

DECOLONISING EPISTEMIC ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES IN AFRICA

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Abstract

At the present moment there are renewed interests to decolonise the academia in particular, academic disciplines in Africa. For a long time, after her independence, Africa has been under the capture of epistemic coloniality. This phenomenon begun with the introduction and imposition of western education by the colonialists who disregarded indigenous knowledge has continued up to date. Africa political independence means nothing without epistemic freedom. There recent protests by students from Cape Town University is a stern reminder of the need to decolonise fully our academia. It is a challenge to Africans especially her intelligentsia to be change the status quo. By affirming the existence of their own epistemologies, identifying and doing their epistemology. Therefore, there is a need to reflect on the importance of epistemic decolonisation and actualise it. In relation to its main objective, this article will employ Bernard Lonergan's philosophical hermeneutical method as it reflects on decolonising epistemic academic disciplines.

Key words: decolonisation, epistemic decolonisation, epistemic coloniality.

Introduction

At the present moment there are renewed interests in the epistemic decolonisation of the academia in particular, the academic disciplines being taught in Africa. This is informed by the conviction that the academia and its academic disciplines are still founded, formed and informed by her erstwhile colonial masters (the West). It is as if Africa has nothing to offer to the academic world, a situation that makes Africans appear as epistemic consumers and not epistemic producers.

It is in this regard, scholars are in agreement that there is a need to make academic universal; by including the historical colonised epistemologies, that have always been excluded in the epistemic field. Epistemic decolonisation is a stern reminder that no any particular race has an epistemic monopoly over all the other races. It is an act of epistemic freedom, a recognition that no epistemology is good than the other, all epistemologies are equally good. This explains the rationale behind the calls to decolonise epistemology. Epistemic decoloniality means affirming our own epistemologies, it means recognising our epistemologies that have long been ignored and unappreciated, and those of others. It means having an epistemic voice and space among others. It means not being excluded or marginalised and being acknowledged in knowledge production.

The need for epistemic decoloniality

Epistemic decoloniality cannot be spoken without colonialism. Colonialism refers to the way in which one group of people dominate another group in a 'holistic' way. Colonialism since its actualisation in Africa has always used three approaches namely, military action, religion and epistemology (formal education). Military action was and is still intended to subdue any armed resistance from the colonised; religion is intended to make the colonised 'meek' (avoid armed resistance), and epistemology to superimpose the colonialists worldview. Our interest is with

the third approach, epistemology because it not only explains epistemic colonialism, and coloniality, but how epistemic decoloniality can be actualised.

The introduction of colonialism in Africa brought with itself an introduction of colonial epistemology (western education). Prior to the coming of the colonialists in Africa, Arabs had conquered some parts of Africa where they also introduced and established their own system of education largely drawn from Islamic tenets. The colonial education itself came with western epistemology and their religion, Christianity (Tebeho and Lebakeng, 2010). Despite this fact, both the Islamic and Western civilisations met strong entrenched civilisations in various parts of Africa. This accounts for what Ali Mazrui calls the *Triple Heritage of Africa* (Tebeho and Lebakeng, 2010).

The aim of the colonialist education was not for the good of the colonised or for the sake of knowledge. It was for their own interest. The Colonialists ensured Africans were educated to serve their own interests. Too much literacy on the part of Africans was considered as an existential threat and danger to colonialists interests. Africans were supposed to serve as local interpreters, clerks, *et cetera*. As a matter of fact, the introduction and imposition of western education was based on the premise that Africans were an inferior race, irrational, uncultured and had no history.

It is not that some the colonialists after setting foot in Africa did not discover Africans had their own culture, they did, but because of Eurocentrism they selectively chose to ignore this fact. Lebakeng while affirming the existence of Africa's indigenous knowledge systems points out that the colonialists attempted to destroy and deny Africa's "historical place in the evolution of knowledge." And also ensure that Africa remains unrecognized in the evolution of knowledge. Lebakeng says:

With colonisation and the resulting epistemicide and linguacide, indigenous African epistemologies and languages, which were clearly an estimable treasure prior to colonisation, were not tapped into. Rather, they were marginalised and denigrated at the expense of those deriving from the Judeo-Hellenistic heritage. As such, indigenous African knowledge as an instrument of development, and African languages as a means of transmission and instruction did not receive the needed attention in colonial Africa. This meant that indigenous African discourse was excluded from policy formulation in the social, economic, judicial, constitutional and educational areas (Tebeho and Lebakeng, 2010).

This as Lebakeng has pointed out above has been the trend not only during colonialism but also after colonialism. The Most unfortunate thing is that many years after her political independence Africa still remains under epistemic coloniality. Africa's political independence

did not and has never meant automatic epistemic independence. Before the colonial powers retreated, they ensured their imposed epistemology would guarantee their perpetual epistemic domination on their former colonies.

The recent protest by Cape Town University students themed “*Rhodes must Fall*” reminds us of this sad reality, something that calls for ‘epistemic reflective moment.’ It is a stark reminder that coloniality in the academia is still a reality many years of gaining our political independence.

Kwame Nkrumah and Ngungi wa Thiongo earlier on were interested in epistemic decolonisation of their people. Kwame Nkrumah had already pointed out this reality when he spoke about Neo-colonialism, a new form of slavery and dependency. According to Nkrumah, the colonialists were unable to leave Africa completely. The colonialists ensured they had left indelible roots in Africa by for instance, tying Africa epistemology and economy to theirs, in such a way that it would not be easy to uproot them. On the other hand, the colonialists received support from most of the Africans who were educated in Europe and the United States of America (USA). These educated Africans adopted Western epistemologies and advocated for the same colonial epistemologies that uprooted their own epistemologies. As Nkafu indicates:

The scramble for Africa and its carving up into colonies had a very deep impact on the education of the African citizens. The African intelligentsia was educated in Europe and the U.S.A. However on returning to their home country, they brought with them a colonial mentality and most of them forgot their original culture and tradition. This proved to be a big handicap in the elaboration of an African vision of reality, the world and society.

Most of the beneficiaries of Western education who were educated in universities in Europe, USA and even Africa ended up in the academia and in political arena. Like some of their counterparts in the academia, almost all of African political elites instead of changing the existing colonial epistemology they had inherited from their erstwhile colonial masters; they continued to promote it.

Ngungi wa Thiongo earlier on, had also spoken strongly about decolonisation. Wa Thiongo still remains a strong advocate for decolonisation in particular, mental colonisation. In his book, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (Ali, 1986) indicates how Africans are experiencing colonialism when he indicates: “The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.” (Nkafu, 1999) Therefore, wa Thiongo calls for mental decolonisation by inviting us to speak and think using our languages. This is one of the ways in which we can liberate ourselves from the epistemic coloniality.

Therefore, the current renewed interests in the epistemic decolonisation of the academia in particular, the academic disciplines being taught in Africa; is but, a continuation of attempts

begun by African thinkers like Kwame Nkrumah and Ngungi wa Thiongo among others. It is an indication that a lot still needs to be done for actualisation of decolonisation in the academia to be realised. However, the current interest in epistemic decolonisation which continue to draw a lot of attention and concerns on epistemic coloniality is a reminder that almost all of our teaching and learning process in the academia, including research are still founded, formed and informed by those of our erstwhile colonial masters.

Colonialism was and still remains a traumatic experience. The reality of epistemic coloniality makes the colonial traumatic experience more traumatic in ways that can never be explained. We need to be healed from colonial trauma, one of the ways in which this healing can occur is none other than epistemic decolonisation. Whereby, we look back at our history in particular, the genesis of our relationship with the colonialists-that is the source/cause of our trauma- and our current state, so that we can forge our future.

We cannot sit down and pretend about the reality of coloniality. The mere fact that our erstwhile colonial masters continue to be the epicentres of epistemology, as well as continue to dominate and dictate what is scientific, what is to be taught and how it is to be taught, and what counts as knowledge is lamentable. This the main reason why decolonisation is important and in our context, epistemic decolonisation is very fundamental in our lives as Africans.

Decolonisation is the process of undoing colonialism in all its forms. It is a demand for and actualisation of *epistemic justice* against '*epistemic injustice*'. Fricker described *epistemic injustice* as a kind of wrong done on the knower (Fricker, 2007). It occurs when the concepts and categories which people understand their reality are replaced by those of the colonisers.

Epistemic decolonisation therefore, is freedom. It is freedom not only for Africans but also to others that are discriminated against because of coloniality. It is a personal freedom and affirmation of the existence of indigenous knowledge. It is a determination of African epistemology and doing of the same epistemology.

Sarukkai terms decolonising as a 'cleansing process' that is used to cleanse us from colonialism by decolonising not only our universities, its pedagogy, curriculum, and its library but also its research method and aims. On the other hand, it brings to our attention to various "knowledge systems produced by communities across the world, such as in medicine, in mathematics, in education systems, narratives or the universe, society and so on (Sarukkai, 2022). Sarukkai conceives epistemic decolonisation as the "critique of the dominance of knowledge and intellectual practices of dominant (colonial) cultures as well as a call to replace them with 'indigenous'/'local' knowledge systems and practices" (Sarukkai, 2022). Sarukkai goes ahead to elaborate further on the importance of epistemic decolonisation when he says:

Specifically, it is a call to replace/modify the hegemony of 'Western' systems of knowledge in the sciences, medicine, philosophy, education, development and in all aspects of the society in non-western societies. It is a recognition that Eurocentric models that are integral part of education, knowledge systems and

political processes in non-West are not universal and have to be replaced with the intellectual productions of the local and the marginalised (Sarukkai, 2022).

Epistemic decolonisation is not an illusion. It is a reality that can be achieved. The members of the academia can make actualise this fact by being agents and advocates of epistemic decolonisation. Epistemic decolonisation is one of the key areas that help to affirm our own epistemology, liberate ourselves from epistemic coloniality and include other epistemologies in our epistemic spaces.

Decolonising the Social Sciences: why social science?

Our choice of the social sciences is a reminder for the need to decolonise our (African) universities in particular, the academic disciplines. It does not mean that the social sciences are the only academic disciplines which suffering from epistemic coloniality, no. The social sciences are just ‘representatives’ of the other academic disciplines.

Social sciences are some of the academic disciplines that are taught and learnt in African universities (Ake, 1982). Social sciences have their origin in European social milieu. Social sciences emerged as a reaction to the negative effects of Industrial Revolution in Europe. Industrial Revolution was a technological revolution in the late 18th century which began in England and thereafter spread to the other parts of Europe. Industrial Revolution simply refers to the transition from creating goods by hands to using machines to create the same goods. Industrial Revolution among other things led to increased standard of living, improved health-care, improved education, improved transportation and communication networks and the emergence of capitalist society.

On the other hand, Industrial Revolution contributed to socio-political and economic problems like, poor working conditions, exploitation of the poor by the rich, the widening gap between the rich and poor, immorality, crime *et cetera* within and across Europe. These problems is what led to the creation of social sciences with an intention of solving and preventing such problems from occurring in the future in Europe.

Thus, the main aim of social sciences were to address the then challenges the European society was facing. That the social sciences have their foundation in Europe is fact that cannot be denied. This is what informed their content, library and research methodology. It is the same social sciences that some of the first African students were (and are still being) taught in universities across Africa, Europe and the U.S.A. The colonialists introduced the same social sciences in African universities with their content and research methodology. The introduction of social sciences in Africa by the colonialists ignored, undermined and interfered with African form of knowledge. Africa indigenous knowledge in so far as social sciences are concerned was ignored and continues to be ignored even after Africa political independence.

It is unfortunate that many years after Africa countries respective political independence, the academic disciplines and many other academic disciplines continue to be formed, informed and dominated by their erstwhile colonial masters' foundations of knowledge and research methodology, as if Africans were or are *tabula rasas*. The irony of it, is that with the awareness of this fact, African intellectuals continue to belief and follow the epistemic coloniality; which they faithfully transmit dogmatically to their students. These reveals that the social sciences are still under the capture of our erstwhile colonial masters.it goes without saying that social sciences are still under epistemic coloniality capture.

Zezeza mourns because Africa universities in particular, the social scientists in the 21st century continue to import the curriculum, content and research methodology of their erstwhile colonial masters. Moreover, they have perfected and further developed the 'culture of imported scientific consumerism' that was established during colonialism and continues to persist to this day (Ake, 1982). In line with this, Ake earlier on had already observed that social sciences scholarship on Africa was and is still under strong European imperialism. Consequently, western scholarship is used as a strong epistemological tool for controlling Africa and other third world epistemological orientation and perceptions (Ake, 1982). According to Ake, this can evidently be seen by how western theories are used to explain Africa social phenomena. In the sense that research finding in Europe are first generalised in Europe and then Africa.¹ This explains why Europeans have always held a domineering position as far as social sciences are concerned leaving Africans at a disadvantaged position.² The fact that Africa has and is still breathing coloniality since her encounter with colonialists, as well as being influenced by it (Ake, 1982) reveals epistemic coloniality and capture continues to side-line other alternative epistemologies including Africa (Ake, 1982).

It is this epistemic coloniality capture that the social sciences need to liberate themselves from. African social scientists (including other scholars from other disciplines) have no option other than to rise to the occasion and define themselves using African epistemic lenses. They need to affirm their own indigenous (social science) knowledge, do it and engage with other epistemologies in an equal and an objective way.

Importance of epistemic decolonisation

The importance of epistemic decolonisation is that it attempts to bring justice. Justice to the regions that have always suffered from epistemic injustices because of colonialism. It is a recognition of historical epistemic injustices that the colonised have always suffered in the hands of the colonists during the colonial regime and after. Epistemic justice implies that the offender apologises to his/her victims, and is forgiven. It calls in our context for restorative epistemic justice that seeks to restore that which was 'lost'/'ignored' as a result of an injustice, and that which was 'lost'/'ignored' is nothing else but African indigenous knowledge.

Epistemic decolonisation brings epistemic freedom. Freedom is the most thing in epistemology. It means that one is free to explore, question, think, doubt, research, *et cetera*. People are able to identify, name, affirm, do, share and determine their own epistemology, as well as interact it with other epistemologies. All these can only be possible because of epistemic freedom. In line with this Ndlovu-Gatsheni stresses the importance of epistemic freedom when he indicates that epistemic freedom "...underscores the right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop one's own methodologies and write from where one is located, unencumbered by Eurocentrism" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

The other importance of epistemic decolonisation is that it recognises the contribution of 'others', the often under looked to the production of knowledge. Africans belongs to this class of the 'other' that has often been selectively ignored. It acknowledges the immense contribution of the indigenous people to knowledge production and acknowledges their presence as well as significant contribution and presence to knowledge which for a long time has been dominated by Western epistemological paradigms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Epistemic decolonisation also helps to eliminate epistemic dualism that divides the world between 'producers' and 'consumers' of knowledge. It implies that Africa is no longer categorised as consumers of knowledge, but acknowledged as producers of the same knowledge. It means levelling the epistemic ground for all, ensuring that there is epistemic fairness and epistemic empathy so as to understand other people epistemologies.

Epistemic decolonisation reminds us that no part or sections of the world have an epistemic monopoly or privilege over other parts. All human beings irrespective of their races, status, gender and so on, by virtue of their rationality are producers and capable of knowledge production. Thus, the epistemic decolonisation sets to change the wrong epistemic narrative as Sarukkai opines:

The project of decolonisation attempts to set right the wrong history of 'intellectual' traditions in different parts of the world and in different communities. Knowledge has become a term that is used to create hierarchies within, and among, societies. Thus accomplished by valuing knowledge of the colonizers along with claiming that this knowledge is not present or available to the colonised and those lower in the social hierarchy. Thus, European colonial discourse repeatedly claimed that logic, mathematics, science, art and even religion (interpreted in a particular manner consistent with Christian theology) were higher order systems that were only possible for the European mind. This conclusion was not based on knowledge, or a critical analysis, of other knowledge systems. In this process, the knowledge systems of the classified are presented and constructed in particular ways in order to negate their epistemological value. Moreover, created societies where the colonised were forced to repudiate the knowledge produced out of their experiences and their intellectual labour, and replace it with the systems of citizens (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Therefore, as wrong epistemic narratives are being deconstructed and discarded, new epistemic narratives can now be written. New epistemic narratives are to be told by Africans themselves about their indigenous knowledge, its content, research methodology, how to do, interpret, understand and so on about indigenous knowledge.

Conclusion

The current calls for decolonisation in the academia especially, in academic disciplines is a wakeup call for academicians all over the world. It is an honest reminder that no one particular race holds an epistemic monopoly or privilege over other races. It is an affirmation of other forms of knowledge, recognition of the contribution of 'others' in knowledge production. Much as this has been noted, it is upon African themselves to decolonise the current epistemologies, to affirm, name, define, and do their epistemology and so on.

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