

Who is Setting Africa's intellectual Agenda?

African scholars such as Kwesi Prah (1997), Ifi Amadiume (2005) and Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (1994) have argued that Africa's intellectual agenda has largely been set by Euro-American interests and that this reflects former colonial relationships and geopolitical power. Few would disagree with this. More recently emergent economic powerhouses like China, India and Brazil are also muscling in on the production of knowledge on Africa, for example, commissioning studies that explore long-running and new relationships with the continent. These are sometimes framed as south-south research projects, reflecting historical collaborations and solidarity of developing countries that could be traced to the Bandung conference of 1955.

At the same time, Africans scholars are worried that they are being crowded out of framing their own intellectual agenda, aided by the fact that their state governments do little to support local research and researchers. Also of concern is that little is being done to engage seriously with the production of knowledge falling outside the formal academy and this, Thandika Mkandawire (2000), says has led to a wide distinction between what African scholars know and experience of their worlds and what they learn in the academy and its applicability to their societies. Such disparity has led to the view that formal education orients African scholars to serve the interests of dominant geopolitical powers rather than their own societies.

Calls for decolonised free higher education in South Africa reflect this. As do questions raised by historian, Sishuwa Sishuwa (2015), about the building of Confucian centres in Africa by China, seeing these as another form of cultural and economic imperialism. The silence of much of the African academy, however, on the withdrawal of the state from the provision of education and the relegation of its responsibility to the growing multinational private franchises is unlikely to shift this trend.

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Mahmood Mamdani's (2011) critique on the reliance and pursuit of consultancy work in the African academy, rather than insistence on basic independent research has not as yet significantly shifted and the production of knowledge in the African university remains firmly tethered to corporate and international development aid interests. In the growing student activism around the African university, in addition to calls for a free and affordable education, students are also highlighting the incompleteness of the decolonisation struggle. Political independence they say is not enough; they want economic, cultural and symbolic independence.

Economic relations with old imperial powers continue to dominate. Jean Nanga (2015) actually argues that the continent is at present experiencing another intense wave of neo-imperial and colonial domination. It is in this context that calls for African ownership of resources are not only emerging as a link to the past incomplete decolonisation, but as a contemporary struggle against the 'development' – related dispossession that came with the Africa 'rising' narrative. Calls for African ownership of resources remain, and are unlikely to diminish. For example, in South Africa, one of the largest economies on the continent, one of its most vocal opposition parties, the Economic Freedom Fighters, has been calling for the nationalisation of key resources like land and minerals. Other African countries are considering re-nationalising their key assets.

However, it is not only concern over ownership of what is being mined in the ground, but also what is being cultivated in the minds of young Africans that has spurred a wave of protests on decolonisation. This is symbolic as well as intellectual. Across

the continent, a debate is growing on what it does to a society to valorise the images and symbols of colonial oppressors and persons with racist views. This is reflected in debates on the removal from public view of statues of Cecil Rhodes in South Africa and Mahatma Gandhi in Ghana. There is also concern over what it means to have one's history written through the prism of imperial historiography? Historians are challenging some of the dominant views of the past. For example, Walima Kalusa (2015) questions the 'heroic' status of David Livingstone in British history, highlighting the role of Sekeletu a young African monarch, without whose aid, Livingstone's travels would have been severely curtailed. Taking the dominant account of Africa always having been poor and disenfranchised, Emmanuel Akyeampong and Hippolyte Fofack (2015) challenge this view by taking a longer, 500-year frame of Africa's history. They write on Africa's history of successful trade and commerce and highlight the continent's present predicament to the recent wave of colonialism. African archaeologists also point to the destruction of the continent's rich material culture by colonising forces (for example, the Benin punitive expedition) and to processes of cultural appropriation (see debates on the Great Zimbabwe).

Also, taking a critical eye to the past are scholars contesting the patriarchal account of history. Mutumba Mainga (2010) and Ruth Iyob (2005), for example, in their works on a history of leadership in Barotseland (a kingdom in central Africa) and on Eritrea's independence struggle, respectively, highlight the role of women in leadership and struggle. These works point to intersecting themes of gender, race and power. It is these intersections that African feminist scholars have been struggling to have foregrounded. They argue that any emancipatory politics that does not confront other forms of repression, be it gender, race or economic relations, limits the scope of an encompassing liberation. They are critical of the ways

in which African women, in particular, have been written out of liberation efforts and portrayed as passive subjects to be saved or empowered.

African scholars are also pointing to the dynamics and nuances of African feminism, and masculinity. For example, Ifi Amadiume (2005) and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (2002) have challenged the biological determinism that underlies much of the projection of Western feminism in Africa. Divine Fuh (2012), Kopano Ratele (2008) and Robert Morrell (1998) are doing similar for understanding African masculinities. As have Zethu Matebeni (2013) and the late Elaine Salo et al. (2010) done much to foreground queer scholarship in Africa. These works for African scholars pursuing a decolonising intellectual agenda are important, highlighting a nuanced picture of personhood and relations in Africa, and avoiding the narrow stereotypes that have characterised a colonial view of the continent. It is these nuances that African novelists such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014), Taiye Selasi (2013) and NoViolet Bulawayo (2013) are fleshing out in their works, not only to show the 'multiple stories' of African experience, but also the varied experiences of cosmopolitanism, that calls to thinking of 'Africa' not in isolation, but as part of a wider system of global relations.

This wider view has been part of a pan-Africanist orientation. Influencing this has been Trinidadian, Cyril Lionel Robert James, an internationalist socialist whose works linked African diasporic struggles to those on the continent. More recently the works of African American intellectual, Faye V. Harrison (2008), has been doing this, taking an intersectional approach to decolonising knowledge. Other Africanist scholars such as Maurice Vambe (2010), Bawa Yamba (1997) and Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba (1991) are taking nearer theoretical steps to the continent, looking to local understanding and philosophical thinking before drawing on far-placed analytical frameworks. In addition to this, has also been a sustained critique on the imperial underpinnings of knowledge production. This critique has been driving the point that an emancipatory intellectual agenda will only be realised when the interests and power relations underlying the

dominant forms of knowledge making is made visible. Scholars such as Francis Nyamnjoh (2016) have been sustaining this critique. So too the highly influential works of Steve Biko and Franz Fanon.

On how liberation would re-socialise a colonised people and materialise a new way of life, the prolific writings of national independence struggle leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Abdel Gamal Nasser and Kenneth Kaunda read more as aspirations and unrealised dreams. At the heart of the failure for some post-independence scholars were continued colonial economic dependency and a failure to create truly redistributive economies. For example, Guy Mhone (2000) on the enclave economy in Africa and Samir Amin's (2002) work on imperial capitalism have been influential in critiques of the continent's continued status as an extractive locale. The plans for pan-Africanism as dreamt by Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah waned by the early 1980s with the advent of neoliberalism, a radical liberal agenda that has been reshaping local understandings of personhood, society, state, moral values and exchange relations in Africa. South Africa's former president Thabo Mbeki's dream of an African renaissance ended up being swallowed by the logics of the neoliberal agenda he ended up embracing that, his critics effectively say, expanded the reach of South Africa's white oligarchs across the continent. Other leaders such as Paul Kagame have taken a pragmatic, bureaucratic route for the continent to set its own agenda and run its own affairs, as he seeks to make the African Union independent. How inclusive Kagame's agenda will be, is yet to be seen, as accusations of authoritarian tendencies plague his reputation as one of the continent's most influential leaders.

Beyond an inclusive process of knowledge making, is the critique that the methodologies and analytical frameworks that currently dominate tend to dehumanise African experiences. As such the present debates on the production of knowledge on the continent seek to place humanity and its intersecting experiences at the heart of a decolonising intellectual agenda. They are asking, what it means to study Africa without acknowledgement of the pain of ongoing colonial and racist oppression.

They argue that despite increasing calls for academic collaboration, there is still a dominant tendency to 'think on', rather than 'think with' African scholars. The failings of cooperation, they say, lie in the inability of many Euro-American scholars to break away from Darwinian, Cartesian perspectives that create an 'other' as a subject of inquiry. This, they say, implicates everyone, including African scholars themselves into, at heart, a racially charged intellectual enterprise. How to do away with this?

Rene Devisch and Francis Nyamnjoh (2011) have made a case for the co-production of knowledge, seeing it as important to understanding a shared world. This shared space is made possible, they say, by reconceptualising a notion of personhood that is not characterised, as is presently dominated in liberal thinking, as a dualism of body and mind, but rather as relational – linking persons, environment and their experiences as mutually constituting a shared world. It is a view that starts from the perspective of showing how we are related, rather than how we are different. It goes against the 'us' and 'them' categories that have underpinned the so-called objective science, and the evolutionary perspectives that have made it difficult to see as co-equivalent other forms of conceptualising the world. Taking relationality seriously would mean also examining the economic, social, cultural, political and symbolic ways in which the continent and its peoples are being related to. As a thought experiment, this would mean thinking through whether we would be comfortable with, within the current frame of knowledge production of 'us' and 'them', for our societies and ourselves to be studied with the same thesis, analytical frameworks and methods as is applied to studies of Africa and its people? Would the same policy recommendations and agendas sit comfortably with the places we call our own societies and the people with whom we identify? If not, and if we are to take relationality seriously, then in collaborating with Africans on an intellectual agenda, we should be attentive to impulses that place a lower value on certain bodies and ways of thinking. For then, hopefully, there can be the emergence of solidarity to understand the world we share.

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