

How to truly decolonise the study of Africa

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'Epistemic decolonisation' cannot happen in a political vacuum, separated from the African streets.

From Cape Town to Cairo, Bahia to Bombay, recent calls to "decolonise the university" have gained traction across the globe. These demands correctly challenge the legacies of colonialism and attempt to subvert them in institutional structures of higher learning.

But the problem with this 21st-century "scholarly decolonial turn" is that it remains largely detached from the day-to-day dilemmas of people in formerly colonised spaces and places. Many academics mistakenly maintain that by screaming "decolonise X" or "decolonise Y" ad nauseam, they will miraculously metamorphose into progressive agents of change.

Some tragically believe that by ignoring leading thinkers who were "decolonising" long before it became a fad - including Edward Wilmot Blyden of Liberia and WEB DuBois of the US who were prominent as early as the mid-to-late 1800s - they can carve out "decolonisation" as their scholarly fiefdoms.

Still others erroneously contend that "decolonial" street credibility can be acquired by simply adding non-whites to their reading lists, journal editorial boards, speaking panels, research collaborations, book contracts, etc.

Despite these flawed assumptions, 21st-century "epistemic decolonisation" cannot succeed unless it is bound to and supportive of contemporary liberation struggles against inequality, racism, austerity, patriarchy, autocracy, homophobia, xenophobia, ecological damage, militarisation, impunity, corruption, media muzzling and land grabbing.

For those who research and write about Africa, this is particularly important given the continent's fraught relationship with itself and the outside world. Though Africa remains captured today by the same forces that fuelled colonialism, African activists and artists have responded by commanding revolutionary change.

Before the "fallist" agenda gained prominence most recently at universities in [South Africa](#) and [Ghana](#) - with demands to remove statues of former imperialists like Cecil Rhodes or those with racial biases like Mahatma Gandhi - there were successful calls to topple continental autocrats, including [Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia](#), Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and [Hosni Mubarak in Egypt](#).

While Egypt has regressed to even more repressive leadership and Burkina Faso battles insecurity in the Sahel, no one can negate the heady winds of change that have swept across North and West Africa in the past decade.

Some activist movements have endured more than others. In Senegal, for example, [Y'en a Marre](#) ("[Fed Up](#)", "[Enough Is Enough](#)"), a collective of rappers and journalists, rose to prominence in 2012, when it mobilised the public to vote out then-president Abdoulaye Wade, who had manipulated the

constitution to seek a third term in office. Its success inspired Rama Thiaw's brilliant film [The Revolution Won't Be Televised](#), an ode to Gil Scott-Heron's popular 1970s song-poem. Earlier this year, Y'en a Marre returned to play an important role in Senegal's presidential election.

In Tunisia, seven years after that country's "Revolution of Dignity", people took to the streets again in 2018 asking "[Fech Nestanneu?](#)" ("What are we waiting for?"). Dissent was prompted this time by austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in which taxes were raised, public sector spending frozen, civil servants' wages slashed, and 22 percent of the country's budget allocated for servicing debt.

Meanwhile, a new revolution has swept Algeria and Sudan, where mass mobilisation managed to unseat two long-term rulers - Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Omar al-Bashir.

Aside from demanding accountable governments, Africans have recently pushed for the removal of colonial-era penal codes criminalising homosexuality. While [Angola](#), [Mozambique](#) and [Seychelles](#) relaxed anti-gay laws in the past five years, last month the High Court of Kenya [upheld a ban](#) on same-sex relations.

Despite the ban - initially challenged in 2016 by the Kenyan National Gay and Lesbian Rights Commission - Kenya has seen a rise in LGBTI advocacy. This was most apparent in the overturning of an embargo on the critically acclaimed [Rafiki](#), a film about a young lesbian couple whose director Wanuri Kahui [sued the government](#) for censorship in 2018.

While current crusades to rid the continent of colonial laws rage on, actual decolonisation in some parts of Africa persists. When the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in February that the UK must return Chagos Islands to Mauritius, the nation scored a symbolic victory. This verdict exposed the UK's unlawful retention of Chagos at independence in 1968 and the deportation of its inhabitants, who have been battling to repatriate ever since. London has since refused to respect the "advisory", non-legally binding position of the ICJ, but Chagossians are not giving up their right to return without a fight.

Whereas some movements have focused on single countries, others operating at more regional, pan-African levels remain convinced that political independence means nothing without economic emancipation. Founded in 2007 during the World Social Forum, the Tax Justice Network Africa discovered that \$50bn leaves the continent annually in illicit financial flows. Instead of employing non-empirical indices of corruption, such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the network has developed a more robust, evidence-based [financial secrecy index](#), which measures actual stolen wealth from Africa by well-off individuals and foreign multinationals.

These are but just a few examples of Africans defying the relics of colonialism. So, academics who are genuinely committed to "decolonisation" must meet them half way. They must resist the urge to co-opt for their own career advancement, and instead focus on collaboration. They must transcend the ivory tower by seeking "relevance" not "recognition", in the words of celebrated Cameroonian scholar Francis Nyamnjoh.

They must take a cue from African and diasporic public intellectuals who have intentionally straddled academia and activism on behalf of the continent - including Frantz Fanon of Martinique, Walter Rodney of Guyana, Samir Amin and Nawal el Saadawi of Egypt, Sylvia Tamale of Uganda, and Ayesha Imam of Nigeria - by joining social justice movements and documenting their successes and failures.

They must produce emancipatory, ethical and subversive scholarship that serves Africa and its

people.

Only then will they be able to truly “decolonise the university”.

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