The Battle for Ideas in African Studies

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni
Chair in Epistemologies of the Global South with Emphasis on Africa
University of Bayreuth
Germany

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Opening remarks

Let me begin my observing all the protocols. Let me also express my thanks to the University of the Free State for offering me the Extraordinarius Professorship. It is indeed my great honour to deliver this Inaugural Lecture here during the heritage month. African knowledges are one of the important heritages that were looted since the time of colonial encounters. This is given expression by the existence of African art-works, sacred ritual materials and other important artefacts constitutive of what Toyin Falola (2018) has termed "ritual archives" that are kept in museums and art galleries in Europe.

My lecture is focused on the domain of knowledge in Africa where various crimes were committed. These ranged from what Jack Goody (2007) termed theft of history, what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009a, 2009b) depicted as epistemicides, culturecides, linguicides, and linguifam; and what Michel Foucault described as subjugated knowledges.

I thought of no other subject to address than the contestations and struggles haunting African Studies partly because my location at the Centre for Gender and African Studies and partly due to the fact that at the University of Bayreuth, I am the Vice-Dean for Research in the "Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence" whose overarching agenda is to reconfigure African Studies conceptually and structurally. I hold a Chair in Epistemologies of the Global South with Emphasis on Africa.

I also worked as Lecturer in African Studies at the Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies at the Open University in Milton Keynes in the United Kingdom. I received my education in Zimbabwe and built my academic career here in South Africa. Taken together, these experiences enable me to think about African Studies from diverse vantage point of Africa and Europe—these geospatial locations enable particular loci of enunciations of knowledge in general and conceptions of African Studies in particular.

Organization of the lecture

Today, I want to deal with four broad issues—of ***context, challenges, debates*** and the ***future*** of African Studies. In the first part of the lecture, I deal with those long-standing issues which form a necessary background and context to the understanding of African struggles for re-existence in general and those that haunt African knowledge domain in particular. In this lecture, I delineate nine elements of the broader discursive context within which African anti-colonial and decolonial struggles emerged namely the ***existential, historical, developmental, reparative/restitutive, material, identitarian, epistemic, dignitarian*** and ***re-membering/reconstitution***.

In the second part of the lecture, I delineate and reflect on 10 challenges confronting reconfiguring African Studies, namely ***genealogical, epistemic, linguistic, chronological, theoretical, spatial (area studies, country studies), androcentric, disciplinary, canonical*** issues and resilience of ***colonial library***. These challenges are posed as part of comfort zones (asserted and reasserted truth/common notions) in doing African Studies that have to be changed in accordance with demands for a decolonised African Studies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023b).

In the third part of the lecture, I briefly map out the broad scholarly debates reverberating within and impinging on African Studies, which constitute what I have termed the battle of ideas. The battle of ideas has become accentuated in the context of the current resurgent and insurgent decolonisation of the twenty-first century. The battle of ideas swirl around six broad issues: ***the re-opened basic epistemological questions*** and their implications for knowledge in general and African studies in particular , ***the contestations over the meaning and implications of colonialism*** arising within a context of intensified struggles for decolonization on the one hand, and on the other hand the rise of the right-wing revisionist discourses in colonialism, the debates on ***Marxism and decolonization***, the ***hegemony of the Africanist enterprise*** in African Studies, the ***coloniality of global economy of knowledge***, and the delicate issue of ***modes of writing about Africa*** in the 21st century.

The fourth and concluding part of the lecture is a reflection on the future of African Studies and it explores four possibilities: ***Comparative African Studies, Critical African Studies, Frontier African Studies***, and ***Global African Studies***.

Through these overlapping interventions, I will be able to delve into complex issues of the politics of knowledge and sociology of knowledge as they impinge on African Studies while at the same time making a case that decolonization may be an overloaded concept but it is not a buzzword, a slogan or a metaphor. There is concrete contexts and content which make decolonization as a grammar of liberation attractive and usable in the 21st century.

Context

In a present context where the agendas, initiatives and struggles for decolonization of knowledge are experiencing a pushback including being criticised for being wrong-headed (see Taiwo 2022), it is important to give context and delineate key unresolved long-standing issues driving it and impinging on African Studies. Nine of these elements are discernible.

(a) The existential question: At the centre of the existential challenge for those people who were reproduced as Black and native which include is the triple processes of social classification, racial hierarchization and feminization of human population as key technologies of 'coloniality of being' (see Wynter 2003; Maldonado-Torres 2007). Here was invented a people whose humanity was questioned, degraded and even denied. It is within this context where a colour line was drawn and some people were defined as a problem in the modern world (Du Bois 1898, 1903). This existential challenge provoked Aime Cesaire (quoted in Thiam 2014) to reflect on what he termed the three "tormenting questions:" who am I, what are we, and who are we in an antiblack world. With hindsight we now realise that the questioning of the humanity of other

people became an essential justification for carrying out of genocides, colonial conquests, enslavement, and other inimical colonial and capitalist activities. The questioning of the humanity of other people enabled the construction of what James Blaut (1993) termed the "colonizer's model of the world" within which lives of the enslaved and colonized became dispensable (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023c). This question is not yet resolved and it feeds into the Black Lives Matter movements of today.

(b) The historical question: The idea and philosophy of history in Africa is not about the past but about re-emergence and re-existence of African people against the background of colonialism which was accompanied by 'theft of history' as part of a broader agenda of denial of humanity. As a result of this, one finds that at the centre of knowledge production related to those who were categorised as Black and native, there is what Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr (2023: ix) termed 'politics of time' informed by a reality of a people who were "expelled from the time of history.' At the centre of this were and are the initiatives and activities of recovery of the past not simply as seeking 'proof of historicity' but as a means to use history to reclaim denied humanity, relocate Africans in the present, and deploy history 'as a transformative force' (Mbembe and Sarr 2023: x). This context must enable us to appreciate the works of such scholars as Cheikh Anta Diop, which directly challenged and turned upside down the Hegelian idea and philosophy of history which denied the place of Africa in human history. It must enable us to understand why at the centre of the Negritude movement was the issue of 'presence Africaine' (African presence) (see Diagne 2023).

(c) The development question: A people whose humanity was questioned and denied were also said to be incapable of engaging in any forms of self-improvement. They were considered to be without any ideas of development. They were deemed to be primitive people enveloped by the mantle of darkness. Such a people became candidates for the colonial civilizing mission with its attendant violence and brutalities. Here was born a people who were turned into objects of development. Development discourse became part of ways of entrenchment of coloniality (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Murrey and Delay 2023). This is why there are increasing searches for modes of living and self-improvement that are delinked from racial capitalism and its exploitative practices. What emerged poignantly from this were struggles for self-reliance.

(d) The material question: The people who were subjected to racism, enslavement, genocides, colonial conquest, colonial dispossession, displacement and exploitative racial capitalism became exposed to processes which deliberately sought to destitute, under-develop, and impoverish them. The survivors today exist as providers of cheap labour within a globalised division labour defined by race, class and gender. Such a people were severed from their modes of production and in the process their very dignity, which was linked to ownership of resources including land, in the first instance, was attacked and destroyed.

(e) The reparative/restitutive question: This is a justice issue for a people who were deeply aggrieved as they were subjected and exposed to various colonial crimes of enslavement, genocide, colonial conquest, dispossession, displacement, exploitation, underdevelopment, and made to live a life where their lives do not matter. The demand

for reparations and the restitutive politics point to the damages done through enslavement, colonialism, racial capitalism, neo-colonialism, and heteropatriarchal sexism as systems and structures, which were deliberately introduced to destitute Africans. Reparations and restitution are part of the decolonial agenda of re-constitution and re-membering. Already the restitutive struggle is going on for recovery and return of African art and ritual artefacts.

(f) The identitarian question: The key issue is that of a people who suffered denial of self-definition and were exposed to external definitions and representations by others. What emerged was an imposed identity crisis for a people who underwent a series of "inventions" and "re-inventions" as deficient subject. The misrepresentations were backed up using fables, mythologies and stereotypes (Mudimbe 1988). This resulted in colonial forms of governmentality predicated on define and rule (Mamdani 1996; 2013). Therefore, the struggles of today include fighting for self-definition and attainment of sovereign selfhood.

(g) The epistemic question: A people denied humanity automatically experience denial of possession of knowledge and are said to lack epistemic virtue (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Consequently, those who were defined as Black and native were subjected to coloniality of knowledge which entailed epistemicides as prerequisites for genocides, linguicides and culturecides. The reality which emerged from this is that even the very conceptions of the "human" and the "social" which gave birth to Humanities and Social Sciences were conceived under Euromodernity against what was considered Black and native (see Vargas and Jung 2021; Sithole 2020). This reality makes the case for epistemological decolonization very necessary as a driver of redemptive African Studies.

(h) Dignitarian question: The concept of dignitarianism is borrowed from Ali A. Mazrui who used it to capture what he termed an experience of "lived humiliation" for African people who are the most humiliated in modern history. This is how Mazrui (2001: 107) put it: "no other groups were subjected to such large-scale indignities of enslavement for several centuries in their millions as the Africans were. No other groups experienced to the same extent such indignities as lynching, systematic segregation, and well-planned apartheid as the Africans were. It is against this background that Africa`s dignitarian impulse was stimulated. A deep-seated African rebellion against humiliation was aroused. It has been a misnomer to call this rebellion 'nationalism.' This has not been an African quest for nationhood. At best nationhood has been just the means to an end. The deep-seated African struggle has been a quest for dignity—human and racial."

(i) Re-membering question: This is pertinent for a people who suffered what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009a, 2009b) termed "dismemberment" which entailed kidnapping, thingfication, and shipment of African people as "slaves" across the oceans to labour in the mines and plantations. Natality was severed. Those who remained on the continent experienced the "partition" of Africa into colonies. Re-membering is not just about memory but about picking pieces for self-reconstruction. Re-membering becomes a process of re-humanization.

It is within this context that the Black Radical Tradition and what Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) termed the Black Radical Imagination and `freedom dreams` emerged both in the African diaspora and on the continent (see Robinson 2000). This Black Radical Tradition together with what Tendayi Sithole (2020) termed `the Black register` encased political, cultural, social, economic, and intellectual initiatives. Such anti-colonial and decolonial formations and movements as Ethiopianism, Rastafarianism, Garveyism, Negritude, Pan-Africanism and many others were part of the Black Radical Tradition. This is the context within which liberatory knowledge was conceived and decolonial Black and African Studies are rooted. African Studies is imbricated in high stake contestations, battles and struggles because of its deep location within the volatile politics of liberation of the enslaved, the colonised, and indeed the oppressed people of Africa and the African diaspora.

Challenges[1]

- **Geneses and genealogies of African Studies**

Critical consideration of the question of geneses and genealogies of African Studies has implications for understanding its imbrications within global imperial designs. It also opens the potential to advance its reconfiguration. For example, one can trace the genealogy of African Studies to the establishment of the African Studies Association (ASA) in 1957 in the USA, which marked a watershed not only in the rise of what Martin and West (1999, 85) termed 'the Africanist enterprise' but also the conception of African Studies as 'Area Studies'. Adebayo Olukoshi (2006, 540) calls this the 'original sin' of African Studies which it has 'difficulty in completely shaking off'. This is because the Africanist enterprise has deep roots in colonial history. One example is the establishment in the UK of the Royal African Society in the 1880s: its journal, *African Affairs*, is currently the top Africanist journal in the world, symbolising the triumph of the Africanist enterprise.

Perhaps in seeking to escape this intellectual, academic and geopolitical skein of coloniality, there is a need to open up to diverse geneses and genealogies of African Studies. For example, a shift can be made to trace geneses and genealogies of African Studies to what Cedric the 'Black Radical Tradition' and the 'Black Radical Imagination' which fuelled 'freedom dreams'. If this shift is made, the detachment of African Studies from Black, African and feminist struggles for liberation and freedom is destabilised. At another level, it was Ali A. Mazrui (2002, 11) who traced the beginning of African Studies to Africa itself. He identified Egypt and the Nile Valley, where Africa's first grand civilisation began, as the 'birthplace of systematic study of an African civilization' (*ibid.*). Mazrui (*ibid.*) also traced the genealogy of African Studies to the writings of Abu Abdallah Muhammad Ibn Battuta (1304–1368), born in Tangier in Morocco, whose chronicles formed the pioneering work in African Studies. The third starting point was the time 'when Africa began to be truly identified as a continent in its own right' by geographers, which Mazrui pinned down to 1656 (Mazrui 2002, 11–12).

Adam Branch (2018, 74) posited that if diverse histories and geographies of the genealogies of African Studies are considered, 'what decolonization means will also differ, entailing different temporalities, transformations and dilemmas.' There is also value in locating the geneses and genealogies of African Studies to what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009a, 2009b) termed're-membering initiatives' that is, African and Black self-reconstitution, self-definition and self-

[1] This section is based on my recently published article (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023b).

determination struggles, such as Ethiopianism, Negritude and many others. A reconfiguration of African Studies which takes the African ideational and institutional genealogies as departure points subverts the strategy of the Africanist enterprise to displace other geneses and genealogies of African Studies. Ghana, where Kwame Nkrumah was instrumental in the establishment of the Institute of African Studies in Legon in 1961, can be privileged as it was directly linked to practical political efforts aimed at redefining the very idea of Africa and forging pan-African Africa (Allman 2013). What must be remembered is how such political-cum-intellectual African leaders as Julius Nyerere played significant roles in articulating the emerging 'sentiment' of African togetherness, with Nkrumah positing Africa as something that was born inside him (Mazrui 1963, 26).

There is also need to turn attention to the understanding of geneses and genealogies of African Studies in Dakar in Senegal, Makerere in Uganda, Cairo in Egypt, Maputo in Mozambique, Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Henriet 2022), Ibadan in Nigeria, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (Al-Bulushi 2022) and other places within Africa where initiatives in decolonising and Africanising knowledge ensued in the 1960s. For example, a recent study on the DRC focused on Université Nationale du Zaïre's Lubumbashi campus revealed how 'Lubumbashi scholars participated in early post-colonial attempts to radically transform the university's teaching, research and operations, at the crossroads of intellectual decolonization and cosmopolitanism' (Henriet 2022, 1). This strand of decolonisation resisted the nativist Authenticité state-imposed version. Yousuf Al-Bulushi (2022, 1) revisited the Dar es Salaam school and repositioned it as a centre of expressions of what he termed 'red and Black internationalisms' as he recovered Tanzania's place in global decolonisation. Al-Bulushi (2022, 9–11) also highlighted the often-ignored role of women within the Dar es Salaam School. He noted the visit of Angela Davis in 1973, Ruth First spending a term at the university in 1975, and Marjorie Mbilinyi, a leading feminist, being a permanent member of the university who played a key role in the establishment of a gender and development study programme.

- **The epistemic question in African Studies**

The most difficult and complex question in reconfiguring African Studies relates to epistemology in African Studies. It was Mudimbe (1988, 1994) who posed the questions of the episteme (configuration of knowledge), gnosis (ways of knowing) and discourse (communication) in African Studies, influenced by Michel Foucault and Edward Said. In *The scent of the father* (published in French in 1982 and in English in 2023), Mudimbe engaged with the difficult question of 'the order of African discourse' (forms of thought and practices of knowledge) in the light of two realities. The first was the reality of the 'colonial structure of knowledge' (colonial library) which bound Africa to the West epistemically. The second was the political decolonisation of Africa, which was accompanied by the search for epistemological decolonisation, a struggle which has undergone resurgence and insurgence in the twenty-first century (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021).

Mudimbe's findings (2023) have been that a colonising structure invaded and colonised the very idea of Africa (through its invention) and the order of knowledge to the extent that attempts to escape epistemological colonisation continue to be a challenge. The search for ways out the colonial cul-de-sac has resulted in cultural relativist interventions, reproductions of the paradigm of difference in such initiatives as Negritude, essentialist positions and easy

embracement of colonial inventions of traditions, taking them as authentic African ways of doing things (Ranger 1983, 1993). But scholars have not given up the fight against what Toyin Falola (2022b, xv) depicted as:

> The pervasive and absolute hegemony of the West and its philosophies in African Studies – where a Western presence has become a metastatic cancer eating away at centuries-old traditions and the knowledge they hold – demands alternative, innovative and sometimes far-reaching approaches to sustain African heritage and culture.

Africanisation did not adequately stand up to this epistemological challenge. If anything was done under Africanisation, the tendency was to include African productions in an existing order of knowledge. Through such concepts as 'Afrikology', Dani Nabudere (2012) sought to articulate an African order of knowledge. Catherine Odora Hoppers and Howard Richards (2012, 8) introduced the concept of 'rethinking thinking', trying to 'cast light at last onto subjugated peoples, knowledges, histories, and ways of living' and working 'to bring other categories of self-definition, of dreaming, of acting, of loving, of living into the commons as a matter of universal concern'. Suffice to close this section with the illuminating words of Oyeronke Oyewumi (2022, 51): 'The real unmined gems are African concepts, ideas, values, ways of being and systems of knowledge and episteme.'

- **The theory–empiricism bifurcation in African Studies**

Is theory European and empiricism African? This important question arises in a context where the positionality of Africa and African scholars within the world of human thought, and domain of knowledge, continues to enable and reproduce uneven intellectual and academic division of labour. There is a broader context in which conventional social theory is institutionalised as social sciences, while African decolonial and postcolonial thought/theory in its various iterations is reluctantly appreciated as a humanist project and pushed to the domain of humanities (Go 2016). Consequently, African decolonial and postcolonial thought and theory is largely questioned for being culturalist, normative and given to identitarian politics, hence failing to be objective and scientific. But in the current conjuncture the dominant conceptions of knowledge and conventional social theory are increasingly being pushed onto the defensive and being found to be inadequate to the demands of understanding the modern world in its diversities, complexities and multiplexities. There are calls for decolonisation of 'the normative foundations of critical theory' (see Allen 2016). This reality has opened the space for 'epistemologies of the South' and 'theory from the South' where theory and empiricism are not bifurcated (Santos 2014; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

This shift has to be traced as far back as the 1960s and 1970s, when there were concerted efforts to shift the balance of power in intellectual and academic division of labour. Africa and African institutions of higher education were rebuilding themselves to simultaneously generate empirical data and formulate theory. Universities and African Studies centres in Africa were attracting some of the most progressive Africanists, such as Thomas Hodgkin to Ghana and Terence Ranger to Tanzania. Even the famous William E. B. Du Bois moved to Ghana. Radical Black scholars like Walter Rodney (1972) from Guyana in the Caribbean were also attracted to Tanzania. It was during those years of African confidence as generators of knowledge that Nkrumah (1965) developed the theory of neocolonialism. With African economies plunging into crisis from the end of 1970s, African Studies could no longer sustain its agility to continue

its own chosen trajectories. It underwent re-subordination and African Studies centres in Africa were reduced 'to sites for the collection and transmission of raw data to centres of African Studies in the North' (Olukoshi 2006, 540). Collegial relations degenerated into clientelist modes of engagement.

The uneven intellectual and academic division of labour continues to expose Africa to 'epistemologies of extraction', and Europe and North America still dominate in theory and model generation (Alcoff 2022). Paulin J. Hountondji (1990) distilled 13 indices of academic dependence. An intellectual and academic culture has developed and is being reproduced by African students for their master's and doctoral theses, whereby they habitually gather data in Africa then search for theory in Europe and North America. Africa becomes a laboratory for testing theory and models developed in Europe and North America.

Claude Ake (1979, 12) coined the concept of 'social science as imperialism' whereby anything African, ranging from development to politics, is compared to Europe as a normative template, concluding that: 'It is becoming increasingly clear that we cannot overcome our underdevelopment and dependence unless we try to understand the imperialist character of Western social science and to exorcise the attitudes of mind which it inculcates.' The solution lies in taking African scholarship and intellectual production seriously, which entails being able to draw concepts and theories from their work. For example, the concept of hybridity has a long genealogy in African scholarship, perhaps beginning with the work of Edward Wilmot Blyden (1887). He grappled with the question of the synthesis of African civilisation and knowledge with Islamic and Euro-Christian civilisations in the making of 'African personality'. This same subject was picked up by Kwame Nkrumah (1964) when he coined the concept of 'consciencism. It was elaborated on by Ali A. Mazrui (1986) when he introduced the concept of 'triple heritage'.

- **Linguistic encirclement in African Studies**

'Linguistic encirclement' is not only a consequence of colonial conquest and imposition of colonial languages. The postcolonial embrace includes the role of official languages as well as intellectual and academic use of these languages in research, teaching and learning in Africa (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986, 15). What is worrying is the normalisation, if not naturalisation, of colonial languages as the only ones amenable for scientific thought and its productions. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has no problem with Africans learning other languages per se. He is worried about other languages replacing African languages. Second, he is concerned about African children being detached from their 'mother tongue' and the disturbance of the normal cognitive processes of learning (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2013). His third concern is that language is not just a means of communication, it is a carrier of a people's culture, identity and consciousness (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2016, 69).

The fourth concern arose from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (2009a, 121) reflections on the African Renaissance and how it could be achieved if African intelligentsia 'work outside our own linguistic memory? And within the prisonhouse of European linguistic memory?' This linguistic encirclement has been the most difficult to confront and resolve because African leaders, and a majority of African intellectuals and academics, either prefer to ignore it or to defend it using all sorts of justifications. These range from the argument that Africans have effectively used imposed colonial languages to 'write back', that colonial languages have been

useful in expression of African dreams of freedom, to that these languages are international compared to African languages that are local and too diverse. But as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2009a, 124) articulated, 'how can we resolve our present predicament, whereby considerable knowledge produced by sons and daughters of Africa is already stored in European linguistic granaries?' One response to this challenge is that imposed colonial languages are no longer colonial languages but part of African languages.

One of the negative consequences is that in many African countries, being competent in imposed colonial languages has been elevated to being knowledgeable. The second negative consequence is that the bulk of literature written in African languages is not used to enrich African Studies. The third negative consequence is that everything written in African languages is commonly pushed to departments of African languages and literature, even if the subject is philosophy or politics. Can one take all the works written in the English language, lump them together into one department called English Literature and Language, and ignore the content and subject of the publication?

The last point about linguistic encirclement is, for whom are African academics and intellectuals writing? It is high time that African intellectuals and academics are called upon to account to Africans. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2016, 214) called on African intellectuals and academics to avoid operating like outsiders in their own continent. In his recent work, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2023) deals with the important question of translation as a language of languages. Translation is posited as an enabler not only of conversation between and across cultures, but also as a means to enhance the unity of African people across the continent. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o advocates for the fall of hierarchies of languages and favours literature without borders, enabled by translations.

- **The question of chronology in African Studies**

The next lingering and difficult challenge is that of chronology and periodisation in African Studies: the colonial period stands at the centre in the same manner as the birth and death of Jesus Christ (BC/AD) stand in Christian time reckoning. Mazrui (2005, 75), in his reflections on time and invention of the world, posited that 'Europe invented the world, at the Greenwich Meridian' and that Europe timed the world so that the 'Greenwich meridian chimed with the universal hour'. The question of time has troubled historians of Africa.

In 1966, a conference was held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London on African chronology (Jones 1970). The question of chronology was posed as a concern of historians dealing with precolonial African history. Consequently, king lists, dynastic genealogies, dynastic generations, and reigns were discussed extensively as the foundation of chronologies. But the question of chronology is not just for historians. Thandika Mkandawire (2005, 10) raised the periodisation challenge this way: 'Periodization is always a treacherous exercise, involving as it does an arbitrary imposition of discrete time markers on what is essentially a continuum.'

Jacques Depelchin (2004) identified periodisation as a silencing technology in African history ranking alongside what he termed conceptual and paradigmatic silencing. He argued that African history has suffered from two paradigms: the paradigm of denial of existence prior to

the 1960s, and the paradigm of recognition of existence after the 1960s. This is how he formulated the problem:

> *The apparent paradigmatic shift – from denial to recognition – can be revealed as false by showing that the affirmation was paralleled by a systematic silencing of questions, themes and/or conceptualisations. So, in reality, what took place was a redefinition or reformulation of the denial.* (Depelchin 2004, 12)

In short, by the time the existence of African history was recognised and introduced as academic history, it had been disciplined to fit a particular Eurocentric chronology and periodisation. It had also been fitted into existing Enlightenment ideas and philosophy of history (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 1–2).

The most enduring periodisation in Africa is the 'precolonial', 'colonial' and 'postcolonial'. Prah (2016, 9) argues that:

> *Possibly, the single most disastrous epistemic effect of colonial tutelage and experience on our thinking and education, which nomothetically and systematically strait-jackets our basic assumptions along intellectually colonial and neo-colonial lines, is the historical periodization scheme which runs from; precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods.*

The colonial interlude stands at the centre of this mode of periodisation, with 'the most determinant features in the hundreds of thousand years of the history of homo sapiens in Africa' (Prah 2016, 9). In his reflections on Africa in theory, Mbembe (2022) also alluded to the challenges of periodisation in African Studies and suggested a shift to consider the longue durée of African history – what he termed the deep histories of Africa before colonialism. Prah (2016, 9) suggests that 'we must in the first instance conceptually place Africans in the centre of history in general and African history in particular.' One possibility is to turn our attention to Cheikh Anta Diop, who directly challenged the Hegelian negation of Africa and generated African history (Diagne 2023, 6).

The precolonial, colonial and postcolonial chronological and periodisation schema has proved to be very hard to transcend or abandon. Even the large UNESCO General History of Africa Project did not succeed in laying it to rest. African Studies has to be sensitive to diverse temporalities as well as continuities within discontinuities. This takes us to the spatial challenge, which is rendered here as the 'country study' approach in African Studies.

- **The spatial/country study approach in African Studies**

What role does space/spatiality play in African Studies? What does it mean to take Africa as a 'space of thought'? Is there a relationship between country studies and area studies? In the field of philosophy, it is the work of Bruce B. Janz (2022) that grapples with the questions of 'the space of thought' and implications of 'thinking in place'. For the field of African Studies in Africa, one can turn to Mahmood Mamdani (2001, xiii) who launched a critical agenda of 'decolonizing area studies.' He posited that one of the rules of area studies as it manifests itself in Africa is that 'every expert must cultivate his or her own local patch, where geography is forever fixed by contemporary boundaries'. Mamdani (*ibid.*) depicted this in terms of 'intellectual claustrophobia' and a problematic methodology. The problematic methodology is

understood by Mamdani to consist of two equally problematic logics: 'The first sees state boundaries as boundaries of knowledge, thereby turning political into epistemological boundaries.' The second logic has to do with the 'theoretical–empirical bifurcation' in African Studies, whereby empirical facts are valorised and theory is resisted (*ibid.*).

Mamdani made efforts to break from this 'intellectual claustrophobia' through the acts of 'historicizing geography' and demonstrating the complicity of history writing with imperialism in his endeavour to de-naturalise political identities. He was developing a new approach to doing African Studies in Africa that is not hostage to 'methodological nationalism' and empiricism (Wimmer 2003). The intellectual vistas opened up by Mamdani are threefold for African Studies: (a) a study of Africa that illuminates the broader questions and challenges of 'late modern life'; (b) a study of Africa that enables 'looking at the world from within Africa' (Mamdani 2001, xiv); and (c) a study of Africa that avoids the 'analogy' approach where Europe is the template of what is normal and Africa provides examples of what is yet to be normal (Mamdani 1996).

Other political scientists believe that the way out of the 'intellectual claustrophobia' is through the adoption of 'comparative area studies' (CAS) that enable a shift from micro-perspectives to 'the big picture and the longue durée' (Basedau 2020). Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Rüdiger Seesemann and Christine Vogt-William (2022) found comparison as the solution to be inadequate as it ignores what Kessi, Marks and Ramugondo (2020) termed 'epicolonial' challenges that necessitate decoloniality. Area studies, with the baggage of colonialism and imperialism, cannot be reconfigured without decolonising it and the 'adding of "comparative" to "African Studies" or "area studies"' is inadequate to address the complex epistemological, methodological, structural and relational issues (Basedau 2020, 201). Odanga (2022, 2) raised the problem in the comparative approach of comparing a continent with countries: 'China–Africa, Brazil–Africa, India–Africa'.

Africa is constantly being belittled and reduced to a country. At the same time, there is need for a shift from the assumptions of countries as natural units for comparative studies. It might help to turn to work such as that of Amy Niang (2018) which challenges the naturalisation and universalisation of the nation state. Niang makes a well-thought-out call for rethinking conceptual and theoretical tools that have been used to understand Africa, its people and its institutional frameworks. For her,

> *a task requires first and foremost that we un-understand the state as we know it and start thinking more fruitfully about how different historical communities have gone about conceptualizing institutions that adequately embody different figures of authority, of order, of self and of interrelating and the crucial connections that underlie them.* (Niang 2018, 14)

Rethinking and unthinking is the domain of critical African Studies, not comparative African Studies. The other question which arises in engagement with the broader issues of spatiality and country study approaches is that of the contributions of ethnically mapped studies of particular ethnic groups, such as Yoruba Studies, Igbo Studies and others. Do these approaches undermine methodological nationalism and reject the container called 'nation state?' This takes us to the problem of androcentricity in African Studies that has to be unlearned if the reconfiguring of African Studies is to succeed.

- **The androcentric question in African Studies**

Even though there is consensus that gender is a social construct, it has successfully embedded itself in social phenomena and conceptual and theoretical constructions. It is in this context that the challenge of androcentricity has risen in knowledge in general, and African Studies in particular. This has taken the forms of ignoring and marginalising women's contributions to society, legitimising the subordination of women within existing male-dominated social orders, and keeping women academics and intellectual interventions and productions on the periphery of the knowledge domain. Realisation of this led the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) to publish a foundational volume in 1997, *Engendering African Social Sciences in Africa*, edited by three leading African feminist scholars: Ayesha M. Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow (1997). The volume was foundational in many ways. First, it introduced and clarified concepts and theories such as gender bias, gender neutrality and gender blindness as it interrogated African social sciences and the positionalities often taken by scholars as they justify ignoring gender analysis and feminism in their work. Second, it interrogated the various disciplines that constitute African social sciences, thus exposing entrenched gender biases, gender neutralities and gender blindness(es) of the disciplines themselves and scholars.

Third, the volume was curated such that it provided both introductions and overviews of issues. Fourth, it made cross-cutting interventions on issues of power and resources as it underscored the aspect of political struggle as a necessity in enabling engendering on knowledge in general and social sciences in particular. Fifth, it is Africa-focused and considered the African context in its articulation of issues, without compromising the necessity of gender analysis and feminism. Finally, the three editors are not only leading feminists, they are also leading African scholars, committed pan-Africanists and active members of CODESRIA – the leading scientific institution in the production of Africa-centred knowledge. The volume was thus produced as a key text to influence the direction of African scholarship, if not its reconfiguration, through embracing gender analysis and feminism.

In the introduction to the volume, Imam (1997, 2) raised the issue of hostility to engendering knowledge and feminism, explaining that 'engendering African social sciences is not a simple development of knowledge, but also necessarily and simultaneously profoundly a political struggle over power and resources.' Therefore, the agenda of engendering knowledge was pitched at the same level as anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles and analyses, which assumed the form of critical race, class, and decolonial analyses. The engendering of knowledge has to enable a social science which takes into consideration the fact that 'half of humanity is of feminine genders' and ignoring this produces 'an impoverished and distorted science' (Imam 1997, 2).

The volume proceeds to demonstrate how insights from women's studies and feminist theory have contributed to the improvement of social sciences' perspectives, provide better explanations of African social realities and assist in finding ways out of the crisis in Africa. It also makes an important observation that 'the search for a mythical "scientific objectivity" has never been wholly dominant in African social sciences as in Europe or North America' (Imam 1997, 14). Throughout the volume, there is clear understanding of the intersectionality of

issues: ‘class, gender, race, imperialism are simultaneous social forces, both interwoven and recursive upon each other’ (Imam 1997, 21). It is the insights from this treatise on engendering knowledge that informed extrapolations can be made on the centrality of depatriarchising knowledge as part of reconfiguring African Studies. This means that the work of reconfiguring African Studies has to reflect on the status and contributions of what Awino Okech (2020, 315) has termed ‘African feminist epistemic communities’ as well as those of ‘Gender and Women’s Studies centres across African universities’. This takes us to the disciplinary question in African Studies as a challenge for reconfiguring it.

- **Disciplines in the field of African Studies**

Seen from a disciplinary vantage point, African Studies exists like a sea which is watered from diverse rivulets, with disciplines the rivulets (Zeleza 2006b). Therefore, across space and time, African Studies has been haunted by the challenge of how to reconstitute itself as a discursive and epistemological field (Robbe 2014, 255). These challenges are compounded by five factors. The first is that social sciences and humanities which occupy the centre of African Studies have a problematic and compromised genealogy. Joao H. Costa Vargas and Moon-Kie Jung (2021, 5) clearly articulated this point, positing that ‘antiblackness’ (by extension anti-African) is etched in the very conceptions of ‘the social’ and ‘the human’ as the basis of social sciences and humanities. These fields of study were conceived against what was rendered as ‘black’.

Mudimbe (1988) introduced the concept of gnosis to depict the complex processes of conversion and translation of ways of knowing and human thought into epistemic systems as well as social and human disciplines. The second important factor, which is often ignored in African Studies, is to distinguish knowledge to live by from knowledge that has been redefined into expertise to dominate, control and rule by (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). This has given rise to the challenge of how to reconfigure African Studies in such a way that there is intellectual and academic commitment to recovery of socially relevant knowledge. The third factor is therefore how to reconfigure African Studies in such a way that it is not exhausted in pursuit of disciplinary debates at the expense of engagement with existential problems haunting humanity in general, and Africans in particular.

The fourth challenge is raised by Lewis R. Gordon (2006, 4) in terms of ‘disciplinary decadence’ which is ‘ontologizing or reification of a discipline’ resulting in the treatment of ‘our discipline as though it was never born and has always existed and will never change or, in some cases, die’. This attitude feeds into the last factor, whereby scholars enter the field of African Studies carrying their disciplinary identities and always ready to retreat to their disciplines. However, what sustains African Studies is that ‘thousands of people all over the world in multitudes of institutions earn their living teaching, researching, writing, or even celebrating and condemning Africa’ (Zeleza 2006b, 1). This has made African Studies a field of study vulnerable to being orphaned at any time. Therefore, the configuration and reconfiguration of African Studies have taken the format akin to the building of the Tower of Babel, characterised by a desire to engage in a common endeavour across disciplines on the one hand, and on the other to maintaining disciplinary differences. Appeals to inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinarity have so far failed to enable a reconfiguration of African Studies into a

cohesive discursive and epistemological field. This takes us to the last two intersecting canon and colonial library questions and challenges in African Studies.

- **The canon and colonial library questions in African Studies**

Toni Morrison (1998, 12) described the canon this way:

> *Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested.*

While Morrison was concerned about questions of African American presence in American literature, her definition of the canon is applicable to African Studies, where the Africanist enterprise and its intellectual and academic productions dominate and enjoy privileged citational visibility.

This led Olukoshi (2006, 535) to write of privileged 'non-African high priests of the discipline' as producers of canonical works in African Studies. The canon is reinforced and reproduced by what Mudimbe (1988, 1994) depicted as the 'colonial library', which highlights the entrapment of Africa as an idea and invention as well as whatever tries to assume and recover African knowledge within the 'colonizing structure' (Wai 2020). But Mamadou Diouf (2008, 8) posited that besides the colonial library there is the 'Islamic library' which is often ignored but has a longer history in Africa. Thus, taken together the questions of canon and library invoke a particular imperative of reconfiguring African Studies, taking the form of decanonisation and decolonisation so as to open up space for African intellectual and academic productions and the recovery of those knowledges that have been subjugated (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021, 884). While Mudimbe (2023) has highlighted the difficulties of subverting the 'colonial library', African scholars have not given up on the struggle to decolonise knowledge. For example, Toyin Falola (2018, 913) has introduced the concept of 'ritual archives' and defined it this way:

> By ritual archives, I mean the conglomeration of words as well as texts, symbols, shrines, images, performances, and indeed objects that document as well as speak to those religious experiences and practices that allow us to understand the African world through various bodies of philosophies, literatures, languages, histories, and much more.

It is also Falola who has reintroduced the value of personal archive, experiential knowledge and indeed autoethnography as recommended methodologies in his endeavour to construct ''African epistemologies'' (Falola 2022a). In this commendable effort to subvert the ''colonial library'' Falola (2022a, xvii) turned to such aspects of African life as hair making, sculpting, painting, singing, masquerading, festivals, burial ceremonies and others to advance what he terms ''decoloniality of autoethnography.'' The possibility of circumventing the "colonial library" lies in what I termed "decanonization" of knowledge which involves tapping into Indigenous, every day and knowledges born of struggles rather than relying on academic knowledge only (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021).

Debates

The battle of ideas has become accentuated within a context of what others have termed the revived "culture wars," "woke" consciousness, resurgent and insurgent decolonization of the 21st century, and the coming of age of epistemologies of the South (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Santos 2018; Lester 2023). In this lecture I will confine myself to six contours of the battle of ideas in African Studies and the concomitant debates.

- **Re-opened basic epistemological questions**

Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) depicted the modern world as experiencing "uncertainties of knowledge" which have resulted in re-opening of the basic epistemological questions within a context in which the domain of knowledge is undergoing reorganization and reconstitution. One can identify six re-opened basic epistemological questions that are haunting the domain of knowledge in general and African Studies in particular: (1) Where does knowledge come from? (2) Is there any connection between identity and knowledge? (3) Does knowledge have a geography? (4) Does knowledge have a biography? (5) What is the link between ideology and knowledge? (6) How is technology transforming knowledge? (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023a: 6) The previous responses to these pertinent questions resulted in positivist conceptions of knowledge together with its notions of scientific, objective, disembodied, impartial, un-situated, detached, universal, and truthful knowledge across space and time. This conception of knowledge is countered by what Ramon Grosfoguel (2007: 212) termed the "epistemic decolonial turn," which posits that "Nobody escapes the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system." The epistemic decolonial turn is advanced from Black and feminist, Indigenous scholars, Afrocentric scholars and others who highlights realities of geopolitics of knowledge, situated-ness of knowledge, embodied knowledge (body politics of knowledge) as well as egopolitics of knowledge (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986; Anzaldua 1987; Haraway 1988; Collins 1990; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023a). All these epistemic interventions have implications for knowledge production. For example, when African scholars do research as themselves the research activity itself is expected to be transformed as they seek to read and understand Africa from the inside rather than from the outside. Methodologically, the transformation include shifting from the traditional extractivist approaches predicated on subject-object relationship to that of subject-to-subject co-production of knowledge.

- **The colonial revisionism**

The resurgent and insurgent struggles and initiatives to decolonize knowledge has provoked a reactionary response that tries to minimise the violence of colonialism and perfume it into an ethical project that advanced the well-being of the colonized. The leading figures in colonial revisionism include Brue Gilley (2018) who even advocated for recolonization of Africa as colonialism promoted development. The second is Nigel Beggar (2023) who is pushing forward the notion of a need for a "balance sheet" (balanced view of colonial history) and "ethics" of the empire. The colonial revisionist discourse is predicated on three major tropes. The first is that colonialism was legitimate, it was anti-slavery, and introduced liberal values in Africa. The second is the downplaying, relativizing, and justifying of colonial violence as a necessary part of civilizing mission (Sandmann 2021). This leads to the rejection of even clear cases of colonial genocides as the German genocide in Namibia. The third trope entails the use of straw man, cherry-picking, distortion, ignoring context, and twisting of evidence and historical research to perfume colonialism and present it in good light (Lester 2023). These

tropes of colonial revisionist discourse has given ammunition to conservative academics and governments to attack those fields of studies that anchor African and Black experiences. Consequently, those who highlight the long-term consequences of colonialism in the various domains of contemporary life are dismissed as stuck in history, promoting white guilt, pursuing politics of victimhood, and ignoring African agency (Taiwo 2022). However, African Studies is also driven by strong arguments that underscore how colonialism not only unleashed physical violence but introduced an imperialistic social science (see Ake 1979), lodged the "colonial library" at the centre of African Studies (see Mudimbe 1988, 1994), and this resulted in the colonization of the minds of Africans (see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

- **The Marxism and decolonization intersections**

There are three matters arising from how Marxism and decolonization as paradigms have to be understood in African Studies. There is the idea that Marxism is part of Eurocentric thinking and therefore is not too relevant to African Studies. This thinking ignores how Marxism has been one of the most travelled theory that has not only been embraced by African scholars but also stretched to make it relevant (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ndlovu 2022). The reality is that there has been a complementarity between Marxism and decolonization leading to the coining of such terms "Black Marxism" as an integral part of the Black Radical Tradition (see Robinson 2000). The second idea is the conflation of the resurgent and insurgent decolonization of the 21st century with post-structuralism, post-modernism and postcolonial theory to the extent that it is seen as part of what has been termed "the cultural turn" in which the material question is ignored (see Prashad 2023: 12). This is not a correct rendition of decolonization/decoloniality. While it seems to be pushing more on the epistemic front it does not ignore the political economy (the material question). This point come out clearly in Robin D. G. Kelley (2020: 8) `s definition: "Decolonization requires abolition of all forms of oppression and violence, and thus is fundamentally anticapitalist. It means decolonizing land, embracing a vision of freedom not based on ownership or possession or anthropocentrism but stewardship and caretaking as expressed in indigenous thought. Dispossession is not just about property; it is spiritual theft, a disruption of history and our relationship with the ancestors who still occupy the land. It means disbanding the military/police, opening borders, opening prisons, freeing the body from constraints of inherited and imposed normativities of gender and sexuality. The liberation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender queer, trans, and two-sprit people is central to the struggle for decolonization. It is also about ending what might be the oldest war of all—the war on women`s bodies. The war that takes the form of control over production, mobility, sexual violence; the reduction of women to property." Prashad is not against decolonization/decoloniality, his position is that "We have to recover decolonization into Marxist paradigm, we cannot allow it to slip out there and become part of these culturalist pre-Marxist forms of thinking." The third idea comes from Paul Tiyambe Zeleza who unlike Prashad sees African nationalist humanism framing Marxism: "Nationalist humanism has withstood new theoretical waves that have arisen from time to time and lashed against its sturdy foundations. More often than not, new ideas and ideologies—from Marxism to dependency to feminism to the posts—have been incorporated into its strappings, spacious complex" (Zeleza 2006: 113). The beauty of it is that revived democratic Marxism and radicalised decolonization of the 21st century is back on the academy arena and they contribute to the reconceptualising and repurposing of African Studies.

- **The hegemony of the Africanist enterprise**

Martin G. William and Michael O. West (1999) identified what they termed the 'Africanist enterprise' as another source of battles in African Studies. The Africanist enterprise is a

reference to the dominance in African Studies by well-resourced Africanist scholars who have access and control over the leading presses and journals, making their publications to occupy the status of a canon in African Studies. It is linked also to what I have termed the Herskovitsian ghost, which is continual privileging of the Africanist enterprise based on claims that those non-African scholars who are based in the United States but who are actively involved in African Studies are well positioned to pursuit of knowledge which scientific, objective and is good scholarship compared to knowledge generated from Africa which is said to be ideological, subjective and less of good scholarship (Herskovits 1958). This is justified by notions that Africanists are detached from Africa whereas Africa-based scholars are too close to what they are studying, which makes them less objective. The African fight against the Africanist enterprise by African scholars resulted in the establishment of the African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA) in 2013 whose mission is to promote Africa`s own specific contributions to the advancement of knowledge about the peoples and cultures of Africa and the African Diaspora. Its objectives include advancing research by African scholars on the continent.

- **The coloniality of the global economy of knowledge**

Paulin J. Hountondji (1990) identified 13 indices of African scientific dependence informed by weak African political economy, which makes it hard to undercut the resilient uneven intellectual and academic division of labour within the global economy of knowledge. Here is a case of how economic extraversion resulted in intellectual and academic extraversion. This has consequences for African scholars and African Studies. The first is the compulsion for African scholars to publish in those journals and presses based in Europe and North America that have monopolised the status of being international. For purposes of recognition, validation and intellectual status, African scholars continue to struggle to publish in presses and journals in the Global North. The Africanists based in Europe and North America do not carry any burden of publishing in presses and journals based in Africa. The languages used in research and publication in the said top journals is that which were imposed on Africa during colonial rule. The second is that within the global economy of knowledge, Africa continues to be the site of hunting and gathering of empirical data, which is then processed into theory and concepts in the Global North. The third is the marginalization of African scholarship within African Studies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Inevitably, Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, as well as some progressive Africanists, have been contesting coloniality of knowledge hidden within global political economy of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023a). Hierarchies of knowledge and knowledge-workers, the distribution of resources, and the organization of research infrastructure are reflective of the power dynamics within the global economy of knowledge (Seesemann 2020). Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks and Elelwani Ramugondo (2020: 273) captured this challenge in terms of "structural decolonising" of African Studies, which take the form of "redistributing and reopening material resources and opportunities – institutions, jobs, titles, professional recognition, research budgets, leadership, and gatekeeping roles, scholarships, and entries of admission – that are currently distributed in ways that echo and reproduce colonial relations."

- **How to write about Africa**

The ways and modes of writing about Africa constitute another terrain of battles of ideas in African Studies. The central disputes concern who writes about Africa, what is written about Africa, how is Africa interpreted and represented. The central problematic is that of who has epistemic power and who controls the narratives. These contestations arise within a context in

which Africa and Africans have been subjected to stereotypes and pathologizing narratives. It was this drive to change the narratives about Africa which provoked Binyavanga Wainaina to write that satirical work entitled *How to Write About Africa* (2022). It is the same spirit that drove Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to entitle her 2009 TedGlobal Speech "The Danger of a Single Story." There is a strong discourse which posit that Africa is not a country and it challenges those narratives which are predicated on generalizations about a complex continent inhabited by a diverse people.

Conclusion: The future of African Studies

Taken together, the three interventions that I have presented takes us to the difficult task of envisioning the future African Studies. For me, I see four possibilities namely (1) Comparative African Studies (CSA), (2) Critical African Studies (CAS), Frontier African Studies (FAS), and Global African Studies (GAS). CSA seems not be well-conceived to deal will the challenges haunting African Studies such as the embedded white gaze as well as structural and conceptual problems (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al 2022). The act of adding "comparative" to "African Studies" minimizes the problem of "area studies" as an invention of global imperial designs. CAS takes seriously the structural, conceptual, relational, methodological, scholarly, and other haunting problems in African Studies as it embraces decoloniality as a necessary force for transformation and repurposing of African Studies (see Kessi et al 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al 2022). FAS is predicated on ontologies of incompleteness that privilege convivial relationalities and convivial scholarship underwritten by ecologies of knowledges (see Nyamnjoh 2017; Ndhlovu 2023). FAS and CAS has the potential to feed into GAS which is informed by the ideas of planetary Africanity and global Africa underpinned by common experiences and connections, which enable new conceptions of being African who are spread across the world. GAS put Africa and Africans in their rightful place as part of world and global history and resolves the problems of dismemberment (West 2005).

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