

On Relevance, Decolonisation and Community Engagement: The Role of University Intellectuals

Paper prepared for the USAf Higher Education Conference

6-8 October 2021

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Presentation Notes

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Introduction

The decolonial debates and transformation discourses have brought with them several questions such as who should be the main role-players. We now know that looking at Di Maggio and Powell's isomorphism, when we transform the university we will also change the society and vice versa. We also know the challenges of the involvement of many hands in policy-making especially when education and society are involved. Therefore, when we discuss the changing idea of a university we cannot only think this as exclusively the work of the academe's intellectuals. Searching for cognitive justice, epistemological justice and even decolonial pedagogy needs the engagement of communities. The struggles against Eurocentrism and Western hegemony are efforts not only of the academe's intellectuals but society-wide structures which include Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectuals from the subaltern. Arguably, very few of us can disavow with Ali A. Mazrui who argues that **Pan-Africanism** and transformation without intellectuals is doomed. Furthermore, Mazrui defines the intellectual as one who is *fascinated by ideas*. Intellectuals, should lead the transformation and decolonisation of society. Some have spoken about the need for Pan-African tolerance if we are to rid Africa of epistemic violence, culturecides and linguicides. Yet the paradox of decolonial debates may be that some may suspect that intellectualism is waning. One wonders whether South Africa might experience or is experiencing what happened in the new independent African states in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In South Africa intellectuals from the academe have been haggling over several issues and these include funding, politicisation, pedagogy, language and of course decolonisation and transformation. In this presentation, I examine the role of the academe's intellectuals and how their accommodation and alienation of organic intellectuals influences the paths of transformation. Euron (2019) states:

According to Gramsci, the new intellectual should not only be, like the traditional one, a specialist in his subject but rather a cultural and political leader with a specific function. The function of the intellectual has to be defined according to the needs of a determined society; he must create cultural and political hegemony. The intellectual must be recognized by its organic nature.

The critical questions we need to pose is why some community engagement projects don't make sense? Why do they appear like waste of time? Why is there no symbiotic relationship between them and the university?

Four themes are discussed in this brief presentation:

- Examining the responsibility of intellectuals
- Pan-African philosophy and intellectuals
- The challenges of engaged intellectual debates
- Decolonial Journeys and Communities

Intellectuals and Responsibility

In a time when universities in Africa respond to policy windows that have opened for Africanisation and decolonisation, the role of Pan-Africanism has never been so critical as a guiding light for intellectuals who should lead towards new social paradigms. One critical role of the intellectuals is to be able to mobilise the people, the communities to move for transformation. When we look at higher education institutions, the Pan-African thought is supposed to develop and sustain the transformation beyond the university upon the communities as well. Pan-Africanism that intellectuals need to handle covers a broad agenda which does not only embrace political economy only but African culture, aesthetics, poetry and philosophy. The

role of the intellectuals should then be to lead the society to the liberation of the mind in all aspects of society. Chinweizu (1987) like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986) and Esia Mphahlele (1974) highlight the role that intellectuals need to champion and that is to lead the fight to obliterate the vestiges of colonialism. In fact, that is a summary of the role of intellectuals in society, that they should help magnify the African identity. This is also a need for cultural renaissance and the struggle for relevant institutions. The zeal of post-colonial leaders in eradicating colonial remnants was clear; Nkrumah talked of consciencism, Nyerere spoke of *Ujamaa* and Kenneth Kaunda emphasised *African humanism*. All these were incipient initiatives to ignite anti-colonial intellectualism across African Continent and to spread the spirit of Africanisation and decolonisation. The sixties were a time of ideas where idealistic African leaders portrayed their vision for a free Africa. Numerous scholars were rethinking the role of intellectuals in building relevant institutions. In the introduction to IB Tabata's *Education for Barbarism* Ncube writes, "The revolutionary intellectual's role must be that of critical intervention; to explain to the masses not only their own action but the objective reality which surrounds them." Apartheid like Mazrui's military Uganda, was inimical to intellectualism and intellectual freedom. Bantu Education under which apartheid institutions operated robbed all South Africa's citizens of African education and shut them "into a spiritual and intellectual ghetto" (Tabata, 1979: 35).

Pan-African Philosophy and Intellectuals

Two flaws have been prominent since we started the debates on Africanisation and decolonisation. The first one is thinking that these can happen without the communities; that the university scholars are adequate in leading the transformation we need. The second oversight is thinking that the society can decolonise without anchoring some ideas in Pan-African thought. Without the understanding of Pan-African theory intellectuals will achieve void decolonisation and barren Africanisation. The Pan-African thought always utilises conscience to bring back the scholarship of transformation to the realities of the communities. Without the understanding of the ideals of Pan-Africanism it is easy to consciously or unconsciously paralyse the goals of transformation. Pan-African thought encompasses relevant community goals and it is the genesis of epistemic decolonisation. It is also critical to begin from the start when colonisation killed culture, robbed the African of history and decimated indigenous languages. Intellectuals who do not start here will miss the understanding of the necessary revolutionary change. Africanisation and decolonisation that do not start here will be superficial and even defeat the purposes of transforming institutions meaningfully. Genuine African scholarship begins with African intellectuals who understand the incipient struggles of Pan-Africanism. The challenge we have today is that some intellectuals may not believe in the great role Pan-Africanism has in reasserting Africanness and promoting African intellectualism for Africa's progress. Pan-African ideals will always be a guiding beacon to intellectuals thus ensuring that they address the human condition in African communities. Some of the challenges we have in institutions of higher learning is that the decolonial agenda is led by intellectuals who

do not necessarily acknowledge African philosophies. Understanding Pan-African thought leads to the understanding and acceptance of African identities, social justice and the trajectories of transformation. It also ascertains that intellectuals understand the travails of attainment of the ideal. Intellectuals can never dismantle what they do not understand hence starting from the beginning of Pan-African thought is vital in unmasking Western hegemony.

The decolonial debates have illuminated extremes when it comes to intellectualism in (South) Africa; on the one hand, much fascination with ideas has been illuminated whilst on the other, there has been what Joe Mintsa (2007) refers to as *intellectual neurosis*. Some debates among intellectuals have been energising in support of the transformation agenda as they support the evolution of higher education institutions. Other debates have been refreshing trying to build more intellectual communities through engagement. Yet there have been other sceptical groups who are egotistical, apathetic about transformation and see no role of communities outside the higher education institutions. In the decolonial debates, several intellectuals have become suspicious of any knowledge that appears to eclipse the global village.

In my previous research I have delineated four kinds of intellectuals and they play a role in either embracing or alienating the communities.

Knowers – they are the opposite of learners. Not the ideal type for constantly changing situations. They have many blind spots.

Loyalists – Agreeable but uncritical. Their blind loyalty leads to infantilization of the people for they demean the ability of the public to think. This infantilization is against the social justice principles as well as cognitive and epistemic justice.

Denialists – They claim that the change in the status quo will not only drop standards but is not advisable to society seeking transformation and globalisation. It is dangerous to have the powerful people as intellectual denialists. This dumbs down the intellectualism of the masses and detrimental to all those without power. Some intellectuals who are anti-decolonisation maintain that it is anti-globalisation and the emphasis on Africa is unrealistic in building new and relevant epistemologies.

Planetary Intellectuals

The decolonial struggles need planetary thinking, the belief in an eclectic approach to cognitive and epistemic justice. The planetary intellectuals believe in the de-Westernisation of globalisation and they maintain that the society cannot eschew the “medley of a community of ideas” that anchor knowledges. They accept critical African intellectualism as well as de-marginalisation of African knowledge. The centre should not only embrace Eurocentrism but African knowledges as well. Many not only talk of the *justice turn* but they embrace the *decolonial turn* as well. Due to their openness, the planetary intellectual is progressive. The paradox of decolonising knowledge is the need to be aware of the local community (the glocal) in relation to the world community (the globalised). It is for this reason that Wa Thiong’o (2004) speaks of the *interconnectedness of the world*. Cognitive and social justice can be attained when intellectuals have a broader view of the world. Bierman and Kufagianni (2020) underscore the “justice turn” in political dialogues on transformation with references to equity, equality and justice.

Conclusion

The discussions in this presentation demonstrate how critical it is for intellectuals to be omniscient as they motion the society towards epistemological decolonisation and

societal transformation. This is about the fascination with ideas. Whilst Mazrui argues that scholars at higher education institutions should lead intellectualism this cannot be realised if the organic intellectuals do not become part of the transforming institutions. In fact, there can be no truly decolonised institutions if these are situated among colonised communities. The debates in this presentation also demonstrate why we need to decolonise community engagement for this means in the Gramscian fashion that organic intellectuals found in communities bring much about the evolving world of our institutions. Colonial education might have made many to believe that knowledge production resides in institutions of higher learning only and that public intellectuals are those who are eminent scholars. Dismantling epistemic violence will be realised when intellectual work translates to relevance and is congruent with positive societal values. The building of new public intellectuals should include new research where the community members do not become mere subjects of research. Higher education institutions should also perceive community members as co-creators of knowledge especially when dealing with topics of decolonising knowledge. Knowers will not sharpen the communities, loyalists will infantilize the people and denialists will abdicate their intellectual duties. For meaningful change, our institutions need the wisdom of planetary intellectuals and the inclusivity they stand for in erecting communities that would embrace transformation and champion decolonisation.

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