathetic self-emancipation in an everyday context" (Richmond 2011, 12, 2018, 303). Further criticism points to the predominantly applied narrow so-called "interest-based approaches" (Lethi 2019, 2) with their static identity constructions embedded in geopolitics.

The interlinking of mediation to "liberal peace" faces not only methodological challenges but also a lack of consensus on the *nature* of "peace" and "mediation". Those generic terms are often taken for granted rather than being thoroughly contextualised. The ongoing commodification of mediation has also been a key critique. Peace mediation is

treated as a product or service within a competitive market logic, Eurocentric and capitalist in its approach (Nouwen 2022, 36). Some also argue that mediation is a "Eurocentric tool for managing post-cold war status quo, overloaded with norms and tasks, mediating different cultural and normative systems including those of the UN" (Richmond 2018, 309). As a result, its potential to mediate the existing legal plurality seems to be constrained.

As noted above, unlocking the potential of mediative practice as a decolonial device also requires deconstructing the narratives of "development" and "progress" inherent in liberal approaches. The historical trajectory of peace mediation has been explained by Siba Grovogui (2006, 42):

> The legitimacy of knowledge rested in its concordance with the deduced European experience and institutional development, from Augsburg (where that continent institutionalized domestic tolerance in 1555) to Westphalia (which sanctified princely authority in 1648), and Utrecht (which ushered in the balance of power and the terms of modern hegemony in 1713).

Conventional history readers on mediation tend to reflect a Eurocentric perspective. A prominent historical reference point is the *Peace of Westphalia* (1648) between the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of France and their respective allies that formally ended the Thirty Years' War in Europe and established the framework for "modern" international relations. Concepts such as state sovereignty, mediation between "nations", and diplomacy all trace their origins to this treaty (Patton 2019, 91). The Westphalian system continues to serve as the model for international mediation. In addition, the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which regulate warfare and the peaceful settlement of international conflicts, are also considered as key documents for international mediation (Möhn 2012, 28f). The peace mediation canon portrays predominantly "Western" peace negotiations and treaties, while "non-Western" conflict resolution mechanisms have long been largely omitted. This canon continues to prioritise certain ideas of "liberalism, democracy, and secularism and their parallel rule of law on governance, property, human rights, and so on [as] the barometers of reason" (Grovogui 2006, 33). No wonder that over time this has led to the fatal assumption that:

> the West is the legitimate legislator and adjudicator of values, norms and institutions for the 'international community' and that those (presumed) incapable of producing good government, good laws, and good morals should obey the moral order bequeathed to them by the West, as a matter of defence. (Grovogui 2006, 31)

Consequently, it is also not surprising that mediation theory has not engaged much with postcolonial theory (Richmond 2018, 307). There is a conspicuous silence when it comes to addressing knowledge and power hierarchies, including mediation theory's own often flawed assumptions and standardised tools – a gap that is also visible in institutionalised mediation processes in the African context:

> While most African societies [have] historically relied on mediation, there is lack of confidence in African approaches to conflict resolution which is rooted in colonial thinking. This partly explains the tendency of some of the African Union (AU) mechanism to reflect knowledge taken from conflict resolution theories from the Global North – as well as international organizations like the United Nations (UN), Worldbank, and the OECD. (Faißt 2019)

Building on this critique, this paper seeks to reveal the coloniality of knowledge inherent in peace mediation narratives. To expose the exclusionary pattern of international peace mediation, I will now outline how the imperatives of "peace" and "care" are intricately intertwined with the production of knowledge *about Africa*.

2.1. Eurocentric construction of peace and care

Ideas of "peace" and "care" have historically underpinned the narratives of inter-state peace mediation and diplomacy, thereby forming the conceptual foundations of a distinct canon. Ideas of liberal peace can be traced back to the thoughts of the German moral philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), for example, and his "Eurocentric racist ontology of cosmopolitanism" (Uimonen 2020, 83). In *To Perpetual Peace* (1795) and *The Idea for a Universal History* (1784), Kant advocated "for a universal law of nations, a federation of free states, and world citizenship" based on the assumption that "the state of nature (*status naturalis*) is not a state of peace among human beings who live next to one another but a state of war" (Kant, cit. in Uimonen 2020, 84). Based on this assumption, the pursuit of peace was often equated with the naturalisation of colonisation, effectively transforming relations characterised by military conquest and commercial exploitation into legal arrangements. Moreover, a significant problem arises from the ignorance of "non-European" ideas of state and governance, which perpetuates a perceived superiority of European "civilizations" (Uimonen 2020, 84f).

The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) also remarked that pre-colonial Africa had no movement or development to exhibit. Immanuel Kant similarly expressed views such as: "Die "*Negers*" von Afrika haben von der Natur kein Gefühl, welches über das Läppische stiege [transl. the "*Negroes*" of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling]" (Kants Schriften Bd. II, 253, cit. in Smidt 2004, 44). Analysing the Eurocentric production of knowledge, Wolbert Smidt highlights how Africans were the subject of Kant's aesthetics of the sublime as the trivial counter-image. Kant, according to Smidt (1999; 2007, 300), concluded that Africans had failed to "progress" towards reason, the supposed goal of human history, by interpreting empirical data as evidence of a decaying and inverted social system (with the exception of Christian Ethiopia), which would necessarily entail – from a historical point of view – the subjugation of Africans (children, servants) by "law-governed" peoples (Europeans). Kant's underlying socio-evolutionary categorisation of moral characters was based on "race", leading to a taxonomy of "races" in his work *Of the different races* (1777), which contributed to the imperial categorisation (Mignolo 2000, 735).

Imperial categorisation is intertwined with a knowledge production that is rooted in a colonially shaped sense of superiority of the *Occident* and a dualistic construction of the *Orient* as an inferior, feminised *Other*. Edward Said (2003), for example, has addressed the epistemic violence of such a "western" projection that becomes visible in its construction of the *Orient* and its inherent politics of representation, as well as in the instrumentalization of this knowledge as a means of maintaining the dichotomy and power asymmetries.

Similarly to *development* and rule of law discourses, international peace-making efforts are also linked to notions of *care,* with the parent ("global Norths") applying her standards of "peace" and "mediation" to the "child" ("global Souths"). These

assumptions are still somehow linked to socio-evolutionary and modernisation theories, expressed in the "civilising mission during colonialism and assumptions that get internally naturalised, over and over again" (Sabaratnam, 2017, 4, Nouwen 2022, 36). Eurocentric perceptions have created path dependencies through a systematic hierarchised formation of differences. *Othering* becomes an instrument of power and is linked to hegemonic colonial and development discourses. For centuries, entire societies have been classified into dualized categories: in need of care/not in need of care, underdeveloped/developed, traditional/modern, civilised/uncivilised, rational/ emotional (Danielzik 2013, 28).

The path dependencies of these theoretical underpinnings are also visible in "modernist" positivist legal theory neglecting legal pluralism, which inter alia resulted in a hierarchical treatment of plural legal orders in postcolonial African states. During the colonial era, so-called "pre-colonial" law was classified as "backward" and "uncivilised", in contrast to the exported colonial law, which was classified as "modern" and "civilised". In line with the Hegelian notion of law, various "non-state" forms of social ordering were labelled as "customary law" in the context of colonial rule, and legal systems were thus constructed as "bipolar schemes" (Mamdani 1996, 109). According to Mahmood Mamdani (1996, 111), "customary law" became a "blanket racial category", related to ethnic identity construction. "The notion of the ethnically defined customary law … grounded racial exclusion in a cultural inclusion" (Mamdani 1996, 112). It is not only in the colonial context that local law and dispute resolution mechanisms have been perceived as an impediment to "development". Moreover, as Sara Araújo (2023, 101) thoroughly analysed, "[t]he imposition of the modern state, as an exclusive unit of social intelligibility, required law to be naturalized as state law". The presumption of the state's monopoly of law and force does not take into account that in most states there are multiple structures of law and authority that coexist interdependently with the state. As intrinsic aspect of this naturalisation of state law with its dualistically constructed *other*, what is frequently referred to as "customary law" or "traditional law" has become an integral part of the contemporary discourse in literature, legal texts and the media. The enduring mantra of "development" reappears in ever new guises through "legal imperialists" (1950s), "the legal missionaries" (1960s) or "legal engineers" (since the 1990s). As a result, *local* conflict resolution and mediative practices have been categorised as part of "traditional" or "customary law" and consequently marginalised. Perceptions that only Anglo-European knowledge has solutions to global challenges such as violent conflict perpetuate ideas of progress and *perpetual care*: "there is always something for international actors to fix, always a plan that the international community should contribute something to, and always something that goes wrong and needs fixing through further intervention" (Migdal and Schlichte 2005, 33). This attitude of constant intervention reflects the coloniality of being, characterised by unequal power relations worldwide, which defines "culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production" (Quijano 2000, Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243).

2.2. The ambiguous international credo of local ownership

In the international arena, there has been a growing sense of self-reflection and collective learning regarding the implications of entrenched misconceptions of *care*. For example,

the *UN Report on the Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post Conflict* (United Nations 2004) called for a reassessment twenty years ago:

> Too often, the emphasis has been on foreign experts, foreign models and foreign-conceived solutions to the detriment of durable improvements and sustainable capacity (…). We must learn better how to respect and support local ownership, local leadership.

Local ownership was not high on the agenda of conflict resolution practice at the beginning of the millennium, as the following empirical example illustrates: The Kenyan chief mediator of the peace process between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in the early 2000s succeeded in protecting the mediation process from excessive external intervention. Looking back, he noted that "the international community tried to push us to sign an agreement even if we had not yet negotiated the implementation modalities. We refused, because implementation modalities are essential" (Sumbeiywo 2009, 5).

The 2004 UN report demonstrates an awareness on the misguided intervention and thereby reflects an emergent rethinking of its general (liberal) approach. Since than *local ownership* has become an international credo, and there seems to be an international consensus that post-conflict settlements "must be firmly rooted in domestic social realities" (Donais 2012, 12). In recent years, calls for greater engagement with local mediation practices have become more prominent in UN policy discourses in connection with the *Agenda for Peace* – even though local practices still remain at the margins of actual conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes.

To illustrate the lack of contextualised engagement and knowledge sharing in practice, I still vividly remember a conversation I had, during one of my fieldwork stints in South Sudan (2013), with a very experienced judge of the *South Sudan Court of Appeal*, who was reflecting on the UN's promotion of the rule of law in the emerging state. He criticised the UN for never asking, for example, what his understanding of the rule of law was, or what priorities he would suggest in the conflict-affected context. The judge's statement indicates that the path the UN has chosen to implement the international demand for *local ownership* of projects and programmes does not seem to reflect or address the realities of local actors. Nevertheless, if local context, expertise and recommendations are not seriously taken into account in decision-making and subsequent actions, one can expect disappointment and lack of local acceptance of international assistance (Seidel 2017, 2019, 2025), also when it comes to mediation support. This is not only because solid concepts and mechanisms for plural negotiation have not been developed. There seems to be a structural reluctance to implement proclaimed *local ownership*:

> [T]here are few guarantees that local owners will process either the capacity or the will to pool their efforts towards the creation of a just, stable and social order [since] local political elites – whether democratically elected or otherwise – represent the most obvious and usually the most problematic set of local owners' – (…) particularly in the context of armed conflicts [where] questions of legitimacy and representativeness once the a semblance of post-war normalcy returns' is core. (Donais 2012, 10)

The reluctance to embrace local conflict resolution has thus led to a prevailing focus on, and further naturalisation of "Western" approaches to conflict (Brigg and Bleiker 2011, 19). These approaches have been juridified over time through international guidelines, handbooks, and policies – the *travelling peace mediation models*. For example, the UN

developed *Guidance for effective mediation* to deal with the "problematic set of local owners", to promote professionalised mediation worldwide and to secure its position in the mediation market. This guideline (United Nations 2012b) states: "While all disputes and conflicts are unique and require specific approaches, there are good practices that *should* inform the approaches of all mediators".

3. Travelling mediation model in translation

We will now take a closer look at the travelling international frameworks for peace mediation and how "good practices" of mediation and fundamental principles, enshrined in the UN frameworks, including the above-mentioned guideline and the *Resolution Strengthening the Role of Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, Conflict Prevention and Resolution* (United Nations 2012a), have been translated into the mediation frameworks of the African Union and the mediation practice of African peace processes.

3.1. International peace mediation frameworks and the African Union

Peace mediation as a guiding paradigm for global peace governance and conflict management is framed by international norms. The general principle of mediation is enshrined in Chapter VI, Article 33 of the *Charter of the United Nations* (1945) as a means for the peaceful settlement of disputes:

> The parties to any dispute, the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice.

Mediation has also become a tool for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Over the past two decades, the UN has increasingly institutionalised her expertise (e.g. UN Mediation Support Unit and the 2012 *UN Guidance for Effective Mediation*) to provide practical support for mediation actors. The UN Resolution on *Strengthening the Role of Mediation in the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes, Conflict Prevention and Resolution Guideline* (United Nations 2012a, 3, 5) acknowledges the growing contribution and capacity of the African Union to mediation and explicitly "encourages the use, if appropriate of the United Nations Guidance for effective Mediation" – a call for compliance.

As one of the important regional mediation actors, the *African Union* with her peace and security architecture represents an attempt to address "Africa's security dilemmas through continental (local) resources, mechanisms, and leadership, including traditional leadership and practices" (Paalo 2021, 4). Already the AU's predecessor, the *Organisation of African Unity*, has been historically used as a device of decolonialisation since the 1960s with a strong emphasis of institutional mediation (ACCORD and African Union 2014, 10). Various mechanisms have been developed in this context. They include the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* (1981), which places a strong emphasis on collective rights and on strengthening "positive African cultural values" (Art. 29(7)), the *Commission on Reconciliation, Mediation and Arbitration* (1994), and the AU's *African Peace and Security Architecture* (African Union 2000). The popular notion of "African solutions to African problems", one of the founding credos of the *African Union*, is now embedded in Africa's regional peace mediation approach. The AU prioritises the maintenance and

preservation of peace and security through mechanisms that promote a dialogue-centred approach to conflict prevention and resolution of conflicts (African Union 2003). The establishment of a *Peace and Security Council* (PSC) as a decision-making body for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts saw the creation of innovative consultative bodies such as the *Panel of the Wise*, composed of "five highly respected African personalities from various segments of society who have outstanding contribution to the cause of peace, security and development on the continent" (Art. 11(2) PSC Protocol, African Union 2003).

The continental and pan-African approach is designed "to replace, lead, or collaborate with Western powers' involvement in African security" (Paalo 2021, 4). The goals of AU's recent *Agenda 2063* align with the UN SDGs, particularly AU's Goal 13, which focusses on "Peace, Security, and Stability", and Goal 14, which aims for a "Stable and Peaceful Africa". To operationalise the framework and to position itself in the mediation market, the AU has taken further steps to professionalise its engagement by adopting specific mediation action plans and integrating a *Mediation Support Unit* (established in 2016) in its *Mediation and Dialogue Division*. To enhance AU's mediation capabilities, various capacity-building initiatives have been conducted in collaboration with international partners, including the *United Nations*, the *African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes* (ACCORD), the *Crisis Management Initiative* (CMI), the *Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue*, the *Folke Bernadotte Academy*, and others (ACCORD and African Union 2014, 8).

The AU's 2009 *Plan of Action to Build the AU's Mediation Capacity*, an unpublished report commissioned by the *United Nations Mediation Support Unit* and the *African Union Conflict Management Division*, written by Laurie Nathan (2009), Professor of the Practice of Mediation and Mediation Program Director at the KROC Institute, Notre Dame, is an example of this. The paper offers a broad definition of mediation that includes dialogue and negotiation as tools for conflict prevention, management and resolution. In contrast, the 2012 UN Guidance Note takes a more narrow approach that focusses on peace agreements (United Nations 2012b), thereby limits the scope of peace mediation to agreement-seeking, rather than viewing mediation as a means of achieving lasting peaceful resolution (Lethi 2019, 16). Mediation at both the AU and the UN levels, is defined as a structured process with several key stages: initial contact between the mediators and the parties involved, ceasefire negotiations, and the implementation of agreements. This does not correspond to AU's broader mediation definition.

Both frameworks acknowledge that all conflicts are context-specific and the need for tailored approaches to interstate and intrastate conflict. In particular, the AU emphasises the necessity to avoid quick-fix solutions and to address the root causes of conflicts. At the same time both the UN and AU stress the importance of adhering to established "good/best practices" that should inform the approach of all mediators. This raises the fundamental question whose "good practices" are being referred to. The also enshrined "basic principles" of mediation are broadly similar in both frameworks and include consent, impartiality, inclusiveness, and ownership. These ideal principles are taken from the tenets of "liberal" mediation theory, as will be discussed below.

But we will first focus on the AU's claim that mediation has evolved through the OAU/AU conflict resolution practices by examining what experiences are actually

incorporated into, for example, the AU's 2012 *Standard Operating Procedures for Mediation Support* (AU-SOPM).

3.2. African Union's standardised peace mediation

Building on the 2009 Action Plan, the AU-SOPM was developed in collaboration with the *Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue*. This Swiss-based think-tank states in its mission to "assist regional organisations and mediators in strengthening their capacity by developing practical tools, providing training" (African Union 2012, 1). This raises the question of whether the SOPM and the 2009 Plan of Action have been developed *for* or *by* the AU. The SOPM echoes AU's credo that "mediation is deeply rooted in Africa's culture and traditional best practices. Nowadays, African mediators need to take such a rich heritage as a powerful source of inspiration" (African Union 2012, 2). Despite the promotion of inclusivity, "African" or local conflict resolution practices have not been a source of knowledge, as the only source of influence that is explicitly recognised is the above-mentioned *UN Guidance Note*.

AU's compliance is specifically reflected in the SOPMs' "templates for implementation" of the Action Plan (African Union 2012, 10). It also includes an annex entitled "Skills enhancement to support AU SOPM" and a "briefing binder adapted from the UN Checklist of Materials" (African Union 2012, 19, 40–44). This checklist is a manual for mediators containing "good and best mediation practices compiled by Dr. Connie Peck" [working for the UNITAR Programme in Peacemaking and Conflict Prevention, co-sponsored by UN at this time] (African Union 2012, 40). It is also mentioned that the Swiss partner organisations could include the topics of the checklist, i.e. "the lessons from UN mediation experience" (African Union 2012, p. 46) to the training curriculum. It can therefore be argued that the AU-SOPMs, seemingly externally produced, are more influenced by UN experiences and frameworks than by the mediation practices developed by the OAU and AU.

As demonstrated, contemporary mediation mechanisms, procedures and principles reflect knowledge drawn from conflict resolution theories of the "global Norths" canon. A coloniality of knowledge is expressed in the transferred mediation models including "good practices" provided by international actors. Despite referencing "African approaches to conflict resolution", there is still a serious lack in integrating concrete local mediation knowledge. This may be one of the root causes why "Africa's regional peace architecture neither makes the necessary provisions for nor makes any intention to integrate African traditional peace practices" (Paalo 2021, 17, 23). Reasons for this range from questions of "whose tradition" needs to be integrated to the fact that "regional bodies tend to operate within and respond to international norms rather than local ones". Furthermore, funding for peace mediation efforts is frequently provided by the international community, which is committed to a *liberal* international order (Paalo 2021, 23). The funding issue has led to the establishment of compliance mechanisms between unequal partners, deepening power imbalances. Or in the words of Babacar Kanté (personal communication),[2] Professor of Law and Chairman of the AU's 5th Panel of the

[2] Interview, Budapest (14.07.2023).

Wise: "The UN has forces in the field, the AU does not. How can you negotiate with the UN?".

3.3. Anglo-European mediation principles in translation

The guiding principles for mediation, as understood by both UN and AU, describe mediation as a voluntary process in which a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements (Nathan 2009, African Union 2012, United Nations 2012b, 9). A closer look at these principles reveals the necessity for a critical analysis of the generic terms used: impartiality, consent, inclusiveness, and ownership. A problematic aspect is the desire to identify "objective" categories to depict empirical reality which is combined with a methodology to define them ideally (Nicolas 2022, 79). As analysed by Nicolas (2022, 73), mediation concepts claim to be "acontextual" and universally valid while in fact they are:

> paradigms derived from experiences and observations in specific countries (mainly US, partly also European countries) in specific historical times (between the 1970s and now), in specific dispute settings (divorce mediation, commercial negotiations, worker-employee disputes, etc.) and with specific background of mediators (therapists, professionals, community representatives, court mediators etc.

Looking at the principle of "impartiality", this is not always given as the peace mediation practices across Africa display the role of "partial" mediators (Mason 2008, 16). It is not uncommon for (chief) mediators to have been politically or militarily powerful (predominantly male) actors. They often bring their own interests to the negotiating table, which may sometimes be in tension with the substance of what the conflict parties can agree on. Examples ranging from political and economic self-interests to humanitarian motivations, stability and security concerns. In some cases, these actors have been involved in conflicts in their own countries or have been former conflict parties (Mason 2008, 16, 18f). By way of illustration, in the context of the ongoing disastrous violent conflict in Sudan after the ousting of former President Omar Bashir in 2019, the President of South Sudan, a key conflict partner of the former Sudanese President, not only prior to South Sudan's secession from Sudan in 2011, is now actively involved in the peaceful resolution of Sudan's conflict (Sudan Tribune 2024). Through assuming the role of a mediator and a host of the mediation between the conflict parties, he diversified IGAD-led mediations. At the same time, the President is a conflict party in South Sudan's ongoing peace mediation currently conducted in Nairobi with "non-signatory political parties" of the latest 2018 Peace Agreement (Oluoch 2024). This demonstrate that the "outsider/impartial" model of a mediator, which is often regarded as an ideal principle in conventional mediation discourse, has proven to be less applicable in certain conflict contexts.

The roles and personalities of mediators are diverse, with different approaches and techniques adopted in theory and practice (Mason 2008, 17). These range from indirective or so-called facilitative mediation, where the focus is on organising communication between the parties in a non-directive way, and which corresponds most closely to the ideal type of mediation in terms of the mediator's mediative stance, to rather directive, often called formulative mediation, where the mediators formulate option papers or drafting agreements. An extreme form of active intervention is what is

known as power-based, directive or manipulative mediation that often led to "an agreement" in practice (Mason 2008, 10, 17f.). These latter approaches create considerable tensions, often provoking strong reactions from the conflict parties, which raises questions about the sustainability of "agreements" reached in this way. Let me illustrate this with an example from the ongoing peace negotiations in South Sudan: During one of the many rounds of peace mediation led by AU and/or the sub-regional organisation IGAD, the 2015 Peace Agreement, which was based on a draft agreement proposed by the IGAD-led mediators, provoked contentious reactions from the negotiating parties. Following the signing of the "agreement", the *Government of South Sudan* complained about external pressure during the mediation process and published twelve reservations to the signed agreement, leading to a blockade and undermined the implementation of the agreement by disrupting the power-sharing arrangements (Seidel, forthcoming 2025). As in facilitative mediation, the consent of the parties is considered as essential in directive mediation, but the idea that the parties to the conflict should find their *own* solutions seems to be undermined. The parties to the conflict are partly pressured to reach an agreement through different forms of carrot-and-stick-tactics. While this approach may contain also mediative elements, it is typically not aligned with the proclaimed key principles of mediation.

In all variations of the alternating use of pressure and dialogue, the empirical question arises to what extent of pressure is considered as legitimate and proportionate. It is therefore important to recognise that the mediation process itself is a powerful negotiation of interpretations, which highlights the role of the mediators' socio-cultural, political and professional positionality. Accordingly, without an analysis of power, including that of the mediators, political conflicts risk being de-politised and power imbalances reinforced. The notion of *impartiality* thus tends to conceal empirical realities as well as the positionality of mediators behind notions of procedural responsibility and ownership.

The principle of "consent" of the conflict parties is also challenging in the peace mediation practice. This becomes already evident from the wording of the UN guideline, which pragmatically specified that "sufficient consent" is required. It seems to be more about the acceptance of the mediator by the conflict parties to work together in an "even-handed manner" (Mason 2008, 19), which is not necessarily based on the mediators' "impartiality".

As noted, it is frequently the case that ceasefire negotiations are part of a mediation process. At the beginning of such a process, military actors are often reluctant to voluntarily engage in "civil" conflict transformation. Although it may seem counterintuitive, it is often the case that "the only weapon a rebel movement has is fighting, to force the other party to the table" (Sumbeiywo 2009, 6). Generally, the conflict escalation levels are highly advanced during peace negotiations, making mediation an arguably unsuitable instrument of choice at first glance. It is often the case that a combination of significant regional and international political pressure, dialogue and power-based diplomacy is required to bring the conflict parties to the negotiating table. Mediation seems to be more likely to become an option when neither conflict party feels able to secure a victory over the other party, or when the available resources have become insufficient to achieve a favourable outcome. To illustrate this, let us look again

at South Sudan: Following the above-mentioned collapse of the 2015 peace agreement, the exertion of considerable political pressure in various forms from neighbouring countries and supranational institutions, including a UN Security Council arms embargo proved successful in persuading the warring parties to return to the negotiating table and to sign the 2018 Peace Agreement, which has only been partly implemented to date (Seidel 2025).

Consent and voluntariness thus frequently appear to be a delayed process. Even if consent is not given at the beginning of mediation, it can often be achieved in the course of the process, at the latest when negotiating concrete "solution" options and signing agreements and peace treaties. Nevertheless, if international pressure is not limited to "inviting" the conflict participants to participate in the mediation, but rather pressure is exerted on the production of consensus, and both the content of the mediation and the outcome are also "externally" shaped and (pre-)dictated, it is difficult to classify these interventions as mediation.

The principle of "inclusiveness", set out in both the AU and the UN mediation frameworks, reflects a participatory approach based on ownership. Inclusiveness or inclusivity refers to the question of who participates in the mediation process. Participation poses a dilemma because the trade-off between inclusive and exclusive negotiations is complicated, as mediation processes are context-specific and raise difficult issues of representation and legitimacy (Mason 2008, 14)

Inclusive mediation emphasises diversified approaches and the necessity to involve as many participants as possible, including "traditionally" excluded women, and many other marginalised civil actors. It is not uncommon for key actors with strong political and military power in the conflict to be the only ones selected, despite their often limited authority and legitimacy to peacefully implement viable mediation outcomes. Nevertheless, it is frequently "non-state" actors, such as local civil societies, human rights activists, traditional and religious authorities, who can make a decisive contribution to conflict mitigation. The issue of "non-state" actors is ambiguous because engaging with diverse individual and collective identity claims and interests raises questions of representation and the identification of pivotal conflict participants, along with an assessment of their socio-political significance. These questions become very acute in the context of peace mediation processes, which are often internationally funded and involve rather the larger, often capital city based local non-governmental organisations. Representatives of a supposed civil society are often not necessarily the ones that enjoy popular legitimacy on the ground. Internationalised peace mediation struggles with combining multi-layered inclusive and exclusive approaches, taking into account "presentation, decision-making power, internal party cohesion, pragmatic power politics" (Mason 2008, 19f).

As shown, the formulaic principles of mediation – impartiality, consent, inclusiveness and ownership – are detached from the mediation realities, as the translation dynamics in African peace mediation context have exemplified. As part of the travelling model, the juridified principles rather impede the search for frameworks based on mediation-in-context approaches, including debates on the coloniality of knowledge (production). Although the pre-formulated principles, taken from the "liberal" mediation theory, have been adapted to the different contexts, they continue to reflect Anglo-Eurocentric ideals

of conflict resolution. The example of AU's standardised peace mediation frameworks illustrates how such principles with their flawed underlying assumptions become juridified. Through juridification, they unfold the hegemonic force of the model, thereby silencing discussions on core tenets of peace mediation that emerge from genuine peace mediation experiences in African settings. If the assumptions of these principles are taken for granted, a polylogue on what are perceived as crucial elements of peace mediation in different contexts seems unlikely, and ideas on ideas on paper that peace mediation must be "deeply rooted in African culture and traditional practices" remain mere lip service.

4. Disrupting the coloniality of peace mediation frameworks

Peace mediation as a technology of governance raises questions about the value of standardisation. Juridification and formalisation run the risk of taking mediation out of its context. It can freeze *living peace mediation*. This impedes the major goal of mediation – to restore communication in the conflict. Caution in standardisation also applies regarding the reinforcement of power imbalances that have become anchored in the principles of mediation, e.g. in the negligence of power aspects both at a structural and processual level.

Moreover, imported mediation models from Euro-American history and the engagement with standardised instruments remain problematic. As the AU-SOPMs demonstrated, "good practices" and the ideal-typical principles taken from the "liberal" mediation theory are far away from involving African experiences and conflict resolution mechanism. The mediation models have been rightly criticised for being "trapped in international state-centric approaches to peace, focussing on rebuilding the state (…) rather than re-orienting citizenry or boosting indigenous civil society structures" (Zondi 2017, 126), even though there seems to be a growing participation of actors beyond the state-led elite bargaining. Nevertheless, donor-driven approaches with external funding structures remain an expression of coloniality.

It can therefore be argued that the AU's mediation frameworks simultaneously reproduce international and regional norms, yet they lack sufficient grounding in the conceptualisation of "African thinking" – a claim that has been made over decades but has never been substantiated.

Nevertheless, given that there have been no updates of those internationalised mediation frameworks such as the above-mentioned SOPMs by the AU and its specific Mediation Unit in the last decade, it seems that the AU has in fact rejected the internationalised mediation approach, despite somehow imitating or mimicking the UN guidelines, adopting manuals, handbooks and SOPMs, etc. This "rejection" means that there is no political will to "learn" from the Anglo-Eurocentric models and experiences, no will to apply, comply with, or repeat the (UN) "good practices", guidelines, principles etc. One might even argue that it is an explicit resistance to the UN-scripted model and to its inherent coloniality. It is in fact a sign of agency. As a way of navigating UN's hegemonic call for compliance, the "recipient" only de jure "accept" the model by integrating the international frames in its policies. By so doing, the AU could be seen as "reordering" mediation beyond the model; resistance might be the first step that allows AU to re-think or re-create mediation approaches without and/or beyond the travelling

model. This reordering allows for the consideration of the more than half a century of OAU's/AU's peace mediation experiences developed since the decolonisation period 1950/60s. The OAU stance of "mediation in the African way" and the idea of "deeply rooted in Africa's mediation, arbitration and reconciliation experiences" calls for a discursive practice across diverse conflict resolution knowledges and experiences (including gender) as a starting point beyond the (predominantly male) elites.

As it stands, the international communities persist on prescribing the model transfer on how to conduct peace mediation. This study shows that it is time they revised the fundamentals of this practice.

This approach demonstrates the fallacy of the reductionist use of legal pluralism as a normative policy tool, where legal plurality is utilised to legitimise and authorise transnational actors' interventions. It also reveals a re-emerging neo-colonial tendency to standardise local knowledge de jure into internationalised legal templates as an expression of only formal recognition of the existence of plural legal conditions. Increasingly systematised and dogmatised, peace mediation can be seen as an arena for the juridical construction of legal pluralism – from a hegemonic transnational perspective. It is thus a hierarchically structured and categorised legal pluralism that determines the scope of recognition of different legal orders and dispute resolution mechanisms. This juridification shows a totalisation and universalisation of certain ideas of mediation thoughts, which can be seen as a form of continuation of (post-)colonial politics of recognition through the co-optation of "other" legal orderings. In this process, Anglo-Eurocentric mediation knowledge is privileged over diverse local knowledge, thereby silencing multiple endogenous dispute resolution knowledges, and consolidating or expanding power and influence of the international peace governance.

The *travelling model* thus represents an aspirational vision of peace mediation that is conceptualised as "universal", retaining their underlying Eurocentric notions of conflict resolution. They do not consider much the existing multiplicity of ideas of conflict resolution mechanisms.

This raises the question of how to reconcile "African ownership" and imported "good practices," as the latter are decontextualised and standardised mediation tools designed to facilitate comparisons between different settings. The idea of "best/good practices" assumes that processes are sufficiently uniform to allow for the identification and adoption of a "good practice" by another entity. Ultimately, it is a tool for those whose interests are served by the promotion of "good practices", frequently reinforcing "modernist" notions of conflict resolution and naturalising underlying flawed assumptions. It reproduces a reductionist approach to mediation that "undervalue its complex relationship with retaliation and punishment, which are interrelated and complementary concepts and logics that also seek to establish, negotiate, maintain and regain social order, peace and (human) security at different levels" (Härter *et al.* 2020, 1)

As demonstrated, peace mediation processes require a clear understanding of power dynamics at play. The application of standardised mediation principles risks depoliticising and decontextualising peace negotiations. Such an approach has proven to be an obstacle to legitimacy, because the "success" of mediation is contingent upon the social order within the local context. Accordingly, it is important how the mediation process is conducted and what conflict resolution repertoires are employed beyond the

internationalised models. It is therefore crucial to substantially engage with the existing legal plurality, particularly with local knowledges and expertise in mediation at both conceptual and implementation levels.

In many cases, (sub-)regionally and internationally brokered mediation is utilised as a means of advancing local power negotiations over competing political and economic agendas. These practices allow for the justification of constant political delay tactics aimed at avoiding political concessions, as the example of South Sudan have illustrated. Consequently, the basic principles developed in international peace mediation practice become premises that are detached from the reality on which mediation processes are developed and carried out. This limits the search for viable conflict resolution mechanisms and can hamper both legitimacy and genuine implementation of mediation outcomes.

Accordingly, not only careful context analyses and clarifications of root causes and conflict dynamics, but also diversified conflict resolution mechanisms are crucial as a starting point for any mediative intervention. A prerequisite is to develop an understanding of the implications of "good practices" and process logics, as an appropriate mediation process design in one context may be an inappropriate one in another. Systematic inclusion of local mediators beyond the elites to facilitate the exploration of diverse normative understandings of the conflict dynamics seems to be important. Despite regional and international commitments to consensus, inclusiveness and ownership, legal pluralism and cooperation with actors beyond the powerful main conflict parties are not sufficiently addressed in mediation interventions. It is also important to seek a balance in the cooperation between conflict parties and regional and international mediators, by creating a genuine safe space for mediation. Existing tensions between the principle of *local ownership* and international and regional mediative interventions, can be useful in this process, as they open up negotiation spaces for different understandings of conflict resolution. These negotiation spaces can help to renegotiate and redefine existing dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, e.g., concerning the participation of women or other marginalised actors; not least because local mediation approaches are often not particularly participatory beyond the respective (male) political and military actors (Seidel 2025). Instead, mediative interventions have often been used to support institutional and political processes that serve "to control" conflicts, but which promise little sustainability. As shown, peace-mediation-in-context requires constant reflection on the potential and limits of various mediation concepts and practices beyond the *travelling model* approach and politics of global legal pluralism.

5. Conclusions

A shift in perspective is required to decentre peace mediation. Decentring UN-scripted mediation entails processes of learning, unlearning, and relearning. It involves moving beyond the confines of Anglo-European grammars to embrace marginalised knowledge, with both "provincializing Europe" (Chakrabarty 2000) and "deprovincializing Africa" [*global Souths*] (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). This approach allows for more nuanced understandings of "peace" and "conflict", transcending the constraints of essentialist conceptualisations of "we" and "*other*", of "internal" and "external", of "local" and "global", etc. This entails expanding the mediation canon with marginalised and neglected knowledge. It is essential to expose the power-knowledge nexus by starting

from non-binary conceptualisations of legal pluralities. This might also require the "[i]ncorporation of local political claims for expanded rights in a fluid and digital international framework where legitimate authority is made up for shifting networks and relationships, and non-Eurocentric approaches to global justice are the goal" (Richmond 2018, 314).

Peace mediation as a decolonial tool might be reconceptualised as a transcultural polylogue based on the recognition of a multiplicity of conflict resolution mechanisms and on actual power constellations. Intercultural mediation might play a more prominent role in translating different local-global normative logics to foster communication channels and to support the search for a transnational peace mediation architecture beyond the universalisation and normalisation of very particular Anglo-Eurocentric experiences of conflict resolution.

De-centring mediation requires a problematisation of the ontological and epistemological framing of peace and mediation. Challenging the Anglo-Eurocentric mediation canon means to also theorise "alternative" perspectives of "peace". An illustrative example is provided by Uimonen (2020, 91–96), who discusses "Nkrumah's creolized philosophy of consciencism for decolonisation". This concept developed by Kwame Nkruhma (1909-1972; first prime minister and president of the West African state of Ghana) draws upon different philosophical traditions, including those of European dialectical materialism and egalitarianism, as well as ideologies such as socialism and humanism. It also draws upon "African tradition" to develop an emancipatory philosophy for decolonisation. A "creolized political theory" acknowledges the existence of multiple sociocultural strands of spatiotemporal origins, within the context of asymmetric power structures, to capture the transnational interconnections. In conceptualising "peace" beyond the Kantian-based notion of "perpetual peace", Nkrumah posits that war was not a natural state of humans; rather, he linked war to the political economy of inequality, exploitation and oppression (Uimonen 2020, 95). This alters the perspective.

In order to diversify the peace mediation canon and peace mediation practices through African experiences, as envisioned by the AU mediation framework, it is also necessary to consider systematically the already existing "infrastructure for peace" (Irene 2018). This would require a critical examination of the various institutionalised conflict resolution mechanisms at different scales. There are numerous empirical examples of gradual conflict transformation that employ also local-peace-making methods. To provide a final example from emerging South Sudan: A peace conference on a land dispute was held at a sub-national level in 2012. Despite internationalised peace mediation's focus on producing peace agreements that entail making concessions to reach compromises on substantive issues, it has not been possible to resolve issues such as land tenure, neither at the national nor at the sub-national level. This is due to existing different conceptualisations and perceptions of land and land distribution. In the case of the above-mentioned local peace conference and during public consultations on the constitution-making process in South Sudan (which continues to date), it became evident that there was no national consensus either on the nature of land tenure and how to demarcate borders, or on the mode of statehood. The outcome of the peace conference had been primarily procedural, enabling the involved actors to continue negotiating

without reaching consensus on substantive "solutions" that might have expelled many actors from the negotiation table (Seidel and Sureau 2015). This example illustrates that producing *processual solutions*, particularly in the context of conflictive state-making, may be more appropriate than power-mediating approaches that often result in non-lasting peace agreements on paper. Because a processual solution, which does not claim to represent a substantial consensus among the parties involved, has the potential to prove more viable to facilitate the integration of different perspectives. The numerous broken peace agreements in South Sudan over the past decade, well-intentioned but pushed through by (sub-)regional and international actors, and the haste with which the mediators have drafted "the agreements", have the effect of deterring many actors from participating in the process. The peace-making efforts in South Sudan over the past decade have bluntly shown the ineffectiveness of the peace mediation models employed by international and (sub-)regional actors. One potential explanation for this can be found in the assumptions of the international peace-making, namely that the conflict parties are willing to make substantial political concessions, which, has proven to not (always) being the case. Additionally, in the South Sudanese context I could observe that there has been a slight shift in focus in the internationalised peace mediation efforts over the past decade. The result of the debate on *local ownership* beyond the idea of national ownership is that the former primary emphasis on state actors has shifted to adding in so-called "non-state actors", including South Sudanese civil society organisations, religious and local authorities. This shift has the potential to also influence the perceived legitimacy of mediation processes and outcomes, prompting a re-evaluation of the role and impact of these actors in peace mediation (Seidel 2025).

In conclusion, peace mediation requires a fundamental shift in mentality beyond the "North-South" conceptual binary, which can disrupt the vicious cycle of coloniality in conflict resolution knowledge production and the (neo)colonial patterns articulated by Edward Said (1994, xiii): "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them".

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