



A Historical Review of African Scholarship and the Decolonial Discourse: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

African scholarship plays an important role in asserting the value of African epistemologies and those of the global South in the knowledge economy. This is pertinent to higher education in postcolonial Africa, whose indigenous knowledge systems and intellectual legacies have played peripheral roles because of coloniality and the global neoliberal trends. This paper presents a historical review of a generation of African scholarship that spans from the last half of the twentieth century to date. It does so with the view of exploring the developments, challenges and prospects experienced by African scholars in their pursuit of African knowledges and the decolonisation discourse in the higher education sector. The first part of the paper provides a backdrop through an analysis of some selected major research on the nature of African scholarship published in the last half of the twentieth century, and its

contributions to the decolonisation discourse on the continent. The second part examines the nature of contribution of African scholarship to knowledge production in the twenty-first century. That section critically analyses the challenges and opportunities which have been encountered in reshaping the discourses of knowledge production and decolonisation in theory and practice. It is concluded that in its distinctiveness in asserting African and marginalised knowledge systems as valid and relevant, and operating in spaces of struggle, the African scholarship should continue to contribute to the interrogation of the objectivity of Eurocentric, neoliberal thought. The paper recommends the promotion of African scholarship in shaping the decolonisation of knowledge production.

Keywords: African scholarship, Decolonisation, Historical review, Intellectual legacies, Knowledge production.

Introduction and Background

African scholarship contributes pivotally to the intellectual legacies in knowledge production at the national, continental and global levels. It equally plays a key role in elevating the African philosophies and epistemologies in a world where producers of epistemologies of the global South are confronting the coloniality of knowledge, power and being. It is imperative to provide conceptual understanding of African scholarship.

Delineating the concept of African scholarship remains a conundrum as there are myriads of definitions depending on where one is located and what influences one to take a particular definition instead of the others. This paper shares similar views with Mapaya (2016) who says that an African scholar should historically originate from the African continent. The paper, however, extends the conceptualisation of African scholarship to include knowledge producers and production processes by the African Diaspora and non-African scholars rooted in African philosophies, who write in support of the decolonisation of Africa and the global South. Knowledge production about Africa should be informed by Afro-centred lenses that are undiluted by the mythologised, biased and incomplete views about African histories and ways of being and knowing. African scholarship should be framed in the context of Africa's economic, socio-cultural, socio-political, and historical contexts in the broader global context of the knowledge economy.

After discovering the unity and richness of the knowledge system of the African people, colonialists dis-membered the wellsprings of this knowledge through eliminating the fountains of knowledges from their roots (Datta, 1984; Falola, 2005; Koma, 1976; Mosweunyane, 2013; wa Thiong'o, 2009). The physical violence of the battlefield in which "the prominent African indigenous knowledge experts got killed was followed by the psychological violence which followed the African child in form of formal education in the classrooms of missionaries" (wa Thiong'o, 1986: 9) which effectually made the African indigenous students believe that their value systems, identities and histories were inferior, and should be looked down upon as barbaric. Thus, formal education during colonialism was intended to train and produce

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learners in basic education, university graduates or educated elite who would implement the policies of the colonial administration (Ashby, 1961; Woldegorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013).

The African scholarship and decolonisation discourse has been shaping up against a background where the concepts of schooling and university had been manipulated by the colonial administrations to produce graduates and scholars who would spearhead and project the Western canons of knowledge as the excellent universal truths (Mamdani 1990). The discourse is also active in contexts where scholars are struggling with a lot to be rewritten, especially concerning African histories and identities. These should be considered as valid systems and should be treated as equal in the global scholarship scenario. Against this background, this paper presents a historical overview of selected African scholarship and decolonisation discourse dating back to the second half of the twentieth century to the present. The first part of the paper provides an overview of some of the major research outputs, which typify African scholarship from the last half of the twentieth century and its contributions to the decolonisation discourse in the continent and beyond. The second part examines the contribution of African knowledge production in the twenty-first century. It also analyses the challenges and

opportunities which have been encountered in reshaping the discourses of decolonisation in theory and practice. The research questions for this paper are framed as follows:

- How does African scholarship from the second half of the 20th century to date contribute to decolonisation discourse and global knowledge economy?
- What challenges and prospects have been encountered in African scholarship and to what extent have the African scholars navigated their research trajectories?

A synopsis of the major research covering the nature of African scholarship on decolonisation in the last half of 20th century is provided as a context to illuminate the motive of research and scholarship on decolonisation thus far. The paper also includes snapshots of research contributions which legitimate African epistemologies as valid knowledge systems in the global knowledge production system. This is despite the difficulties faced by scholars from the global South, especially African scholars. The paper concludes with a discussion on how African epistemological, theoretical and methodological orientations could be further developed.

The Second Half of the 20th Century

Since the invasion of Africa by Europe, three epochal shifts have been noticed concerning knowledge production and intellectual legacies (Cross & Govender, 2021; Mkandawire, 1998). To begin with, the first generation of African scholarship was produced abroad out of those African students who had been enrolled to take up African Studies in North American and European universities. This group included scholars such as Mahmood Mamdani, Chinweizu Ibekwe, Sam Moyo and Ali A. Mazrui (Mkandawire, 1995; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). During the 1950s, African scholarship was characteristically anti-white by 'Africanists' who criticised the Eurocentric portrayal of Africa as uncivilised, without history and without its own writing. The Nigerian historian, Dike (1952) vehemently argued that most of the negative research work about Africa was based on preconceived notions and assumptions of backward Africa. Dike (1952) further advanced that European standards could not be used as basis to compare African culture, progress and development with another culture, say European. According to

him each culture is a product of its environment, which should be understood in relation to the context which it serves. This first generation of African researchers was responsible for establishing the Pan-African research networks such as the Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), a data bank which promotes social science research in Africa.

African scholarship of the 1960s into the 1970s remained preoccupied with their search for a new epistemic base which centred African identities, values and histories in African discourses (Appiah, 1992; Mudimbe, 1988). In the same vein, scholars such as Hountondji (1996), Mazrui (1978), and Nyerere (1967) counteracted the Westernised view which claimed that African canons of knowledge were characteristically pure repetitions of practices without any theoretical backing. These African scholars argued that such a perspective was conspicuously limited in its conceptualisation of scholarly and scientific work as distinctively theoretical. Nyerere (1967) further questioned the role of higher education in the development of countries. He pointed out that if academics remained preoccupied with theoretical knowledge at the expense of the needs of the local people poverty and inequality would not be eradicated (Nyerere, 1967). Research should lead to the provision of sustainable development and solutions to Africa's problems. Therefore, true African scholarship between the 1960s and 1980s was guided by the principles of sensitivity to developmental challenges encountered in African communities.

The second generation of African scholarship is characterised by Pan Africanism, Negritudism, Afrocentricism, Black Consciousness and sentiments which fed into the struggle for political independence in the various African countries in the twentieth century. In their desire to uphold African thought systems, Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere clearly explained that the role of the university in postcolonial Africa was to uphold African values by shifting to new African-centred ways and systems (Nkrumah, 1967; Nyerere, 1967). Nkrumah and Nyerere are examples of African scholars who had a common vision. They believed that education in Africa should focus on the welfare of the society by being relevant to people's experiences and by recognising applicable knowledges produced elsewhere (Nkrumah,

1941; Nyerere, 1967; 1985). There were noticeable developments in Nkrumah's perspectives regarding education. In his earlier works Nkrumah focused on the link between education and culture, but he later developed a theoretical/conceptual orientation for conceptual decolonisation (Ajei, 2018). Post 1965, Nkrumah endorsed violent revolution as a means for transformation (Ajei, 2018; Ani, 2014). To date, some of Nkrumah's progressive philosophical and transformative ideas are still appreciated by institutions such as the African Union (AU). For instance, the AU 2063 agenda exhorts the continent to commit itself to put Africa on the move by promoting African scholarship for sustainable development. Institutions such as University of Ibadan in Nigeria, Makerere University in Uganda, University of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania, Legon in Ghana and IFAN in Senegal have been recognised in scholarship as the cutting edge of enthusiasm in centring Africa in thought and deed.

Among the well-known Negritude scholars were South African Steve Biko (1987) and Senegalese Leopold Sedar Senghor, who in their writings celebrated Blackness and Africanness. For Senghor, negritudism was a movement which emerged as a reaction to slavery and French colonialism in Africa as well as to the French cultural assimilation policy. As for Biko, writing targeted the discriminatory apartheid policy in apartheid South Africa. Anglophone scholarship and literary culture are also evidently influenced by negritudism. Literary works such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1967) *A Grain of Wheat*, Chinua Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart* and Wole Soyinka's (1965) *The Interpreters*, among others, are examples of negritude-flavoured literature in which the authors reacted to the derogatory representations, myths and peripherisation of African cultures and capabilities. In their writing, these authors valorise African cultures, languages and identities.

Although Negritude scholarship is an African discourse which aimed to counteract the existing Western discourses about Africa, it was heavily criticised by scholars such as Appiah (1992) and Hountondji (1996). These critics felt that negritudism was a failed theory, which glorified emotions at the expense of centring the essence of Africa in the scholarship against Eurocentricism. Negritude

scholarship was further critiqued as too focused on blackness. This was interpreted as a mere collection of narcissist philosophies propagated by colonial thinking. For example, despite *The Interpreters* being a valorisation of African culture, Wole Soyinka, in his essay, *The Future of Western African Writing*, declared that: "The duiker will not paint 'duiker' on his beautiful back to proclaim his duikeritude; you will know him by his elegant leap." This was a lash on negritudism as a movement which promoted too much parroting about the goodness of blackness without putting into place any action plan. Despite being critiqued as a weak, failing movement, a lot has changed in the study of literature in several African universities. Literary works of negritude scholars such as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Sembene Ousman and others are included in the Literature modules studied in some postcolonial universities. For instance, in universities in Zimbabwe, such works are part of the Bachelor of Education's African Literature in English curricula. This paper also upholds the value of negritudism in as far as it initiated debate on the affirmation of the beauty and worthy of blackness, being African and also bringing African ontological and epistemological perspectives under scrutiny. Despite being criticised as a lot of noise, the negritude movement drove the Pan-

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African agenda and spurred the subaltern to think critically about what coloniality does to the African being and the possible means to reverse it.

Western modernity and civilisation which influenced Africa in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the dependency syndrome and the development of Afro-pessimism in African scholarship. This saw the adoption of a depoliticised stance of post-modernism and post-coloniality in their writing which worsened the isolation of Africa, misrepresentation of its histories, knowledges and identities (Mkandawire 1995; Zeleza, 2003). The post-structuralism and post-modernism postures in the academics and researchers of the era negatively impacted on African scholarship. Firstly, they got muted because of lack of funds for their research to be published. Secondly, the reviewers and editors from the global North negatively reviewed their research work such that they could not publish in journals of the global North (Zeleza, 2003).

By the 1980s and into the 1990s, African scholars made attempts to explore African social and political histories. They emphasised on issues such as political cultures, identities and the civil society. During the same period, the world witnessed the rise of neoliberalism, a movement which had a debilitating effect on African scholarship in African universities (Zeleza, 2003). Instead, the typical Euro-American University in Africa persistently prevailed in which emphasis was on profiteering in almost every engagement in both private and public institutions. The university in Africa was and continues to be compelled to shape up into a commercial university under-girded by the need to satisfy the global markets. The scholarship needed in the market should subscribe to the Euro-North American canons of knowing and being (Zeleza & Olukoshi, 2004; Mbembe, 2017). However, despite the Westernised ontological and epistemological imperatives, there have been renewed calls and struggles for epistemic freedom and transformation of African universities since the beginning of the 21st century (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). This means that there is an endeavour to make Africa the epicentre of discourses that dismantle the Eurocentric philosophies which masquerade as the global knowledge economy.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, some scholarship focused on the struggles for liberation

of the African being/mind. I see these struggles as best understood from a decolonial perspective. For example, in *Decolonising the Mind*, wa Thiong'o's argument provokes deep thinking about the possibility of a truly decolonised linguistic space in Africa when he probes as follows:

Is an African Renaissance possible when we the keepers of memory have to work outside our own linguistic memory / and within the prison house of European linguistic memory? ... can we expect this army to conquer when its generals are held prisoner? (wa Thiong'o, 2009: 12).

For wa Thiong'o, bringing back the erased languages at the centre where they originally belonged serves the role of re-membering, which Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) understands as a means of realising a decolonial turn. wa Thiong'o challenges linguistic dis-membering as a case that should be fought against through decolonisation of language. He strongly took this stance in the 1962 *Makerere Conference of African Writers of English Expression at Makerere University* in Uganda. As a follow-up to his undertaking to decolonise African languages, wa Thiong'o adopted his Gikuyu language in his scholarly work (wa Thiong'o 2009). He was also actively involved in the intellectual struggles to decolonise and transform the English Department at the University of Nairobi in Kenya in 1968. His *On the Abolition of the English Department* (wa Thiong'o, 1972) was a call for the decolonisation of the cognitive processes and a lobbying for awareness that the so-called universal literature was merely European literature. In the essay, wa Thiong'o proposed a decolonised model of literary studies which conceptualised curriculum from a bottom-up perspective, starting with the geo-location of the readers who should reconnect with their local histories. I argue that waThiongo's 1972 essay challenged and continues to challenge the complicity of the disciplines in the higher education institutions of the postcolony which are intended to promote Western epistemologies and pedagogical practices in the teaching of literature.

Mudimbe (1988) shared the same understanding with waThiongo where he observes that Europe's geographical expansion and civilisation submitted the world to its memory, thus, uprooting Africans from their memory. Chinweizu (1985) subscribes to the decolonisation of linguistic spaces in the

African Literature departments in most African universities. Wa Thiong'o, Mudimbe and Chinweizu interrogations could play an important role in compelling academics and scholars to engage in complicated conversations which provoke academics to think about where they should place Africa in their work. On the contrary, Achebe felt that the acquisition of the English language was useful to the African. For Achebe, acknowledgement of English Language becomes a valuable resource in the hands of the Africans, thus his assertion:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit new African surroundings (Achebe, 1965: 47).

Developing on Achebe's reasoning, I argue that an African who uses the Eurocentric languages in social, business or academic engagements has the privilege to Africanise the English, French or Portuguese. For example, he or she could do this through embracing the different, rich indigenous accents in speaking it and/or use of rich indigenous meanings in proverbial and idiomatic expressions. I join scholars such as Hlatshwayo, Shawa and Nxumalo (2020), Le Grange (2012), Letseka (2013) and waThiongo (1994) in their calls for the framing of African thought and philosophies and branding them in indigenous terms as opposed to the top-down Westernised hegemonic approaches to teaching research and community engagement.

However, there are scholars such as Mbembe (2002) who describe African nationalism as fake philosophy. In his earlier works, Achille Mbembe was opposed to nationalist-inspired discourses which criticised global coloniality. Indeed, Mbembe had attempted to embrace the cosmopolitan idea and approach. He further discarded the thinking that identity was synonymous to the physical

location of a person and upheld and celebrated cosmopolitanism. Similarly, Mafeje (2011) asserts that nationalism does not necessarily guarantee better things since several nationalistic alternatives have resulted in further exploitation of Africans by fellow Africans. Nonetheless, in their recent works, both Mbembe and Mafeje attack the capitalist elements evident in global mobility.

Moving On: African Scholarship and Knowledge Production in the 21st Century

The contemporary generation of African scholarship is characterised by its hunger for non-Western epistemologies and methods that are more responsive to the social and economic complexities besetting Africa (Cross & Govender 2021; Mamdani 2018). It is influenced by scholars from the global South, especially the Latin American scholars such as Grosfoguel (2007), Quijano (2000), Maldonado-Torres (2007) and Mignolo (2009; 2011). These scholars' views about epistemic disobedience/borderline thinking could be used as tools to dismantle the myth that Western epistemes and philosophies are the objective reality. Often, most contemporary African scholars propose ontological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological orientations which value heterogeneous locations of knowledge (Asante, 2019; Chilisa, 2012; 2017; Mafeje, 2011).

Challenges and Prospects

Although local domains of knowledge positively contribute to the production of local academic knowledge creation, there is still a problem of contemporary scholars being hampered by the global economic disparities and structures (Melber 2021). Thus, a gap exists where the African scholar ought to engage by contributing more to the reduction of the global restrictions in providing African solutions (Mkandawire, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), one of the key scholars in this development, provided

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some rationale for a locus of enunciation, shifting geography of knowledge, decolonising the normative of critical theory, rethinking thinking and learning to unlearn so as to learn, as possible means to the dismantling of neoliberal forces in scholarship (2018:16). Ndlovu- Gatsheni is supported by Kumalo (2020) and Mandlingozi (2018), who believe in resuscitating the Black Archives in order to recentre the marginalised African systems in knowledge production and sharing in African university curricula. Hlatshwayo (2022) critiques neoliberalism in scholarship by observing that scholars/academics are conceptualised as knowledge producers in the spaces in which they operate. In saying this, Hlatshwayo confirms Jonathan Jansen's (2009) observation that:

... university-based intellectuals no longer work in the same kinds of campuses that, for the most part, were once sites of productivity, problem-solving and politics... (Jansen, 2009: 147).

The neoliberal paradigm compels scholars and academics to understand what is on demand in the knowledge market and to supply their products to that market for them to remain relevant in the system. This consideration compromises the production of graduates who are critical thinkers and able to use their acquired knowledges to solve their societies' immediate problems. In his relatively recent work, Mbembe (2017) critiques global capitalism and neoliberalism as clearly anti-public good. His stance has thus changed, compared to his earlier work, as already discussed, in which he condoned globalisation as a solution to African problems. In his recent work, he subscribes to progressively decolonial scholarship which digs deeper and confronts neoliberalism in scholarship for the good of the communities which they serve, and for a futuristic vision of a possible post-neoliberal university in Africa and the global South at large.

Another limitation of African scholarship is its lack of indigenous theories. This absence of theory has led to the reliance on borrowed methodologies which have the effect of epistemological and methodological silencing. African scholars operate in spaces where the epistemologies, theories and methods of the global South are looked down upon and misrepresented and relegated to the periphery (Chilisa, 2012; Dastile, 2016). The

syndrome of borrowed methodologies can be evaded by adopting empowering indigenous research methodologies which seek to unmute the silenced voices, interpretation and reflexivity (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 1999).

In trying to fill the gap created by the borrowed methodologies syndrome, Mafeje (2000) and Mamdani (2012) advocate a narratological research paradigm which affords the researcher opportunities to hear the stories from the perspective of those who experienced it. This approach enables the African scholar to unlearn, rethink, reconceptualise and deconstruct the hegemonic discourses. Similarly, Dastile (2016) commended the beauty and logic of a narratological stance in African scholarship and beyond by asserting that when centred upon one's own intellectual corpus, challenges encountered will be solved through culturally relevant ways. It becomes imperative for more African scholars to embrace testimonies from marginalised groups as addressed by such African scholars as Bagile Chilisa in her (2012) seminal work, *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. This work was greatly influenced by culturally responsive research methodologies which bring together theoretical underpinnings, literature, ethical assumptions, ontological and epistemological orientations as part of a whole and interdependent. Chilisa (2012) asserts that indigenous research creates a basis for historical perspectives on how to conduct research about indigenous issues. Some decolonisation research work in the new millennium has been framed on Chilisa's work, in which scholars focus on the deconstruction of knowledge systems which limit and exclude other forms of knowledge (Ajani & Gamede, 2021; Zavala, 2013; Nhemachena Mlambo & Kaundjua, 2016) in theorising the decolonisation of higher education.

Mafeje's scholarship is popularly known for its argument that researchers should consider phenomena of enquiry on their own terms. Hence, the theoretical orientations of a research should not dictate to data. Insights should be generated from the data themselves. The Mafeje, (1995: 158) logic that "it is a mistake to endow concepts with ontological meanings" is however contradictory to Afrocentrism since one would wonder if, for example, viewing Africanism in ontological terms is a mistake. From the Mafeje standpoint, when

data contrasts with established views, there is epistemological rupture which would dictate for the development of new theories or knowledge enrichment. Thus, the idea of a deconstructionist stance in research plays a major role in Mafeje's work (Mafeje, 1991; 1996). Another well-known scholar who advocates African-oriented research methodologies is Molefi Kete Asante. M.K, Asante is credited as the brains behind Afrocentric philosophy, a philosophy which is concerned with the encapsulation of African ideas, values spearheaded by intellectuals who have come to terms with their African identities, and are geared to create scholarly response to national and continental issues (Asante, 2007).

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, some collaborative work is underway to upscale knowledge production in Africa. The multi-country project, *Organisational & Research Culture in African Universities* is a typical example. A three-day workshop hosted by the University of Zimbabwe, with researchers and academic intellectuals from South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Canada, and the United States of America collaborated and explored avenues to overcome barriers to productivity in African scholarship and contribution to knowledge production (Thondhlana & Garwe, 2021: 2). The *Journal of British Academy*, in turn, set aside a supplementary issue which provided African scholars an opportunity to publish. Such developments in the promotion of African knowledge production and sharing could play a significant role in the increase of African knowledge production from its meagre 2% mark (Thondhlana & Garwe, 2021). Such low contribution to the knowledge economy is one of the contributing factors to Africa's underdevelopment (Ajani & Gamede 2021).

The preceding discussion illuminates that the 21st century African scholar is operating in an era of serious epistemological battles in which knowledge systems of global South in general are contesting those of the global North (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Zondi, 2016). Contemporary African scholars grapple with the misrepresentation of the histories of the indigenous Africans. In that struggle, African scholarship focuses on combative methodological and epistemological tools that seek to create

spaces for Africans to speak about their past, present and future and to correct distorted discourses about Africa's experiences.

On a Parting Note

This paper attempted to examine and illuminate the direction of African scholarship and decolonisation discourse from the 1950s to date. There is a visible thread which connects African knowledge systems and decolonial discourses in public domains such as higher education, which are the key areas targeted by African scholarship. Many African scholars have sought to capture the diverse aspects of African realities in the past and present, and are searching for the epistemological ideas to fill the missing ontological link that qualifies African perspectives and global South knowledge systems as equally relevant. In their pursuit of that ontological gap, African intellectuals should continue to make impactful steps. They should continue to lobby for a decolonial turn that would enable Afrocentric theory building. African scholarship could contribute more to knowledge production from the global South if more is done on the conceptualisation of African philosophical, emancipatory concepts and notions which could guide further development of African ontological, epistemological and methodological orientations which guide research, teaching and community engagements not only at local but also at global levels.

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