

# The Freedom to Differ

## Introduction

In 2006, Amina Mama gave the Bashorun M. K. O. Abiola Distinguished Lecture at the 49th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association in San Francisco, with the title ‘Is it Ethical to Study Africa?’. At the outset of her talk, she said:

I will not be discussing the work of Africanists, but rather discussing the manner in which ethical concerns have been addressed within an intellectual tradition of African scholarship that is largely progressive in its orientation. This is not a tradition defined by conventional and obedient discipline-based academic study. I would instead describe it as a critical tradition premised on an ethic of freedom. Such scholarship regards itself as integral to the struggle for freedom and holds itself accountable not to a particular institution, regime, class, or gender but to the imagination, aspirations, and interests of ordinary people. It is a tradition some would call radical, as it seeks to be socially and politically responsible in more than a neutral or liberal sense. It is guided by an ethic that requires scholars to be identified with, and grounded in, the broad landscape of Africa’s liberation and democracy movements. (Mama 2007: 2–3)

Amina Mama went on to argue, among other claims, that the liberatory promise of the anticolonial nationalist eras remained unaccomplished and that African intellectuals still had a lot to do. Almost twenty years on, one may be tempted to ask whether the situation has changed significantly. While

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there may be misgivings concerning the right answer to this question, one thing is sure: if the situation has not changed, it is definitely not because African intellectuals have not tried. CODESRIA has tried very hard to fulfil the liberatory promise and take the gauntlet thrown at it by the challenge of seizing centre stage in producing knowledge of Africa. Not all credit goes to CODESRIA, of course. Still, today, more than ever before, nothing passes for knowledge of Africa that has not gone through the scrutiny of an increasingly critical African scholarly community that finds inspiration in such intellectual giants as Samir Amin, Thandika Mkandawire, Archie Mafeje, Sam Moyo, Fatou Sow and so many more who have been strongly associated with the work of the Council.

The vigour with which ‘post-colonial’ and ‘decolonial’ perspectives are pursued bears testimony to this vibrant intellectual environment. The scholarship that has hailed from Africa for more than fifty years is committed to the militant suspension of belief when knowledge claims have not been sufficiently questioned concerning the authority of who makes them and the warrant they give for the innocence of the concepts with which they formulate their claims. CODESRIA has been about defining a place of enunciation that

is African, by which no essential notion of Africa is implied but rather the deeply historical realisation of a place in the world constituted by history. The history in question is not the languid and innocent passage of time. Instead, it is the outcome of what Valentin Y. Mudimbe describes in *The Invention of Africa* as the ‘colonising structure’ that embraces, in his words, the physical, human and spiritual aspects of the colonising experience (Mudimbe 1988). This corresponds to what the same author posits as accounts on the basis of which the invention of Africa can be critically constructed, namely, how colonialism proceeds as intervention, occupation, appropriation and abduction into an alien world (ibid.), boiling down to domination, cultural estrangement and structural integration into the world economy.

## The Freedom to Differ

I joined the academic world in the late nineties after completing my PhD in Sociology at a German university, with a thesis that studied the debate over whether there is an African philosophy, which African philosophers have pursued passionately for decades (Macamo 1999). I was fascinated by the energy that went into that debate. Not being a philosopher myself, I was content to simply work out the significance of the debate to scholarship in Africa. I concluded that I was, in fact, witnessing the emergence of Africa as a construct denoting a community of fate. My first participation at a General Assembly was in 2002, in Kampala,

Uganda – at the invitation of the then Executive General, Adebayo Olukoshi, who introduced me into the CODESRIA family. The Council was celebrating 10 years of the Kampala Declaration on Academic Freedom. That was my induction into the CODESRIA family. The significance of that occasion boiled down to the extent to which my first experience of an African scholarly community consisted of a cry for the right to engage in knowledge production unencumbered by the usual constraints of authoritarian regimes.

I realised through this experience that CODESRIA was engaged in the business of claiming for itself the freedom to differ—that is, the freedom to differ not only from received wisdom in Africa but also from the wisdom of the canon. The freedom to differ comes down to three methodological points:

1. degrees of understanding;
2. the relationship between facts and ideas; and
3. the organisational apparatus of translation.

The idea of degrees of understanding bears on the simple fact that understanding is never absolute. It goes from nothing to full. We know this from the principles of induction, deduction and abduction. First, to understand we need to accumulate bits and pieces of knowledge that we consolidate into intelligible patterns. This is the inductive mode that is privileged in qualitative research. Second, we use the intelligible patterns to develop our best possible explanations of something while at the same time saying why we think the explanation is likely to be correct. This is abduction, which pragmatist philosophers define as inference to the best explanation. Third, and

finally, we seek to confirm what we think we know, which is deduction, once upon a time held to be the scientific method par excellence.

The freedom to differ has focused on challenging knowledge that results from too strong a focus on deduction or reliance on what we think we know. This favours the knowledge stored in the ‘colonial library’, which imposes itself as the set of valid premises from which conclusions about the nature of phenomena in Africa should be drawn. CODESRIA has insisted, instead, that African researchers should privilege induction and abduction—what we think we know should be informed by what we think we know and not by what others think they know about us.

Furthermore, the relationship between facts and ideas is quite straightforward. Facts do not speak. We make them speak. Or rather, facts are intelligible within theoretical frameworks. Suppose I see Kenyans, for instance, burning shops and cars after elections. In that case, I could say, this is post-electoral violence, which would suggest a problematic democratic culture. Or I could say, this is ethnic violence, suggesting perhaps a weak civic culture. Either way, the facts have not spoken for themselves. I have made them speak. What we see is often the result of ways of seeing. Put differently, how we choose to look at what happens determines also what we look at and how we make it count. CODESRIA has encouraged researchers to treat what passes for knowledge of Africa as the result of decisions taken by (Northern) researchers to make facts speak.

Finally, knowledge production is, deep down, translation. Science, therefore, can be conceptualised

as an organisational apparatus of translation, consisting of three elements. First, an infrastructure that enables us to transform information into data, to sift through information in search of those bits and pieces that we think are most relevant to whatever we are studying. Second, we process data by translating it into evidence, indicating why we think it is relevant to whatever claim to knowledge we are making. Finally, we fine-tune evidence by translating it into knowledge—the conditions under which we can claim that a certain truth holds. CODESRIA has established itself as a powerful intellectual apparatus through its training programmes, research funding and publications. In so doing, it has engaged in the intellectually rewarding work of ascribing the status of knowledge to everything we can say based on what happens within the organisational apparatus of translation.

## Conclusion

I understand African Studies to be a kind of ‘methodology of the social sciences’ and an excellent way of critically assessing the nature of knowledge in the social sciences. This is so because nobody really studies Africa. That would amount to assuming knowledge we do not have. We would be taking for granted that which would undermine our knowledge. So to engage in African Studies is to deal with the very possibility of knowledge. This is what the methodology of the social sciences is about and why the crucial question is knowing what knowledge is and, for those of us in the social sciences, what the social is.

Knowledge is not what we know. Knowledge is how we know—hence, how we arrive at what we

know. The social, in turn, is not the world shared by people but the effort we invest in sustaining the illusion of knowledge. CODESRIA has been claiming the freedom to differ from colonial accounts of Africa. As far as I can surmise, it has insisted on reflecting on the conditions of the emergence of that illusion and the practical investment

people make in its maintenance. It has defined itself by asking how Africa was constituted as an object of knowledge.

### References

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