

Revisiting Trajectories of Epistemological Decolonization in Africa*

Introduction

Today's struggles for epistemic freedom across the world are ranged against existing and resilient cognitive injustices cascading from colonialism and maintained by global coloniality, which fundamentally amount to violation of the very idea that all human beings were born into valid and legitimate knowledge systems (Mudimbe 1994). Cognitive injustice manifests itself as a failure to recognise the different ways of knowing by which diverse people across the human globe make sense of the world and provide meaning to their existence (Santos 2014). In short, cognitive injustice is basically a social injustice that cascades from denial of humanity of other people and by extension refusal to recognise their epistemic virtue (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) underscored how the metaphysical empire unfolded in terms of invasion of the mental universe of the colonized people. In his book entitled *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2009) elaborated that this invasion of the mental universe amounted to the removal of the hard disk of previous African knowledge and memory and downloading into African minds the software of European knowledge and memory. The key consequences of all these processes has been epistemicides (killing of

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existing endogenous knowledges), linguicides (killing of existing indigenous languages and the imposition of colonial languages), cultureicides (killing of indigenous cultures and setting afoot cultural imperialism) as well as alienation (exiling of indigenous people from their languages, histories, cultures and even from themselves). Suffice it to say that African knowledges, languages, and cultures were too strong to be completely swept away by colonialism. Even their very existence in oral forms made it difficult to destroy physically. It could not be burnt like books.

Today the struggles for epistemic freedom are represented by the *Rhodes Must Fall* (RMF) and *Fees Must Fall* (FMF) movements in South Africa, *Why is My Curriculum White* in the United Kingdom or *Black Lives Matter* in the United States of America. These movements, which are mainly spearheaded by students, the youth and a few radical intellectuals and academics, are erupting over what appears to be old yet unresolved epistemological and ontological questions (Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 1). These movements have brought back to the public arena longstanding and interrela-

ted problems cascading from what William E. B. Dubois (1903) termed the 'the colour line.' This 'colour line has given birth to 'the epistemic line' Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018). These seemingly old questions remain new as long they have not been resolved and settled.

Africa: from academic freedom to epistemic freedom

The recognition that all human beings were born into valid and legitimate knowledge system is the basis of the assertion of epistemic freedom. Epistemic freedom is a deepening rather than replacement of academic freedom. While academic freedom is closely related to the ideas of freedom of expression and speech rights; epistemic freedom is closely related to social justice and democratization of knowledge (academic democracy). The struggles for epistemic freedom are about building intellectual sovereignty in production and reproduction of knowledge. What is underscored in epistemic freedom is the right to think, write, theorise, communicate and interpret the world from where the African people are located (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

We are continuing the struggles for epistemic freedom today within a modern world that is said to be a global village underpinned by a global economy of knowledge simply because of the existence

of a resilient uneven intellectual division of labour, which engenders what Paulin Hountondji (1997) termed epistemic dependence. Knowledge that is considered valid and scientific cascades and circulates from Europe and North America to the rest of the world. In this uneven division of labour, Africa in particular and the Global South in general, exist as sites for hunting and gathering of raw data (Hountondji 1997; Hountondji 2002). Europe and North America remain the key sites of professional processing and data for the purposes of formulation of social theories. These theories are voraciously consumed in Africa. What are considered prestigious and international peer-reviewed journals that easily earn African scholars' recognition and promotion are based in Europe and North America. All these are clear hallmarks of intellectual/academic dependence that provoke the resurgence of struggles for epistemic freedom in the 21st century.

A call for epistemic freedom is a vehement rejection of all the illusions of a magnanimous liberal empire that has delivered a global economy of knowledge of which every human being contributed. At the centre of the so-called global economy of knowledge is resilient Eurocentrism. In a fundamental sense, struggles for epistemic freedom were and are a direct response to denial of humanity itself, (coloniality of being), which automatically resulted in the denial of knowledge and epistemic virtue to those who became victims of colonialism (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). What must be remembered is that the success of colonialism and coloniality in the domain of knowledge was and is

still dependent on winning some of the colonized people to its side to the extent that they then speak and write as though they were located on the racially privileged side of the global power spectrum (Grosfoguel 2007). This was possible because colonialism was a seductive process that promised to be a civilising enterprise while in reality it was a death project.

Epistemic freedom is a search for meaning after centuries of reduction of African people to a subject race (sub-humans) bereft of alphabet and knowledge. For Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2009b), the struggles for epistemic freedom are aimed at 'remembering' Africa after centuries of 'dismemberment.' Engelbert Mveng (1983:141) stated that 'if political sovereignty is necessary, the scientific sovereignty is perhaps more important in present-day Africa.' Epistemic freedom for Ake (1979) was necessary in enabling Africa to escape the trap of reproducing 'knowledge of equilibrium' (knowledges of maintenance of status quo of coloniality). For veteran novelist Chinua Achebe (1997:179), epistemic freedom had to 'help us to get on our feet again.' Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2017:5), believed that epistemic freedom was to deliver 'convivial scholarship' that 'confronts and humbles the challenge of over-prescription, over-standardization, over-routinization, and over prediction.' In short, the struggles for epistemic freedom confront epistemological colonization and all other consequences of the invasion of mental universe of the colonized people with the aim to democratize knowledge in terms of freeing it from Eurocentrism. The expected outcome of these struggles is what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) termed 'ecologies of knowledges'

(plurality of epistemologies reflective of the diversity of human species and richness of human knowledge). Epistemological decolonization remains elusive.

Trajectories of African struggles for epistemic freedom

Early African educated elites like Blyden and James Africanus Beale Horton of Sierra Leone, and J.E. Casely Hayford of Ghana, agitated and fought for the establishment of universities in Africa from as early as 1868 (Ashby 1964). While these early African educated elites fought for a very particular type of university – the 'African university' (rooted in African cultural and intellectual soil and climate) – the reluctant colonial regimes imposed the 'university in Africa' (transplanted from Europe and North America).

This means that the struggles for epistemic freedom emerged concurrently with the contestations over the suitable model of the University for Africa. Blyden and Hayford exhibited the earliest ideas of a decolonised higher education. According to Eric Ashby, Blyden advocated for an African university that was free from the grip of the 'despotic Europeanizing influences which had warped and crushed the Negro mind' (Ashby 1964:12-23; see also Blyden 1882). Blyden became the leading advocate, if not the pioneer, of the philosophy of 'African personality', which he did not want Western education to destroy. Rather, he wanted it to be nurtured as part of the restoration of African cultural self-respect.

The philosophy of 'African personality' was predicated on five key issues: the separate and unique destiny of black people from Europeans; the development

of a distinctive African mentality; religion's place of pride in African thought and life; the inherent socialist/communal nature of African society; and the strong idea of 'Africa for Africans' (Frankel 1974). Blyden was opposed to modern Western civilisation as he saw it as a carrier of 'race poison', and harked back to the Greek and Latin civilisations as classics that could nourish Africa intellectually without racism (Ashby 1964:13). Blyden is also the earliest advocate to promote African languages, African songs and African oral traditions as part of higher education. His decolonial ideas were echoed by Reverend James Johnson of Sierra Leone who wanted a higher education institution that would 'Leave undisturbed our particularities' (Wandira 1977: 40).

Hayford was another early African decolonial thinker who advocated for a decolonised higher education for Africa. His ideas about an indigenous university were captured in his book *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911). Hayford, a pioneer African nationalist and advocate of Ethiopianism, was very critical of an African university that was a mere replica of European institutions and that mimicked and reproduced foreign influences. He went further to propose the use of African indigenous languages in teaching and learning. Like Blyden, Hayford was a proponent of an African university that 'would preserve in the students a sense of African Nationality' (Hayford 2011).

What happened to these early struggles and demands for an African university is analogous to what happened to the person who cried for a fish and was given a snake instead. In the first place, the colonial regimes argued for a

sound African secondary education as an essential prerequisite and foundation for African university education. Second, the early educational institutions established in Africa, such as Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone (1876), emerged as 'colleges' of overseas universities (Ashby 1964). Third, the colonial regimes continued to turn a blind eye to the expansion of higher education for Africans, leaving the missionaries to concentrate on primary and secondary sectors. As argued by Mazrui, mission education inaugurated the first form of African intellectual dependency and acculturation 'cultural schizophrenia' through separating young Africans from their parents and enclosing them in mission boarding schools (Mazrui 1978:27). Colonial education at whatever level amounted to desocialization of Africans and their miseducation.

The challenges of re-socialization and re-education

African nationalism carried the promise of re-socialization and re-education of African people after centuries of desocialization and miseducation. Thus, the dawn of African political independence in the 1960s was accompanied by intensified struggles to Africanise the university in Africa into an African university. At its deepest level, this struggle entailed formulating a new philosophy of higher education informed by African histories, cultures, ideas and aspirations as well as a fundamental redefinition of the role of the university. But to achieve this objective, there was a need to navigate carefully not only the imperatives of 'standards' set in Europe and the African local imperatives of the 'social function' of the university, but also

the dangers of looking 'inward' at the expense of the universal aspect of knowledge (Mkandawire 2005: 22-23). This challenge was well expressed by Julius Nyerere of Tanzania when he became the first black chancellor of the University of East Africa on 28 June 1963:

There are two possible dangers facing a university in a developing nation: the danger of blindly adoring mythical 'international standards' which may cast a shadow on national development objectives, and the danger of forcing our university to look inwards and isolate itself from the world (Nyerere 1966:218-219).

While Nyerere emphasised the dangers of failing to maintain a balance between the national and international character of the university in Africa, Ali A. Mazrui highlighted three important relationships that the university in Africa must navigate and negotiate:

A university has to be politically distant from the state; secondly, a university has also to be culturally close to society; and thirdly, a university has to be intellectually linked to wider scholarly and scientific values of the world of learning (Mazrui 2003:141).

It was in the 1960s that the idea of an African developmental university emerged. Such a university was expected to be truly African and to play an active role in nation-building, socio-economic development and promoting African consciousness (Nyerere 1966:219). Thus, on another level, the 1960s constituted the 'golden age' of the African higher education sector. Not only did the institutions of higher learning multiply, but the Africanization agenda was embraced by leading scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop who dedicated

his entire career to producing Africa-centred knowledge and exploding the myths created by imperial colonial historiography (Diop 1974; Diop 1981). A vibrant and respected African Nationalist School emerged at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, led by historians such as Kenneth Onwuka Dike, Jacob Ade Ajayi, John Omer-Cooper and many others who contributed immensely to the Africanization of history as a discipline, as well as to the African nation-building project (Ifemesia 1988; Falola 2001:224).

Nationalist historiography was 'passionate, combative, and revisionist' as it consistently and persistently dethroned the 'Eurocentric perceptions of Africa' and Africans (Falola 2001: 224). It was the historians of the Ibadan, Dakar, Maputo and Dar-es-Salaam nationalist history schools that introduced the oral tradition methodology in their writing of African history; they successfully countered the negatives imparted by imperial/colonial historiography; and they shifted the African historical focus from 'conquest' to 'resistance' as part of their recovery of African agency in history (Falola 2001). The nationalist historians also actively and tirelessly worked to change history curricula and to put what they termed 'the African factor' at the centre of history courses (Falola 1993:72).

The formation of the Association of African Universities (henceforth, AAU) in Rabat, Morocco in 1967 revealed the continued commitment by African leaders to decolonise and Africanise universities in Africa and make them truly African universities. But unlike the nationalist political leaders, African intellectuals never tired of defending so-called 'international

standards' while Africanising and decolonising the university in Africa. The AAU expressed adherence to world academic standards and development of a higher education in the service of Africa, and was in favour of linking the African spirit of the university with the pan-African spirit embodied by the Organisation of African Unity (Yesufu 1973:5). At its first general conference held in Kinshasa, Zaire, in September 1969, the AAU's chosen theme – 'The University and Development' – was revealing of the envisaged role of the university.

A 1972 AAU workshop, themed 'Creating the African University: Emerging Issues in the 1970s', which ran from 10–15 July in Accra, Ghana, demonstrated that the struggle for an African university was continuing even within a context where African economies were beginning to collapse. The Workshop's purpose was to formulate a new philosophy of higher education and develop institutions of higher education that were truly African, drawing 'inspiration from Africa, and intelligently dedicated to her ideas and aspirations' (Yesufu 1973:5).

Importantly, the workshop delegates agreed that tinkering with imported ideas was not enough and that what was needed was a fundamental re-conceptualisation of the very idea of the university in Africa. There was a clear agreement among the members of the AAU that the African university must be a developmental one. However, Wandira (1977) raised critical concerns about what he termed the 'Yesufu University Model' which emerged from the 1972 AAU workshop.

Even though the African economies were hit by crisis in the 1970s and despite the fact that some notorious

dictators like Idi Amin had ascended to power, African intellectuals and academics continued to fight for intellectual spaces, this time outside the declining universities. The formation of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (henceforth, CODESRIA) in 1973 is a case in point. With the support of donor funding, CODESRIA emerged as a research council that became a comfortable home for exiled academics like Thandika Mkandawire from Malawi and Archie Mafeje from South Africa. It also became a home for radical left-leaning intellectuals like Samir Amin from Egypt, Mahmood Mamdani from Uganda, Sam Moyo from Zimbabwe, Issa Shivji from Tanzania and many others. In the words of Mamdani (2016: 78), the council 'was a ready-made forum for public intellectuals.'

What distinguished CODESRIA from other intellectual spaces was the intense public debates it generated on topical issues affecting Africa, such as African politics and the problem of political authoritarianism; African political economy; dependency; democracy; gender and emancipation of women; the agrarian question and land reform; neoliberalism and structural adjustment programmes; higher education; economic and social development; and the national question and constitutionalism. What also distinguished CODESRIA was its 'non-disciplinary' orientation (Mamdani 2016: 78-79).

CODESRIA produced some of the most ground-breaking researches that directly confronted Eurocentrism (the mother and father of epistemological colonization). For example, the work of Samir Amin (2009) confronted Eurocentrism directly while that of

Archie Mafeje (1991) that directly and consistently challenged anthropology as a handmaiden of colonial knowledge. It was actually CODESRIA that published two of the most influential volumes on the university in Africa: *African Universities in the Twenty-First Century: Volume 1: Liberalization and Internationalization (2004a)* and *African Universities in the Twenty-First Century: Volume 2: Knowledge and Society (2004b)*. To its credit, CODESRIA has maintained a clear oppositional position to imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The council is still a vibrant intellectual space and one can only hope that it builds on its unparalleled intellectual work to directly address the topical issue of the decolonisation of the universities and the epistemological question. At a general level, the decline of African intellectualism in the mid-1970s provoked two important questions. The first is why African intellectualism declined in the early 1970s. Why did the early decolonisation/Africanization initiatives fail? These issues led Mazrui (2003:137) to pose the question: 'Who has killed intellectualism in East Africa?' The first killer of intellectualism was the rise of brutal dictatorship, symbolised in East Africa by the coming to power of Idi Amin Dada in Uganda through a military coup in January 1971. He unleashed a reign of terror that had an immense impact on intellectualism (Mazrui 2003).

The second killer was the advent of the Cold War between Western powers and the Soviet bloc. The Cold War not only polarised Africans into pro-West and pro-East ideological dichotomies, but within states like Kenya that became pro-West, '[b]eing socialist

or left-wing as an intellectual became a political hazard' (Mazrui 2003: 138). In the same manner, in a country like Tanzania, led by respected intellectual Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, who chose the path of socialism, the local excessive enthusiasm for socialism bred ideological 'intimidation in the name of socialism' and respect for Nyerere that Mazrui critiqued as 'Tanzaphilia' (Mazrui 1967). What suffered severely in both cases was academic freedom.

Considering the preceding analysis, it is not surprising that the 1980s and 1990s became crisis years for the university in Africa, and attempts to create an African university collapsed. New factors intervened to deepen the crisis. For example, the World Bank introduced a negative attitude towards universities, discrediting them as agencies of development and public institutions worthy of government and international support. Instead, the World Bank (1986) prioritised secondary education. The idea of creating African universities died as the powerful international forces of neoliberalism and global finance posited that Africa had no need for universities, and that what they were taught was irrelevant to the needs of the global market and national development (Olukoshi and Zeleza 2004b). But instead of the university in Africa dying, it was forced to mutate into a 'corporate university' in the 1980s and 1990s. Markets became the major agents of coloniality.

Corporate university and knowledge as commodity

The late 1980s and the 1990s witnessed the rise of the 'corporate university', characterised not only by the invasion of the university by

business models but also by 'great antipathy to thinking' (Gordon 2006:5). What distinguished the corporate university in the words of Lewis R. Gordon (2006:9-10) was the rise of the 'academic managerial class' using 'corporate analogues' as its basis of governing the institutions. Gordon (2006:10) elaborated that the rise of this 'academic managerial class has been, perhaps the most catastrophic development in the modern university.' The catastrophic aspect of this phenomenon is multidimensional. Firstly, this academic managerial class, according to Gordon (2006: 10), is 'unlike past scholars who so happened also to administrate' because it 'no longer has knowledge as part of its telos.'

Worse still, this academic managerial class 'has folded onto itself as the object of its own preservation and the result is its proliferation' (Gordon 2006:10). Gordon further characterises the composition of this academic managerial class as 'consisting of failed academics and scholars whose credentials do not extend beyond their doctorates' and who practise the 'sociology of revenge and entrenched resentment toward productive and influential scholars' (Gordon 2006:10). It is this academic managerial class that 'seeks inspiration from the corporate world primarily because of a form of decadence of the imagination in which corporate management is equated with management itself' (Gordon 2006: 10-11). It is within this context of a decadent corporate university presided over by an equally decadent academic managerial class that many scholars found themselves in the midst of what Mamdani (2007) termed the 'market place.'

New struggles and old questions

The South African students who spearhead the Rhodes Must Fall (henceforth, RMF) and the Fees Must Fall (henceforth, FMF) movements must be understood broadly as heirs to the long-standing struggles for an African university and epistemic freedom in Africa. What the South African students put to the fore is what Oginga Odinga (1968) articulated as ‘Not Yet Uhuru’ – a clarion call to continue the struggle for decolonisation even after the dismantlement of direct colonial administrations and juridical apartheid. It is not surprising that South Africa, hailed by neoliberals as a democratic society with one of the most liberal, progressive constitutions in the world, has become the site of resurgent decolonial struggles, because what was gained in 1994 was democracy without decolonisation. ‘Neo-apartheid’ rather than ‘post-apartheid’ best describes present-day South Africa, where racism, inequalities and exclusions signify a problematic democracy; where a dispossessed black majority refuses to accept the constitutionalised apartheid theft of resources and their continued concentration in the hands of the minority white population; and where a few black people use control of the state to engage in bureaucratic petit-bourgeois looting.

Like all struggles of decolonisation, the RMF and FMF movements were inevitably riddled with internal ructions, contradictions, ambiguities and struggles-within-the-struggle. This has given ammunition to its critics like Jonathan Jansen (2017) to mount some of the criticism which borders on dismissal and discrediting of the movements. The outbreaks of

violence in particular, have armed the opponents of the RMF and FMF movements including justifications of employing and deploying private security companies, resulting in the militarisation of campuses. Rather than diminishing it, this contributed to an escalation in the violence.

What is also clear is that there has always been a robust internal critique if not auto-critique that raised such issues as the patriarchal tendencies; intolerance of divergent views; the sometimes careless use of the discourse of racism, which affected the initial multiracial quality of the student movements; weak responses to the realities of the intersectionality of student struggles, which caused struggles within the struggle as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community complained of being side-lined; and the challenge of avoiding being used by external political forces (see Chinguno et al 2017). However, the fact remains that South African students have taken the torch of epistemic decolonisation and successfully put decolonisation squarely on the public agenda. In the process, they have forced universities to revive their mission to be torch-bearers of equality, democracy, justice and human rights. Whether the ‘westernised’ universities in Africa will rise adequately to these noble demands is yet to be seen. As a way forward, there is need for:

- Provincialization of Europe and deprovincialization of Africa to resolve the twin problems of overrepresentation of Europe and underrepresentation of Africa in the domain of knowledge.
- Reviewing of existing disciplines with a view to enhance their fitness for purpose and relevance.

- Decolonial critique of dominant knowledge to unmask its provincial roots and race poison.
- Decolonization of normative foundation of theory to deal with some of the problems cascading from Cartesianism, Enlightenment reason and Hegelianism.
- Rethinking thinking itself to recover and re-centre marginalised knowledges (see Odora-Hoppers and Richards 2012).
- Resocialization and re-education with a view to banish Eurocentrism and colonial mentalities of alienation (details are in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

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