

# **Decoloniality, Epistemological Decolonization and African Knowledge Practices**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I critically engage the concept of decoloniality in the project of the epistemological decolonization of African knowledge practices. Decoloniality is an orientation towards extricating oneself from the colonial matrix of power. It advances a liberatory language for the future of Africa and seeks to develop the horizon of previously colonized peoples by disinterestedly looking inward. Therefore, it is a way of thinking, knowing and doing. As an epistemological movement, it consists of two moves: First, to delink from the single story of Western narratives and its accompanying epistemic injustice, and secondly, to relink with, affirm and preserve our indigenous modes of knowing and existence. Thus, epistemological decolonization as the project of addressing the epistemic wrongs of colonialism, is decoloniality in the sense that it clears the way for a new rationality based on intercultural communication and the exchange of experiences. Epistemological decolonization involves the dual projects of critically exposing the latent Eurocentrism that characterizes dominant knowledge systems, and the reconstructive task of reformulating our knowledge systems. In this paper, I shall employ the qualitative method of research to critically analyze the concept of decoloniality in the discourse of the project of epistemological decolonization of African knowledge practices. To this end, the paper delineates the notion of decoloniality, takes a critical look at the project of epistemological decolonization, and it proposes Afrocentricity as a veritable process towards decolonizing African knowledge practices. It concludes that epistemological decolonization is imperative for the establishment of African knowledge practices in global epistemic inquiry.

**Keywords:** African knowledge practices, Afrocentricity, Decoloniality, Epistemological decolonization, Eurocentrism.

## 1. Introduction

Decoloniality seeks to dislodge the Euromerican conceptions that universalize Western rationality and paradigms as the *only* authentic framework for analysis and thought. Its aim is to delink with universalizing Western ways of conceiving reality and to relink with epistemic sites that were hitherto colonized. By so doing, it seeks to re-articulate the mistaken conception of Eurocentric narratives that present a Westernized history of world civilization. This project requires undoing coloniality, to which end, it prioritizes the epistemic. Thus, epistemological or epistemic decolonization provides the appropriate pathway to decoloniality. Epistemic decolonization appropriates all sources of knowledge by recognizing all forms of knowledge in epistemic investigation. It establishes epistemological diversity which encourages multicultural or polycentric epistemology. In relation to African knowledge practices, epistemic decolonization comprises the recovery of silenced African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS) towards the provision of alternative ways of perceiving reality. That is, providing African epistemic narratives outside the bias of Eurocentrism, it un-silences silenced African modes of knowing. In this regard, the present paper, (i) theorizes the concept of decoloniality, (ii) engages the concept of decoloniality in the discourse of epistemic decolonization, (iii) examines African knowledge practices, and (iv) consider the implication of epistemological decolonization for African knowledge practices by exploring Afrocentricity as a veritable process of decolonization. It concludes by underscoring the necessity of epistemological decolonization if we are to establish African knowledge practices in global epistemic inquiry.

## 2. What is Decoloniality?

According to Walter D. Mignolo, decoloniality is an orientation towards “delinking from Western narratives in order to relink and

affirm the modes of existence we want to preserve.”<sup>1</sup> Delinking implies extricating oneself from the colonial matrix of power (CMP) or coloniality. The latter refers to “a structure of management [consisting of different levels and domains] that controls and touches upon all aspects and trajectories of our lives.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, to understand decoloniality properly, we must first understand the concept of coloniality. To avoid confusing coloniality with colonialism, let me first clarify the distinction between both concepts. While colonialism refers to the political and administrative domination enforced by military and administrative apparatus to force colonized people and places to submission, coloniality is an analytic concept employed to describe the power structure that evolved from colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Even though colonialism ended with the political and territorial independence of colonized peoples, its power structure continues to impact on the culture, labour interpersonal relations, and knowledge practices of ex-colonized populations. This extant impact of colonialism constitutes a pattern of global power – CMP or coloniality, that establishes Western domination through the inferiorization of places, persons, knowledges and subjectivities. It is manifested in the extraction of natural resources and labour exploitation of ex-colonized places and populations, and it is often disguised as the expansion of capital reproduction.

According to Aníbal Quijano, the Peruvian sociologist who introduced the concept of coloniality to academic discourse, coloniality as a matrix of power, is the exercise of control on the levels of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity of ex-colonized populations.<sup>4</sup> For Mignolo, coloniality is obscured in the idea of Western modernity

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Mignolo, “Coloniality is far from over, and so must be Decoloniality,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art Context and Enquiry* (2017): 39. <https://www.doi.org/10.1086/692552>.

<sup>2</sup> Mignolo, “Coloniality is far from over,” 40.

<sup>3</sup> Eduardo Restrepo, “Coloniality of Power,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Hilary Callan (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2018): 2-3. <http://www.ram-wan.net>. PDF.

<sup>4</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2-3 (2017): 168-178.

that enables and enforces control, domination and exploitation with the pretentiousness of progress and modernization that is good for all.<sup>5</sup> If correctly interpreted, coloniality is the mental and intellectual replication of the political and territorial domination, oppression and suppression that were associated with colonialism. Thus, Nelson Maldonado-Torres describes it as a survivor of colonialism and has been kept “alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience.”<sup>6</sup> But because it is disguised within the appealing idea of modernity, it is often not seen for the evil and injustice that it is. Given our general understanding of modernity as some form of transformations involving technological innovation, governance and socioeconomics that is culture neutral, we consider it desirable, even though coloniality is shrouded within it, and hidden from our immediate perception. Our conception of modernity which is westernized entrenches the logic that justifies the continued control, domination, suppression and exploitation of the ex-colonized. Hence, Mignolo describes coloniality as the darker side of modernity.<sup>7</sup>

Some African scholars like, the Algerian, Franz Fanon (1952, 1961), the Ghanaian, Kwame Nkrumah (1965), and the Nigerian, Ibekwe Chinweizu (1975, 1987) have engaged the idea of decoloniality in their works. However, the Kenyan, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, speaks more directly to my cause in this paper in his work, *Decolonizing the Mind*.<sup>8</sup> According to him, coloniality has had adverse impact on the psychological, epistemological, cultural and linguistic sphere of the African people. The colonizers employed the weapon of the “cultural bomb” to dissipate the collective defiance of the African people. The cultural bomb refers to the

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005): 6.

<sup>6</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2-3 (2007): 243.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986).

imperialist's attack on the belief of Africans; their names, languages, environment, heritage of struggle, unity, capacities and ultimately, themselves. The attack forcedly orientated Africans to perceive and interpret their existence different from how they have perceived and understood their Africanness. It was a vicious socialization that made Africans believe that their past was a waste; that they achieved nothing until the intervention of colonialist in their space. As a result of this, most Africans now want to break with their past by embracing foreign names, languages and ways of life other than their own.

From Ngũgĩ's perspective, coloniality is an invisible power structure that justifies the domination and exploitation of the resources of the world by Western systems.<sup>9</sup> The latter create racial hierarchies, systems of knowledge and culture based on colonial ideologies that refuse to recognize indigenous, pre-colonial and non-Western ways of knowing, and of being. In this way, they deny authentic knowledge to colonized peoples and societies by describing their ways of knowing as superstitious and uncritical. Thus, they create an asymmetric world order that alienate Africans, and socialize them to prefer what is Western to what is African. Sadly, institutions like; schools, colleges, universities, churches and different organizations in Africa, continue to reproduce coloniality by propagating the Western asymmetric world order. These institutions sustain pedagogies and epistemologies of equilibrium by enforcing the use of unquestioned research methodologies that are purportedly neutral. Whereas, research methodologies are in fact, gate-keeping tools meant to prevent the emergence of other forms of thinking, logic and world view.<sup>10</sup> The realization of the impact of coloniality provides the motivation for decoloniality.

Decoloniality seeks to "[dismantle the] relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geo-political hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the

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<sup>9</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa," *History Compass* 13, no. 10 (2015): 488. <https://www.doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12264>.

<sup>10</sup> Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa," 489.

modern/colonial world.”<sup>11</sup> It is the effort to displace the Western conceptions that universalize Western rationality and paradigms as the *only* authentic framework for analysis and thought.<sup>12</sup> Decoloniality is a two-way movement, it seeks first, to delink with universalized Western rationality; and secondly, to relink with the silenced epistemic sites of ex-colonized population. It is about shifting the paradigm of reason from the West that is hitherto, considered as the epistemic standpoint of rationality, to resituate it for inclusivity, especially for the accommodation of the narratives of formerly silenced voices of colonized societies. This should not be considered as de-essentializing Western forms of knowledge in order to essentialize African knowledge systems. It is about de-essentializing the former to create a polycentric or multicultural epistemology that would allow equal voices to all forms of epistemic inquiry.

According to Mignolo, decoloniality is both a critical intellectual theory, as well as, a political project. As the latter, it seeks to untangle formerly colonized populations from coloniality. And as the former, it tries to unmask the disguise of modernity as the dawn of progress, equality, fraternity, and liberation in human history.<sup>13</sup> He differentiates decoloniality from other critical social theories like, Marxism and Postmodernism, saying that decoloniality is “a pluriversal epistemology of the future.”<sup>14</sup> By this, he means that decoloniality is advocating an epistemology that is free from the abstract universals of Western ontologies and paradigms. Thus, it is an epistemological movement that advances a liberatory language for the future of Africa. It involves deconstructing the single story of Western narratives and its

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<sup>11</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction,” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of Luso-Hispanic world* 1, no. 2 (2011): 117.

<sup>12</sup> See Catherine Walsh, “The Decolonial for: Resurgences, Shifts and Movements,” in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, eds. W. D. Mignolo and C. Walsh, 15-32 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> See Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Mignolo, “Introduction: Coloniality of Power and De-colonial Thinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21 nos. 2-3 (2007): 159.

associated epistemic injustice in order to reconstruct indigenous knowledge systems like, African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS), that have been silenced over the centuries. Although this aspect of decoloniality is not my concern in this paper, but it is important to underscore that as a political movement, decoloniality is expressed in the theories of Negritude, Pan-Africanism, African Socialism, African Humanism, Black Consciousness Movements and African Renaissance.<sup>15</sup>

The epistemological aspect of decoloniality is about the decolonization of knowledge. Its aim is to establish the legitimacy and authenticity of silenced indigenous epistemic forms like AIKS. Western epistemology as the dominant knowledge system disregarded AIKS as superstitious and uncritical, and therefore, subjugated it as irrational and illegitimate. Thus, decolonizing knowledge or epistemological decolonization seeks to undo the coloniality of knowledge which is a “constituted ... pattern of global classification and hierarchization of knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> This is a situation in which the colonizers conceived themselves superior to the colonized based on phenotypes and skin colour. They created a racial classification of the world’s population wherein knowledge is attributed to Western epistemologies and non-Western epistemologies were classified as inauthentic, inferior, products of ignorance and superstitions. This established a hegemonic structure of epistemology that impacted the colonial mentality of ethnic, culture and epistemic inferiority on the colonized. The inauthenticification and inferiorization of non-Western epistemologies shuts the door to exploring the methodologies and the principles that undergird them. Such closure eliminates the possibility of understanding reality from the perspectives of *inferiorized* indigenous African cultures and epistemologies. This is tantamount to killing non-Western epistemologies, a process that Boaventura de Sousa Santos describes as epistemicide,<sup>17</sup> the non-recognition of

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<sup>15</sup> For details on the political dimension of decoloniality see: Ndlovu-Gatsheni “Decoloniality as the Future of Africa.”

<sup>16</sup> Restrepo, “Coloniality of Power,” 3.

<sup>17</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicides*, (New York: Routledge, 2014) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315634876>.

the different epistemic practices of marginalized populations across the globe. To achieve the aim of decoloniality, we must ensure the cessation of epistemicide through epistemological decolonization.

### **3. What is Epistemological Decolonization?**

Depending on who and why someone is using the term, decolonization can, and does take different meanings. Conjoined with the epistemological, which implies matters about knowledge whose precise definition is not free of contestations, reverberates the importance of unpacking the concept of epistemological decolonization. As a concept rooted in decolonial scholarship, epistemological decolonization investigates non-Western forms of knowledge in order to reconstruct and legitimize the knowledge systems of formerly colonized populations.<sup>18</sup> It challenges the suppression of knowledges that are conceived outside the hegemonic paradigms of Western epistemology, and tries to address the epistemic wrongs of colonialism by advocating intercultural communication and the exchange of experiences in epistemic inquiry. For Pheng Cheah<sup>19</sup> and Lerato Posholi,<sup>20</sup> epistemological decolonization is an essential part of the project of decoloniality because of the fundamentality of the epistemic in deconstructing colonialism.

Even though Bernard Matolino considers the outcome of the project of decoloniality contestable because according to him, we are not sure if decolonial theorizations will actually benefit the ex-colonized, he nonetheless, admits that the intent of the project is clear. First, he admits that formerly oppressed people have the right to engage in epistemic decolonization based on the fact that they were excluded from dominant knowledge practices. Secondly, he articulates the aims of epistemological decolonization as: (i) the

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<sup>18</sup> See Jaco. S. Dreyer, "Practical Theology and the Call for Decolonization of Higher Education in South Africa: Reflections and Proposals," *HTS Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017): 1-7 <https://www.doi/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4805>.

<sup>19</sup> Pheng Cheah, "The Limits of Thinking in Decolonial Strategies," *Townsend Centre for the Humanities* (2006): 9-11.

<sup>20</sup> Lerato Posholi, "Epistemic Decolonization as Overcoming the Hermeneutical Injustice of Eurocentrism," *Philosophical Papers* 49, no. 2 (2020): 279-304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2020.1779604>.

restoration of the “humanity of victims of colonization” and (ii) the assertion of the “standing [of the victims of colonization] as people capable of full exercise of rational authority.”<sup>21</sup> Based on Matolino’s claim, we can plausibly assert that the decolonial analysis of epistemology is about the exposition of the hermeneutical injustice of colonialism. Furthermore, the objective is to envision a polycentric or multicultural epistemology.

According to Santos, epistemological decolonization critically interrogates the latent Eurocentric elements in our dominant forms of knowledge, so as to constructively reformulate knowledge systems that were subjugated and silenced.<sup>22</sup> This requires that we disinfect our academic activities of corrupting and colonizing elements that are not genuinely directed towards truth as the cognitive goal of epistemic inquiries. Alex Broadbent expresses this lucidly when he claims that “[i]f curricula and ideas and knowledge are colonized, that means they have been shaped in part by considerations that are political, economic, social, cultural or otherwise tangential to the ideas of academic inquiry.”<sup>23</sup> Broadbent’s point is a valid assessment of the trajectory of colonialism. The subjugation of African indigenous knowledge systems through its classification as uncritical, inferior, superstitious and irrelevant, is not informed by genuine epistemic evidences, but by the economic and socio-political concerns and gains of the colonizers.

There are two proposals towards decolonization of knowledge; the radical and/or the moderate proposals. The radical proposal advocates a fundamental break with Eurocentric epistemology.<sup>24</sup> It is the view that colonized people whose epistemologies have been marginalized should engage reality from the perspectives of their lived experiences. Following the notion of epistemic privilege,

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<sup>21</sup> Bernard Matolino, “Whiter Epistemic Decolonization,” *Philosophical Papers* (2020): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2020.1779605>.

<sup>22</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Alex Broadbent, “It will take Critical, Thorough Scrutiny to Truly Decolonize Knowledge,” <https://www.theconversation.com>. (Accessed 02/05/2022).

<sup>24</sup> See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

formerly colonized populations are well positioned because of the privilege of their experiences, to investigate and analyze their social reality in ways that Eurocentric scholars may ignore or are not able to.<sup>25</sup> Epistemic privilege is the view that knowers have access to certain epistemic resources by virtue of their particular standpoint or experiences. Access to such epistemic resources is usually not available to agents who lack the experiences (or are outside the standpoint) of the knowers. In line with the radical proposal, Mignolo had argued that we should think and conduct inquiry outside or beyond Eurocentric paradigms of epistemic evaluation.<sup>26</sup> By this, he means that we do not have to necessarily reject Western epistemology, but that we should transcend its elements that tend to essentialize Western paradigms as the *only* authentic framework for epistemic evaluation. Arturo Escobar elucidates that the 'outside' or 'beyond' that Mignolo talks about, applies to the hegemonic tendencies, reminisces of colonialism, that continue to characterize evaluative paradigms in Western epistemology.<sup>27</sup>

Mignolo's position lures us into the moderate proposal for epistemological decolonization. This proposal presents the argument that we cannot completely put aside the ideas of Western epistemology, regardless of its entanglement with colonial domination and oppression.<sup>28</sup> The thinking is that we have internalized Eurocentric thought to the point that we cannot think outside of it, especially because they present us with useful conceptual tools to understand the world. Given this intractable situation, what we need to do in decolonizing knowledge is to critically engage Eurocentric thought within the context of our

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<sup>25</sup> Briana Toole, "From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression," *Hypatia* 34, no. 4 (2019): 598-618.

<sup>26</sup> See Walter D. Mignolo, "Philosophy and the Colonial Difference," in *Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates*, ed. E. Mendieta, 80-86 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Arturo Escobar, "Beyond the Third World: Imperial Globality, Global Coloniality and Anti-Globalization Social Movements," *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2004): 207-230.

<sup>28</sup> See Mignolo, "Introduction: Coloniality of Power" and Rajeev Bhargava, "Overcoming the epistemic injustice of colonialism," *Global Policy* 4, no. 4 (2013): 413-417. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12093>.

marginalized past – our cultures and forms of knowledge that colonialism subjugated. Thus, while we employ the useful conceptual tools of Western epistemology, we should avoid a blind acceptance of their conclusions and ensure that we interrogate the motivations and goals that underlie their conclusions. The implication of this for African knowledge practices is that, even if we have to employ the concepts and categories of Western epistemology for the purpose of epistemic analysis, they should be critically scrutinized and reconstructed within the context of our lived experiences as marginalized people.<sup>29</sup>

In this paper, I take sides with the moderate proposal because I find it more realistic and plausible. Unlike the radical proposal that advocates a fundamental break with Western epistemology, the moderate proposal is open to all sources and systems of knowledge; be it Western, African and/or any other epistemic system. As Bert Olivier puts it, the idea of epistemological decolonization is to achieve autonomy for all systems of knowledge, especially the “previously unacknowledged and/or suppressed knowledge-traditions.”<sup>30</sup> To support this view Miguel Zavala avers that acknowledging the legitimacy of all forms of knowledge will restore epistemic justice for marginalized forms of knowledge and aid the recovery of latent knowledges.<sup>31</sup> It will open the door for multicultural/polycentric and/or epistemological diversity/pluralism that will envision comprehensiveness and authenticity in global epistemic inquiry.

#### **4. The Implication of Epistemological Decolonization for African Knowledge Practices**

Epistemological decolonization would enable us as Africans recover and reconstruct our lost epistemic sites. The sites which I refer to as African knowledge practices are the ways Africans of the

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<sup>29</sup> See Posholi, “Epistemic Decolonization.”

<sup>30</sup> Bert Olivier, “Decolonization, Identity, New-Colonialism and Power” *Phronimon* 20 (2019): 2. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/3065>.

<sup>31</sup> Miguel Zavala, “Decolonial Methodologies in Education,” in *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, ed. M. A. Peters, 361-366 (Singapore: Springer, 2017).

sub-Saharan arrive at their understanding of reality. Africans believe in the interconnectedness of all things – the human and non-human, the animate and inanimate, as well as the visible and invisible. Thus, the African thought system is fundamentally communal, profoundly spiritual and with a substantial orientation towards the mystical. There is no strict distinction between matter and spirit, both constitute a continuum in a hierarchical categorization of being.<sup>32</sup> Based on this ontological orientation, African epistemology relies on the immaterial aspects of reality to interpret the lived experiences of the African. Thus, the African derives experiential knowledge of reality based on her cultural worldview which I describe as African communitarian epistemology (ACE).

ACE is the indigenous ways Africans derive and transmit the truths about reality. These ways include; storytelling, music, proverbs and divination among others; they provide a meaningful and rational basis by which the lives of natives of a particular place are guided.<sup>33</sup> Aware that the notion of what is indigenous is contentious, suffice to state that as used here, it refers to “the natural belongingness that characterizes the African continent despite the multiplicity of cultures and native peoples without common ancestry.”<sup>34</sup> ACE is a way-centred approach to knowledge that emphasizes the dialectics, cooperation and togetherness in knowledge derivation. The way-centred approach to epistemology is “concerned with identifying the proper path and appropriate models of conduct that will enable humans to live the kind of lives

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<sup>32</sup> See Christopher Agulanna and Peter Osimiri, “African Worldview and the Question of Democratic Substance,” in *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy*, ed. I. E. Ukpokolo (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 333–349. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40796-8\\_22](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40796-8_22).

<sup>33</sup> See Anselm Jimoh, Moses M. Akpoughul-Abunya and Peace O Jemibor, “The Epistemology of African Sociological Knowledge Practices,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sociology of Africa*, eds., R. Sooryamoorthy and Nene Ernest Khalema (online ed., Oxford Academic, 18 Aug. 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197608494.013.2>. (Accessed 1/11/2022).

<sup>34</sup> Jimoh, Akpoughul-Abunya and Jemibor, “The Epistemology of African Sociological Knowledge Practices.”

suitable for human beings.”<sup>35</sup> It is associated with indigenous knowledge systems because they consider knowledge as the holistic and integrative understanding of phenomena that enables humans live in harmony with their surroundings.

Knowledge in ACE is derived from a chain relationship in which all aspects of reality are intersected to provide a holistic and integrative understanding of reality as constituted in a unitary universe.<sup>36</sup> This is evident in ancient Egyptian thought which according to Joseph Agbakoba, “strove to achieve a balance, a synthesis of the multiplicity of being presented to them through the channels of cognition, understanding and manipulation of reality offered by the diverse activities of magic, mysticism and intellectual pursuits.”<sup>37</sup> With reference to Innocent Onyewuenyi, Agbakoba further avers that the Egyptian thought system demonstrated their belief in reality as a balance or harmony of opposing forces, therefore, reality cannot be limited to the material or spiritual mode of being alone.<sup>38</sup>

In ACE therefore, knowledge is a product of the intercourse between the cognitive agent and the object of cognition. This occurs when the agent interacts with others, the community and environment. Africans have a realist view of reality. For them, the contingent world is an independent existence that we come to know when our minds associate with the objects in the world. These objects that exist independent of the human mind, impose themselves on the mind through the human senses that constitute the windows for the perception of these objects. Thus, “the mind assimilates, frames, conceptualizes and interprets these objects in accordance with its own categories, which are informed by subjective and empirical (*a posteriori*) factors like culture, environ-

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<sup>35</sup> David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (New York: State University Press, 1998): 57.

<sup>36</sup> Anselm K. Jimoh, “Reconstructing a Fractured Indigenous Knowledge System,” *Synthesis Philosophica*, 65 (2018): 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.21464/sp33101>.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph C. A. Agbakoba, “The African Origin of Philosophy,” in *African Philosophy Down the Ages: 10,000BC to the Present*, ed. Francis Ogunmodede, 107–114 (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2004): 110.

<sup>38</sup> Agbakoba, “The African Origin of Philosophy,” 110.

ment, experience, etc.”<sup>39</sup> These factors constitute the framework by which the African mind makes sense of the world around him.

An inquirer who is educated and influenced by the linearity of the Western notion of reality which is essentially dualistic, would find it difficult to understand the logic of communality and its attendant commonality in African thought system. That is, the cooperation, belongingness and consubstantiation of the material, physical, immaterial, spiritual, mythical and mystical in African epistemology. Such an inquirer would always seek to subject phenomena to the idealist/materialist, rationalist/empiricist and mind/matter distinction and analysis. On the contrary, however, the human person in African thought is constituted by the mutual relations between the self and others, the visible and invisible, the human and the spirit. Hence the African approaches the universe, environment, society and the divine, with a sense of commonality. This is what accounts for the communitarian character of African epistemology such that, for the African communitarian epistemologist, knowledge transcends the individual rational endeavour of the cognitive agent to include the world beyond the natural experiences of the agent. Knowledge is also inclusive of intuition because Africans consider it a valid part of the cognitive experience that arises from the organic and dynamic relationship between the cognitive agent and the object of cognition. Both the agent and object of cognition are mutually inclusive as aspects or parts of a single whole where the meaningfulness of any aspect is derived from its relationship with the other aspects of reality.

Unlike Western epistemology that considers them antithetical to genuine knowledge, ACE takes into account the susceptibility of human knowledge to sociocultural factors. The latter which includes among others; language, environment, traditions, cultural practices and social relations, influence how we formulate and establish the truths of our beliefs. Given the diversity of the sociocultural backgrounds of human beings, a particular knowledge system cannot constitute a universal or global paradigm

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<sup>39</sup>Anselm Jimoh and Peace Jemibor, “Knowledge Derivation in Thomistic and African Communitarian Epistemologies,” *WAJOPS: West African Journal of Philosophical Studies* 20 (2020): 17.

of epistemic evaluation. This is the error of essentializing Western epistemology; its tendency to objectify its methodology and evaluative paradigms as a “one-for-all” model or standard for genuine knowledge is both unjustified and not justifiable. To allow this dominant practice to continue is to engage in the coloniality of knowledge and the epistemicide of African knowledge practices.

Epistemicide is the epistemic violence of silencing, as well as the attempt to erase non-Western epistemologies,<sup>40</sup> it is the killing of non-dominant forms of knowledge.<sup>41</sup> This could be by completely silencing knowledges that are not based on the ideologies of the dominant form of knowledge – Western epistemology, and/or by bullying the non-dominant forms of knowledge into shapes that are agreeable to the dominant form of knowledge.<sup>42</sup> The implication here is that, until ACE for instance, is restructured in concord with the paradigms and categories of Western epistemology, it would not be accepted in the global space of epistemic inquiry as a legitimate and plausible epistemology. To restructure ACE to agree with Western epistemological ideals would strip it of its underlying framework, originality and relevance to the African space. It becomes an imposed knowledge of oneself upon him by agents outside his sociocultural framework and ontological worldview.

The colonialist conquests of colonized populations, saw libraries with tons of volumes destroyed, suppression and silencing of oral knowledges, and conquered slaves were conceived as sub-humans and therefore, lacking the capacity to be critical and reflective.<sup>43</sup> Based on this, epistemicide prospered on the false conception that only the West had the exclusive and superior right

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<sup>40</sup> Anselm Kole Jimoh, “Coloniality of Knowledge, Epistemicide, and the Imperative of Decolonization of African Epistemology,” in *Truth in the Waters of Wisdom: Relevance of Old and New Fountains of Knowledge for our Time*, eds. Francis Adedara and Patrick Akunne, 422-446 (Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2022): 433.

<sup>41</sup> Karen Bennett, “Epistemicide,” *The Translator* 13, no. 2 (2007), 154. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2007.10799236>. 158.

<sup>42</sup> Bennett, “Epistemicide,” 154.

<sup>43</sup> Hall and Tandon “Decolonization of Knowledge.”

to reason.<sup>44</sup> The injustice of epistemicide consists in “shut[ing] the door to the African cultural space [but allowing] Eurocentrism to valorise and affirm Western epistemology.”<sup>45</sup> This exculpates Western epistemology of “existential and epistemological violence against indigenous epistemology,”<sup>46</sup> while simultaneously, the African cultural and epistemological heritage is suffocated. Thus, Western epistemology assumes the hegemonic role to define and delimit what counts as genuine knowledge. In performing this appropriated role, Western epistemology obliterates as unscientific, irrational and lacking knowledge whatever is not in conformity with its methods of inquiry. It subjugates and interiorizes any inquiry that does not fit into the parameters of its methodologies. This has made the Western knowledge system more appealing to many Africans and has reinforced in them the colonial mentality that the Western epistemological structures are superior, more valid and germane. Consequently, these Africans suspect indigenous ways of inquiry, deride indigenous knowledge practices, and rather allow Western knowledge system penetrate and subvert inquiry in indigenous African systems.<sup>47</sup> This is evident in the academic and intellectual mimetism that is replete in African scholarship. It is a reflection of the failure to sever the intellectual umbilical cord with the West and the refusal to exit from borrowed discourses.<sup>48</sup> If we must tell our own story as participants with immediate experience of our ways, we must first extricate ourselves from the narratives that do not correctly represent our epistemology and lived experiences. Herein, lies the implication of epistemological decolonization for African knowledge practices.

To address the cognitive injustice of epistemicide which is manifested and instituted by the essentialization of Western epistemic paradigms, we must seek ways to delink with the essentializing elements of Western epistemology. To this end,

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<sup>44</sup> Teboho T. Lebakeng, Manthiba M. Phalane and Nase Dalindjebo, “Epistemicide, Institutional Cultures and the Imperative for the Africanization of Universities in South Africa,” *Alternation* 13, no. 1 (2006), 72.

<sup>45</sup> Jimoh, “Coloniality of Knowledge,” 435.

<sup>46</sup> Lebakeng, Phalane and Dalindjebo, “Epistemicide, Institutional Cultures,” 71.

<sup>47</sup> Jimoh, “Coloniality of Knowledge,” 436.

<sup>48</sup> Lebakeng, Phalane and Dalindjebo, “Epistemicide, Institutional Cultures,” 71.

epistemological decolonization provides the way forward; it would enable us delink with universalized epistemic paradigms and reconstruct our decontextualized and fractured epistemologies. In line with the moderate proposal of epistemological decolonization, I propose Afrocentricity as a veritable process towards decolonizing African knowledge practices.

Although the efforts of African scholars after the continent's colonial experience to dispute and disprove the colonial idea that Africans lack the capacity for critical and reflective thought is commendable, their approach further fractured AIKS. They tried to validate AIKS by engaging Western paradigms and so presented African approximations of Western specifications. Their aim was to demonstrate that "Africans have categories and concepts that are similar or equal to Western categories and concepts"<sup>49</sup> and so establish that Africans are capable of critical rational inquiry and genuine knowledge. However, this approach is counterproductive because it unwittingly denies AIKS of a logic and rationality of its own. Developments in African scholarship have gone beyond this methodological error and more plausible approaches like Afrocentricity, which I subscribe to, have emerged.

Taking cognizance of the need to avoid epistemic enmity, that is, the commitment to avoid interaction with a particular form of knowledge because it is considered as inimical to one's form of knowledge, which is antithetical to the core of epistemological decolonization,<sup>50</sup> I propose the engagement of Afrocentricity in decolonizing African knowledge practices. The core mandate of epistemological decolonization is to think outside the box of Western epistemic superiority and to affirm the legitimacy of African forms of knowledge. Thus, the choice of Afrocentricity is based on the facts that it is not anti-White, neither does it seek to form new divides.

Afrocentricity is not about replacing White Greeks with black Egyptians; it is against the oppression that denies Africa her

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<sup>49</sup> Jimoh, "Reconstructing a Fractured Indigenous Knowledge System," 6.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis Gordon, "Fanon on Decolonizing Knowledge," in *Fanon and Decolonization of Philosophy*, eds. Elizabeth A. Hoppe and Tracey N. Nicholls, 3-18 (Washington DC: Lexington Books. 2010): 3.

rightful place in world civilization. While Greek civilization takes its rightful place in human history, marginalized ancient Egyptian civilization should be accorded its rightful place as a precursor of Greek civilization and a global center of learning where a number of early Greek philosophers studied.<sup>51</sup> The first known Greek civilization of Crete only came over two thousand years after the ancient Egyptian civilization. George M. James' claim that "the Greeks are not the author of Greek philosophy, but the people of North Africa, commonly called Egyptians"<sup>52</sup> were the progenitors of Greek philosophy supports this claim. If early civilizations and their contributions to human development are accorded their rightful place, the history of human intellectual development would be corrected. Just as no culture would be denied its right to stand on its ground, no culture should be allowed to usurp and appropriate to itself the heritage and rightful place of any other culture.

Afrocentricity is not about overthrowing and replacing Eurocentrism, it is not an antithesis of Eurocentricity. Its interest is to liberate African epistemic space by deconstructing and undermining hegemonic epistemologies. It seeks to correct the records by placing Africans in their rightful historical framework to reflect their contributions to human civilization and ensure that this is reflected in the history of the world.<sup>53</sup> To this end, Afrocentricity repudiates the marginalization of indigenous cultural knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it is not a replacement for Eurocentricity, instead, it seeks the mutual coexistence of cultures in which each culture is allowed its rightful place, as well as, the entitlement to their perspectives of reality based on their experiences.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See Innocent Onyewuenyi, *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 1987): 29-39.

<sup>52</sup> George M. James, *Stolen Legacy* (New York: New York Philosophical Library, 1954): 49.

<sup>53</sup> Chidozie J. Chukwuokolo, "Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism: The Dilemma of African Development," *New Journal of African Studies* (2009): 33.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Amo-Agyemang, "Unmasking Resilience as Governmentality: Towards an Afrocentric Epistemology," *International Politics* 58 no. 5 (2021): 688. <https://doi.org/10.1057/S41311-021-00282-8>. S2CID 233930251.

<sup>55</sup> Midas Chawane, "The Development of Afrocentricity: A Historical Survey," *Yesterday and Today* 16 (2016): 83. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2016/n16a5>.

According to Molefi Asante who is credited with the origin and development of the concept, Afrocentricity is an intellectual paradigm of analysis that provides a framework by which we can engage in the liberation of Africa from the distortive narratives of Eurocentrism. It advocates African-centeredness by developing African intellectual agency and establishing the epistemological relevance of Africa in the civilization of the world. It privileges African interests, values and perspectives,<sup>56</sup> by emphasizing the culture and achievements of Africans with the aim of rediscovering Africa outside the colonial narratives, transform the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of Africans and accentuates the central role of Africa in the civilization of the world. In this way, it hopes to restore to Africans their intellectual pride as the progenitors of civilization.<sup>57</sup> According to Midas Chawane, Afrocentricity is about ensuring that “the African heritage and culture and its history and contribution to world civilization and scholarship are reflected in the curricula on every level of academic instruction.”<sup>58</sup> The objective is to correct the false narratives about Africa and Africans created and projected in/by Western academia.

Afrocentricity challenges Eurocentric misrepresentation that purports that rationalism was Greek heritage to the world. This is a twisted historical narrative that marginalizes non-Europeans and generates disbelief about the achievements of Africans by either ignoring or misinterpreting African influence on Greek civilization and intellectual development. According to Chawane, such influence is evident in the works of Aetius, Strabo, Plato, Homer, Herodotus, Diogenes, Plutarch, and Diodorus Siculus.<sup>59</sup>

Afrocentricity provides a methodological and epistemological framework to correct this misrepresentation and falsehood. Thus, it presents a veritable ground for the epistemological decolonization and the reconstruction of fractured African knowledge practices. It enables Africans to understand themselves as players and not

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<sup>56</sup> See Molefi K. Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago: Peoples Publishing Group, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Chawane, “The Development of Afrocentricity: A Historical Survey,” *Yesterday & Today* 16 (2016): 78-99. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2016/n16a5>

<sup>58</sup> Chawane, “The Development of Afrocentricity,” 82.

<sup>59</sup> Chawane, “The Development of Afrocentricity,” 84.

victims, in the study of ideas and events. It emphasizes the epistemological relevance of Africa and opens up the horizon for African scholars and researchers to present a systematic African epistemology that is firmly grounded on African worldviews, instead of assembling African approximations of Western specifications. Afrocentricity decentralizes the powers in knowledge practice.

## **5. Conclusion**

I have theorized the concepts of decoloniality and epistemological decolonization, and applied the latter to stem the tide of the epistemicide of African knowledge practices. In recent times, the need to engage in decolonial endeavours, especially in academics have gathered momentum. This is evident in the series of academic conferences on the themes of decoloniality and decolonization. What this demonstrates is that African scholars are becoming increasingly aware that if we do not engage in decolonizing our knowledge systems, African scholarship would continue to be apron-stringed to Western intellectual hegemony. What I have done in this paper therefore, is to elucidate and articulate the need to decolonize knowledge in order to establish the legitimacy of African knowledge practices in global knowledge inquiry.