Repurposing the university in Africa against an explicit racist epistemology

Teboho J. Lebakeng

Thabo Mbeki African School of Public and International Affairs, University of South Africa (UNISA)
lebakj@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The university in Africa is, historically speaking, a function of its colonial history and this has had severe implications for knowledge production and the nature of such knowledge in Africa. Logically, the Europeans classified themselves as fully human and, therefore, they declared humanity to be in its greatest perfection in the race of whites. The thesis advanced in this essay is that while it is indisputable that European epistemology constitutes a pyramid of knowledge, it is equally valid that African epistemology also independently and rightfully includes another pyramid of knowledge. Thus, this conceptual essay, which methodologically uses desktop research, looks at the prospects and challenges of reasonably reversing epistemicide as an ethical imperative for epistemic liberation with social justice as a necessary complement for repurposing the African university for the renewal of the continent. Towards this objective, Africans will need to dispense with their status anxiety or worries stemming from considerations of what Western academic orthodoxy would think, especially in light of deceptions that repurposing the university to be relevant to the African condition will lower standards and assertions that efforts at indigenisation offer no creative breathing space.

Introduction

Historically speaking, the contemporary university in Africa is a function of its colonial history and, as such, has not been a torchbearer for African development broadly cannot be contested. European scholars made chronically

inaccurate representations of Africa and the Africans, which, in turn, spawned an academic pandemic characterised by a captive and mimetic university in Africa. At the core of this was the rationality debate which questioned whether Africans could philosophise. Such questioning led to a fictive ontological hierarchy and bifurcation of humanity into the European *Humanitas* (complete human beings rationally and ontologically) and African Anthropos (imperfect human beings rationally and ontologically). Central to the debate on African philosophy is the concept of reason, a value believed to stand as the great divide between the civilised and the uncivilised, the logical and the mystical (Masolo, 1994; Jimoh, 2018). This was foundational to racism' (Lamola, 2019).

What is now common knowledge is that such a conception of Africa and the Africans was a function of the fact that European scholars lacked the tools to deal with the complexities of African ontology and epistemologies. Naturally, this had severe implications for university education in Africa. Since the decolonisation of the African continent, the nature and purpose of higher education institutions have been a sore point of contestation and significant disillusionment, among other areas, because of the exclusion of indigenous knowledge systems in the African university. In light of this, several African scholars and intellectuals have been engaged in disrupting the persistence of an unreasonable colonial epistemology that dehumanised Africans by endeavouring to reassert African epistemology as a primary abiding obligation and reclaiming the legitimacy of African epistemology. This essay looks at the prospects of reversing epistemicide as an ethical imperative for epistemic liberation with social justice as a necessary complement for repurposing the university in Africa for the renewal of the continent.

Contextual appreciation

Ordinarily, the thesis advanced in this essay should not, by definition, constitute a thesis because it is a position that should not be debatable and contested. Under normal circumstances, this "thesis" should generally be accepted as fact. However, because of differing and contesting opinions on it, it thus grudgingly qualifies as a thesis. This is because consistent denials force one to

persuade denialists to concede the indefensibility of their objectionable position. Simply put, the thesis advanced is that: the university in Africa is ontologically decontextualised; hence the persistence of the explicit racist epistemology emanating from the western colonisers is dangerous for such institutions, and this situation requires their repurposing as an urgent ethical imperative for epistemic liberation. This thesis and the attendant necessary interventions have, over time, been necessitated by the fact that the dawn and the unfolding of Eurocentric modernity through colonialism and imperialism unleashed a particularly racial ethnocentric attitude (Mafeje, 1971; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016) that led European colonialists to question the very humanity of African people including their ways of knowing (Ramose, 1999; Lebakeng, 2010).

Expressions of the race (typically hierarchical) were commonly and deeply rooted in the Enlightenment thinking (Eze, 1997a; Ramose, 1999), and so were views that Africans were barbaric as a race which sunk beneath all human beings in their mental presuppositions and predispositions. Thus, while race established a hierarchy between different races, barbarism established a dichotomy that sought to question the humanity of Africans. Barbarism shaped Europe's idea of the 'Other' since antiquity and served the justification of colonialism from ancient Greece throughout the Renaissance to the eighteenth century (Eberl, 2019). Logically, the Europeans classified themselves as fully human and, therefore, they declared humanity to be in its greatest perfection in the race of whites. Through this, they valorised European knowledge systems and thus imposed monochrome logic and set up a single epistemic authority of Western epistemology that gets to sanction what counts as knowledge, rationality, science and philosophy (Tarusarira, 2018; Mitova, 2019).

Such blatant white supremacist racism was even justified religiously as the divine order of things, hence the evangelisation by missionaries (Prior, 1997). The racial ethnocentric attitude historically provided the epistemological foundation for the philosophical justification (Cloete, 2019) and theoretical grounds (Jimoh, 2018) for European colonialism. The long-standing effects have been that Africans

were ontologically decomposed, cosmologically disaggregated, epistemologically disenfranchised, cognitively dissonant, and their consciousness blemished. Regarding education, the implications of the colonial core assumptions of the lack of rationality on the part of Africans were even more devastating. Here I wish to invoke well-known sources precisely, so I do not reinvent the wheel. For instance, Fanon (1986, p.7) captures this philosophical racism. Thus, "…the white man had a myth that the Negro is a stage on the slow evolution of monkey into a man." Because of this ethos, the colonial master designed education to ensure that African people would not develop critical awareness. As such, colonial education became an exercise for subordination, exploitation, mental confusion, and underdevelopment development (Rodney, 1972; Freire, 1970).

Again, I wish to invoke another set of well-known sources by pointing out some critical European thinkers who entrenched racism. In so doing, I will not delve into their racist pronouncements for fear of being repetitive and circuitous. Suffice to say, among those who were in no small way responsible for such a legacy of untruths and injustices that essentially provided alibi and rationalisation for colonisation could be included Emmanuel Kant in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1996), David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1896)) and Charles Darwin (1869). George Hegel's omission of Africa from his four cultures or civilisations is often interpreted as classifying Africa as being of an unhistorical and undeveloped spirit (Clarke, 1957; see also Kuykendall, 1993). It set the tone for Western thinking of Africans as irrational and emotion-governed. On National Character, David Hume expresses this philosophical racism in a very vivid and graphic manner: I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites (see Hayman, 1971). In a nutshell, what Hume implies is that there scarcely ever was a civilised nation of a darker skin nor even any individual from it eminent in action or speculation. Some, like Horton (1967) in the contemporary time, continued with this tradition by asserting that Africans are incapable of independently evaluating their systems of thought in terms of truth and falsity.

Given that Enlightenment rationality developed in Europe as European nations aggressively claimed and partitioned other parts of the world, especially the African continent, for their enrichment (Eze, 2008), it is thus understandable why European moral philosophy was not able to stop the imperialistic exploitation of Africa (and so many other parts of the world) (Freter, 2018). Thus, fundamental to the colonial discourse was fixing and framing the African continent as a region of complete savagery and intellectual darkness, representing a negative Other without self-consciousness and underpinning philosophy of life (Itandala, 2001).

Thus, when we talk about whiteness, which is the face of colonialism, we are referring to the "system of domination and structure of privilege" (Dei, 2006, 12), which drove the colonial oppression, exploitation and de-humanisation for centuries and apartheid racist oppression for decades. As illustrated over the years, through the perceptive insights and wisdom of a wide range of writers such as Woodson (1933), Fanon (1952), Sartre (1964/1965), Biko (1970) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2005), the colonial violence went so deep that the human being who was forced to understand themselves as the Other subsequently attempted to be like the supposed European norm or gold standard.

Some Challenges in Deconstructing Eurocentric Myths

While it is indisputable that European epistemology constitutes a pyramid of knowledge, it is equally valid that African epistemology also independently and rightfully includes another pyramid of knowledge. The fundamental difference between the two epistemologies can be found in the distinction between the cultural and ontological conception of reality. At the same time, western epistemology limits itself to the scientific method of abstraction and divides reality into subjective and objective in consonance with western ontology. In accord with African ontology, African epistemology conceives the world as a basic unity, therefore, sees reality as interwoven and connected. In this way, African epistemology can see beyond the issues of the distinction between knowledge and belief, the subject and the object, the noumenon and the phenomenon, and appreciate the role and contributions of the human person, the environment, and the society to our epistemic claims

(Jimoh, 2018). It is in light of this position that we need to repurpose the university in Africa through the pursuit of decolonisation and Africanisation.

The racist representations of Africa and the Africans, especially by Euro-American philosophers, led Vest (2009) to inquire as to whether it continues to be necessary for African philosophy to take on what she refers to as "perverse questions" or "perverse preoccupations" with the West. She further passionately argues that to engage and respond to questions about the intellectual capabilities of African thinkers or the possible existence of philosophical resources in African cultures is to react to perverse questions. She then warns that engaging in academic dialogues implicitly or explicitly guided by a request or a felt need to justify and defend the possibility of African philosophy or African rationality is to engage in perverse and unnecessary dialogues (Vest, 2009). She is not alone in raising such concerns as Hallen (2019, p.20) poses the following questions related to this crucial issue: "Why have those powers been allowed to offer falsehoods and base rationalisations that excuse or even justify their crimes? Why is it the case that efforts must still be made to convince the rest of the world that the indigenous population of Africa is fully human?"

There are multitudes of reasons for this but of importance here is because, despite the decolonisation of the African continent, the tenacity of colonial myths is still reflected in and sustained through various historical and archival records and present-day racist and fascist intellectual and philosophical representations. A wider concatenation of other factors can negatively impact the realisation of ontological, epistemic and cognitive justice, especially in the academy in Africa. This is precisely because of the many ways colonial violence has affected and continues to affect Africans during and even after an official political end to colonialism. The colonial university in Africa has been at the forefront of denying the humanity of Africans by being the 'bastions of white power and prestige'. This can be attributable to the fact that colonial, post-colonial and neo-liberal universities in Africa continue to operate to obscure their complicity in creating and maintaining colonial knowledge hierarchies.

Therefore, there is a need to engage the representations and pronouncements articulated by these well-known racist sources to deploy them to advance a novel argument. This is more so given the under-representation of African intellectual discourses and philosophical projections in higher education, which remains an enduring social, epistemic, ontological and cognitive justice issue; African students must therefore appreciate the need for African archives – both historical and contemporary. Through the archives, a consciousness of change and insatiable curiosity can be instilled against the stubbornly ingrained false historical narratives. As Gatsheni-Ndlovu (2013, p.10) warned, "What Africans must be vigilant against is the trap of ending up normalising and universalising coloniality as a natural state of the world. It must be unmasked, resisted and destroyed because it produced a world order that can only be sustained through violence, deceit, hypocrisy and lies."

Little wonder that historically, the derogatory Enlightenment assertions provoked a particular consciousness in both Africans and non-African intellectuals to rise in response and defence of the rational capabilities of Africans. Among such scholars were well-known sources such as Cheik Anta Diop (1989), John Mbiti (1969), Alexis Kagame (1955) and Placid Tempels (1959), a Belgian Missionary who worked for many years in lower Congo. Broadly, these scholars sought to demonstrate that, like all other beings, Africans have rationality and articulate systems of knowledge and governance, but these were discredited and relegated to the fringes through colonisation. For instance, Cheik Anta Diop (1989) situated the origin of civilisation in Africa and, in the process, nullified German philosopher Hegel's contention that Africans do not have a history (Maserumula, 2015). Moreover, a range of post-colonial literature points to African scholars who sought to undo, dispel and debunk colonial legacies and imperialist conceptions of Africa through active critique (Oyeshile, 2008).

African decolonisation was characterised by heroic intellectual struggles by Africans across the continent to reclaim the humanity of Africans and the sovereignty of Africa by unpacking the anatomy of epistemicide (Lebakeng, 2021).

In this respect, Africans understood that *lehlanya le ya bokwella* (It takes collective effort to overcome a difficult challenge). With that, there have been and continue to be significant efforts to demonstrate the insanity of denial of African humanity, historical presence, ontological legitimacy and epistemological sovereignty. Through their efforts to situate African civilisation historically, we now understand that African epistemology speaks to "the African theory of knowledge, which includes the African conception of the nature of knowledge, the means used to gain knowledge, the purpose of the pursuit of knowledge, and the role that knowledge plays in human existence'" (Nkulu-N'Sengha, 2005). Justification in African epistemology is thus culture-bound and context-dependent. The truth value or falsity of our epistemic claims ultimately depends on human, social and cultural factors (Jimoh, 2018).

Despite the above clarity and the fact that no serious scholar or intellectual still entertains the claims of Africans not being rational beings and the African continent ever being a dark continent, African scholars and intellectuals continue to debunk these myths. However, there is a sense in which these engagements are problematic in that they forestall the initiation of research agendas to address more serious and creative dialogues on African revitalisation and development of African epistemologies, methodologies, theories and philosophies. Adding to this obstacle is that most African scholars have, over the years, remained captive to intellectual representations and theories that emanate from outside Africa. Some of these have been radical such as decoloniality, Marxism and *dependencia* and thus helpful in critiquing the epistemology of alterity. However, as I have argued elsewhere, these cannot assist in inscribing indigenous African knowledge as a dominant feature of African epistemology (Lebakeng, 2018). Despite the apparent significance of indigenous knowledge (Dei, 2000; 2014; Lebakeng, 2010), the knowledge production and dissemination regime prevent the resuscitation of indigenous knowledge systems as they are considered fringe and not mainstream.

There are also logistical and structural reasons. For instance, in most African countries, conditions for research have been severely compromised, as manifested

by the generally poor remuneration, staff shortages, heavy teaching loads, inability to mentor young faculty, physically damaged and inadequate infrastructure (Sawyerr, 2014). In addition, academic staff recruitment and retention remain a challenge in many African countries. Leaders of African universities acknowledge the devastating impact of staff shortages on the goals of institutions of higher education and warn that if something is not done very soon, the African academy will not only lose its ability to produce adequate personnel to support the countries' human resource needs but also to uphold and protect the quality of intellectual life in the Africa region (Tettey, 2010).

All these factors account for the tenacity of the explicitly racist epistemology since the structures informing the negative othering of African people continue to prevail throughout the contemporary world in camouflaged modes (Mkhwanazi, 2019).

Repurposing the university in Africa: Epistemic freedom and other freedoms

Although the colonial incursion presupposed the hegemonic place of colonial modes of knowing and knowledge-making in the global knowledge paradigm (Kumalo, 2021), as a point of departure in the grounding of African students, there is a need to go beyond the 'colonial encounter'. The importance of this approach lies in the fact that Africans, as historical and philosophical beings, are people with histories, philosophies and knowledge systems – with theories and methodologies - that existed long before colonialism.

With such acknowledgement, decolonisation proposes the democratisation of knowledge production and the acknowledgement of other pyramids of knowledge, including the African pyramid of knowledge. In this proposition, one can read the call for decolonisation as the establishment of mutual deference between competing knowledge systems. This is only possible if Western intellectual traditions are stripped of their entrenched universalistic pretensions and long-standing misguided universalising propensities. Given that the colonial yoke continues to bear down on the African university in terms of the non-

material and material institutional cultures, African ideas and actions must also have meaning and relevance to this specific intellectual environment. Thus, African scholars and intellectuals cannot be 'free-floating' signifiers (Mafeje, 2000) and do not have the luxury of speaking from anywhere (Mitova, 2019) on unyoking the African universities of the burden of epistemic oppression. Hence to decentre Eurocentrism is to reject the notion of a thinker without a point of origin, without a history, without an ideological position, and without interest in the outcomes of this critical conversation (Zeleza, 2013).

A worrying trend is that most African universities are downplaying their particular histories by emphasising their 'global' qualities and positioning themselves for global leadership in research, teaching and active engagement in global issues (Kamola, 2011). Universities in Africa will be better off not taking this path but focusing on reversing epistemicide to unyoke these institutions of Western epistemological paradigms as their core features in knowledge. This is important because many African scholars have articulated a visceral critique of African scholarship as characterised by mimetism of the worst kind (Hountondji, 1992; Prah, 1989), especially mimetic philopraxis (Ramose, 1999) and failure to tap into traditional wisdom and the African archives. In this regard, they have demonstrated how far imported approaches may be irrelevant for analysing and understanding local societies.

Such a critique is essential in grounding the unyoking of the African universities of the burden of Western theories, methodologies, philosophies and historical distortions. As the Eritrean philosopher Serequeberhan (1990) points out, "in the name of the universality of values, European colonialism violently universalised its singular particularity and annihilated the historicity of the colonised. In this context, western philosophy - in the guise of a disinterested, universalistic, transcendental, speculative discourse - served the essential function of being the ultimate veracious buttress of European conquest".

Repurposing the university in Africa is thus a prerequisite for an authentic post-colonial African university and to make sense of claims that any form of

knowledge makes effective meaning on the condition that it is located only within its cultural context (Ndofirepi and Cross, 2014). Hence a collection titled *Knowledge and Change in African Universities: Volume 1 – Current Debates* calls for universities in Africa to relocate from the position of the object to the subject to gain a form of independent epistemological voice more responsive to the social and economic complexities of the continent (Cross and Ndofirepi, 2017).

From the sociology of knowledge, we must appreciate that the Western university system is not universalisable, its standards are not gold standards, its model is idiographic, not nomothetic, and it is an injustice to impose them on university institutions across the African continent. As Okere et al. (2005) point out, all knowledge, including Western ability, is first local and, as Mafeje (2000) warns the enthusiasts with universal pretensions, universal knowledge can only exist in contradiction. Hence, we need to understand the concept of standards or excellence as an entirely non-referential, open concept, acquiring meaning only in relation to some further context and purpose (Jansen, 1995; Readings, 1999). By this understanding, Western knowledge is deeply pathological in its claims of being universal and objective, whereas it is highly ethnocentric and cannot be the essential knowledge at repurposed universities in Africa.

The process of repurposing the university in Africa calls for Africans to develop a particular historical appreciation of the damage caused to their ontological authenticity, come to terms with the legacy of epistemic injustice, embrace the historical importance of their self-worth and instil a sense of urgency in the task ahead for repurposing such institutions. According to Mungwini (2017), to reverse epistemic injustice and pursue liberating knowledge, the maxim or injunction of the moment should be: "African, know thyself." Clearly, among other conditions, overcoming colonialism requires that the violated human beings have to recover and re-appropriate what is theirs (Freire, 1970) and that they re-instantiate their 'ontological legitimacy' (Kumalo, 2018). Hence, rebellion against alterity and extroversion and the question of the locus of enunciation of knowledge, that is,

the privileging of Africa as an independent epistemic site, pre-occupied the mind of scholars such as Mafeje (Adesina, 2008; Nabudere, 2011).

For Ramose, an Ubuntu perspective on this problem argues that the "epistemic decolonial turn" overlooks "decolonisation", as contended by Africans, and disregards humanisation as the fundamental counter to the de-humanisation project of colonialism (Ramose, 2001). Given this problematisation, it could be that the point of departure will have to be anchored in Africanity as a combative ontology which seeks to humanise the African and needs to be informed by African philosophy, African epistemologies, and African methodologies and African theories.

Thus, repurposing the university in Africa is essentially tied not only to the epistemic wrongs and violence of colonialism, especially in how this marginalised and silenced knowledge systems of African people. Partly it involves reclaiming the right to think and theorise from the African point of view rather than from the one unjustly imposed on Africans by European colonisers. Inevitably, the signature features of epistemicide and valuecide force Africans to search for meaning, reason and relevance through intellectual standpoints derived from rootedness in African conditions and sensibilities and acknowledging and affirming African ontological legitimacies (Lebakeng, 2018).

However, I posit that to succeed, the idea of repurposing the African university should extend beyond institutions of higher learning and constitute a comprehensive attempt at national self-recovery. What is needed is to re-establish the historical legitimacy of Africa as a unit of analysis and a point of reference. Even those who destroyed Africa and denied her people their humanity take the dictum "know thyself" very seriously. According to the Greek writer Pausanias, this Ancient Greek aphorism is one of the Delphic maxims and was inscribed in the pronaos of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. The phrase was later expounded upon by the philosopher Socrates who taught that: The unexamined life is not worth living. Socrates says in Plato's *Phaedrus* that people make themselves appear ridiculous when they are trying to know obscure things before they know

themselves. Plato also alluded that understanding 'thyself' would have a more significant yielded factor in understanding the nature of a human being. The irony here should not be lost on Africans, as Western epistemology denied them self-knowledge.

Africans will need to dispense with their status anxiety or worries stemming from considerations of what Western academic orthodoxy would think, especially in light of deceptions that repurposing the university to be relevant to the African condition will lower standards and assertions that efforts at indigenisation offer no 'creative breathing space. Repurposing the university in Africa should neither be debatable nor negotiable. This is so because the continuing status quo in the structures, cultures and purpose of the African university that marginalises African cultural practices and experiences is cognitively violent, ethically unjustifiable and pedagogically unsustainable.

Concluding remarks

There have been raging debates on how universities in Africa should break from the yoke of the erstwhile colonisers as manifested in content, research, technology and language. Ironically, in these attempts, Western logic and models were used as paradigms in investigating, interrogating, and evaluating our knowledge practice (Jimoh, 2018). This is partly because the epistemic violence of the colonial model of the academic organisation of the university, based on Western disciplinary knowledge, remains entrenched. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that a great deal of work has already been done by African scholars and intellectuals across the continent, and this has established archival records for posterity and as a baseline. Therefore, we do not need to start *de novo* or continue to be seduced by new and passing intellectual fads.

In the same breath, we need to heed some of the warnings about a 'return to the source' (Matolino, 2016; Eze, 1997b). Although Eze's sign is pointed to a particular case of Wiredu's arguments, Matolino provides a theoretical warning as a matter of principle by pointing out that at least three problems pose some

significant threat to the project of the return to the source. This is because: (a) there is a problem in interpreting what the exact nature of that traditional set-up was, (b) there is a problem in working out how the traditional mode can fit into the modern, and (c) there is the problem of the possibility that different sources existed in that pristine past. Being conscious of such warnings, in some of my previous writings, I have alluded to what the practical steps and selected areas of focus could be in addressing the issues of using Africa as a source pursuant to the challenges of moving towards an African university (Lebakeng, Phalane and Nase, 2006; Lebakeng, 2016).

The responsibility of the new generation of African scholars is to consolidate the lofty work already done. In this, the new generation must be cognisant that the unyoking project cannot be limited to the level of theories and changes in texts and intellectual icons but must consider material inequalities and institutional and power factors. As they consolidate, they can take comfort from the observation of Mafeje (1985) that intellectual traditions take time to be established. Until Africa develops an indigenous African intellectual cadre, the continent's knowledge poverty and deepening material deprivation will not end. Herein lies the relevance of repurposing the university in Africa. In addition, there is a need to continue the responsibility of shining a light into the darkness of colonialism and apartheid-settlerism, to reveal the illusions and historical erasures that have enabled the persistence of racist epistemologies. There is a lot that the Western world could learn from Africa, but that can only happen when Africa looks at herself, her history, traditions and culture and does not allow herself to be subjugated to the global governance of education (Brock-Unte, 2017).

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