

Rethinking the Norm

Sheila Aketch

Abstract

This article explores the origins of African Studies, including when it began and who its forefathers were. The objective is then to define epistemic injustice, identify its manifestations in African Studies, and propose practical solutions. All of these will be inspired by Einstein's philosophy of not solving problems with the same mind that created them. The goal is to find solutions to the root cause of the injustices.

Keywords: African Studies, Epistemic Injustice, knowledge

Introduction

'Tackle the root cause, not the effect,' says Haresh Sippy. Epistemic injustice has sparked widespread outrage in African studies. However, these injustices are not new; they have existed since the beginning of the African Studies discourse. Why are there epistemic injustices? What are the problems we are attempting to avoid? This paper examines the historical evolution of African studies, tracing its origin and development over time. As we delve deeper into this subject, however, we are confronted with the unsettling reality of epistemic injustices that have plagued the discipline for decades.

To address these issues with scholarly rigour, the paper explores the various manifestations of epistemic injustice within the discipline and how they have impeded the authenticity of African knowledge systems. Drawing on the insights of scholars from various backgrounds, it provides a nuanced and contextually relevant definition of epistemic injustice in African studies. The paper also highlights how Eurocentric perspectives have dominated the field, marginalizing knowledge systems from Africa and perpetuating an epistemic violence cycle that silences African voices. This paper is a call to action as well as an

analysis of the problems that persist in African studies. We propose novel solutions that challenge the status quo, such as creating platforms for African voices to be heard and advocating for a more inclusive and diverse curriculum. We also define epistemic freedom and its implications for African Studies, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Afrocentric and decolonial schools of thought to provide a roadmap for African Studies' decolonization.

Finally, this article is a testament to the transformative potential of scholarship and the power of knowledge to effect change. It gives a glimpse of how we can imagine a world free of epistemic injustices by thinking critically and creatively, and African Studies is a field that truly reflects the diversity and richness of African cultures and perspectives. The paper hopes to motivate African scholars to contribute to a more thorough and equitable understanding of Africa and its people.

What's with the name: 'African Studies'

African Studies can be traced back to anthropological research conducted by European explorers, missionaries, and imperialists. At the end of World War II in 1945, the global crusade against colonialism began. This also resulted in the introduction of African Studies in the United States of America (USA), which was a response to the intellectual demands and policy requirements for strengthening and projecting U.S. power in the post-war world period (Olukoshi, 2006). These ideologies also resonated with the European higher education system, which was concerned with how to foster "development" after colonialism ended. While in the United States, research was essential for developing foreign policy and strategies. In Europe, development strategies were used to respond to rising nationalist demands for independence. One of these responses was the formal establishment of African Studies Institutes, throughout Europe and North Africa, with pioneer staff drawn

from former colonial provincial and district officials (Olukoshi, 2006).

The Hunter Lion Analogy of Epistemic Injustice

"Until the lion tells his side of the story, the hunting tale will always glorify the hunter." The hunter's heroic acts of conquering the forest and taming the barbaric lion, will cause the audience to applaud and believe the hunter is the hero. When the lion becomes "civil enough" decades later, to reveal the hunter's cruel, deceptive, and backstabbing nature, his story is called into question (Achebe, 1958). In this essay, the hunter and lion analogy represents' African history told through Eurocentric lenses. Hunters, in this case, European explorers, imperialists, missionaries, and colonizers, have always told the Africans' story. They have always applauded their brave acts in Africa, such as discovering vast lands, rivers, lakes, valleys, and mountains, civilizing the barbaric Africans, and rescuing them from traditions such as polygamy, witchcraft, and voodoo. Thanks to recent advances in African scholarship, the lions could tell their story of how they resisted the hunter and fought to the death to protect their dignity and territories.

The problem is that they are saying it in the hunters' language, not their own, where they can freely express themselves. Due to the power dynamics in the forest, the lions' story has always lacked credibility. Even though African Studies has provided Africans with a platform to tell and write their stories, the road has not been easy; colonial legacies have always cast a shadow over African history and knowledge. As a result, I contend that understanding Africa through Eurocentric perspectives, theories, experiences, and history has alienated African history, perpetuating what we now call epistemic injustice.

Understanding Epistemic Injustice

According to the Oxford dictionary, injustice is the absence of fairness, prejudice, bias, or suppression, which African knowledge faces globally. African knowledge, commonly referred to as "indigenous knowledge," exacerbates the problem. From a place where indigenous implies something native, African knowledge has been relegated to pseudo-science, subaltern knowledge, or "savage science" (Santos, 2018). This mindset has resulted in a preconceived negative ranking of so-called Indigenous knowledge compared to modern science. Pitting it against scientific research as if it belonged in opposed realms (Hountondji, 2002). As a result, African knowledge has been excluded from the global arena of knowledge production, generating an unjust situation. In her seminal book *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker defines 'epistemic Injustice,' as a process that degrades certain groups of people regarding their status as epistemic subjects. It can manifest itself in various ways, such as hermeneutical marginalization, which occurs when a socially disadvantaged group is denied access to knowledge or to communicating knowledge. Resulting in a gap in collective interpretive resources and putting someone in an unfair position. Secondly, testimonial injustice occurs when prejudices cause a listener to give a speaker's word a deflated level of credibility (Fricker, 2007).

In her contribution to this debate, Kristie Dotson refers to it as epistemic oppression, which she defines as a persistent exclusion that impedes one's contribution to knowledge production (Dotson, 2011). Chimakonam also emphasizes that epistemology can be complete only if it is founded on justice (Chimakonam, 2018). On the other hand, Bhargava introduces the coloniality order into this discourse by coding it as a cultural injustice that occurs when concepts through which people understand themselves and their world, are replaced by the colonizers' concepts (Bhargava, 2013). Bhargava's concept focuses on the underlying cause of injustices and how colonialism has contributed to these epistemic injustices. I opine

that identifying the root cause and defining the problem, is the first step toward determining the type of remedies that can address epistemic Injustice in African Studies.

Contextualisation of the Epistemic injustices

In reference to Europeans, renowned South African singer turned civil activist Miriam Makeba stated, 'The conqueror is the one who writes history, for they came, conquered, and wrote.' The question of who wrote African history is essential because it is from this point that most disciplines in African Studies developed. According to the hegemonic view, Africa was a tabular rasa hence the label "dark continent," which prompted the need to write about it. Much of written history was driven by Europe's desire to understand Africa rather than Africans' need to recount their histories. African Studies was developed by the same people accused of causing injustices such as colonization, which has been the epicentre of all epistemic injustices in African Studies.

Furthermore, given that hunters have dominated African Studies scholarship, the question of whether they can be trusted to tell the truth is compelling. As much as we debate epistemic injustice, it is also critical to ask why African Studies was founded in the first place. Who is the target audience, who controls the narrative, and how does the narrator benefit? The answers to these questions could point to some practical solutions to these epistemic injustices. The pioneering African studies centres established in modern African universities had very close ties with the global North in their early years. Many founding members were from or educated in the Global North. Hence, African Studies in the South was a carbon copy of what was being studied in the North (Olukoshi, 2006).

Politics of Knowledge

Because knowledge is an intrinsic epistemic good, it should be distributed following the same fairness principle as essential

goods. However, dominant societies have monopolized knowledge production, assuming control over what counts as knowledge and who is recognized as a credible knower. As a result, knowledge from the Global South has suffered the injustices associated with the politics of knowledge production (Ogone, 2017). This brings up Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice, which occurs when a relatively vulnerable population is denied the epistemic resources to explain their experiences, thereby inhibiting intelligibility and understanding. When making sense of their social experiences, hermeneutical injustice creates a gap in the collective interpretive resources, putting people at an unfair disadvantage (Fricker, 2007).

In the case of African Studies, the interpretation of social phenomena appears to have been 'known about,' speculated over, explored both in actuality and fantasy, and even mapped by the Greeks, Jews, Arabs, and Phoenicians, each took their turns' (Soyinka cited in Ndlovu- Gatsheni, 2018). This shows how hermeneutical epistemic injustice has played out in African Studies. For example, in the study of African history, as a long-term result of modernity, enslavement, and colonization, African scholars were reproduced as agents in a Eurocentric history. Therefore, what exists today as a philosophy of history is still Eurocentric, neo- Enlightenment, neo-Hegelian, neo Marxist, neo-modernist, and Habermasian (Ndlovu- Gatsheni, 2018).

The politics of knowledge production does not end there. It has permeated the knowledge published by African scholars. Historical power imbalances have resulted in hierarchies in scholarly publications. Ensuring that only a few publications are recognized from the myriad of works published by African scholars (Nyamnjoh, 2012). As per Connell's observation, 'to publish in metropolitan journals, one must write in metropolitan genres, and cite their literature.' In consequence, with a few exceptions, journals, and other publication outlets from Africa,

have been met with doubt and suspicion in their promotion and assessment (Connell, 2017).

The power imbalance in the production of knowledge has always existed. Since the Global North operates as gatekeepers in the academic world, selecting what knowledge enters and exits. With this kind of power, studying Africa through lenses other than those created by the Global North becomes difficult. Because, as Ssentongo puts it, it is always what interests them that is considered credible knowledge. Call it soft power or not; the Global North hold the keys to knowledge production (Ssentongo, 2020). This can be summarized by Raewyn Connell's Southern Theory, which says the global knowledge economy is skewed in favour of the hegemonic North. Who exercises epistemic gatekeeping, determining what counts as knowledge or not? According to this theory, the South is primarily responsible for data collection, compiled in the North and then returned to the South as theories (Connell, 2017).

Thou shalt not speak in tongues

Miranda also addresses testimonial injustice, which occurs when prejudice causes a listener to give a "deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word—implying that someone is not believed to the extent that they deserve to be believed (Fricker, 2007). In this case, prejudice can manifest itself in various ways: Identity prejudice, according to Fricker, is a type of bias that comes with a person's identity. Subsequently, all the knowledge they claim to have may not be credible based on their identity. Evidence of injustice raises the issue of credibility based on the speaker's language. Historically, language has been used to conceal colonial processes, (Olatunji, 2010).

Language is essential to knowledge production because it leads to epistemic and cultural identity (Mampane et al. I 2018). Language policy also aims to promote a country's sociolinguistic culture and environment; thus, imposing language is imposing culture. That leads to cultural superiority and the systematic

subjugation of other cultures (Higgs, 2012; Olatunji, 2010). Language is compelling in conferring credibility to knowledge produced. An accent can significantly impact how much credibility a listener gives a speaker, especially in a one-time exchange. Accents not only carry a social charge that affects how a hearer perceives a speaker--it may indicate a particular socioeconomic or regional background--but also carries an epistemic charge (Fricker, 2007). This injustice has made most African scholars' credibility suffer because they lack a command of the colonial language, which has remained a standard language for knowledge production. Credibility relates to a person's believability and is conferred on individuals by the community (McConkey, 2004). Since the community or society has the power to determine if one is believable, there is the possibility of denying some groups of people credibility (Eyo & Obioha, 2022). Most African scholars are victims of this type of injustice. By simply translating African concepts into colonial languages destroys their meaning. A significant part of African knowledge is transmitted orally, making translation extremely difficult, hence the suppression and monopolization of knowledge through language (Eyo & Obioha, 2022).

Epistemic Injustice Antidote

There has been much debate, particularly with the emergence of decolonial thinkers who advocate for epistemic freedom. Which is the right to think, theorize, and interpret the world from wherever one is located and free of Eurocentrism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The decolonization concept aims at epistemological transformation towards an inclusive approach to what should count as knowledge. It is a deliberate call toward a change of Eurocentric epistemologies that excludes African perspectives (Woldegiorgis, 2020). The decolonization debate is ideal because it calls for the restructuring and total reorientation of epistemologies, curriculum, and languages used in African studies, making them more inclusive and relevant to Africa (Woldegiorgis, 2020). These discussions have prompted many

scholars to reconsider knowledge production, a step toward epistemic justice in Africa.

Many scholars have also jumped on Ndlovu's call for deprovincializing Africa, an intellectual and academic process that centres on Africa as a legitimate historical unit of analysis. An epistemic site from which to interpret the world while also globalizing knowledge from Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Indeed, the revolution that began with discussions about decolonizing epistemology has impacted African Studies. The point is to legitimize African knowledge, and with these movements, many have started to question the Eurocentric epistemologies. Moreover, providing an alternative voice by publishing books and articles and organizing seminars and conferences. This effectively put decolonial thought out there, a vital milestone toward epistemic freedom.

As early as 1965, African nationalists like Nyerere were pivotal in the Africanisation of African universities, which was a revolutionary idea in search of what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o calls a liberating perspective (Woldegiorgis, 2020). Many African Nationalists supported this, but the revolution did not produce the desired results (Woldegiorgis, 2020). While the African Nationalists had a great cause, they acted as an elitist group who were out of touch with Africans in the periphery. Thus, the cherry remained at the top. Because most Africans were unaware of the relevance of changing the history and curriculum taught in their schools, decolonial thinkers in African Studies should interact with young scholars in Africa and the diaspora to avoid making the same mistakes. This is because, based on the current African curriculum, most African nations inherited the colonial curriculum, which includes teaching colonial history and Eurocentric views in African institutions. It will be critical to change the young scholars' mindsets by introducing them to these alternatives. The point is that decolonial thinkers and young scholars should collaborate to achieve a common goal: epistemic freedom.

To achieve epistemic justice in African studies, it is prudent to follow the advice of Mobutu Sseseko, who advocated for the complete emancipation of the Congo's education system from the Western model by returning to authenticity while paying due attention to scientific knowledge. 'It is preferable to have an educational system that shapes young people to meet our needs. This would make them truly Congolese,' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The goal is not to live in a bubble, blocking out all outside thoughts, but to believe in African knowledge production methods and make it accessible to the average person. If African Studies would adapt to Mobutu's philosophy, then this would lead to the training of experts in African studies, who will be authentic to African thought and produce relevant knowledge for African scholarship. A challenge for decolonial thinkers in the diaspora would be to take the conversation to African institutions and capture the African mind as early as possible.

Moreover, there should be called to overhaul the curriculum in most African institutions completely. There is a need for academic freedom, which seeks institutional autonomy and allows students to express diverse ideas (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). When institutions allow critical consciousness to knowledge production, cognitive freedom is achieved by acknowledging the various ways in which humans all over the world make sense of their existence (Santos, 2014). Indeed, a more realistic way of dealing with the dominant narrative, which has always been shaped by what the global North wants, is to form a powerful intellectual alliance of scholars hence a non-Eurocentric power. This can happen if African scholars, researchers, and intellectuals actively and deliberately change their audience (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Western knowledge has been defined by the erasure and silencing of local voices. Consequently, African knowledge has been subjected unfairly to foreign standards, which are now used to evaluate knowledge. For this reason, African knowledge is validated within the

dominant frame of reference. African scholars who do not follow the established rules risk being excluded from the mainstream discourse (Ogone, 2017). What if Africans became the primary audience for African researchers and scholars? Then the dynamics of knowledge production would change, and African scholars would not have to seek credibility from the Global North (Hountondji, 2002). In the end, African Studies scholars and researchers would be free to produce the relevant type of knowledge that speaks of the African experiences and realities.

Another practical solution would be establishing more African Studies centres in African institutions, research centres, think tanks, and publishing houses to promote critical thinking among African scholars. Because once Africans regain power, they will be free to write and teach whatever they want. The basis for sustainable epistemic freedom lies in formulating an original set of questions. It must begin with a focus on authenticity. The desire to be oneself by freely raising questions to a higher level of formulation, as opposed to passively accepting questions about us from other people's fixations (Hountondji, 2002). The presence of more African Studies institutes indicates accessibility and availability of the studies. This is significant because eliminating epistemic injustice in this discourse requires widespread participation.

Being educated in early African societies meant speaking in the colonizers' languages, which re-structured African societies into two groups: the literate elite and the illiterate. As a result, learning methods were limited to mastering the colonizers' languages (Mazrui, 1978). The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1938). Considering this, how about allowing African scholars to express their realities in different languages other than the standard colonial languages? There should be a critical rethinking of colonial legacies, and language is one of them. The consequences of these legacies have made it impossible for Africans to read or write in their Indigenous language(s). Thus,

stripping them of their representations, identity, culture, heritage, and especially their imaginary (Woldegiorgis, 2020). It will be very ambitious to call for African scholars only to produce knowledge in their local languages. Nevertheless, multilingualism and the intellectualization of Indigenous languages will allow Africans to freely express themselves, and their audience can relate. One of the difficulties in African studies is studying Africa as a country, which has resulted in generalizations in explaining African realities. This can be avoided if Africa is studied as a continent concerning the diversity in this space. If we begin this discussion, we will be on the right track toward epistemological justice. Many African institutions rely excessively on "Western philanthropy" to fund research projects. Such projects' knowledge is not always contextually relevant to the continent. Many scholars seek to practice their skills elsewhere, resulting in a brain drain. It also deprives Africa of the expertise required to raise them (Ogone, 2017).

In his autobiography, Binyavanga Wainaina, a Kenyan writer, discusses his unsuccessful writing contact with the European Union. He had been asked to write a book about Sudan's sleeping sickness. When he submitted his completed manuscript, he was informed that it was flawed and that "many things were not in accordance with E.U. policy." He was surprised to be offered his entire fee if he returned the book! He declined the offer and concluded, "I'm beginning to understand why Kenya produces so little good literature," (Binyavanga, 2011). This case exemplifies the political goals of epistemic gatekeeping. The African government and higher education institutions can take on this responsibility by investing more resources in African research. They will have eliminated the over-reliance on donor funds and the donors' ability to dictate the type of knowledge produced in Africa (Ogone, 2017). It is time for African institutions and governments to take the initiative and allocate resources to academic and applied research in their respective African countries. Of importance is

that African institutions and governments should be more proactive in funding African-based research and scholarship.

Final Thought

Colonization was a mental and psychological battle that resulted in the alienation of the continent's culture, language, and intellect. Thus, African knowledge was demonized and dismissed as inferior, resulting in epistemic injustice. While much has been said about decolonizing the African mind and critical thoughts on alternative modes of knowledge production. It is time to rethink the normal by coming up with radical approaches, as discussed above, to achieve epistemic freedom in African Studies.

References

- Achebe. C, (1958). Things Fall Apart. William Heinemann Ltd.
- Olukoshi. A, (2006). African scholars and African Studies, Development in Practice, 16:6, 533-544, DOI: 10.1080/09614520600958116
- Bhargava. R, (2013). Overcoming the epistemic injustice of colonialism. Global Policy 4 (4), 413–7.
- Binyavanga. W, (2011). One Day I Will Write About This Place.
- Chimakonam. J, (2018). "Addressing the epistemic marginalization of women in African philosophy and building a culture of conversations." African Philosophy and the Epistemic Marginalization of Women (pp.8-21).
- Connell. R. (2017). "Southern Theory and World Universities." Higher Education Research and Development 36 (1): 4–15.
- Dotson, K, (2011). Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing.

Eyo. E. & Obioha, P. (2022). African Epistemology and Epistemic Injustice Against Women: Complementary Epistemology to the Rescue.

Fricker. M. (2007). Epistemic injustice. Power and the ethics of knowing.

Higgs. P. (2012). African philosophy and the decolonisation of education in Africa: Some critical reflections. Educational Philosophy and Theory.

Hountondji. P. J, (2002). The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa. Athens. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2011.00794.x>

Ssentongo. J. S, (2020) 'Which journal is that?' Politics of academic promotion in Uganda and the predicament of African publication outlets, Critical African Studies. DOI: 10.1080/21681392.2020.1788400

Mampane. R. M, Omidire, M. F., & Aluko, F. R. (2018). Decolonising higher education in Africa: Arriving at a global solution. South African Journal of Education. DOI:10.15700/saje.v38n4a1636

Mazrui. A. A, (1978) Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa.

McConkey. J, (2004). Knowledge and Acknowledgement: Epistemic Injustice as a Problem of Recognition.

Musitha. M. E & Mafukata M. A, (2018). Crisis of decolonising education: Curriculum implementation in Limpopo Province of South Africa.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni. S, (2018). Epistemic Freedom in Africa.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, (1938). Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.

Nyamnjoh. F. B, (2012). “Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa.

_____ (2012). “Potted Plants in Greenhouses’: A Critical Reflection on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa,”. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47 (2012): 127–54.

Ogone. J. O, (2017). Epistemic injustice: African knowledge and scholarship in the global context. *Postcolonial Justice*, pp. 191, 17–36.

Olatunji. S. A, (2010). Thematic changes in postcolonial Africa literature: From colonialism to neo-colonialism.

Santos. B. de S. (2014). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*. Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers.

Santos. B. de S. (2018). *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Woldegiorgis. E.T, Turner. I, & Brahim. A, (2020). *Decolonisation of Higher Education in Africa: Perspectives from Hybrid Knowledge Production* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355288>

Online Reference

Miriam Makeba Video On the conqueror Writes History
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rmjvGHwRM>