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Interrogating the postcolonial Nigerian university: pitfalls and pathways

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Nigerian public universities stand at a crossroads. They are confronted by a multidimensional crisis that challenges their self-curated image as bastions of learning, thought and instrumental research. The universities are also increasingly imbricated in global epistemological politics and trends. These entwinements both weaken them and offer them new ways of imagining their missions, and new imperatives for reinventing themselves as distinctly African universities participating robustly in the global scholarly and pedagogical marketplace.

One dimension of the crisis is the conundrum that Jeremiah Arowosegbe poses in his two articles in this journal: the quest for academic freedom and autonomy of inquiry in the midst of an increasingly fraught reliance on the resources of deeply politicized state machines with designs to co-opt and remake universities (Arowosegbe 2023; 2024). How Nigerian universities, individually and collectively, respond to this multipronged crisis will determine their continuous relevance in discussions around national development and nation building.

This article maps the landscape of the current crisis, discussing its dimensions, the novel characteristics introduced into familiar problems of form and substance, and the ways in which the crisis is shaped in part by new anxieties and pressures exerted by global and continental epistemological debates. I sketch the contours of a fast-evolving, constantly mutating structural and epistemic crisis, while identifying and analysing the enduring foundational issues that require radical rethinking.

An early caveat is in order: my analysis here will focus on the humanities, which form my primary scholarly constituency. The humanities are also where the most acute manifestations of the Nigerian university crisis are felt and where they are most vigorously debated. Another disclaimer is necessary from the outset, which is that in sections where my analysis takes on a comparative slant the comparison is informed in part by my training and employment in two well-resourced and selective North American universities.[1]

[1] I spent six years in a doctoral programme at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and have now spent twenty years teaching at Vanderbilt University. Even by American standards, these are non-representative institutions, given their reputation, prestige and resources. Since all perspectives are

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A crisis of relevance in the humanities

The humanities are troubled everywhere – including, or even more so, in the global North. The global economy is convulsing and morphing at a dizzying pace under the influence of multiple, overlapping technological and digital revolutions in knowledge, research and learning. Generative AI tools with the capacity to extract, process, render in text and image, and then spit out massive amounts of data and information have refocused attention on the ways in which traditional humanities are being upended and new spaces created for expanding humanities knowledge. These trends have created a scenario in which the humanities are fighting to re-establish their relevance to twenty-first-century concerns and to new knowledge economies that seem to have transcended the humanities. The hubristic triumphalism of those invested in the assumed transformative exclusivity of STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) has seen resources and patronage shift away from the humanities, already an under-resourced field of knowledge production.

The response in Nigerian universities to this challenge has been a prolonged period of self-redefinition whose end goal is to establish a nexus between humanities knowledge and instrumental impact. Given the global nature of the challenges the humanities face, the question of instrumentality is not an exclusively Nigerian or African preoccupation. While resources for humanities research remain weighted disproportionately in favour of Euro-America and against scholars working in the global South, the anxieties of humanistic scholars in both Africa and Euro-America are more alike than different. In the Western academy, the humanities have had to justify their relevance to state and non-state funders. Moreover, humanities disciplines face growing capitalist and transactional pressures that are depleting enrolment in them as students weigh the rising costs against the benefits of a humanities degree.[2] Clearly, then, the 'crisis of relevance', as J. I. Dibua characterizes it (Dibua 1997), plagues the humanities everywhere, even if, as Sola Akinrinade's response to Arowosegbe's 2023 article in this journal affirms, the crisis and the responses to it take on certain distinctly Nigerian forms (Akinrinade 2024). There are indeed marked differences in how questions regarding relevance are framed and posed in Nigeria and in the global North.

As in most parts of the global South, in Nigeria the crisis of the humanities is not framed as a post-developmentalist or 'crisis of late capitalism' issue as it is in the global North. Rather, as discussed by Akinrinade, the articulation revolves around another kind of anxiety, which is starkly developmentalist and instrumentalist. In a developing country, the debate on national development, whether fought out in policy or in university circles, has always rested on a consensus that STEM fields are

ultimately autobiographical, it is important to acknowledge that some of the ways in which I observe and relate to public universities in Nigeria are informed by my immersion in these American academic institutional cultures where the relative availability of resources, the existence of global reputational capital, and the persistence of established standards and traditions make it possible to internalize and live out certain academic values that remain aspirational in Nigeria and in other countries of the global South.

[2] Arowosegbe (2023; 2024) makes a similar point about how African knowledge systems are captive to or hamstrung by the political economy of capitalist knowledge production and utilization.

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more directly impactful on national developmental aspirations than the humanities and should thus attract the bulk of the state's meagre education budget. Another side of the humanities debate in Nigeria is derived from the aforementioned developmental anxiety: the humanities have to prove themselves relevant, even if indirectly, to national development, broadly defined, in order to stake a claim to dwindling state resources that are increasingly allocated based on a narrowly instrumental definition of relevance. Here, unlike in the global North, the debate is not so much about how to locate the humanities in a changing post-industrial capitalist economy as it is about how the humanities map onto or figure in debates about industrialization, deindustrialization, reindustrialization and development.

In the last decade or so, I, like many Nigerian academics based in institutions in the global North, have been participating in various forms of Nigerian academic life. I have collaborated with Nigeria-based historians in research, archival digitization, workshops and conferencing. On request, I have read and reviewed the manuscripts of colleagues in various humanities disciplines in Nigeria. I mentor graduate students and early-career colleagues in Nigeria through career development seminars, journal publishing mentorships, theory workshops and private, informal sessions. I have presented conference papers and keynote lectures in Nigerian universities. Perhaps most instructively, I have been external examiner for a few MA and PhD dissertations in Nigeria. I have evaluated at least two dossiers of colleagues seeking promotion to the rank of full professor. In the last five years I have received, on average, three inquiries a month from undergraduate and graduate students in Africa (mostly Nigerian and Ghanaian) who want to enrol in North American doctoral programmes, including the one at my institution. Their correspondence usually comes with a statement of purpose, a research proposal and a writing sample. These documents are an instructive window into the extent to which the logic of instrumentality and policy relevance has permeated the humanities and its pedagogical practices in Nigeria in response to postcolonial universities being configured to undervalue and provincialize humanities knowledge.

Taken together, these engagements and interactions have brought me closer to the workings of the humanities as they are currently constituted in Nigerian universities. The overarching takeaway from my multifaceted observations is that Nigerian academic humanities are suffused with an instrumental imperative that is partly self-generated and partly the product of external pressure to demonstrate their relevance and utility to national development and the national purpose. The internal anxieties are the result of internalized tropes of relevance – public relevance – being the measure of a discipline's worth. The internal and external pressures work in symbiosis to catalyse and authorize subtle and not-so-subtle methodological, epistemological and programmatic manoeuvres towards a renewed and more robust focus on instrumentality in Nigerian humanities scholarship.

As with the framing of the problem, responses to the crisis in Europe and North America differ from those in Nigeria. In the former, the idiom of relevance takes on a philosophical and abstract dimension, but this has now crossed over into productive, futuristic and synergistic conversations around digital humanities and humanized digital worlds. In Nigeria, the language of the debate is that of crude national utility and development. This explicitly formulaic instrumentality shapes the way humanities and humanistic social science scholars in Nigerian public universities increasingly frame their works and teach their students to structure their works. The central feature of this

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new iteration is how the humanities are being reconfigured as sites of problem solving, a reconceptualization that, in extreme cases, causes practitioners to include 'recommendations', 'solutions' and 'policy implication' sections in their works.

What is missing from the response of Nigerian universities to the humanities crisis is any exploration of spaces where insights and methods developed in the humanities can intersect productively and in symbiotic osmosis with those generated in the natural, quantitative and technological sciences. What is needed is not simply a programme that panders to the developmental rhetoric of state bureaucrats who are driven by outmoded theories of modernization and industrialization, and by faith in the exclusive catalytic impact of STEM knowledge on these aspirations. Rather, the Nigerian university system is in need of a radical recalibration of its primary mission of training students. The university degree, whether in the humanities or in STEM, needs to be reimagined as a process of empowering students with creative, analytical and adaptable skills that have components drawn both from the humanities and from the inescapable technological and digital economies evolving around us. Posing and responding to the relevance question in dichotomous disciplinary terms and approaching disciplines as discrete formations is a problem. Nigerian universities should embrace inter- and trans-disciplinarity, which enable conversations about solving national and global challenges to be conducted across disciplinary lines.

Of theory and the Nigerian university

Another way in which the anxiety of relevance has manifested and created a counterproductive predicament in Nigerian universities is the mechanical, uncritical and ultimately self-defeating adoption of theory in Nigerian humanities and humanistic social science scholarship. This adoption of theory as a way of framing and disciplining empirical knowledge has been bureaucratized in many Nigerian universities as a mandatory mechanism for demonstrating the importance of scholarship. This in turn has generated the unintended effect of stifling originality, scholarly creativity, and Africa-inflected, Africa-relevant inquiry.

In 2019, I made a series of Facebook posts critiquing what I had observed in the works of Nigeria-based interlocutors, students and colleagues: a tendency to uncritically impose theoretical formulations of external Euro-American origin on scholarship that, with rigorous analysis, can stand on its own empirical – and proudly African – merit. To compound the problem, the theories are sometimes irrelevant to the subjects of inquiry and are arbitrarily sutured to research to fulfil departmental, university and regulatory requirements. Most times, the theories are outmoded and have been transcended. The mandatory requirement in most humanities and humanistic social science to have a 'theoretical framework' in postgraduate and even undergraduate dissertations produces a jarring and forced theoretical contrivance that devalues many dissertations.

I had been told that the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC), which regulates universities in Nigeria, had imposed the 'theoretical framework' requirement for dissertations and theses on universities. The updated 2023 NUC's Core Curriculum Minimum Standards for the Nigerian University System (CCMAS) guidelines for degrees in arts confirm this. In the prescribed standards for courses in fields such as English, education, entrepreneurship and linguistics, the NUC states as 'learning

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outcomes' and course objectives the capacity of students to 'compose … [the] theoretical framework of the research'. It states further that students should 'choose suitable theoretical framework(s)', with this wording appearing repeatedly as one of the central elements of many courses' mandated learning outcomes. Even more revealing is the fact that, in the NUC's CCMAS prescription on the long essay or dissertation, one of the three learning outcome items is that a student should 'demonstrate knowledge and capacity to frame theoretical framework', a strongly worded – not to mention redundant – articulation of the theoretical framework mandate.[3] Given the top-down, overly centralized structure of higher education oversight in Nigeria, it is possible that many public universities are interpreting these formulaic theory mandates rigidly. The mandate then appears to take on a life of its own as the asymmetries of power between students and advisers in a deeply hierarchical university system kick in to mediate the theoretical strictures in what has now become a self-justifying ritual of academic mass mimesis.

I was also told that the theoretical framework requirement emerged and resonated in part because scholars in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences in Nigeria sought to deflect pressures from the government to justify the relevance of their fields, thus enabling what seemed like a restrictive imposition to find a receptive audience of humanities scholars and leaders. Theory was seen as conferring seriousness and bullet-point usability on complex knowledge. But in adopting theory in a mechanical and uncritical way, Nigerian academic leaders have compounded the anxiety of relevance, creating an even bigger problem than the one they were attempting to solve.

The problem is not the place of theory in scholarship, or its value as a way of structuring and rendering knowledge relatable, axiomatic, enduring and universal. Rather, the problem is that in most cases the choice of theory is a perfunctory exercise with no correlation to the empirical and analytical aspects of the research in question. The theoretical framework is simply an unquestioning appropriation of an existing theory (or theories) instead of a critical engagement with it (or them) in light of insights from the current research. Because the 'theoretical framework' is a requirement, scholars simply adopt rather than adapt theories previously used by others or theories that they found randomly through internet searches. They rarely bother to reinterpret the theory in their own words and in the context of their own work; instead, they simply uncritically reproduce the original theoretical postulation as a structuring paradigm, and in a manner that suggests that the current work has nothing theoretically new to contribute. They are simply fulfilling a requirement.

Not all topics lend themselves to theorization to the same degree, so requiring all dissertation students to have a theoretical framework is draconian and unintellectual. If a work has a strong data/empirical base, is rigorously analysed, and has a coherent, original argument (or a set of arguments) that is carried forward through a dissertation or article, that constitutes scholarly merit. Theory should not be forced on a work as a matter of formula or convention. Whether the work employs a deductive or inductive approach, moving from the general or axiomatic to the

[3] See pages 207, 231, 365, 434 and 629 for the theoretical framework curricular mandates on different courses and disciplines. The CCMAS for the arts degree is available at <https://nuc-ccmas.ng/downloads/?cp=2>.

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specific, or the other way around, rigour and originality are paramount and should trump a formulaic theory requirement.

As practised in Nigerian universities, the theoretical framework requirement offers little room for original theorization, which defeats the logic of theoretical scholarship. Nigerian academics and students tend to understand 'framework' as a box or container that houses their research work, a restrictive space from which their work should not and cannot deviate. They tend to engage with theory as a settled universal epistemic axiom that cannot be challenged or critiqued but must be accorded the aura of finality in a particular field of knowledge. This produces self-restriction and a curb on analytical and theoretical risk taking and iconoclasm. Moreover, because the chosen theory is often set in a Euro-American context, it bears little relevance to Nigerian realities and has the capacity to overdetermine the analysis or reify colonial or hegemonic perspectives. The work of decolonizing African knowledge includes theorizing smartly from the right premise and using the tools of scholarly scepticism and criticism to engage theories that have experiential, empirical and ontological roots outside Nigeria and Africa.

A rigidly enforced blanket requirement for all students' research projects to have a theoretical framework is counterproductive, but if a particular research topic lends itself to theorization and theoretical engagement there is an entire archive of African theories that should inform and enrich the scholarship produced in Nigerian universities. African theorists in the African humanities and humanistic social sciences whose works constitute a library of relevant theories include Achille Mbembe, V. Y. Mudimbe, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Archie Mafeje, Oyeronke Oyewumni, Ify Amadiume, Kwesi Wiredu, Nimi Wariboko, Amina Mama, Mahmood Mamdani, Ato Quayson, Cheikh Anta Diop, Samir Amin, Magema Fuze, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Frantz Fanon.

Since my Facebook intervention on this topic, the response has been overwhelming. Because the posts circulated widely in the Nigerian university space and found their way from there into other continental university circuits, I have received correspondence from other African countries about similarly stifling academic relationships with theory as defined in the canonical epistemological formulations of the global North. A Kenyan and a Ghanaian have responded that the situation in their universities mirrors what I have critiqued. Several Zimbabweans wrote that the situation is the same in their country. An Ethiopian interlocutor stated that the same regimented imposition of the 'theoretical framework' is the reality in Ethiopia. This is clearly a continental problem.

On 21 September 2023, four years after my initial intervention, Kenyan scholar Wandia Njoya posted a lengthy, illuminating reflection on how the 'theoretical framework' and similar theoretical requirements in Kenyan scholarship had become their own justifications, lacking any productive connection to scholarship that ennobles, edifies or documents Africans' rich experiences and aspirations. Declaring herself a rebel against the theoretical framework convention, she proclaimed that theory was being lazily and mechanically prescribed where rigorous engagements with African texts and experiences, compelling interpretations and novel analyses are needed.[4] It is precisely this substitution of theory – not as a product of research and

[4] Wandia Njoya, Facebook post (untitled), 21 September 2023.

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reflection but as an inherited, often foreign, axiom of thought – for the hard work of generating new, Africa-centred and rigorously vetted thought that concerns me.

Provincialism and the twenty-first-century Nigerian university

Another aspect of the crisis plaguing the Nigerian university is the subversion and supplanting of the foundational cosmopolitan ethos of higher education by a new provincialism that is both political and intellectual. Public universities, funded and overseen by the federal government and state governments, are being captured and transformed into appendages of parochial projects of exclusivity. This has diminished universities as arenas of ecumenical intellectual exchanges, experiential and thought diversity, and perspectival pluralism.

Nigerians with various stakes in the country's university system bemoan the decline of instruction and research inputs and outcomes. There are several obvious reasons for this decline, most of them beyond the scope of this article, but the least acknowledged one is academic inbreeding, which is often coterminous with the identitarian capture of the university. A visit to a typical academic department in a public Nigerian university reveals one or more layers of intellectual incest. Sometimes the department is packed full of people from the state or region where the university is located. At other times, the academic staff is a mini departmental alumni association since most of the lecturers are former students of the same department and socialized into the same approaches to knowledge. Sometimes both types of incest are present in the same department, producing a toxic culture of intellectual and primordial inbreeding that stifles intellectual creativity, diversity and freedom. In other departments, the academic staff is a linguistic fraternity since almost everyone speaks the same first language or is from the same state. In others, the inbreeding is religious, with almost everyone worshiping in the same way and reading from the same sacred scripture, thus placing restrictive faith-based guardrails on inquiry.

The concept of the ivory tower, transcendent and operating outside the tribal logics of the rest of society, lies in ruins in these institutions since the primordial politics of the familiar and the comfortable seeps into and captures the public university space. Why has this happened? As public universities have become squeezed in the post-structural adjustment era, and as skyrocketing enrolment in them has forced an even greater reliance on state resources, political leaders have secured new leverage over universities, enabling them to exert more pressure on institutions, make demands on university leaders, and remake academic culture in the parochial images of political and identity formations with populist and patronage resonances. This new intrusion has infected academic staff recruitment, university leadership appointment and the quality of teaching and research. These factors have catalysed a cascading crisis of curricular, pedagogical and epistemological atrophy, while mediocrity, grounded in primordial validation, has replaced merit, productivity and impact.

The Nigerian university system needs to be depoliticized, freed from the clutches of those who superintend the state and view public universities as extensions of the civil service and as political sites of zero-sum distributive battles. This can only happen if the understanding of public universities as instruments of political

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patronage is dislodged, along with concepts of 'ownership', which are shaped by locational identities and the politics of institutional capture that they animate.

A Student Bill of Rights

Why do universities exist? And what is the primary mission of the African university? Paul Zeleza and Adebayo Olukoshi answer these questions in the broadest programmatic sense possible (Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004; Zeleza 2009). However, such answers about the grand aspirational philosophical logics of the African university fail to encapsulate microlevel imperatives, such as the fact that, ultimately, universities are judged by the quality of their teaching and learning outcomes and of their research output. In Nigerian universities, the centrality of students to the university both as participants in the creation of knowledge and as primary consumers of university-mediated knowledge seems to have receded as a priority. In its place there are supposedly higher-order debates about autonomy, financial survival, research output and institutional governance. Perhaps the basic idea that students' intellectual needs and interests, however defined, should drive the intellectual trajectories and traditions of a university has never really permeated the philosophical foundations of Nigerian universities and their modes of self-understanding. And yet students, as primary stakeholders in these debates, cannot and should not be ignored, nor should their interests be subordinated to other issues in the university. One of the problems of the Nigerian university system is poor instruction and a poor culture of research supervision and mentorship. In egregious cases, the poor mentorship is made worse by abuses perpetrated by lecturers. In such situations, learning outcomes suffer, research quality degenerates, and the foundational mission of training thinkers and doers in a national(ist) developmental matrix recedes.

The Nigerian university system is in dire need of a Student Bill of Rights, which would protect students in their academic, supervisory and mentorship relationship with lecturers, prevent abuses, and clearly define the minimum intellectual obligations of the university and its academic staff to students. This Student Bill of Rights would outline clear guidelines for how supervisors should treat postgraduate student supervisees, how promptly chapters and research reports and outcomes should be evaluated and feedback provided, and what constitutes the boundary of professional interactions between supervisors and those they supervise.

Recentring students as active catalytic participants in the production of academic knowledge and as contributors to how the protocols of teaching, research, supervision and mentorship are structured and implemented has the potential to re-establish trust between those who learn and those who facilitate learning. It would also streamline processes and prevent their abuse by students and lecturers, protecting the integrity and status of both groups of interlocutors.

A terrain of union struggle

Lecturers in the Nigerian university system face a perennial struggle to secure the basic dignities of an academic workplace. However, this struggle, with its successes, failures and blind spots, has also become part of the problem. Leading this struggle for

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liveable wages and infrastructure funding is the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The union was a formidable bulwark against state neglect of and intrusions into universities, but the golden age of the ASUU struggle ended about twenty years ago. For the past fifteen years or so, the union has been struggling to redefine itself and find a new identity even as the purpose, cost and stakes of university education have shifted. ASUU's initial struggle was successful. The system had collapsed and needed to be resuscitated. ASUU strikes in the 1990s succeeded in raising salaries and allowances and in attracting state funding to universities. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), a child of ASUU's efforts, is awash in billions of naira that it disburses to universities for capital projects – the building of lecture halls, laboratories, hostels, offices and other physical structures. These are tangible, material fruits of ASUU's struggle. Salaries improved significantly as ASUU won pay raises in the early 2000s, but inflation has since eroded those remunerative gains. As a result, today there is a national consensus in support of ASUU's activism for better salaries for lecturers.

The problem is that the justifiable demand for better salaries skirts two uncomfortable realities. First, ironically, ASUU strikes have become counterproductive. Previous salary increases were followed by further deterioration in the quality and quantity of teaching, the primary remit of lecturers in Nigeria. Overall, these previous remunerative improvements also produced poorer-quality research, even though the quantity of research increased. This demonstrates that poor remuneration, factual as it is, is not the primary reason that standards of teaching, research and mentorship have fallen, and that better pay, desirable and deserved as it is in the present circumstances, would not in and of itself result in better teaching and research standards.

Second, teaching and mentorship, the two most important determinants of the quality of the education students get, have continued to decline. Not all of this is the lecturers' fault, since the politicization of the Nigerian public university and the proliferation of new institutions have compromised the integrity of university academic staff recruitment. Unqualified people have subsequently found their way into the system in large numbers. Nonetheless, it is important to note that even when conditions improved, many lecturers continued to skip classes; poor or non-existent supervision and mentorship of postgraduate students continued; and many lecturers continued to teach from outdated lecture notes, making no effort to update their instruction. Many lecturers continued to publish poorly researched papers or not publish at all; in fact, most lecturers started to game the new NUC publications metrics by patronizing pay-to-publish predatory journals in India and Pakistan, by self-publishing, and by publishing in incestuous venues such as departmental journals, making a mockery of the academic publication process. It did not help that the flawed NUC publications requirements focus on quantity rather than quality, making publishing in the Nigerian university largely an exercise in bean counting. Improved access to online journals and resources, enabled in part by increased funding of universities (another product of ASUU's struggle), ironically led to lax research ethics and rampant plagiarism.

This negative correlation between improved funding and deteriorating standards is worrisome but hardly surprising. This is because, as ASUU struggled to persuade the government to invest more in infrastructure and compensation, it never asked

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anything of its own members. For their part, government negotiators never asked ASUU to submit to any metrics of instructional accountability in exchange for acceding to some of the union's demands. It is not just that ASUU has refused to self-critique or allow lecturers to be subjected to rigorous accountability measures in teaching and research. The union also sometimes stands in the way of creative problem solving in the university. For instance, even though the union wants its members to be paid better and rightly wants access to public universities to be unrelated to family income, the astronomical demand for higher education and the competing social burdens on the Nigerian state mean that these goals may not be realizable without the introduction of some form of tuition payment. Is there space to reconcile the lofty goals of ASUU with a narrowly conceived tuition regime that is income tested and exempts the poorest households? ASUU has so far scoffed at this pragmatic possibility, consistently rejecting even a limited, targeted introduction of tuition fees to raise funds from affluent and financially capable households in order to finance the changes the union desires.

The nuances of university decolonization

Universities all over Africa are haunted by the sweeping theoretical spectre of decolonization and decoloniality. Decoloniality, as a set of theoretical postulations, has taken the field of African humanistic and social science studies by storm, challenging the inherited colonial foundations of knowledge produced and housed in universities, and constituting a new paradigmatic orthodoxy against which scholarly merit is now increasingly measured. While decolonial theory's African iteration originated in South Africa, its seismic theoretical impact has resonated with remarkable vigour in the Nigerian academy. In conferences, academic papers, sundry manuscripts and research proposals, decolonization and decoloniality make interchangeable appearances as signifiers of a radical reorientation of scholarship in the service of Africans and Africa.

Decoloniality proposes the decentring of Euro-American frames of knowing, ontologies and epistemological hegemonies traceable to colonial and neocolonial forms of domination. In their place, decoloniality calls for recentring African modes of seeing, doing and understanding the self and the world. There are, of course, political, economic and cultural aspects to decoloniality, but the aspect that has upended Nigerian university humanities and social science scholarship is the epistemological dimension. This side of decoloniality seeks to decolonize the persistent and mutating presence of the ideational projects of colonialism and subsequent forms of power and domination – what theorists call the coloniality of power. For Africa, the leading theorist of decoloniality is Zimbabwean scholar Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015). The premises and prescriptions of decoloniality have their critics, including Simon Ogude and philosopher Olufemi Taiwo (Ogude 2023; Taiwo 2022), but the critiques are more about overreach and sweep than about the logical, contextual merit of decolonization. Central to decoloniality as an overarching project of remaking African universities and their epistemic foundations is the claim about the persistence of colonial political and epistemic hierarchies, and ontological domination and erasure in academic knowledge production. This all-encompassing template of remaking the African university is appealing, and it is no surprise that Arowosegbe, in his response to his

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interlocutors in this journal, devotes the last prescriptive section of his article to the imperative of decolonization (Arowosegbe 2024).

Decolonial theories and practices offer epistemologically disruptive strategies to centre non-Western peoples and ideas in circuits of knowledge production and in consequential institutions that determine the fate of all humans, including Africans. Because African ways of doing, seeing and thinking have been uniquely marginalized and violently subordinated to marauding Western imperial and neo-imperial systems of thought, decolonial theories should particularly resonate in Nigeria, which arguably houses Africa's largest university system. Coloniality as a condition pointing to the persistence of colonial forms of knowledge and praxis has wrought generational damage in Africa. Therefore, Nigerian scholars, thinkers, doers and innovators with university affiliations should not only decolonize the inherited structures and frames of their own work but also help create intellectual and political conditions for the ascendance of African modes of thought, political governance and development. Their work should display unabashed fidelity to African perspectives and be rooted in what Achille Mbembe calls 'African modes of self-writing' (Mbembe 2002).

However, there is another side to the picture, one that I distil here into three important caveats. First, older generations of Nigerian, African and Africa-descended scholars, activists and thinkers have been espousing these same ideas for more than a century. Their foundational works and thoughts should be acknowledged and curated as part of our repertoire and manual of decolonization.[5] There is a long genealogy of decolonial thought and praxis in Africa that should guide today's formulations and give them a distinctively African epistemological signature.

Second, there is so much for Nigerian scholars to do beyond advancing decolonial theories, a project that is often wrongly advanced as a defensive epistemological and intellectual manoeuvre. Given the many challenges facing Nigerian universities, there is a need to advance less abstract regulatory, legislative, institutional and governance reforms. A decolonial agenda that becomes its own justification, has no terminal point and is advanced as a cure-all for the crisis in Nigerian university education can become lost in self-referential abstraction and navel-gazing irrelevance. Such a theoretical project could become too narrowly reactive as an intellectual exercise platformed in self-referential universities.

Decoloniality should complement but not subsume higher-order priorities that border on learning, access and outcomes. Decolonial theory must write itself into a broader reformist programme that improves conditions for learning and producing Africa-centred and Africa-relevant knowledge. Its insights cannot be decoupled from practical issues in Nigerian universities unless decoloniality is accepted as merely a theoretical fad with little transformative consequence. The extent to which decolonial theory can take on an instrumental dimension or embed itself in empirical conversations around university governance and quality control will determine its ultimate place in the Nigerian university system.

[5] The works of Amílcar Cabral, Okot p'Bitek, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Thandika Mkandawire, Claude Ake, Chinweizu, Njabulo Ndebele, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Frantz Fanon, Amina Mamma, Toyin Falola, Valentine Mudimbe and many others constitute this older archive of epistemic decolonization that preceded the current trend.

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Third, Nigerian scholars doing transdisciplinary decolonial intellectual work must be careful not to reify the claims of Euro-American theorists regarding colonial and neocolonial power and influence. We should not exaggerate the reach of such power or inadvertently de-emphasize the historical and contemporary resilience and creative flourishing of African peoples in the face of oppressive Western political, economic and epistemic violence. The totality of the African experience and of African joys and pains should not be reduced to a project of foreign deterministic power. It is this same creative and proactive agency that can produce innovative solutions to the crisis discussed above.

My own observation on humanistic and social science engagements with decolonial theory in Nigerian universities is that our colleagues there are struck by the radical reincarnation of a familiar theory. As a result, they are stuck in a rather ahistorical and totalizing decolonial understanding that minimizes or ignores African ontological agency in the face of colonialism; African epistemic productions in the orbit of colonialism and neocolonialism; and African contributions to what is articulated as the coloniality of being and knowledge in Africa.

Another blind spot of the decolonial overhang in Nigerian universities and conference circuits is that the call to decolonize inherited canons, approaches, praxes and paradigms is often understood somewhat narrowly as an effort to replace the entirety of the knowledge system that currently exists in Nigeria and African universities. This perspective needs to shift because decolonial theory is not a single, coherent endeavour but rather a set of overlapping epistemic projects and programmes that complement one another, tackle the epistemic hegemony of colonial power formations, reclaim the violated and distorted humanity of Africans, and restore Africa and Africans to the centre of African intellection. All the disparate theoretical projects that make up the decolonial epistemic canon are united not by the ethos of mechanically replacing what exists, but rather by the imperative of restoring epistemic and self-making autonomy to African peoples.

Logically, this aspirational epistemic autonomy extends to the freedom to partially or wholly reject, accept, modify, combine, adapt, Africanize, naturalize and vernacularize ideas, theories, epistemologies, canons and approaches from a variety of sources. This is the decolonial project that is both pragmatic and feasible for Nigerian universities. It aligns fully with the African quest for autonomy of being while staying faithful to the fungible and osmotic character of knowledge. The idea of reflexively replacing all existing canons and approaches, including those into which Nigerians and Africans have written, spoken, published and contributed, is a form of epistemic self-marginalization, one that would curtail the sense of unencumbered ecumenical explorations that inheres in the project of decolonization. Nigerian universities should engage with the decolonial turn in a way that understands decoloniality broadly beyond this narrow reflexive oppositional frame. The twenty-first-century Nigerian university would be better served by this expansive understanding of decolonization.

The promise of decolonization is not that African-produced knowledge can or should be siloed away from other knowledges or protected from their influences. Rather, it is the possibility, articulated decades ago by philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe, that knowledge about Africa can be produced on terms established by Africans

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without separating such knowledge from global confluences of thought and into satisfying but problematic categories of insular authenticity.[6]

A curricular intervention

In a previous section of this article, I discussed the challenge posed to the humanities by a constellation of technological innovations and trends in the twenty-first century. In Nigeria, there is a consensus that the current university curriculum is neither responding to global dynamics nor facilitating the appropriation of youthful intellectual energies for national development. One way to respond to this challenge is to formulate an entirely new curriculum that prioritizes critical thinking, creativity and adaptive, applied knowledge. This new curriculum must move Nigerian university education away from rote informational mastery to independent and innovative application of knowledge. Another way is to construct a new curricular superstructure in which technology, AI and other assistive learning tools are seamlessly integrated to produce graduates capable of manoeuvring in an increasingly competitive world. Toyin Falola outlines a similar programme of curricular overhaul in his response article in this journal (Falola 2024).

There are other brick-and-mortar institutional innovations that can enhance the impact of the needed curricular interventions and mitigate pedagogical deficits on the part of lecturers and learning difficulties among students. In one of my public-facing writings on higher education in Nigeria, I proposed that institutions of higher learning in the country should be empowered to establish centres of teaching and to institute awards for teaching excellence. The incentive factor aside, such innovations would restore prestige to the neglected craft of teaching so that the attainment of mastery over pedagogy would become desirable to lecturers. This would have an even more far-reaching impact if some categories of academic staff were designated by their own preference as teaching-oriented academics to be evaluated for promotion mainly on the basis of their instructional endeavours and outcomes. The student-focused side of this institutional reform is the establishment of writing centres on university campuses. Since writing is central to learning and scholarly exchange in all fields, and clear, effective and succinct writing is an essential tool for communicating research outcomes and expressing thought and learned material, investment in writing centres and competent writing coaches and consultants is an important element in a modern university. Writing-focused interventions should form one arc of a much-needed curricular overhaul.

The Nigerian university curriculum of the twenty-first century must be nimble, with the right mix of core pedagogical principles informed by national and global imperatives and moveable, flexible components that confer instructional freedoms on teachers and supervisors. Moreover, university curriculums must anticipate the future, modelling the classroom and the workplace of tomorrow to craft the instructional manuals of today.

[6] Although this argument is the subtext of Mudimbe's better-known works, the work in which he makes this intervention in its most explicit form is his introduction to his edited volume *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the politics of otherness* (Mudimbe 1992).

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Concluding remarks

The Nigerian university system is beset by multiple, intersecting challenges. Some of them relate to foundational issues of what a postcolonial African university is, what kind of knowledge it should produce in the matrix of development and nation building, and what kinds of citizens it should train. Other challenges are global, brought on by a fast-changing global economy characterized by new economic and technological imperatives. The changes necessary to overcome these problems and reposition the Nigerian university will be multifaceted and radical, requiring iconoclastic and creative thinking as well as a mix of ideas and resources drawn from multiple disciplines and forms of knowledge. In the humanities, where the crisis of postcolonial university education is particularly acute, trans-disciplinarity will not only restate the foundational entwinements of all knowledge but also enable universities to harness new technological and digital innovations and fuse them into more abstract forms of knowledge to produce a new, capacious curriculum. The new Nigerian university curriculum must disrupt traditional disciplinary boundaries and be informed by the imperative of posing and answering major existential questions confronting Nigeria, Africa and the world.

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