

CODESRIA and the Humanities Crisis Pandemic: Fifty Years On

Introduction

This article is a brief reflection on CODESRIA's fiftieth anniversary since its establishment in 1973 and the institution's five decades of addressing the crisis in the humanities in Africa. This golden jubilee is not only a moment to celebrate CODESRIA's past intellectual achievements but also a time to contemplate alternative futures for the humanities, which have been steeped in crisis globally, much like a pandemic. The article describes how, over the last fifty years, CODESRIA has been confronting epistemic injustice by challenging colonially inherited humanities discourses and knowledge production through the promotion of epistemologies that are relevant to Africa.

Although decolonisation of knowledge has been central to CODESRIA's project, the crisis in the humanities remains endemic. This reflects a culture framed by colonial structures of thought and epistemologies of knowledge, and echoes categories of representation of the imperial past that are still strong, fifty years on. Despite CODESRIA addressing the humanities question in general, the pandemic-like crisis is becoming even more complicated as a consequence of major societal transformations brought about by globalisation

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forces and the dominant discourse of neoliberalism. And in spite of CODESRIA's promotion of relevant epistemologies and alternative futures in the humanities, the selective application of theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts remains stubbornly Euro/US-centric (see Lebakeng 2018; Prah 2016; Lauer and Anyidoho 2012; Bates, Mudimbe and O'Barr 1993).

Launching an application call for the 2020 Humanities Institute, CODESRIA summarised the crisis of humanities thus:

Over the years, teaching and research in the humanities in African universities has been on the decline, occasioned partly by external and national level policies advocating for more investments in STEM subjects. STEM subjects are presented as offering better choices for Africa's development. While there seems to be emerging agreement across the world that the humanities are and should constitute an important component of a higher education sector in developing societies, universities in Africa continue to underfund the humanities.

Consequently, the quality of teaching and research in the humanities has been undermined partly because the infrastructures for knowledge production in most institutions, including doctoral and post-doctoral programmes, are near collapse. In addition, little has been done to revise content in the traditional humanities to accommodate emerging areas of study and/or disciplines. The overall impact has been the devaluation of the critical role of the humanities as an interrogative force for human values, principles and history throughout most universities in the continent. There is therefore need for interventions to explore new theories and methods on which to ground relevant knowledge production in the humanities on the continent and possibly suggest ways of broadening the scope of the humanities in the continent's universities, beyond the traditional academic disciplines.¹

This scenario has led scholars to intervene in the recovery and restoration of the role and relevance of the humanities in Africa (Crawford, Mai-Bornu and Landstrom 2021) and to address current disruptions and disequilibriums in the humanities that arise as a result of epistemic dependency (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a and 2018b; Andrews and Okpanachi 2012). The ultimate goal is to decolonise the humanities by seeking

alternatives that address the urgent needs of African development (Wanjala 2022; Benyera 2022).

CODESRIA'S fiftieth anniversary, therefore, provides an opportunity to interrogate how the institution has intervened in the crisis of the humanities, by looking back to the future. To ask today how CODESRIA has engaged with this crisis and whether it offers potential solutions seems sensible and logical. But fifty years ago the question would not have been taken seriously, since at its establishment in 1973, CODESRIA was conceived as a social sciences institution meant to deal with the history, ideology, logic, strategies and structures of inherited colonial economic development in Africa (Amin et al. 1978). Having existed for half a century, now is the right time for a critical reflection on CODESRIA's interventions in African humanities and its endemic crisis.

The Humanities Crisis as Pandemic

This article analyses the metaphorical framing of the crisis of the humanities as a pandemic. It claims that the discourse of the humanities crisis in Africa can be understood and explained best in pandemic language so as to make clear and distinct the troubled lives of the disciplines. Hence, the pandemic metaphor is used as an analytic tool to understand the crisis of humanities and to examine the health status of the disciplines and necessary interventions.

Although crisis of the humanities is a global problem, and while almost all universities that offer a liberal education across the world have experienced humanities crisis moments, many have had second

thoughts: they have realised the importance of the disciplines and redefined and redesigned their curricula to accommodate them (Arndt 2007). In Africa, however, the crisis remains malignant and malevolent, with its impact being felt more than anywhere else in the world. The endemic crisis is a threat to African cultures, civilisation and development that must be fought and won, much the same way a pandemic is confronted and defeated.

The motif of pandemic, therefore, is used in this article to question general inaction and passivity in the face of the humanities crisis in Africa. The crisis and the existential challenges it poses is intellectually dangerous for the continent. Its debilitating impact on individuals, institutions and society, causing the real death of disciplines in some cases, urgently requires. Whereas the violence behind medical aspects of a pandemic is life-threatening, the epistemic violence that the humanities crisis represents does not seem to attract similar attention. Yet, the crisis of humanities is, in a sense, a pandemic that is even more calamitous than a real disease. The humanities crisis becomes a metaphor for the crisis facing humanity.

Scholars of pandemic narratives, such as Sweed (2021) and Williams (2017), argue that disease has a paradigm-shifting effect on people's ideas, beliefs, value systems and social structures, as well as on political and religious entities. Therefore, to use the language and imagery of plague is to make sense not so much of a literal pestilence as of a crisis in the moral of the metaphor.

The use of metaphor enables easy communication and understanding of concepts, experiences and

problems by expressing, reflecting and reinforcing different ways of making sense of the world (Stanley et al. 2021; Semino, Demjén and Demmen 2018). Metaphor communicates more than literal language (Gibbs, Leggitt and Turner 2002; Marshak 1996). This is the basis for analysing the crisis of the humanities in pandemic metaphorical frames.

Bringing the Humanities In

CODESRIA was conceived as a consequence of the 1964 Rockefeller Foundation Conference in Italy on economic research in postcolonial Africa (West 1965). The marginalisation and absence of Africans at that meeting led to the idea of a Pan-African organisation that would address the challenge (Mkandawire 1988). Formalised in 1973, CODESRIA prides itself as being the longest surviving intellectual institution that fosters collaboration between African scholars (Hoffmann 2017).

The conception and birth of CODESRIA also has to be contextualised against the Bandung Era and what was happening in the global South in general. According to Samir Amin (1994), the Bandung Era was the period roughly between 1955 and 1977 when many newly independent nations and collective nationalist movements struggling for independence in Asia and Africa began collaborating with other global movements in the hope of developing tools for anticolonial and anti-imperial resistance. This was part of a larger project that Amin described as disengagement and delinking from imperialism (Amin 1985; Campbell 2021). In 1955, twenty-nine Asian-African countries met in Bandung, Indonesia, to promote *Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation*

and to oppose colonialism or neocolonialism (Kuan-Hsing, Miao and Jack 1999; Scott 1999).

The desire to promote South–South collaboration for epistemic independence was felt early during decolonisation. Much later, the imperative for partnerships was reiterated:

The Collaborative Tri-continental Program was launched in 2005 by the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO), the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Asian Political and International Studies Association (APISA) with the purpose of enhancing the production of knowledge suitable for fostering high quality social science research building a Southern perspective on critical issues with the aim of contributing to the global debate of several issues. (APISA-CLACSO-CODESRIA 2010: 1)

Thus, CODESRIA's establishment in 1973 was motivated by achievements in both Asia and Latin America and came at a momentous period in the history of Africa: it was the first decade of independence and also the first decade of official experiment with Pan-Africanism. It was a time when the first generation of African scholars began to think critically, in reaction to Eurocentric perspectives, ideas and institutions, about the social sciences and the trajectory and project of the development of a continent that was divided territorially and intellectually for oppressive purposes (Chen and Ikegami 2016).

At the initial stages, cultural studies (as humanities) did not enjoy as much intellectual nourishment and epistemic enrichment as did the social sciences. CODESRIA's research and intellectual priorities

focused more on economic development (read social sciences) than the humanities. The symbiotic relationship between economic and cultural development as envisaged at the Bandung Conference in 1955 appeared to have been abandoned, at least for a while. Failure to appreciate the central role of the humanities in the economic development of Africa soon after independence starved the disciplines of distinctive, diverse and dynamic developments and the evolution necessary to confront the crisis of the humanities as a colonially inherited epistemic injustice.

In what Pillay (2017) calls 'the founding predicaments', CODESRIA faced the challenge of the difference between the social sciences and the humanities. For an institution that was established to fight against marginalisation, this benign discrimination of the humanities mirrored the initial centre-periphery problem of knowledge production and dissemination. That unfortunate fragmentation was a miniature mirror of Keim's (2010) centre-periphery model processes of social scientific knowledge production, diffusion, reception and communication, with scholars from the North constituting the centre of the disciplines, and those from the global South occupying a peripheral position. In CODESRIA, whereas the social sciences were mainstreamed, the humanities survived on the margins.

As a consequence, in the first decade of CODESRIA's existence, the humanities lived in the shadows of the social sciences with little intellectual investment. They were not acknowledged, cultivated or nurtured as necessary and active agents of African development. Meaningful insights from the

various complex dimensions and dynamics of humanities disciplines as valuable variables that could help to explain the socioeconomic development of Africa were lost. This may inadvertently have contributed to, or at least reinforced, the crisis.

Castryck-Naumann (2022) argues that the history of CODESRIA has to be situated in the broader context of international social science politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Its focus should be seen as a critical response, in fact a countermove, to the politics of UNESCO, which sought to take the lead in partnership with state governments in the founding of regional social science councils in Latin America, Africa and Asia as well as in initiating a transregional dialogue between them. While acknowledging the international dimension of the intellectual history of CODESRIA, 'the founding predicaments' and how they impacted take-off in the struggle for epistemic self-determination and the decolonisation of the humanities must also be considered.

Nonetheless, as a pragmatic and transforming institution, CODESRIA did not take long to abandon superficial differences between the humanities and social sciences. It evolved quickly and integrated and mainstreamed humanities into its intellectual project. The purely economic-oriented research approach that had been vigorously pursued in the institution's formative years was reappraised; now, the humanities occupy a high position in CODESRIA's transformative agenda of knowledge production for African development (Meneses 2016). This agenda has to be framed beyond the crisis of the humanities as epistemic dependence.

The Crisis of the Humanities and Epistemic Dependence

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014 and 2018a), Africa as a site of knowledge production has suffered and continues to be afflicted by historical and contemporary epistemic dependence. Defined as the reliance on and persistent and unwarranted exclusion from practices of knowledge production, epistemic dependence is equated to epistemic oppression, which is an injustice (Sertler 2022) that is discriminatory and harmful to the epistemic agency of sense-making (Dunne and Kotsonis 2023). Epistemic injustice is identifiable by five conditions: first, the disadvantage condition, where the knower is victimised, discriminated against and marginalised; second, the prejudice condition, which involves prejudices and stereotypes; third, the stakeholder condition, which means denial and exclusion from decision-making processes; fourth, the epistemic condition, where the knower is harmed; and fifth, the social justice condition of being disregarded through structural inequalities and social inequalities (Byskov 2021; Dladla 2021).

Epistemic dependency results in an imbalance in the production of social sciences across societies and the resultant division of labour between producers and consumers of such knowledge (Alatas 2003). As an epistemic inequality, the 'knowers' have more recognition and privileges than 'others' (Alatas 2006). This problem of epistemic dependency is far more devastating in Africa and is reflected in the continent's current and vast education systems.

Not only was the history of Africa disputed or appropriated and the humanity of Africans denied, but

also the continent's cultures were belittled and oppressed on a major scale (Ahluwalia and Nursey-Bray 1997). This is the problem of postcolonial knowledge production in Africa and the context for the establishment of the CODESRIA mandate (Olukoshi 2003), which is the struggle for epistemic independence (Murunga and Fuh 2018). Mpofu (2013) argues that the colonial 'knowledge' of Africa, generated by colonists as part of imperial designs, must be resisted, negated and rebelled against.

Over the past fifty years, a critical mass of CODESRIA intellectuals have examined and engaged with the humanities in Africa, demonstrating at the same time that the disciplines are facing a complex crisis (Potgieter and Kamwendo 2014). These and other scholars have produced narratives that seriously interrogate the humanities question and demonstrate a quest for their recognition, reform, legibility, legitimacy, independence and identity. Through research and publications, the scholars have spotlighted an epistemic dimension to the humanities crisis. *A key theme that runs through much of their work is that Africa had and has knowledge, ideas and skills that are valuable and therefore impactful to society. Yet the educational relevance and academic significance of these sources of knowledge have been debased as a result of the encounter between Africa and the world and the resultant experience of marginalisation of the former in universities and society. It is this epistemic injustice that the scholars are challenging.* This is the background against which to contextualise CODESRIA's intervention in the humanities crisis.

To overcome the colonial challenge, Africans have to 'decolonise their mind' and cast aside the implied inferiority complex that was induced by colonialism and which has persisted till now, particularly among Africa's social scientists (see Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986). As Meneses (2016: 7) cautions:

... the colonial imprint in our societies is not a finished business, we have to argue for new epistemologies. These new epistemologies cannot arise from the traditional disciplines of the social sciences and humanities, as this division reinstalls a specific approach opted out by Euro-centric scholarship,

By challenging established colonial epistemologies and pursuing new radically different ways that make sense and give meaning to marginalised African knowledge, CODESRIA is confronting the crisis of the humanities in multiple and complex ways.

Confronting Epistemic Oppression

The humanities crisis in Africa is one way in which epistemic oppression and knowledge dependence play out. It has its roots in colonialism and unwarrantedly excludes and obstructs Africans, as epistemic agents, from theories and practices of knowledge production.

Dotson (2018) opines that epistemic injustice is not the exception but the rule in colonial epistemologies and is designed to pervade the systems that produce it. Therefore, the continent needs to liberate itself by pursuing and promoting alternative theories, methods and practices that advance research which advances African interests, needs and priorities (Andrews and Okpanachi 2012). Thus, the CODESRIA project seeks to locate Africa within the

global knowledge system through epistemic independence.

As CODESRIA became more aware of the need to embrace the humanities more closely, this focus grew in strength and size (Aina 1993). CODESRIA's support for the humanities led to the initiation of a Humanities Institute and establishment of an annual thematic institute on 'The Humanities in Africa'. These interventions were in response to the steady decline in teaching and research in the humanities in African universities. The Institute, amongst other things, aimed at exploring new theories and methods on which to ground relevant knowledge production in the humanities on the continent and suggest ways of broadening the scope of the humanities in the continent's universities, beyond the traditional academic disciplines (Hoffmann 2019; Sall, Bangirana and Onoma 2015).

The transformations that CODESRIA has undergone have changed the focus and maturity of the humanities in Africa enormously. Adopting a broad transdisciplinary and innovative approach has resulted in the humanities growing rapidly in popularity and impact. CODESRIA is practising an applied epistemology that questions and critically analyses bases, forms and structures of knowledge production in the humanities in Africa (Thondhlana and Garwe 2021). Whether epistemic oppression is put centre stage thematically or is made the backdrop for any publication, CODESRIA is confronting epistemic dependency through research. CODESRIA's research and publications engage with the politics of knowledge production and therefore are a form of resistance to the colonial

epistemologies that oppress and suppress the contribution of African epistemic resources.

There is an elaborate literature on the need for epistemic independence and academic identity in Africa. As a result, a new and transformed understanding of the role of the humanities has emerged, which in turn has produced a better conceptualisation of the crisis of the disciplines (Andrews and Okpanachi 2012). What becomes clear from the literature is that knowledge dependence is a consequence of the history of colonisation with its attendant colonial forms of education and neoliberal hegemony.

For much of the half-century of its existence, CODESRIA has been reflecting critically on the histories, trajectories and conditions of the humanities in Africa. Some of its key contributions are an understanding of the evolution and development of the crisis of the humanities. The research it has conducted runs through a number of programmes, including graduate research competitions, research grants for senior scholars, networking and participation in a number of collaborative research projects, research methodology training programmes, and holding conferences, workshops and seminars at which humanities scholars present their findings, most of which appear in various publications. Thus, the institution has been reconceptualising and reorienting the humanities as an epistemic empowerment strategy for African development. Hence, CODESRIA's footprint in confronting the crisis of humanities as a pathway to African independence and development cannot be ignored.

Epistemic Empowerment Beyond the Humanities Crisis

CODESRIA has exerted epistemic influence by discrediting the colonial epistemologies implicit in the crisis of the humanities. This influence is a consequence of possessing and practising 'epistemic virtues' as intellectual traits that equip epistemic agents in their action (Elgin 2013). These traits include open-mindedness, rigour, sensitivity to evidence, rules, methods and standards.

Global donors, however, as Shahjahan (2016) cautions, use their financial influence to perpetuate epistemic oppression through their 'good intentions', their versions of 'development' and the discourse of the internationalisation of higher education as an unequivocal good, which in turn reproduces dependencies and constrains local decision-making (see also Walker and Martinez-Vargas 2020). As large donors and powerful agencies set their research parameters, they shape global higher education research also (Sriprakash, Tikly and Walker 2020).

According to Gebremariam et al. (2023: 1), Africa's position in the global knowledge production ecosystem needs to change significantly. Even more critical is the central place that such a repositioning is bound to have in upholding African dignity. This is the obligation that CODESRIA has been grappling with in the last fifty years: the struggle for epistemic independence and placing Africa at the centre of knowledge production and dissemination so that the continent may impact the world through its knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a and 2018b).

Throughout its existence, CODESRIA has been responding to the crisis of the humanities as a moral and intellectual obligation. This it does by setting research agendas dictated by Africa's development needs. The institution's decolonial thinking entails epistemic delinking from Eurocentric knowledge, not by empty theoretical moves but through concrete intellectual resistance against colonial hegemony and epistemic violence. Confronting and contesting colonial epistemologies and their limitations, acknowledging the validity and recognising the legitimacy of African humanities as academic agendas and situating them within a new independent epistemological frame, is a way of empowering them.

Intellectual advances and milestones made in the humanities as a result of the CODESRIA tradition have generated a better understanding of the humanities crisis. CODESRIA has made simple the complex multidisciplinary nature of the humanities in Africa. The idea of the humanities has been rethought and reconceptualised and a new sense of African identity and alternative futures is emerging, growing and blossoming on the continent (Olukoshi and Nyamnjoh 2006). Using a variety of approaches to explore the reciprocal influence of the humanities from a broader international context highlights Africanist ideals and quest for renewal, so that no great space in the global epistemic hierarchy is left to the imaginations and designs of a few Eurocentric scholars. The proper way to guarantee the future of the humanities in Africa is to point out the blanks and shortcomings that have prevented them from reaching their full

disciplinary status among scientific fields (Zezeza 1997). By putting forward a different version and pursuing alternative humanities, the value of CODESRIA now can rightly be understood as a liberation of the disciplines from distorted historical interpretations and the conquest of epistemic colonialism (Aina 2023; Smit and Chetty 2014).

Over the last fifty years, CODESRIA has worked tirelessly to historicise the humanities and give them their rightful place in African universities and society. As a result, there exist today considerable academic resources of various types, based on differing approaches (Lauer and Anyidoho 2012). Clearly, CODESRIA has been claiming intellectual autonomy for the humanities in Africa, as is evident in its robust research, variety of publications and plethora of intellectual meetings.

The CODESRIA School is highly ideological and works in the interest of African universities and society. The CODESRIA approach is prolific, progressive and pragmatic, contesting and challenging colonial intellectual legacies of the humanities that served the interests of dominant corporations and institutions. It is critical, innovative and promotes multimethodological and multiperspective alternative futures concerned with complex and transformative humanities for development (see Murunga, Onoma and Ogachi 2020). These empowering approaches by CODESRIA provide a critical vision of the practice, creative production and use of the humanities beyond the crisis.

Notwithstanding CODESRIA's achievements, it is important to

note that challenging coloniality epistemologically in knowledge production and decolonising knowledge through education is difficult (Mpofu 2013). Decolonising universities, and particularly the humanities, in our case, is about envisioning alternative futures by calling into question the particularities of colonialism in the disciplines. This can be done by analysing how Africa's colonial past continues to inform humanities epistemologies, methodologies and pedagogies.

Efforts at questioning the intellectual universalism of knowledge production should be aimed at aligning the epistemic location of Africa and its people so that they are empowered to serve the present realities and interests of the continent. At the same time, the quest for epistemological liberation and resurrection of the knowledge paradigm in and of Africa should continue contributing to global knowledge (Nyamnjoh 2012).

The search for alternative imaginaries of African humanities should not be encumbered by intellectual nationalism, essentialism or other impeding circumstances that may fail to recognise and acknowledge the complex entanglements of global epistemologies and modern humanities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Mignolo 2011). In any case, this is the intellectual business for which CODESRIA was established. The search for alternative humanities futures should be an intellectual process that is marked by a strategy of qualitative change from the precursors and roots of the current crisis towards new formulations of identity, relevance and significance for Africa and beyond.

CODESRIA's fifty years are a watershed between the past and the future. Faith in the next fifty years is based on the fact that few institutions of independent intellectual thought are as well, or as affectionately, remembered as CODESRIA is. Fifty years is a moment of transition in CODESRIA'S history that was in its foundational phase marked by disciplinary experimentation and crises—including the humanities. The next fifty years should be a new phase in the humanities at CODESRIA, an era characterised by a tremendous sense of measured optimism. History provides experience to the destination that humanities in Africa should aspire to.

Conclusion

This article has reflected on the crisis of the humanities in Africa, by drawing comparisons with a pandemic and by placing the crisis within its broader epistemological contexts. The crisis of humanities is not only a function of education but is also about how African society is structured, how academic power is wielded in the name of role and relevance, and how disciplines are categorised and modelled.

The focus in the article has been on CODESRIA'S fifty years of deconstructing approaches that have contributed to the crisis of the humanities, and the interventions it has adopted to demonstrate the relevance of the humanities in African development. Historical awareness has been used to offer some insights into the crisis.

Since its establishment in 1973, CODESRIA has initiated and sustained a long narrative of intellectual debate on the humanities question in Africa. It has encouraged scholars of disparate disciplinary persuasions to engage

in various intellectual activities that confront epistemological injustice in the form of academic oppression and academic dependency. The former often neglects and fails to appreciate difference and diversity, and the latter relies heavily on Western epistemologies that ignore African agency in knowledge production. Most of these injustices have created and exacerbated the crisis of the humanities on the continent. By nurturing and creating a critical mass of intellectuals with a distinctive sense of epistemic independence and identity beyond the traditional Eurocentric limits inscribed by imperialism and colonialism, CODESRIA's interventions are providing an invigorating corrective to the colonial legacy of epistemic marginality (Mungwini 2017), while at the same time mainstreaming African identity in global humanities discourses.

Notwithstanding the numerous challenges, CODESRIA's positive and impressive humanities trajectory in African scholarship reflects seriously the desire to rethink and shape the futures of the disciplines and the imperative to reimagine alternatives. While a lot has been achieved in understanding the crisis, more remains to be done. This calls for rethinking the humanities and reimagining alternative futures that reconfigure and position the humanities as critical disciplines that have obligations to African sensitivities. The CODESRIA project, then, should be read as an African humanities becoming, a discipline-based identity in process guided by reconstructive aspirations, transformed by historical forces, contextualised by existential realities and anchored in development exigencies.

CODESRIA's fiftieth anniversary is a key moment worth celebrating in the institution's life. It has been demonstrated in this article that the institution has the expertise and experience to provide the intellectual gravitas to deal with the fundamental theoretical and conceptual issues that confront the humanities. This history of bountiful knowledge production and dissemination forms a basis for renewed impetus and optimism in the coming years. The institution's legacy of confronting the crisis in the humanities and situating it in the context of African development inspires hope that the futures of the disciplines are promising.

Note

1. <https://codesria.org/2020-humanities-institute-call-for-director-resource-persons-and-laureates/>

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