

FROM AFRO-CENTRISM TO DECOLONIAL HUMANISM AND AFRO-PLURALITY

A RESPONSE TO SIMPHIWE SESANTI

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One by one, nations across the African continent won formal political independence in the second half of the 20th century. Some decades since the formal end of colonial rule, the continent continues to be plagued by significant residues of a bygone era. Neo-colonialism is a concept designed specifically to capture several, now implicit, economic, cultural, social and political processes that continue to reproduce patterns of inequality between Europe and its former colonies. Calls for decolonisation are thus necessary and legitimate as Africans continue their efforts to remedy historical injustices. Simphiwe Sesanti’s “Afrocentric education for an African Renaissance” (in this issue) should be read in this context.

At the core of Sesanti’s piece is the notion that tapping into subjugated African “knowledge(s)” is essential to dismantling neo-colonialism. Africa’s economic, social and political ills will be cured through a reclamation of the continent’s lost cultural reservoir. The battle over education – what is taught, how it is taught, and by whom

– is thus a crucial site of decolonial resistance.

“Epistemic violence” is an important descriptive and normative concept. The suppression of African traditions and epistemologies is a fact of history that needs to be acknowledged. Moreover, it produces a normative injunction: how are we, as Africans, to rehabilitate indigenous thought in a way that speaks to local histories and particularities while also meeting the concrete challenges that the continent faces in today’s hyper-globalised political economy? This is the historic mission of our time.

Because institutions of learning play a central role in shaping society, Sesanti reasons that African universities should be tasked with creating and propagating an Afrocentric education. Noting that a majority black professoriate or a black student body will not necessarily produce this, his call for holistic transformation is crucial in a debate that has often been reduced to numbers and quotas. For Sesanti, Africanisation is about values, and whether an African university depends upon values that are >>

espoused through its curriculum. If these values are rooted in African culture, then it is Afrocentric.

Sesanti has identified the need to think through the consequences of epistemic injustice. However, his paper underplays the complexity of Africa's historic challenge. One could take issue with several inconsistencies and factual errors in his article, the cherry-picking of quotations often used out of context, or engage him on the subtleties of curriculum change in the sciences and social sciences, but we focus here on something more fundamental: his presentation of what constitutes African culture and tradition.

Sesanti's essay implies that there is, and has always been, one unique African culture, distinct from European and other cultures, to which an Afrocentric academy should attend. Unfortunately, his definitions of this culture, often borrowed from other authors, are vague, inconsistent and abstract, inviting multiple interpretations.

Quoting Maulana Karenga, Sesanti defines Afrocentricism as "rooted in the cultural image and human interests of African people". Being "rooted in the cultural image" of Africans means "to be anchored in the views and values of African people." Yet this does little to clarify those "views and values". What exactly is the "cultural image and human interests of African people?" Is this image necessarily shared by all Africans on the continent?

Going some way to answer this, Sesanti presents a seSotho maxim as reflecting of pan-African philosophy. He writes: "This maxim teaches that if and when a choice must be made between the preservation of human life and the possession of wealth that may be dispensed with, then it is imperative to choose for the preservation of human life." However, such an attitude is not uniquely African. Philosophers and religious figures from Europe and



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Asia have said similar things. Such a statement may have been made by Jesus or Lao Tzu.

To use another example, Sesanti argues that the goal of traditional African education is to "mould agents of society who would make a contribution towards the advancement of a humane society for the preservation of human dignity through just political, social and economic systems". Once more, this aim is not distinctive to Africa. Sesanti leaves the interesting questions unanswered: What is a humane society? What is human dignity? What political, social and economic systems would help realise human flourishing? How does an Afrocentric education relate to these questions?

It is simply empirically incorrect to assert that Africans have shared a singular identity across time. Accepting this, we can then abandon attempts to define a common African tradition. In this paper, we will try to demonstrate that not much is lost in doing so. While the argument that tribal and

ethnic conflict today is a consequence of colonialism has merit, it is quite another thing to assert that those who inhabited the continent before colonialism did not have meaningful differences between them, and that those differences do not continue to reverberate today.

In order to ground an essential, if undefined, African identity, Sesanti must rationalise precolonial conflict. He does so on spurious grounds. His account of precolonial African warfare is, at best, shallow, and, at worst, romantic. He asserts that Africans avoided violence if diplomacy could achieve the ends desired by an aggressive power. Moreover, if conflict did ensue, losers accepted loss with dignity, while the victors incorporated the vanquished into a morally legitimate "African empire". There is, however and again, nothing uniquely African about this. In fact, these seem like two general principles of war. The expedient use of coercion and diplomacy before pursuing armed conflict, and the provision of some ideological legitimisation for empire, can be found in Sun Tzu's classic *Art of War* – and probably in the strategy documents of the US State Department today.

Sesanti's efforts therefore tell us very little about what constitutes the shared "African" bond that connected precolonial tribes. But this whole line of argument could have been avoided if he abandoned searching for such a thing.

Culture is not something static and immutable, but is rather moving, dynamic, flexible. One would be hard-pressed to define "white" or "Western" or "Asian" or "Latin American" culture without running into the same issues that Sesanti creates. Are we to say European culture is rooted in Enlightenment or Christian values? Is Asian culture Confucian or Buddhist? Why the desire for reduction in the first place?

Ultimately, Sesanti's wish to find an "authentic" Africa fails to account not only for the varied cultures and traditions the continent has hosted, but also fails to consider how these cultures have transformed and intermingled over time. The same harmful reduction is performed on Europe when we are told that education, in colonial times, was dominated by the capitalist class in Europe and that its graduates, in Europe and in the colonies, were tailored to suit the needs of capital accumulation. Are we then talking about a common essential/authentic European culture being expressed in these teachings, or are we talking about the domination of capitalist values over others?

Marx, a European political philosopher, recognised the relationship between culture and capital accumulation. In *The German Ideology*, he argues that the "ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force". European utopian socialists, monks, and anarchists, shared the same geographical location as European capitalists, yet they all railed against capitalist education. Could there be some affinity between anti-capitalist cultural traditions in Europe and anti-capitalist traditions in Africa? We wouldn't ask this if we uncritically accepted Sesanti's Africa–Europe dichotomy.

Cultural evolutions have always been guided by exchange and transfer. Ideas, traditions and religious practises hop across borders, whether intra- or transcontinental. Indeed, Africa was crucial to the development of science at a time when Europe wallowed in superstition and tribal and religious conflict. Scholars on the continent excavated, translated and interpreted the works of Aristotle, Plato and other Greek philosophers, and transported

their teachings to Europe. Although noting this exchange, Sesanti fails to take its implications to heart, implying instead that the ancient Greeks belong to Europeans while the ancient Egyptians belong to Africans. In doing so, instead of dismantling the colonial imaginary, Sesanti in fact implicitly supports it. Following his prescriptions would merely reproduce colonial binaries and Manichean thinking.

If we accept that coloniality has hidden these processes of cultural and knowledge exchange, then our whole line of reasoning around decolonisation becomes more biting. A decolonised philosophy curriculum, for example, would include philosophy that has been written on this continent, but it would also question the purported "Europeanness" of the ancient Greeks and indeed the very basis of the notion of a "Western" canon. Why, today, do we so often equate the Enlightenment, science and rationality with Europe – as if the Moors had nothing to do with scientific progress? Why do we equate non-European cultures with a rejection of "Reason" – as if Nietzsche and the romantics did not point to the limitations and potential destructiveness of technical and instrumental rationality? The history of thought is more complex than the current discourse surrounding decolonisation lets on.

Perhaps, then, a shift of focus or intention is needed, a shift towards a decolonial humanism and an Afro-

plurality. Instead of searching after an African purity, perhaps we should welcome its diversity. Looking back to history, essentialism inadvertently performs the same epistemic injustice we set out to fight. Looking to the present and the future, Afro-plurality offers an inclusivity that an Afro-purism born of essentialism does not. Our continent is home to millions of people of different races, different languages, different belief systems and different traditions. Black, white, Arab, Asian, mixed-race, gay, straight, queer, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, San, Zulu, Maasai... Exactly how much of our history and today's human resources are we willing to discard in a stubborn search for Afro-purity?

In order to avoid essentialism, decolonial politics must be consciously pluralistic, in search of the remarkably textured history of this continent and its relationship to those outside its borders. To search instead for a unified African soul leads directly to essentialist and romantic caricatures. We need not create more phantoms. We should look back with open eyes and unbounded curiosity into the varying cultures, belief systems and traditions that have made, and continue to make, this continent their home. Decolonisation must involve re-centring these in our imaginations. It cannot mean replacing one falsehood with another. To borrow from Fanon, there is no "European" world, any more than there is an "African" world. There are, and have only ever been, persons who search for some meaning and value in community with one another. This they have done, and continue to do, in response to the human condition.

We should also look forward and be ready to embrace the future. Our universities should prepare us for an honest confrontation with our past and what will be a generation-defining confrontation with our present. **NA**



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