

# Decolonizing Knowledge Production and Power Relations in African Studies: Prospects and Challenges

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## Abstract

Intellectual efforts at removing the vestiges of colonialism in knowledge production and power relations in African studies are not recent phenomena. Power relations in this context refer to the binary nature of relations between Africa and the Western world in terms of knowledge production, application, and transference. In terms of its chronology, it has been in existence as far as the first decade of independence from European colonialism in the late 1950s. Despite the novelty of these cerebral efforts in African studies in the postcolonial era, little or no progress has been achieved in its application in our knowledge production processes. Postcolonialism as an intellectual binocular in the social sciences remains an under-explored standpoint even by African researchers in African Universities.

**Keywords:** African Studies, Post-colonialism, International Relations, African Epistemology, Imperialism

## 1. Introduction

Intellectual efforts at removing the vestiges of colonialism in knowledge production and power relations in African studies are not recent phenomena. From the inception of the European invasion of Africa in the 17th century, resistance to European imperialism started in many African colonies under the leadership of the traditional African rulers. These sets of Africans were referred to as traditional nationalists. They were eventually succeeded by the educated elites from the late 1920s and referred



to as modern nationalists. While the effort of these people was targeted at political decolonization, it does serve as an intellectual background to the much-touted post-independent intellectual movement of postcolonialism which is a postmodernist effort at a radical reorientation of epistemological processes and power relations in African studies. This intellectual movement has been necessitated by Africa's relationship with Europe since the time of colonialism. This is because the imperial relations created what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) describes as the cognitive empire, which I describe as the mental slavery of Africans by the European imperialists. Africa is one of the numerous global epistemic sites that experienced not just colonial genocides but theft of history (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Goody, 2006). Africa in its relations with Europe has also experienced epistemicides and linguicide (Ngugi waThiongo, 2009a, 2009b). The former refers to the extermination of indigenous knowledge while the latter refers to the eradication of indigenous languages. These two fundamental flaws from European colonialism form the basis of the intellectual struggle against its protracted influence in the postcolonial era. Despite the plethora of Afrocentric arguments (Crossman and Devich, 1999; Momoh, 2003; Zeleza and Olukoshi, 2004; Fonlon, 2009; Mamdani, 2016; Gebrial et al, 2018; Shilliam, 2018) about the need for the decolonization of epistemological processes in African studies, little progress has been achieved in more than five decades of the emergence of postcolonialism as alternative African intellectual binoculars for Africans and Africanists. At its best, African Universities which are the centre of knowledge production were only decolonized in personnel recruitment while the imperial pedagogical structures, curricula, and methodologies remain intact (Nyamnjoh, 2019).

## 2. Epistemic Decolonization in African Studies

The quest for an African-based epistemology and methodology in African studies has attracted the attention of many scholars, and for several decades since independence most of the focus has been on the decolonization of postcolonial universities (Momoh, 2003; Nabudere, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2019). The argument in this regard is that postcolonial universities were jointly established by the erstwhile colonial masters and the indigenous, postcolonial governments and, as such, they are merely sustaining the colonial legacies in the postcolonial era (Bhambara et al, 2018). Another criticism of the postcolonial universities is that they have been functioning as satellite campuses of the universities in the imperial metropole (Lumumba, 2006). This is because their

epistemic and methodological basis is still Eurocentric and devoid of what is needed to solve Africa's identity crisis and epistemic freedom (Gwaravanda, 2019). The call for the decolonization of knowledge production in African studies has occurred in different waves across Africa at different times and it dated back to as far as the independence of Ghana in 1957(Jansen, 2017). For instance, the first waves of calls for epistemic decolonization took place in the latter part of the 20th century (Mbembe, 2016). The works of scholars like Frantz Fanon 1961 and Edward Said (1978) in his book *Orientalism* provide a sound intellectual basis for subsequent postcolonial theorists. In his two treatises, Fanon examined the psychological effects of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizers with an argument that the native's development of self is through the conditions imposed by the colonial masters(Mambrol, 2016). This was achieved through imperial representation and discourse of the natives while the colonizers developed a sense of superiority. Consequently, Fanon (1961) initiated a psychoanalytical theory of postcolonialism where he explained that the European self develops in its relation and encounter with others. This in turn results in psychological inadequacy which makes the natives try to be as white as possible by adopting Western values to the detriment of their values. Fanon then advocated the idea of national literature and national culture as panaceas to national consciousness that is critical to any decolonization effort. Writing on a major consequence of colonialism in the postcolonial era, Edward Said (1978) gives a succinct mental picture of scholars who studied the orient disregarding the views of their subjects of study and arrogantly rely on their intellectual superiority as well as that of their peers. He faulted these writings by arguing that a true epistemological system should encapsulate the views of both the orient and the occident—namely, a view that their existence is a complementary and not mutually exclusive phenomenon. Ake (1982) argued that the mainstream Western social sciences scholarship on Africa and other third-world nations can only be described as imperialism. He further explained that the West's domination of developing countries is not just because of their superior economic and military power, but because of their imposed idea of development on these countries (Ake 1982:141).

For Ndlovu-Gatsheni(2018) the challenge of Africa in the 21st century can best be described as that of an epistemic battle different from the colour battle of the 20th century. However, there is a connection between the epistemic battle and the colour battle. This nexus, as he argued, is determined by the racist denial of the humanity of the colonized which eventually disqualified them from epistemic virtue. He described the psychological effect of colonialism on the psyche of the colonized, using the

concept of “the cognitive empire”:

The cognitive empire is that form of imperialism which invades the mental universe of its victims and in the process imposing particular knowledge systems, displacing others and consequently shaping the intellectual consciousness of its victims.” (Ndlovu-Gatsheki, 2020:5).

The imperial invasion of the intellectual space of the colonized through colonialism is thus a major task that has occupied the mind of many postcolonial thinkers, and this has also been described as the second phase in the fight against colonialism and its numerous ominous effects on the postcolonial era. As a consequence of the plethora of literature about the persistent narrow and Eurocentric basis of knowledge production in postcolonial Africa, there has been an increasing call in the academia for the decolonization of African universities (Chaka, Lephala and Ngesi, 2017; Mheta, Lungu and Govender, 2018). The call is necessitated by the centrality of the university in the epistemological processes and the need to purge its system of Eurocentric knowledge production. However, scholars were of diverse opinions in their quest for epistemic freedom in African studies. While some (Nadubere, 2003; Momoh, 2003) argued for an African epistemology and methodology, others (Icaza and Vasquez, 2018) argued for diversity in knowledge production, while noting the ills associated with the Eurocentric basis of knowledge production. Despite the numerous call for the decolonization of African universities since independence, African universities without notable exception have only Africanized their personnel while their pedagogical structures, curricula, and epistemology remains the same as those inherited from the European imperialists (Nyamnjoh, 2019).

Heleta (2018) argued that the imperial and Eurocentric epistemic system inherited from the European colonial masters needs yet to transform even in the first two decades of democracy in South Africa. That the students in South Africa are the ones spearheading the protests and not university academics and administrators, reflects the desire to maintain the status quo in knowledge production by postcolonial African leaders. This implies that the task of decolonization of knowledge production in Africa is an effort that requires the collaboration of all the stakeholders. Correspondingly, Nadubere (2003) argued that the existing African universities have failed to generate the kind of knowledge environment that is a prerequisite for the social and economic transformation of their societies. They have continued to reproduce Eurocentric

knowledge, dependent on its actualization in the centres that exploit the African people and utilise Africans. In a similar perspective, Lumumba (2006) indicted the postcolonial African leaders as the forerunner for the sustenance of the European colonial legacy in knowledge production in African studies:

The colonial powers essentially employed force in reshaping African education. Despite the criticisms of this Eurocentric knowledge production system, African leaders who are influenced by this same educational system developed a mindset that viewed European education as good for Africa. Thus, through the dynamic of European colonial education and African leaders' demand for the integral transfer of European education into their different societies, African education was caught in a dependence trap. This repulsive development did not exclude institutions that were created after independence as they have been modelled in the forms of the systems of the colonial powers and their extensions in the west (Lumumba, 2006:31).

Expressing a similar view, (Vilakazi 1999:205) argued that:

For more than forty years on, African universities and the African governments that established them had dismally failed to chart new paths for Africa's emancipation and liberation and Africa finds itself in deep, multidimensional crises that require deeply thought out solutions and responses, if the African rebirth is ever to be achieved.

This assertion blames postcolonial governments for the continued flourishing of the European cognitive empire in Africa.

### **3. African Epistemology: A Critique**

Despite the myriad of scholarly works with optimistic views about an African-based epistemology, several scholarly works have critiqued the African method of knowledge production and its philosophy that is claimed to be inseparable. Most importantly, African epistemology has been criticized based on its metaphysical nature and global competitiveness even in the global south. Nwosimiri (2019) argued that based on our common humanity and our interaction with each other, irrespective of race, African

epistemology is not as distinct or unique as the protagonist of African epistemology had claimed. He further explained that such a claim is partially driven by a non-epistemic move. Similarly, Udefi(2014) argued that definitional issues and clarity of the sufficiency of an African-based epistemology are some of the problems that are still confronting the idea and the discourse of an African-based epistemology. He further noted that this misconception about the idea is based on the meaning ascribed to the concept by its advocates while their interpretations are fluid and inappropriate with present African realities in their relations with the rest of the world. In his work, he did reconstruction and delineation of African epistemology in a way that reflects the appropriate African epistemological and ontological conceptualization with insights from the Igbo traditional thought system. Writing from a more affirmative perspective, Alem(2019) examines the fitness of an African epistemological system in scientific knowledge. The study revealed that there are thought systems in Africa that can have equivalent value to scientific practices in the Western paradigm system and their scientific status is as valid as that of the West. Examining the veracity of an African epistemology, Ndubuisi (2014) argued for the centrality of logic in African epistemology with a further explanation that logic provides African epistemologists with a coherent and methodical approach to objective knowledge acquisition. While so much has been written about the ills of colonialism and its effect on knowledge production and power relations in the postcolonial era as well as the pros and cons of an African epistemology itself, few studies have addressed the issue of the visibility and challenges of the quest for African epistemic freedom.

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