

Decolonial Dilemmas: The Deception of a “Global Knowledge Commonwealth” and the Tragedian Entrapment of an African Scholar

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journals.sagepub.com/home/afrYusuf K. Serunkuma 

Abstract

There are multiple initiatives and efforts to grant African scholars “global visibility” – as part of the decolonisation agenda. These efforts have included aiding and enabling African scholars to publish in journals of international renown, speaking or curating courses at Ivy League universities, and being experts on issues about Africa in international media. Other efforts include collaborations and citations in discourses about Africa. While these efforts and opportunities are intellectually and practically irresistible to a scholar from the subaltern world – as are to those offering and facilitating them – they are actually counterproductive to a decolonisation project. The positive energy they generate obscures the histories and power dynamics that govern so-called global spaces and audiences of knowledge production. Problematically presented as benign and benevolent spaces for participation in the “global knowledge commonwealth,” from which mutual understanding grows, and racism and exploitation could be ended, global spaces/audiences, rather grow out, and are core parts of the revolving doors and constantly mutating infrastructures of colonialist hegemony and control.

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Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Yusuf K. Serunkuma, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg, Reichardtstraße 11, 06114 Halle (Saale), Germany.

Email: yusufkajura@gmail.com



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Keywords

Africa, decolonisation, tragedian dilemma, global audieces, knowledge commonwealth

Introduction

In one of the sessions during the Asia-African conference in Dar-es-Salaam in September 2018, representatives from Taylor and Francis told their listeners that journals focused on Africa were reconsidering their peer-review guidelines and standards in ways that would open more spaces for African scholars.¹ The tension goes that most journals – the supposedly most prestigious and privileged – headquartered in Europe and North America espouse discursive, analytically/theoretically interventionist scholarship. To this end, they have considered (which has become normalised practice) non-analytical and simply descriptive scholarship as lesser scholarship and is often rejected. “Yet this often-rejected work forms the bulk of scholarship produced by African scholars based on the African continent,” representatives from Taylor and Francis argued. The effect is that most journals in the field of African scholarship end up publishing mostly non-African scholars who engage in the acceptable form of scholarship. Without specifically saying why, recent debates in the *Africa Spectrum* journal (Basedau, 2020; Iroulo and Ortiz, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022) and papers published elsewhere (Auma et al., 2020) reiterate the old contention in African decolonial studies about the absence of African scholars in African studies, and also point to ongoing efforts to bring more African scholars into the fold – and this is often discourses as an effort towards decolonisation. Specifically the Journal of South African Studies (JSAS)² – in conjunction with Taylor and Francis – they were adjusting their guidelines to accommodate the African scholar’s distinctive mode of scholarship – which is descriptive and less analytical. Editors contended that despite those handicaps – being descriptive and less analytical – it was crucial for scholarly production capturing narratives on items that may be entirely new and necessary. Elsewhere, movements such as the 2015 #CaadanStudies, and more recent works such as those already cited (Auma et al., 2020; Basedau, 2020; Iroulo and Ortiz, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022) all point to the urgent need for more presence of African scholars in “global” African studies. Earlier iterations such as the widely read essay on misrepresentation of the continent by authors such as Binyavanga Wainaina, “How to Write about Africa” follow a trope of the absence of African experts in conversations about Africa in the global world. In 2018, the then president of the African Studies Association (ASA), Prof. Jean Allman, delivered a well-received keynote at the ASA annual meeting detailing the exclusionary nature of the ASA itself – and by extension, universities and journals – against scholars of colour or African origin, which by implication, compromised the ways in which Africa was studied and represented.

While this awareness, interventions, and related initiatives are a major breakthrough for knowledge production about Africa, especially in the western world, reading it as one milestone in decolonising African studies, or as a decolonial gesture more generally,

misses entirely – or deliberately downplays – the place and power of the audiences of texts and, by extension, the “problem space” (Scott, 2004) in which scholarship or knowledge is produced. This tokenism and *invitationism* of western-based outlets (journals, media, and universities) thrive on two subtly racialised assumptions: first, that subaltern scholars cannot produce world-reflective knowledge from their own localised spaces, and; second, that expressing this knowledge in their local spaces is not “global” enough. These assumptions stem from the problematic assumption that there exists a “global knowledge commonwealth” that is also an innocent and benign space. I argue instead that subaltern scholars can, in fact, and should produce world-reflective knowledge from their own localised spaces and that sharing this knowledge for their local audiences should be the African scholar’s main (although not only) endeavour as far as decolonisation is concerned.

Acknowledging that scholarship is never impartial and non-biased (Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022 or earlier, Usman, 2006 or even Foucault, 1977), I propose, firstly, that since texts tend to have their audiences pre-defined – but can also mobilise their own – the audience of the African scholar, *in a truly decolonial spirit*, is singularly their home audience. This is not to argue that African scholars cannot integrate themselves in a “global audience” in the spirit of cultural diversity or mutual exchange. My contention is rather that when a subaltern scholar integrates – often via invitation in the spirit of representation – into this “global audience,” it ought not to be discoursed as decolonisation, but for everything else such as cultural exchange, diversity, educational tourism, or employment in Europe and North America. What is clear from the aforementioned publications by African scholars, for example, is that the African scholar at this stage is trapped in an existential dialectic of “correcting misrepresentations” of western scholars on the flawed assumption that this advances the decolonisation agenda (Serunkuma, 2022).

My sense of colonialism – and by the same route, decolonisation – is that it is a strictly economic project that remains thoroughly violent and has nothing to do with fair and objective understanding (of the humanity) of the exploited. It does not, thus, matter how well the exploiter understands their victims as human and deserving of fair dealing. Colonisation never thrived on the absence of knowledge or misconceptions about the humanity of the colonised. These were secondary. Dehumanisation/orientalism was the excuse to fulfil a pre-conceived and unstoppable capitalist intention to pillaging entire continents. As Grovogui (1996) among others, has demonstrated, acknowledging the humanity of others presented colonisers and slavers with a dilemma, which even prompted Pope Alexander VI to offer a helpful intervention (Grovogui, 1996: 19–20). Perhaps acknowledging that this was a puzzling sin, the Pope issued them with papal bulls that would justify the control and colonisation of the lands and seas of “non-rational infidels,” (ibid). This is the genius of Said’s (1979) text – the craft of Orientalism followed an already existent project, colonisation. It is not that they were not humans, but they had to be dehumanised in order to exploit them. Later (neo)colonial projects did not occur because the colonisers lacked a fair, objective and nuanced understanding of the humanity of the Africans structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s

that ruined many African economies, while returning them to the hands of the colonisers. They did. But the coloniser had to re-colonise Africa by all means necessary, and so these policies had to be forced onto the continent. For example, the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s ruined many African economies, while returning the economies to the hands of the colonisers (Hickel, 2018, 2020). In fact, Wiegratz (2016) has noted that World Bank auditors deliberately forged accountabilities to show that African parastatals were not working so as to collapse them and enable their return to colonisers. The double standard is that these rabid privatisation policies were not applied in Europe (Zizek, 2009). Thus, proposals and initiatives towards good, objective, fair, and representative knowledge production as decolonial initiatives are barely scratching the surface.

To challenge such complexity – that is, to decolonise – my proposition is for one to focus on strengthening themselves locally, mostly economically and, if needs be, militarily. While I seek not to propose going to war against more structured and deftly hidden colonial processes, my contention, as (1986) proposed, is awakening and mobilising the home audiences, and making visible the hidden shackles and the existential challenge in front of them. Seeking to be visible on the “global stage,” and/or correcting supposed “misrepresentations” about Africa sounds good, but it is a counterproductive decolonial exercise as it remains contained to the colonial episteme.

To this end, I argue, secondly, that the so-called “global audience” or “global stage” is the first delusion – understood as violent, but a fact often taken-for-granted. It, then, produces a second, often unvoiced, delusion of a “global knowledge commonwealth.” This is something like a storage: a common pool, for global knowledge where actors contribute to and share the final products equitably. As I show in my discussion of audiences, my contention is that these combined deceptions (a global audience with a global knowledge commonwealth) are not only inexistent to the African/subaltern scholar but are also counterproductive to a decolonial conversation. While acknowledging our mutual “incompleteness” (Nyamnjoh, 2017), in that Africa has something to offer to the western world, and vice-versa, the inclusion of African scholars in knowledge production for western/global audiences – and discoursed as decolonisation – carries with it racialised, hierarchised connotations. This blurs and downplays the difficult histories and extractivist political economies of knowledge production about Africa, which have been sustained to this day. As Basedau (2020) subtly acknowledges (see also, Serunkuma, 2018), scholarship is deeply embedded in the availability of resources to the scholars.

The third proposition is that African Studies – especially of a decolonial texture – ought to be appreciated or defined through the audiences the scholars serve. This proposition, therefore, both locates, and at the same time discards, the idea of a global audience for an African scholar. Thus, there are multiple audiences available to scholars, but “a decolonial scholar” ought to be speaking to their home audience. Meanwhile, the western scholar producing knowledge about Africa also ought to be understood as speaking to their own audiences (despite this typically being labelled global audience). On either side of these isles are specific histories, imperatives, biases, misrepresentations, and exhibitions of power.

Inspired by the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) on the language of African literature, it is my contention – speaking from an African vantage point – that granting or promoting the African scholar on the global stage actually serves a diametric function as far as decolonisation is concerned. That is serving power and hegemony, which in the end, exploits the scholar and their local constituencies even further using them as symbols of their fairness and balance. But more importantly, the invitation of the African scholar to the “global stage” presents the scholar with a dilemma – a tragic dilemma in Shakespearean/Greek tragedian speech. Here, the scholar is caught up in a series of attractive, but actually tragedian circumstances. While the intervention and invitations – by journals, media, and universities – are pitched in decolonial terms; they actually sustain and enhance the structures of marginalisation, racialised hierarchies and control. Thus, using the narrative lenses of tragedian drama – specifically, the condition of being trapped in “a series of tragic circumstances” as succinctly discussed in Wilson and Goldfarb's (2014), *Theatre Experience* – I contend that invitation to the global stage as decolonisation presents a subaltern scholar with a dilemma.³ Even after realising its decolonial “meaninglessness”, the two options of either rejecting or accepting are both confusing to a decolonial sensibility: while it is satisfying at a personal level (money and status), the decolonial posture it presents is entirely deceptive. Let me explore this dilemma more pointedly.

Thinking Through Classic Tragic Drama

Characters in tragic drama, for their genius, find themselves trapped in a series of inextricable circumstances that present them with a thorough existential dilemma: What would Oedipus do upon learning that he had murdered his father and married his mother, and they have children? How weak would Julius Caesar be viewed were he to hide from the 60 conspirators waiting for him in the senate? To stay back was to pronounce weakness, to go ahead was to meet his murderers. Upon learning of these circumstances, tragic heroes often bravely move forward. So, a character in *King Leah* remarks, “men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither.” The dilemma here is compounded by the fact that moving backwards is doomed, as is moving forward. So, the Shakespearean phrase, “damned if you do, damned if you don't.” These heroes and heroines often find catharsis in the pain of moving forward. Oedipus painfully gouges out his eyes, and Othello commits suicide; while Caesar bravely faced the conspirators. My point is to emphasise the dilemma of their circumstances.

I see African scholars as characters in a tragedian ensemble – as heroes and heroines of the African drama of knowledge production with themselves as both actors and subjects being acted upon. For their smartness and creative genius, they are attracted to the global stage, where they spread their wings telling the African story, correcting errors, and representing themselves in narrativising the continent. The problem is both the tokenism of the invitation to the global stage (which presupposes that their local spaces, and their scholarship, are not global enough), and the pitch that these invitations are initiatives in decolonisation. Working with the idea of audiences/public,

my contention is that the “global stage” is actually a local stage of the western world. Yet, it is so attractive to the African scholar that it is difficult to turn it down, even when presented with the reality that participation is not decolonialisation. This is a tragicomic dilemma.

The Fiction of a Global Audience

Michael Warner (2002) has told us about the oppressiveness of pre-defining an audience or public for a text, because texts ought to mobilise their own audiences. Yet, in practice, authors normally have predefined their audiences before and while drafting their texts. Authors set out to speak to a specific constituency that they imagine as they write, which inform their grammar and other cues. This is the premise upon which wa Thiong'o⁴ (1986) builds in urging authors to write in their native languages because they have an audience with which to speak. Thus, scholarship/knowledge is normally packaged for an audience that is often predefined or pre-imagined by the scholar, since scholarship does not take place in a vacuum. Thus, in pointing out the dilemma of performing on the global stage, my proposition is urging the African scholar to see decolonisation as beginning, and inherently, rooted in the local stage. With scholarship intrinsically connected to the political-economic conditions of any country, scholars in formerly colonised places – interested in decolonising African studies – will have to be a little more patient, and sort the mess at home before venturing abroad. After all, their actual worth abroad has to have the backing of home. Because notions of free markets heralded ideas of globalisation – the global village – we have come to imagine, especially in knowledge production quarters, the global as a benign and infinitely open space to whoever is qualified enough to engage in this space. This explains why, while pointing out the dearth of African scholars or scholars of colour in African studies fields (in universities, international media outlets, and high-impact journals in the western world), we never seek to appreciate the intrinsic structure of these spaces, but rather demand for affirmative action and inclusion. While affirmative action can level the playing field and correct historical injustices; inclusion at this level glosses over the structure of power and control that make these spaces appear the way they do. To this end, the idea of a global stage and global audience cannot be detached from their histories. They are for all intents and purposes localised spaces imagined and made possible *by* and *for* those with power – specifically, the former colonial powers running the global world order and free market economics.

After the end of the Second World War, and coinciding with a large wave of decolonisation, the international community soon became a space mediated by international law. Resolutions and bodies including the UN, WTO, and conservation groups were, however, designed towards continued extraction from the now “decolonised” world (Hickel, 2018; Grovogui, 1996). Then came the structural adjustment programmes (SAPS) in the late 1980s, which resulted in pervasive neoliberalism and so-called free market regimes (Hickel, 2020; Žižek, 2013). This legacy is yet to be discarded as dependency theorists have so timelessly demonstrated. In many ways, the

process turns formerly colonised places into peripheries involved in networks of consumption and production of raw materials. The “formerly colonised places” are more practically (neo)colonised as before, but in a more technocratised, depoliticised form (see e.g. Blanc, 2022; Serunkuma, 2022).

The construction of these globalised marketplaces heralded the birth of global scholars and global audiences across the spell of history, from the orientalist travel writer to the embedded colonialist historians and anthropologists to the scholars of today. While scholarship has become more philological and hospitable to the formerly colonised, the historical chain of the birth of the global space and scholar is yet to be broken. While today’s western scholars are aware and actively strive to ward off the direct conditioning of the foreign policies of their governments – despite enabling their fieldwork in Africa – this scholar is, to use David Scott’s (2004) language, still conscripted (not volunteering) to the regime of control and power. It is not surprising, therefore, that across major universities in Europe, African studies scholarship concentrates on areas where the mother countries of scholars had their colonial armies and outposts. What we call the global stage, and global audience is actually a local playground for former colonisers and newer players who have managed to wrestle their way to the top and now harbour hegemonic ambitions such as the United States and China. Scholars producing pro- and counter-discourses become part of this space.

As discussed earlier, money, power, histories, and hegemonic ambitions have given rise to global spaces and global audiences. However, the structures that sustain these hegemonic ambitions are actually hidden – fetishised – from public view creating the impression of a benign space free of interests where the African scholar is freely welcome. It is not surprising that while the efforts to grant the African scholar global space in the spirit of diversity and mutual engagement – often claimed as decoloniality – from Europe and North America are increasing, Europe and the United States, at the same time, are actively closing their borders to Africans and Middle Eastern immigrants. The Muslim ban, the refugee crises across Europe, the export of refugees back to Africa, and the ongoing deaths of African travellers trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe and North America underscores this predicament.

To Whom Are You Talking?

In an instructively decolonial spirit, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986) advocates writing in the local language arguing that the African scholar has an immediate audience to which to speak. wa Thiong’o would define this audience in language, a “linguistic homogeneity” (say, Kiswahili for Kenya and Tanzania or Gikuyu), which would make comprehension of the writers’ message more directly and impactfully. During the literature conference at Makerere University in 1962, writers including Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, and Sèdar Senghor, argued for the use of European languages since it had been readily given to them, and Simon Gikandi (1996) would appreciate the ways in which English language became radically domesticated across different places. wa Thiong’o cogently argued for literature in Africa to be written in native languages

positing that writing is meant to serve a local audience and thus ought to connect with the masses. In his overtly Marxist pitch, wa Thiong'o (1986: 27) remarks:

African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the language of the African peasantry and working class, the major alliances of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming inevitable break with neo-colonialism.

wa Thiong'o continues that writers need "to connect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organised peasantry and working class in Africa in their struggle to defeat imperialism" (1986: 29). Please note that wa Thiong'o is proud of the anti-colonial intelligentsia, who learned the language of the coloniser and ably used it to challenge colonialism. But locating his critique in a post-colonial moment, he turns his attention to the average person – peasants and the working class – now encumbered by the anti-colonial elite itself, and struggling with the challenges of underdevelopment and neo-colonialism. Noting that yesterday's anti-colonial heroes have become the oppressor themselves, working hand-in-hand with former colonisers – and other capitalists from major capitals in the west – wa Thiong'o thus defines the work of the intelligentsia as needing to awaken the masses. He contends that writing in the language that easily connects with the masses. The comprador elite needs to be challenged. This has to be done in a language understood by the masses, as wa Thiong'o (1986: 30) argues:

But it is precisely when writers open out African languages to the real links in the struggles of peasants and workers that they will meet their bigger challenge. For to the comprador-ruling regimes, their real enemy is an awakened peasantry and working class A democratic participation of the people in the shaping of their own lives in languages that allow mutual comprehension is seen as being dangerous to the good government of a country and its institutions.

My intention is not simply to emphasise wa Thiong'o's call for writing in the local languages as a method of breaking with colonialism in all its forms, or challenging the post-colonial rulers with an awakened mass. Instead, I am interested in his focus on the audience – the primary audience of an African writer is the people among whom they live. Since all literature is composed with an audience in mind, wa Thiong'o's major theoretical intervention here is reminding all writers (especially the African writer) that their audience are often local audiences. By this argument, wa Thiong'o signalled some sort of closure of scholarship; a sort of containment of a work within a culturally and linguistically defined context. In the era of modern states defined through borders, this would mean awakening masses or responding to questions within a political community. By this contention, a decolonial scholar is essentially meant to respond to concerns within their local constituencies. Again, this does not mean African scholars cannot participate in discourses located in the western world. Of course, they can. But this ought not to be discoursed as decolonisation if we followed wa Thiong'o's schema here.

In its narrower sense, the conversation in Dar-es-Salaam defined the African scholar as dark- or brown-skinned. There were not many of those profiles. Muted voices would be heard lamenting the dearth of African scholars in Asian-African scholarship. The “continued lack of involvement of Africans in African Studies”, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al. (2022) emphasise, means that non-African experts dominate African studies and all matters African. But more pointedly, the concern is for scholars educated in and based at a university or research institute on the African continent. More directly, the African scholar would be defined as nationals of the African continent involved in debates or descriptive narratives in their local units. The African scholar’s scholarship was diagnosed as tending to be more descriptive than interventionist or discursive. Initiatives from Europe and North America, as spelled out by the representatives of Taylor and Francis – couched in the language of decolonisation (objective, fair and balanced representation of Africa in global commonwealth of ideas and scholarship) –, sought to give space and voice to this African to represent themselves.

The African scholar has been funded at conferences; partnered with American and European universities and engaged in collaborative work with individual academics from Europe and North America. Both Basedau (2020) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al. (2022) point to several of these initiatives, including the prestigious Bayreuth Multiple Cluster for African Studies. There have been workshops “to train” African scholars in western-style scholarship so as to fit into the rhythm of acceptable global scholarship. From the Dar-es-Salaam conference, scholars learned that journals were considering and actually adjusting (or relaxing) their peer-review guidelines to allow supposedly “less rigorous” scholarship into the pipeline. Pitched as an effort to liberate the African scholar from misrepresentation and enable them to get heard in a Gayatri Spivakian logic of having the subaltern speak, this effort rather conscripts them to the international regime of power and control – the diversification of scholarly trends notwithstanding.

The Audience of the African Scholar

Despite the omnipresent wave of globalisation, and enormous capitalist expansion, most African communities have tended to be contained internally despite being extracted from and exploited, as the dependency theorists – most notably, Samir Amin (1972), Andre Gunder Frank (1990), and Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) – have thoroughly demonstrated. The issues with which African communities and nation-states concern themselves are local and politically confined to their historical–political borders. The reason for this is not simply because the Africans are uninterested in the rest of the world, but because the global means nothing more than the consumption of raw materials right from the periphery.⁵ For the former colonising state, the extraction of resources and of knowledge thus inadvertently overlap.

In Africa, communities give prominence to their native languages, and cultural traditions. Finding their subsistence – mostly through peasant agriculture – concerns them more than matters relating to other communities outside their national borders. Trade between neighbouring African countries is out of absolute convenience – it is

like barter trade – but not out of extractive or paternalistic interests as Europe and North America have often done through SAPs and unequal exchange (Hickel, 2020; Hickel et al., 2021); or through regimes of wars and bribes in Iraq, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan.⁶ In the media for example, with the exception of South Africa, it is extremely rare to find African countries receiving extensive analysis. Television or radio shows dedicate extended hours of programming to discuss international developments in Europe or North America. If the African continent is considered, it is focused on how their country influenced events (Mazrui, 1997).

Acknowledging these historical and structural limitations, the African scholar finds no reason to comment on matters outside their local confines, except only when mobilised to reflect on local issues but not to influence perceptions in the other. It is therefore not surprising that many PhD students on the African continent focus on their countries – and oftentimes their villages. The culture and extractive backing to study another place is missing as it has to be backed by tangible ambitions and established histories. Taken this way, the scholar is powerful and, thus, visible to their local audience who effectively find their knowledge and learning of tangible utility – say, bringing down a dictatorial government or ways of responding to the challenges of poverty and HIV/AIDS. In Steven Feierman’s (1990) phrasing, these are peasant intellectuals. As the absolute movers of the society, the African scholar has to be loud enough at home, not only to transform, but also as ways of decolonising their world – which could then give them the pedestal to speak (and seek to influence) to the world.

Does (Good) Knowledge Translate into Respectable, Equitable Engagement?

It is arguable that the drive to enable African scholars to bring their perspective on the international scene – in the spirit of decolonisation – presupposes the existence of a “knowledge commonwealth,” where mutual understanding and fair engagement are cultivated and made possible, after learning about each other well. Something like, if the African scholar provided “authentic” and “non-stereotypical” knowledge about their world, this will lead to the birth of a *post*-racial, *post*-extractive, properly *post*-colonial world. These claims are noble in their appeal and imagination, but largely ahistorical. Historically, mutual and respectful engagement between individuals and communities has never been a result of a good, balanced, or objective understanding of each other’s cultural and political traditions. In the 1400s, Europe barely claimed any understanding of the “deep and authentic traditions and histories of the Africans” but trade happened with mutual respect for each other. The Portuguese sailors and merchants whose ships traded across the Indian Ocean did not need to know the authentic, non-stereotypical ways of the Africans. The Egyptian traders who traded incense and other herbs with the people in the Horn never studied the African traditions. Indeed, not surprisingly, the tales of the legendary traveller, Ibn Battuta, are filled with conjecture and guesswork about Africans. But this did not stop the early mutual respect and engagement

between the Arab and Africans traders, nor did this later become the motivation for colonialism.

It is also worth noting that the slave trade did not stop because the governments of slave traders had acquired a more “authentic” and “objective” understanding of the traditions of the people in Africa and Latin America. Neither did colonialism stop because Europe all of a sudden understood the authentic knowledge systems of the African peoples they had colonised. Rather processes within Europe contributed to the overall conclusion of both the slave trade and colonialism – the anti-colonial struggles’ individual impacts notwithstanding. Sadly, even with the advancement in knowledge about Africans, Europeans would return just 30 years after direct colonialism and recolonise the continent through SAPs and other means (Hickel, 2020). In a recently published book, Blanc argues that while the colonist left, the experts stayed behind continuing the colonial mission (Blanc, 2022: 55. For an extended discussion of French colonialism in West Africa, see, for example, Pigeaud and Sylla, 2021).

The idea of needing to learn about other communities often appears as a modernist and benign intervention to promote mutual understanding. Learning about the other community is premised on the hope that this knowledge will be important in negotiating transactions – which should be honest and mutually beneficial. This is only partly true. Does Malawi’s knowledge of the cultural traditions of the kings and queens of Great Britain help its negotiations at the United Nations about the price of anti-retroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS? Evidence that the IMF and World Bank actually forged bank documents to show that African state-owned parastatals were unsustainable (Wiegratz, 2016) to make the argument for privatisation exposes the deception of knowledge as important in negotiations. Extraction for Europe and North America remains supreme over and above their objective knowledge about those countries. This is because European and North American survival is intimately connected to their coercive ability to extract from the rest of the world.

Conclusion

On the one hand, I sought to show the “tragedian dilemma” in which African scholars find themselves upon being invited to the global stage — with efforts couched in the language of decolonisation. The initiatives are often intellectually, socially and financially exciting. While they should be welcomed in the spirit of diversity and cultural exchange; the claim of being decolonial is problematic. This awareness of the irresistibility on the one hand, and non-decoloniality on the other, is what I have called a dilemma for a decolonial scholar.

Thus, even critiques of “African studies without African scholars” (Auma et al., 2020; Basedau, 2020; Iroulo and Ortiz, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al., 2022) in Europe and North American universities and journal publications are problematic when they pitch global integration as decolonial initiatives. There is no “global commonwealth of knowledge” where *all* scholars freely contribute their knowledge to understanding a specific phenomenon on fairly defined terms of which the result would be equal and fair relations between coloniser and colonised.

Audiences are often specific and locally contained, with the so-called “global audience/stage” being historically and politically an extension of the local stage for former colonisers and historically powerful countries in the western world. The African academia has only been deftly conscripted and such spaces are often deceptively marketed as mutual and for benign academic learning and engagement with the power to positively effect decoloniality. This is a difficult proposition. Arguing alongside Foucault and Yusuf Bala Usman on the inherent non-objectivity and non-neutrality of knowledge production, it does not matter whether the knowledge produced in these spaces is authentic, accurate or objective, and while any corrections of misrepresentations may be welcome, they are largely outside the realm of decoloniality.

For the African scholar, claims to any meaningful “global stage” must be backed by home-grown liberatory initiatives (mostly, financial and military power), which then compels upon them the obligation to speak to and awaken their local audiences. With a strong base at home, they will then come to the global stage with their own independence, set their own questions, and find answers for these questions on their own terms. In this way, the African scholar has to establish themselves as local public intellectuals first, then as a global scholar.

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ORCID iD

Yusuf K. Serunkuma  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0250-2509>

Notes

1. Aware of the challenges with defining “African,” reference to “African scholar” here means a scholar educated and based on the African continent, whose scholarship also focuses on African issues, especially in their home countries. There are exceptions, of course.
2. Diana Jeater of the University of Liverpool who is also one of the editors of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (JSAS) was in attendance of this session and was in agreement. In fact, she succinctly articulated the difference in scholarship between the African and western scholar. She also informed the audience about her journal’s peer-review adjustments that were already being implemented.
3. In *Conscripts of Modernity*, Scott (2004) uses the idea of “tragedian dilemma” differently noting that tragedy imposes a permanent impress on the present, making “happy-ever-after” endings difficult. In Scott’s usage, “the longing for complete revolution” is a dangerous delusion. While my usage is close to, and inspired by, Scott’s deployment, I am inclined to use the idea of being trapped in a series of tragic circumstances, making either decision a difficult one.
4. Ngugi wa Thiong’o is referred to as “wa Thiong’o” throughout this text because of publishing and citation requirements. However, it is acknowledged that this is not his surname and that he is referred to by “Ngugi” on his website.
5. Minerals are endlessly extracted – actually stolen – from Africa daily and exported to Europe and north America (Hickel, 2020; Keefe, 2013): crude oil, iron ore, gold, diamond, timber, and so on. Besides western imposed policies such as the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAPs), many businessmen and multinational bribe African leaders to steal their minerals through monopoly tenders. Outstanding examples include Dan Gertler in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Glencore Plc. in South Sudan, Malawi, and Nigeria.
6. In 2022, newspapers across the western world reported how global oil and other mineral giant, Glencore Plc. bribed its way across the African continent, “seeking to profit from violence” and wrecking and “inserting itself in pre-existing contracts.” A *Bloomberg* headline on 2 November 2022 read “UK Courts fines Glencore for Bribing its way across Africa.” On 3 November 2022, the CNN headline on the same story read, “Glencore fined \$314 million for ‘endemic’ bribery of African Oil Officials.” Both stories accessed online on 5 June 2023 here: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-02/cash-traders-and-oil-how-glencore-bribed-its-way-across-africa#xj4y7vzkg>; and CNN here: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/03/investing/glencore-bribery-record-fine/index.html>.

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Author Biography

Yusuf K. Serunkuma is currently a postdoc fellow at Martin Luther University in Halle-Wittenberg in Germany where he working on a research project, "Questioning African Studies in Germany through the Lens of Critical Race Theory." Serunkuma has a PhD in social and cultural anthropology from the same university. His research interests include (secessionist) nationalism, political identity, popular culture, and African political economy. Serunkuma's political and activist interests focus on the new infrastructures and modes of colonialism and he is currently finalising a book manuscript titled, "Surrounded: An Ethnography of New Colonialism."

Dekolonisierung als tragisches Drama: Die Dilemmata afrikanischer Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler sowie die Täuschung einer „globalen Wissensgemeinschaft“

Zusammenfassung

Zahlreiche Bemühungen verschaffen afrikanischen Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftlern „globale Sichtbarkeit“ – als Teil der Dekolonisierungsagenda. Zu diesen Bemühungen gehören die Unterstützung und Ermöglichung von Veröffentlichungen in international renommierten Zeitschriften, das Halten von Vorträgen oder die Leitung von Kursen an Ivy-League-Universitäten und das Auftreten als Expertinnen und Experten für Afrika-Themen in internationalen Medien. Während diese Bemühungen und Möglichkeiten für Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler aus der subalternen Welt intellektuell und praktisch unwiderstehlich sind, sind sie in Wirklichkeit kontraproduktiv für das Dekolonisierungsprojekt. Die positive Energie, die sie erzeugen, verschleiert die Geschichte und die Machtdynamik, die die so genannten globalen Räume der Wissensproduktion beherrschen. Es ist problematisch, sie als gutartige und wohlwollende Räume für die Teilhabe an der „globalen Wissensgemeinschaft“ darzustellen, aus denen ein gegenseitiges Verständnis erwächst, mit dem Rassismus und Ausbeutung beendet werden könnten. Globale Räume sind vielmehr Kernbestandteile einer sich rständig verändernder Infrastruktur der kolonialistischen Hegemonie und Kontrolle.

Schlagwörter

Afrika, Dekolonisierung, Trauerspiel, globales Publikum, Wissensgemeinschaft