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FROM LINGUISTIC EPISTEMICIDE TO PLURIVERSAL SECURITY: RE-THEORIZING COMMUNITY AND WELL-BEING THROUGH CHICHEWA PROVERBS

*Jani Grey Kasunda

School of International Relations, Institute of Overseas Chinese Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

ABSTRACT

International Relations (IR) theory, mostly expressed in English, acts as a 'colonial dictionary' that enforces Western ontological and epistemological frameworks, leading to epistemicide and limiting global thought. This paper argues that a genuine Pluriversal IR must actively incorporate non-English linguistic systems to access alternative worldviews. Through a decolonial analysis of key Chichewa concepts—*mtendere* (holistic peace), *umunthu* (relational humanity), and *mphamvu* (life-force)—we uncover a Malawian philosophical foundation for rethinking core IR principles. Our findings show that these concepts fundamentally challenge the atomistic, state-centered models of security and community, instead proposing a relational ontology where well-being is closely tied to ecological and spiritual balance. The paper concludes that integrating such indigenous African epistemes is not just additive but essential for deconstructing the coloniality of knowledge and creating a truly pluriversal discipline, with significant implications for development policy and practice focused on holistic human security.

INTRODUCTION

The movement to decolonize International Relations (IR) has gained significant momentum, challenging the field's Western-centric foundations and advocating for a more inclusive, pluriversal discipline. This intellectual transformation reflects a broader reckoning in development research, which is also confronting its colonial legacies. Dominant models of *security*, *community*, and *well-being*—often disseminated through the English language—drive development policies that can be ineffective or even harmful when they conflict with local cosmologies. However, this effort has frequently overlooked a key element of the colonial power structure: language. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) compellingly argued, colonialism operates not only through physical force and political institutions but also through the intentional alienation of a people from their language, which serves as a primary carrier of their culture, history, and cosmology. The dominance of English as the unquestioned lingua franca of IR theory and development practice functions as what can be called a 'colonial dictionary'—a linguistic framework that enforces its own ontological categories and epistemological limits, systematically excluding alternative ways of knowing and being. This linguistic hegemony creates a form of epistemicide, a concept developed by Santos (2014) to describe the systematic suppression and destruction of non-Western knowledge systems. When complex philosophies embedded in local contexts are

forced through the sieve of English, their nuanced meanings are often lost, simplified, or distorted to fit pre-existing Western concepts. This paper addresses this gap by arguing that language itself is a key site of intervention. The hegemony of English acts as a 'colonial dictionary,' not only in IR but also in development practice, filtering out indigenous frameworks for understanding human flourishing. This study positions itself within the Pluriversal IR (PIR) project, which, as articulated by scholars like Tickner & Blaney (2012), calls for thinking IR differently by weaving together diverse cosmologies. It argues that a genuine pluriversality must be a linguistic project, one that actively engages with the intellectual resources embedded in marginalized languages to challenge the very foundations of IR theory and reimagine the principles of development. Despite the growing literature on decolonial and pluriversal IR, and the parallel critiques within development studies, there remains a critical gap in the systematic examination of how African languages themselves serve as repositories of theoretical insight. The rich, philosophical content encoded in the proverbs, idioms, and core concepts of languages like Chichewa is consistently overlooked as a source of IR theory and a foundation for sustainable development models. These are not merely 'cultural artifacts' but sophisticated frameworks for understanding complex ideas like power, security, community, development, and well-being. The problem is twofold: first, the ongoing epistemicide that dismisses these linguistic resources as non-theoretical; and second, the discipline's failure to recognize that its

core assumptions are products of a specific linguistic and cultural context, not universal truths. As Hobson (2012) has meticulously documented, mainstream IR theory is fundamentally a Eurocentric conception of world politics, which naturally marginalizes non-Western ontologies. This same marginalization occurs when development paradigms, built on these IR assumptions, are applied without regard for local philosophical foundations. This study addresses this dual gap by turning to the Chichewa language to unearth a distinctly Malawian contribution to IR theory and to propose alternative, culturally-grounded conceptions of development and security.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following primary research question:
How can the analytical engagement with Chichewa proverbs and core concepts challenge the epistemicide of Malawian knowledge and contribute to the conceptual vocabulary of Pluriversal International Relations?

To address this, the study will explore two subsidiary questions:

- In what ways does the English language, as the medium of IR, function as a 'colonial dictionary' that enables epistemicide by distorting or excluding non-Western ontological categories?
- What alternative definitions of key IR concepts, specifically *security* and *community*, emerge from an analysis of Chichewa terms like *mtendere*, *umunthu*, and *mphamvu*?

This study is significant for three key reasons. First, it answers the PIR call to examine "non-English primary materials" and "onsite intellectual traditions" by treating Chichewa language itself as a primary text. Second, it moves the decolonial debate from abstract critique to concrete methodological practice, demonstrating how to use linguistic analysis as a tool for theoretical innovation. Finally, it centers Malawi—a nation often marginalized even within African studies—making a unique contribution to the growing canon of African IR thought that typically draws from more widely cited regions or philosophies, thereby enacting the kind of epistemic freedom called for by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018).

Delimitations and Limitations: This study is delimited to an analysis of specific Chichewa concepts and proverbs. It does not purport to represent all Malawian or even all Chewa thought, but offers a focused linguistic-philosophical analysis. The IR concepts engaged are primarily *security* and *community*. On the other hand, a primary limitation is the author's own positionality as a researcher interpreting linguistic and cultural concepts. While every effort was made to ensure accuracy through consultation with linguistic experts and primary texts, the risk of misinterpretation remains. Furthermore, the project of translation is inherently fraught, as it must use the very 'colonial dictionary' it seeks to critique.

Preview of the Paper's Structure: The paper proceeds as follows: Section Two establishes the theoretical framework, deeply engaging with the concepts of the coloniality of language (wa Thiong'o, 1986) and epistemicide (Santos, 2014), while also integrating the foundational work on the coloniality of power by Quijano (2024). Section Three consists of a conceptual literature review, examining how *security* and *community* are traditionally defined in mainstream IR to establish the hegemony of these definitions. Section Four details the methodology, outlining a decolonial discourse analysis of selected Chichewa proverbs and terms. Section Five presents the findings, articulating the alternative definitions of *security* and *community* that emerge. Section Six discusses the implications of these findings for the pluriversal IR project, and Section Seven concludes by summarizing the argument and suggesting areas for further research.

The Coloniality of Language and the Logic of Epistemicide: This study is grounded in a critical theoretical dyad that explains the mechanisms of knowledge domination and the specific violence enacted through language. The framework is built upon the foundational concept of the coloniality of language, as articulated by wa Thiong'o (1986), which provides the cultural-linguistic diagnosis of hegemony; and the concept of epistemicide, developed by Santos (2014), which names the systematic destruction of alternative knowledges that this hegemony enables. Together, they form a lens for understanding how IR theory, by operating exclusively in English, participates in the suppression of pluriversal worlds. The framework begins with the seminal work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), who argues that colonialism's most powerful tool was not merely the physical subjugation of people but the 'colonization of the mind.' This was achieved fundamentally through the systematic alienation of African peoples from their native languages and the imposition of European languages (e.g., English, French, Portuguese, Spanish) as the sole mediums of education, governance, and 'high' culture. For wa Thiong'o (1986), language is not a neutral medium of communication; it is a carrier of culture and a collective memory bank for a people's history, philosophy, development, and worldview.He contends that the elevation of English and the concomitant demotion of indigenous languages to the realm of the 'vernacular' created a cultural and psychic schism. It established a hierarchy where Western knowledge, expressed in Western languages, was perceived as modern, scientific, and universal, while knowledge expressed in African languages was deemed primitive, emotional, and regressive.

This process is a key component of what Quijano (2024) identifies as the 'coloniality of power,' a global power structure that classifies populations based on race and associates European culture with rationality and superiority. Applied to this study, wa Thiong'o's thesis explains why Chichewa proverbs are excluded from IR theory. They are expressed in the 'wrong' language—a language that the 'colonial dictionary' of IR has defined as non-theoretical. The very act of conducting IR in English pre-selects for concepts that can be easily translated and understood within a Western epistemological framework, automatically filtering out ideas that do not fit, thus enacting a form of linguistic gatekeeping. If the coloniality of language describes the structure of domination, epistemicide describes its destructive outcome. Santos (2014) expands this argument, contending that Western modernity's project required the active suppression and annihilation of rival forms of knowledge to establish its own monoculture of the scientific mind. He defines epistemicide as the murder of knowledge, the systematic destruction of non-Western cognitive frameworks and practices. He further argues that this process creates an abyssal line, dividing valid, scientific knowledge from all other knowledges that are cast into the 'abyss' of the nonexistent, the uncivilized, and the irrational. This line is not just metaphorical; it is operationalized through academic disciplines, publishing norms, and university structures that validate certain forms of inquiry while invalidating others. This aligns with Bhambra's (2014) call for postcolonial and decolonial dialogues that directly confront the legacies of this epistemic violence. In the context of this thesis, the analysis of Chichewa concepts through this lens is not an exercise in linguistics but an act of cognitive justice. The marginalization of the Chichewa language is not a passive oversight but an active process of epistemicide. The profound philosophical insights embedded in a term like *mtendere* (a holistic state of peace, well-being, and balance) are murdered when they are reductively translated simply as 'peace,' a term in IR that is overwhelmingly defined negatively as the 'absence of war' or narrowly as 'national security.' This translation erases the term's cosmological, social, and ecological dimensions, performing the very epistemicide Santos (2014) critiques.

Towards a Pluriversal Linguistics: Together, wa Thiong'o (1986) and Santos (2014) provide a powerful theoretical foundation for this study. Wa Thiong'o gives us the 'how'—the mechanism of linguistic domination. Santos gives us the 'what'—the consequence of that domination, which is the destruction of knowledge. This synthesized framework allows us to conceptualize English in IR not as a neutral tool but as a 'colonial dictionary'—an instrument that carries within it the ontological biases of its origins and actively filters out meanings that threaten its epistemological hegemony. Therefore, the concept of

engaging with Chichewa is not merely an additive or comparative exercise. It is an act of resistance against epistemicide and a step towards what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) terms *epistemic freedom*—the right to think, theorize, and interpret the world from one's own historical and cultural standing. It is an attempt to step away from the abyssal line and recover, from the abyss, a world of meaning that the colonial dictionary of IR has actively suppressed. It answers the Pluriversal IR call by demonstrating that a world of many worlds must first be a world of many words, and that the journey towards a truly pluriversal discipline must begin with a critical interrogation of the language we use to construct it.

The Hegemonic Definitions of Security and Community in Mainstream IR: This section examines the orthodox conceptualizations of *security* and *community* within mainstream International Relations theory. Its purpose is to establish the hegemony of these specific definitions, demonstrating how they are not natural or universal but are instead products of a particular Western, modernist, and state-centric worldview. By mapping this intellectual terrain, the review creates a clear baseline against which the alternative conceptions derived from Chichewa proverbs will be contrasted, thereby highlighting the transformative potential of a pluriversal approach.

The Concept of Security: The dominant conception of security in IR is fundamentally state-centric and rooted in the realist tradition. For classical realists like Morgenthau (1948), international politics is a perpetual struggle for power, and the primary, if not sole, objective of statecraft is national survival in an anarchic environment. Security, in this view, is narrowly defined as the protection of the state, its territorial integrity and political sovereignty, from external military threats. This reduces security to a problem of accumulating sufficient material power, primarily military, to deter or defeat adversaries.

The Cold War era cemented this 'national security' paradigm, but also saw the emergence of a critical challenge from the Copenhagen School. Scholars like Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde (1998) argued that security is a speech act; by labelling an issue a *security* issue (securitization), state actors move it beyond the realm of normal politics, justifying extraordinary measures. While this expanded the range of potential security threats (e.g., to environmental or economic issues), it ultimately reinforced the state's role as the primary securitizing actor, the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes a threat. The state remained the central referent object—the thing to be secured.

A more radical departure came from the Welsh School's Critical Security Studies, notably from Booth (2007), who argued that true security must be about human emancipation, not state power. Booth critiqued the traditional view for often making individuals insecure in the name of state security. However, while this human-centric approach is crucial, it often remains embedded within a Western liberal framework that prioritizes individual rights and freedoms, still operating within the ontological confines of Western political thought. The hegemonic thread running through all these schools, despite their differences, is their secular, materialist, and anthropocentric basis. Security is about physical survival, political order, or individual liberty, with little room for spiritual, ecological, or communal well-being as constitutive elements of security itself. This reflects what Hobson (2012) critiques as the Eurocentric conception of world politics, which naturalizes the Westphalian state as the universal subject of analysis.

The Concept of Community: The concept of community in mainstream IR is equally constrained, largely oscillating between two poles: its absence or its limited, functional form. The realist perspective, which sees international relations as a state of anarchy, is naturally skeptical of any lasting sense of community beyond fleeting alliances of convenience. For theorists like Mearsheimer (2014), states act as rational egoists caught in a security dilemma; any cooperation is fragile and depends on the balance of power. Community, in this view, is temporary and ultimately secondary to the need for survival. A more robust concept is found in the English School's notion of an international society. Bull (1977)

argued that despite anarchy, states can form a society bound by common rules, norms, and institutions that facilitate coexistence and order. This society, however, is thin, pragmatic, and exclusive—a club of sovereign states primarily concerned with managing their interactions and maintaining the society itself. It is a functional community of diplomats and statesmen, not a moral community of peoples. Finally, constructivists like Anderson (1983), although not an IR theorist per se, have profoundly influenced the field with their concept of the nation as an 'imagined community.' This highlights that even the state itself is a constructed form of political community, bound by a shared identity and print-language. However, this imagination is often bounded by the territorial state, reinforcing the Westphalian container as the natural locus of community. The hegemonic definition of community in IR is thus statist, territorial, and anthropocentric. It rarely extends beyond the human collective organized as a state to consider communities that are transnational, non-human, or spiritual in nature.

The Hegemony of a Western Ontology: The hegemony of these definitions lies in their presentation as objective, universal categories of analysis. However, as the decolonial lens of this paper argues, they are in fact particularistic products of a Western historical experience centered on the Peace of Westphalia, the Enlightenment, and the rise of the modern nation-state. They are built on an ontology that privileges the state as the primary unit of analysis, material power as the currency of politics, anthropocentrism that excludes the non-human world, and secularism that dismisses spiritual dimensions. This review has established this hegemony not to dismiss these concepts outright, but to provincialize them, to show that they represent one world's answer to questions of *security* and *community*, not the answer. This creates the necessary conceptual space for the next section to introduce the alternative definitions embedded within the Chichewa language, which emerge from a radically different ontological foundation, one that has been systematically marginalized by what Bhambra (2020) identifies as the erasures of the colonial global economy in shaping modern political thought and development.

A Decolonial Linguistic Analysis for Pluriversal Knowledge Recovery: This study employs a qualitative research design centered on a decolonial linguistic analysis of Chichewa proverbs and core concepts. The methodology is explicitly designed to operationalize the theoretical framework of epistemicide and the coloniality of language, moving from critique to the constructive practice of cognitive justice. It aims not merely to analyze text, but to engage in what Mignolo (2011) calls epistemic reconstitution, the process of rebuilding knowledge systems that have been suppressed. To ensure rigor and reproducibility, the analysis follows a systematic, four-stage procedure.

Embracing a Pluriversal Epistemology: The research philosophy is grounded in a pluriversal epistemology, which asserts that valid knowledge about the world is produced in multiple ways across different cultural and cosmological systems (Santos, 2014). This stands in direct opposition to the positivist tradition dominant in mainstream IR and development economics, which often seeks universal laws and dismisses non-Western knowledge as subjective. This approach is inherently interpretive and constructivist; it understands that language does not simply describe reality but actively constructs and embodies a particular worldview (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The task is to interpret the worldviews constructed within the Chichewa language and to analyze them as coherent theoretical frameworks for understanding *security* and *community*.

Methodological Framework and Analytical Procedure: The analytical process is designed as a decolonial recovery project, comprising four distinct but interconnected stages:

Stage 1: Conceptual Identification

The first stage involves the purposive selection of Chichewa terms based on their direct relevance to the core concepts under

investigation in IR and development studies. The selection is not exhaustive but targeted, focusing on key philosophical nouns that articulate foundational ideas. The primary terms selected for this study are:

- Security and Well-being: *Mtendere* (peace, well-being, harmony), *Mphamvu* (power, strength, life-force), *Chitetezo* (protection).
- Community and Relationality: *Umunthu* (humanness, personhood, ethical relationality), *Mphatso* (gift, talent, skill, responsibility).

Stage 2: Semantic Field Analysis

For each selected term, a detailed semantic field analysis is conducted. This involves:

- Literal Translation: Establishing the basic dictionary definition.
- Proverbial and Idiomatic Mapping: Identifying and analyzing key proverbs (*mwambi*) and idioms in which the term is used. This reveals the term's conceptual boundaries and its embedded ethical and philosophical instructions. For example, the proverb *Munthundimunthu pa anthu* is central to understanding *umunthu*.
- Lexical Network Mapping: Exploring the network of related words and concepts to build a comprehensive understanding of the term's conceptual ecosystem.

Stage 3: Contextual Interpretation

To move beyond textual meaning and into lived significance, each term is situated within its cultural, historical, and cosmological context. This stage relies on secondary sources, including:

- Ethnographic and Anthropological Scholarship: Works by scholars such as Schoffeleers (1992) on spiritual landscapes and Boucher (2012) on the *Gule Wamkulu* masquerade complex provide crucial insight into the performative and spiritual dimensions of concepts like *mtendere* and *mphamvu*.
- Historical and Cultural Studies: Research by Malawian historians and cultural scholars (e.g., Steve Chimonbo, John Lwanda) helps to contextualize the terms within specific social practices and historical experiences, guarding against the decontextualized interpretation cautioned by Ranger (2012).

Stage 4: Contrastive Theorization

The final stage involves systematically juxtaposing the deep, contextualized meaning of the Chichewa concept with the hegemonic definition found in mainstream IR and development literature (as established in Section 3). This is not to prove superiority but to illuminate ontological differences. For instance, the holistic, ecological concept of *mtendere* is explicitly contrasted with the state-centric, militarized concept of 'national security,' and the relational ontology of *umunthu* is contrasted with the individualistic and territorial assumptions underpinning mainstream notions of 'community.' This contrast is the core of the paper's theoretical contribution, revealing the transformative potential of Chichewa philosophy for pluriversal thought.

Ethical Considerations: A core ethical tenet of this methodology is researcher reflexivity. As a Malawian scholar, I occupy a unique position: I am both an *insider* with cultural and linguistic familiarity and an *academic* trained in Western IR theory. This dual position requires constant critical reflection to avoid either a romanticization of tradition or an uncritical application of Western theoretical lenses. The methodology prioritizes conceptual humility, allowing the Chichewa concepts, as understood through their semantic fields and cultural contexts, to set the terms of their own analysis. The goal is to let the language speak for itself, mitigating the risk of perpetuating epistemicide through misinterpretation or forced categorization.

In summary, this four-stage methodology provides a rigorous, transparent, and ethically grounded framework for excavating the theoretical wealth of the Chichewa language. It transforms proverbs from cultural artifacts into serious texts for epistemological engagement, fulfilling the core mandate of a pluriversal IR and offering a replicable model for similar decolonial research in other linguistic contexts.

Articulating Alternative Ontologies from Chichewa Proverbs

This section presents the core findings of the decolonial discourse analysis. It articulates the alternative, robust definitions of *security* and *community* that emerge from a deep engagement with selected Chichewa proverbs and core concepts. These findings demonstrate that the Chichewa language contains a sophisticated philosophical framework that fundamentally challenges the ontological foundations of mainstream IR and development.

Re-defining Security from Chitetezo to Mtendere: The analysis reveals a critical distinction between two concepts often simplistically translated as *security* in English.

Finding 1: *Chitetezo* as limited, reactive protection. The term *chitetezo* refers to protection, defense, or a shield. It aligns most closely with the realist notion of security as a response to an immediate threat. For example, the proverb *Chitetezo cha mkazindimwamuna wake* (A woman's protection is her husband) denotes a specific, relational form of dependency and safeguarding. While important, *chitetezo* represents a narrow, reactive form of security.

Finding 2: *Mtendere* as holistic, positive well-being. The primary finding is the profound depth of the concept *mtendere*. It is routinely translated as 'peace,' but this translation commits the epistemicide Santos (2014) describes by erasing its expansive meaning. Discourse analysis reveals that *mtendere* embodies a holistic state of positive well-being, harmony, and balance that encompasses multiple dimensions:

- **Social *Mtendere*:** Harmony within the community, the absence of strife. The proverb *Mtendere ndimoyo, nkhondondiimfa* (Peace is life, war is death) establishes it as the fundamental condition for life itself.
- **Ecological *Mtendere*:** Balance with the natural world. In Chichewa, a good harvest, rain in season, and healthy livestock are all manifestations of *mtendere*. This reflects a cosmology where human well-being is inextricably linked to the environment, a theme explored in Schoffeleers' (1992) work on territorial cults.
- **Spiritual *Mtendere*:** Harmony with the ancestors (*mizimu*) and the divine (*Chiuta*). Among the Chewa people, rituals and correct moral conduct are necessary to maintain this balance. The performance of *Gule Wamkulu*, as described by Boucher (2012) and recognized by UNESCO (2008), is a key mechanism for maintaining this spiritual and social *mtendere*.

This concept directly challenges the IR hegemony established in the literature review. Unlike 'national security,' which is state-centric and militarized, *mtendere* is relational, ecological, and spiritual. Unlike 'securitization,' which is a political act by elites, *mtendere* is a condition of communal existence. It aligns more with Booth's (2007) concept of emancipation but extends it beyond the human to include the non-human and spiritual worlds. *Security*, in this pluriversal view, is not the protection of the state from others, but the active maintenance of balance within a complex web of relations.
Re-defining Community, and the Ontology of Umunthu. The analysis of the concept of *community* centers on the foundational philosophy of *umunthu*.

Finding 3: *Community* as relational ontology, not a territorial unit. *Umunthu* is often translated as 'humanity,' but its meaning is captured more accurately by the proverb *Munthundimunthu pa anthu* (A person is a person through other persons). This establishes

that personhood—and by extension, *community*—is not an innate, individual quality but a relational achievement. One becomes a full human being through ethical relationships of reciprocity, respect, and responsibility within a community. This stands in stark contrast to Anderson's (1983) imagined community, which is a territorial and political construct. The community in *umunthu* is not imagined but lived and enacted daily through mutual obligation.

Finding 4: The communal basis of power (*Mphamvu*). The term *mphamvu* illustrates this relational ontology further. While it can mean physical force or political power [aligning with Morgenthau's (1948) realism], its deeper meaning relates to 'life-force,''vitality,' and 'efficacy.' An individual's *mphamvu* is not solely their own; it is derived from and sustained by their standing within the community and their harmony with the spiritual world. The proverb *Mphamvundimgulu"* (Strength is in the group/community) encapsulates this. This challenges the Western ontological individualism that underpins IR's view of the state as an autonomous actor. It also complicates the typology of power presented by Barnett & Duvall (2005), which, while expansive, remains within a modernist, social-scientific framework. In the *umunthu* ontology, power is not merely an attribute or a social relation to be analyzed, but a spiritual and communal energy. Power is not an attribute to be accumulated by an atomistic entity but a relational energy that flows from collective well-being (*mtendere*).

An Ontology of Relational Balance

The findings present a coherent, alternative ontology for conceptualizing international relations. The key concepts are inextricably linked:

- Community (*Umunthu*) is the network of relations through which personhood is realized.
- Power (*Mphamvu*) is the vital force that is generated and sustained by a healthy community.
- Security (*Mtendere*) is the state of holistic balance and well-being that is the ultimate goal of this relational system.

This framework does not merely add new variables to existing IR models; it proposes a different starting point. The primary unit of analysis is not the autonomous state, but the relationship itself. The central problem of IR is not surviving anarchy, but nurturing and managing relational balance across human, ecological, and spiritual spheres. This is the vital contribution that a Malawian cosmological perspective, excavated from its linguistic roots, offers to the pluriversal IR project.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this analysis are not merely an ethnographic contribution; they represent a profound epistemological challenge with concrete implications for the theory and practice of Pluriversal International Relations (PIR) and development studies. This discussion section interprets the significance of the excavated Chichewa concepts, arguing that they provide a tangible pathway to operationalize the decolonial project, moving it from critique to reconstruction across these interconnected fields.

Linguistic Analysis as Decolonial Praxis: The most immediate implication is methodological. This study demonstrates that engaged linguistic analysis is a fundamental decolonial method. It provides a replicable model for how scholars can begin to answer Santos's (2014) call for a 'sociology of absences' by turning to the conceptual vocabularies of marginalized languages. This moves beyond the often-abstractexhortations to decolonize and offers a concrete technique: the meticulous unpacking of key terms and proverbs to unearth their theoretical content. This approach directly confronts what Mignolo (2011) identifies as the geopolitics of knowledge. By treating Chichewa as a language of theory, it actively delinks from the presumption that valid IR and development concepts can only be generated in English. It proves that the 'colonial dictionary' can be systematically challenged and expanded through rigorous engagement with other linguistic systems. For the PIR project and critical development studies, this suggests that future research must prioritize philological and linguistic competence in non-Western languages as a core scholarly skill, not an exotic specialty.

Theoretical Implication: The alternative definitions of *mtendere* (holistic security) and *umunthu* (relational community) serve to provincialize the core assumptions of mainstream IR, revealing them to be particular, not universal. The concept of *mtendere* forces a radical rethinking of *security*. It challenges the field to consider how its theories would change if the referent object of security were not the state, but the balance of life-giving relations between people, their environment, and their cosmos. This aligns with but critically expands the Welsh School's focus on human emancipation (Booth, 2007). While Booth seeks to secure the individual from the state, *mtendere* implies that the individual's security is inextricable from the security of the entire relational network—human and non-human. Similarly, the ontology of *umunthu* provincializes the Western liberal individual, the hidden foundation of much IR theory. Positing that beings are constituted through their relationships, it challenges the very notion of autonomous actors in an anarchic system. This resonates with Blaney & Tickner's (2017) call for thinking international relations differently by taking seriously relational ontologies. It suggests that a pluriversal IR must develop theories of international cooperation and ethics that start from a premise of radical relationality and mutual constitution.

Implications for Development Theory and Practice: The implications of this study extend decisively into the field of development research, offering robust, culturally-grounded alternatives to dominant paradigms.

Reframing Human Security and Well-being: The concept of *mtendere* provides a more holistic and actionable framework for human security and sustainable development than the often-vague UN definitions. While the UNDP's human security paradigm broadens the concept beyond the state, *mtendere* explicitly and inseparably integrates ecological integrity and spiritual harmony as constitutive elements of security. A development project that, for instance, provides clean water but desecrates a sacred forest or disrupts social cohesion would, in this framework, be seen as a net failure, as it damages the very fabric of *mtendere*. This demands a shift in development metrics from purely material outputs (e.g., GDP per capita, number of wells built) towards indicators of holistic balance and relational well-being.

A Blueprint for Genuinely Community-Driven Development: The philosophy of *umunthu* offers a transformative blueprint for participatory development. Current models often engage communities as stakeholders to be consulted, yet the fundamental power dynamic remains: external agencies are the providers, and local communities are the recipients. An *umunthu*-informed approach would reconfigure this relationship. It would require development actors to see themselves as entering into a relational network of mutual responsibility (*mphatso*), where their role is not to deliver solutions but to engage in a process of mutual learning and co-creation. Success would be measured by the strength and ethical quality of the relationships built and the enhancement of the community's capacity to self-organize and sustain its own *mtendere*.

A Foundational Critique of Extractivism: The concept of *mphamvu* as a spiritual and communal life-force provides a powerful critique of extractive development models. From the perspective of Chewa cosmology, the large-scale extraction of minerals or timber is not merely an economic or environmental issue; it is an act that can sever a community's connection to the land, deplete its collective life-force, and fundamentally diminish its *mphamvu*. This explains the profound cultural and psychological resistance to projects that, while promising economic gain, are felt to *kill* the spirit of the people and the land. This concept challenges

development economics to account for the spiritual and ontological costs of resource extraction that are invisible to its standard calculus but are central to a community's overall security and well-being. In summary, the implications of this study are transformative. It shows that the Malawian philosophy embedded in the Chichewa language is not a historical artifact but a living intellectual tradition with the power to challenge hegemonic concepts, propose compelling alternatives, and provide a practical methodology for building disciplines where many worlds truly fit. The task for both PIR and development studies is to embrace this linguistic turn as central to their decolonial mission.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to demonstrate that the English language, as the dominant medium of IR theory and development discourse, functions as a 'colonial dictionary' that actively filters out non-Western ontological categories, perpetuating the epistemicide of alternative knowledge systems. It argues that a genuine Pluriversal International Relations (PIR) must therefore be a linguistic project. Through a systematic, decolonial analysis of Chichewa proverbs and core concepts, this paper has excavated a distinctly Malawian philosophical framework, revealing how *mtendere* constitutes a holistic, ecological, and spiritual concept of security and how *umunthu* defines community as a relational ontology of mutual constitution. These findings do not merely add to IR's glossary; they fundamentally challenge its state-centric, materialist, and anthropocentric foundations, provincializing its core assumptions and revealing them as products of a particular historical and cultural context, not universal truths. The significance of this research lies in its methodological contribution and its practical implications for development. It answers the call by scholars like Santos (2014) and Mignolo (2011) to combat epistemicide by moving from critique to the active recovery and rehabilitation of subalternized knowledges. It provides a replicable, four-stage model for engaged linguistic analysis as a decolonial praxis, offering a concrete method for scholars to delink from the hegemony of the 'colonial dictionary.' Furthermore, by demonstrating how *mtendere* reframes human security and how *umunthu* reorients community-driven development, this study moves beyond theoretical critique to offer tangible alternatives for policy and practice. By centering the Chichewa language, this study also challenges the internal hierarchies within African studies, asserting the value of Malawi's specific intellectual heritage for global theory.

Areas for Further Research

This paper opens several fertile avenues for further pluriversal research:

First, comparative linguistic studies are crucial. A compelling project would involve comparing the Chichewa concepts of *mtendere* and *umunthu* with similar philosophies in other African languages, such as the Kiswahili *amani* and *utu* or the Zulu/Xhosa concept of *ubuntu*. This would help identify both shared regional epistemologies and unique nuances, building a richer, more diverse archive of African IR and development thought.Second, research must move into applied and policy-oriented domains. Future studies should investigate what a foreign policy or a climate adaptation strategy informed by the principles of *umunthu* (relationality) and *mtendere* (holistic balance) would look like in practice, testing their practical utility beyond the theoretical realm. In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the path to a pluriversal understanding of global politics and development is fundamentally linguistic. By moving beyond the 'colonial dictionary' of English-dominated theory, we can access vital epistemes of well-being and relationality, such as those preserved in Chichewa. The challenge for both IR and development studies is not merely to include these concepts as footnotes but to allow them to fundamentally reshape our definitions of progress, security, and community. Future research must now take up the methodological baton of deep linguistic engagement,

conducting analysis in indigenous languages and co-creating knowledge with communities, to build a field where many worlds not only fit but actively inform one another.

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