

Violence and African Philosophy: Beyond Reaction and Mimicry

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ABSTRACT

The history of African philosophy often begins with the quest for legitimacy, by which I mean the desire for it to be recognised, accepted and considered as critical thinking in the real sense of the word. This starting point, on the part of many African philosophy scholars, was due to the historical epistemic violence that Africans experienced as a result of the encounter with the colonisers. The nature of this encounter resulted in the debasement, neglect, and marginalisation of African philosophical positions. Plunged in this epistemic doubt, uncertainty, and imposed decadence, for centuries, many African philosophers grappling with the question, ‘Is there an African philosophy?’ The question does two main things: on the one hand, it seeks to validate philosophical positions that are uniquely African, and on another hand, the question searches for prescriptive philosophical paradigms for addressing African problems and analysing issues. Most African philosophical engagements do the former. Shedding new light to the question, I argue that a disposition to African philosophy that stems from a need to validate its existence risks being a mere reaction and/or mimicry, and as such, further perpetrates epistemic violence by removing Africa from its lived realities.

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Introduction

The desire for both ontological and epistemological legitimacy was an important driving force for the African philosophical agenda. This was because of the ontological and epistemological debasement that Africans suffered during colonialism. Emmanuel Eze’s (1997) ‘The Colour of Reason: The Idea of “Race” in Kant’s Anthropology’ speaks in a poignant way to the reality of African epistemological disenfranchisement revealed in Kant’s account of hierarchies of ontology, and the degradation his position justifies. Note that Eze is writing in the twentieth century. Before him, we see instances of epistemological degradation in the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s popular *Primitive Mentality* (1923), which blatantly considers Africans as incapable of any rational thought, a position that Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007, 45) rightly ascribes to the Western episteme as ‘an abyssal thinking’ that imposed colonial modernity on Africans based on ‘visible and

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invisible distinctions'. The colonial imperial frame/gaze conceived of Africa as the 'primordial nonmodern origins waiting to be brought up to the present despite her absolute otherness' (Hafiz 2020, 112). The commitment to this legitimisation has resulted in arguments in literature that have directly and indirectly responded to the indelible understanding or conception of colonial oppression, a gaze that appears to never fade. This is a reality that is often woven into post-colonial discourse as evidence to justify decolonisation and show that colonialism is a structure as opposed to an event (Wolfe 2006).

Reflecting on African(a) philosophy, one sees a history of the push for ideological emancipation; many comparative philosophical engagements with Western philosophies characterise this push. Beginning with epistemological legitimacy, one is faced with scholars like Odera Oruka, Kwame Nkrumah, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ifi Amadiume, Anthony Appiah, Paulin Hountondji, Wole Soyinka, Ifeanyi Menkiti, Lucius Outlaw, Aimé Césaire, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon and bell hooks, among others. These scholars speak in a profound way to the realities of colonialism and the various ways these realities remain endemic in the experiences of contemporary African societies. Their positions have justified and reinvigorate the decolonial agenda in ways that challenges education, notions of personhood, epistemologies, ontology, communities, universalism and the absolutist agenda. The layer of tragedy cannot be over emphasised. In the article 'How Africa Misunderstood the West: The Failure of Anti-West Radicalism and Postmodernity', Denis Ekpo (1996) spells out the failure that cannot be ignored when one critically engages the relationship between Africa and the West, especially in post-colonial Africa. Ekpo attributes the desire for power and control as inextricable features of western ideology, and suggested that Africans move past the gaze at the past in ways that seek some kind of remorse, apology, guilt and even retribution. Similarly, Madalitso Phiri has also observed that the regime of violence that has 'further alienated the aesthetics of African intellectuals across *philosophy*, *art*, and *literature* was facilitated by knowledge and power' (Phiri 2023, 22). Power was and remains an essential component of Africa's epistemic marginalisation.

Scholars like Ekpo and Phiri inform my critical engagement in this article, but I move beyond their argument to claim that the African gaze towards its colonial experiences, often reflected through reactions and mimicry, can be interpreted as a new kind of violence, an ideological obsession fabricated into colonial oppression. In other words, I critique a commitment to decolonisation that mimicry and mere reaction epitomise. Thus, wa Thiong'o's invitation to decolonise the mind (wa Thiong'o 1986) demands a new reading that is not characterised by an obsession with the colonial gaze in ways that promote reaction and mimicry, but to turn to African values with a renewed commitment to making their light more visible. Toni Morrison, one of the leading Black American novelists, shares in the sentiments that I present in this article when she advises African Americans to 'take away the gaze of the white male [colonial epistemology]. Once you take that out, the whole world opens up' (in Leve 2012). It is necessary to add that I do not dismiss, undermine, or consider fruitless the works of colonial and decolonial thinkers, but I propose critical theory that engages the violence within reactions and mimicry, and explores the various ways that the taking out that Morrison proposes is necessary for opening our world. This does not mean that we should forget or undermine the significance of the battles fought thus far, but we must not ignore the various ways that the nudging of human experiences invites us to new battles that open and reveal a new path for Africans.

In what follows, I present in three sections how a commitment to the colonial gaze through reaction and mimicry is violent. First, I engage an historical account of the African philosophical quest for legitimacy. In this section, I argue that the history of philosophy sought to depart from its experience of epistemicide, reclaiming its place in time, history, and epistemology, thereby making visible and legitimising its ontology. Second, I explore how post-colonial African philosophy remains a victim of this colonial gaze, a reality that is evident in mimicry and reaction. I do not undermine the relevance of existing African philosophical accounts on decolonisation, but I argue that they are embedded with potential violence. In the third section, I propose a new order that transcends the ideological configuration of colonialism that makes colonial ideologies a necessary path to African visibility. This path has been used for centuries, and I argue that it is important to realise the violence embedded in this path.

The quest for legitimacy

The quest for legitimacy marks an important aspect in the history of African philosophy and its engagement with other philosophical epistemologies. Scholars like Oruka, in their attempt to justify the existence of philosophy in Africa, identify sources of rational thoughts in African societies. Oruka in particular identifies six trends of African philosophy: 'ethnophilosophy', 'professional philosophy', 'philosophic sagacity' (also known as 'sage philosophy'), 'nationalistic-ideological philosophy', 'hermeneutic philosophy' and 'literary philosophy' (Oruka 1998; see Bodunrin 1984; Hountondji 1983). I do not consider an in-depth analysis of these trends necessary for the point that I seek to make in this article. However, while I present an overview of ethno-philosophy, sage philosophy and nationalistic-ideological philosophy, it is important to note that these trends are African scholars', like Oruka's, attempts to search for instances of philosophical theorisations or views that could be classified or considered as uniquely African. For Oruka:

philosophy is not a science in an ivory tower, but has to contribute to the betterment of the life of the people – it has to be practical. Philosophers have to deploy the results of their thinking to the well-being of their communities (Graness 2012, 2).

In addition, philosophy cannot be detached from the social workings or daily practices of a given community, and the measure of effective critical thinking is weighed against its effects on the community. Therefore, the understanding of philosophy as 'a body of logically argued thoughts of individuals' (Bodunrin 1984, 1) entails that its uniqueness lies in the communal appeal.

Furthermore, Outlaw notes that the goal of ethno-philosophers was to 'replace the caricature of the invented African with an image reconstructed (and rehabilitated) through the extension of the denotative range of the privileged category of "rational animal" to "traditional" Africans' (Outlaw 1987, 27). Outlaw (1987, 24) defines ethno-philosophy as 'works or books which "purport" to describe a world outlook or thought system of a particular African community, or the whole of Africa'. The motive is to move from an epistemological universalisation, characterised by colonial invasion, to an epistemological particularisation informed by unique social contexts. It is apparent that ethno-philosophy had its origins in the view that Africans were 'fundamentally distinct and different from Western societies' (Oruka 1987, 58). When Oruka describes ethno-philosophy as

'philosophy only in the "debased" sense of the term' (Oruka 1987, 49), he appears to implore a standard that is removed from the social matrix of the community of investigation, and this, to my mind, does injustice to the structure that is upheld in that community. I will further expand on this idea in the next section.

Another important trend that must be pitted against ethno-philosophy is sage philosophy. While ethno-philosophy engages with African beliefs, values, practices, and ways of life, among others, sage philosophy seeks to identify particular individuals within African communities whose ideas can be considered to have met the requirements of critical philosophical thinking. Those who attain this standard are sometimes referred to as professional philosophers. The shift to sage philosophers is largely due to the critique of ethno-philosophy as lacking rigorous philosophical engagement, and the claim that ethno-philosophy is mainly an oral tradition that cannot be attributed to a particular individual(s). This is because it is mostly based on values, beliefs, and world views that have been passed down from one generation to another in ways that lack real epistemic development. Professional philosophers are a category of people who comprehend and are accustomed to the necessary yardstick for understanding and measuring what constitutes critical thinking. And some of these measurands entail ideological autonomy (that is, the idea(s) can be attributed to a particular individual(s)), rigorous philosophical engagement and process, and open to criticisms, among others. The general observation is that African beliefs, culture, and values are often considered closed in the sense that they are not opened to external criticisms and questions.

The last trend that I consider in this article is the nationalistic-ideological philosophy. This philosophy stems from the positions of African scholars and leaders who offered political ideological frameworks for independence. Scholars like Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Steve Biko, and Cabral, among others, come to mind. Their motive was to formulate theoretical justifications for true emancipation in post-colonial African societies. Thereby advance a commitment to re-humanise the dehumanised African societies. Scholars like Chinua Achebe, in his work *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (2009) argues that 'We cannot trample upon the humanity of others without devaluing our own. The Igbo, always practical, put it concretely in their proverb *Onye ji onye n'ani ji onwe ya* "He who will hold another down in the mud must stay in the mud to keep him down"' (2009). The direct translation is fascinating: 'He who holds another person down, also holds himself down'. The point is to highlight how the dehumanising of the oppressed necessarily entails the dehumanisation of the oppressor. We see that, while there was a commitment to various ideological awareness of the mechanisms of oppression, there was a warning directed at perpetrators of oppression. The victim that they have become in their roles as perpetrators of oppression characterises this warning.

The significance of the trends, as Peter Bodunrin (1984, 10) notes, is to point at the existence of 'respectable and in many ways complex, and in some sense rational and logical conceptual analysis in Africa'. This is partly based on the claim that Africa lacks rational logical content. In recent times, Walter Mignolo has noted that 'Cultures of scholarship were precisely what people outside Europe either lacked [...] or if they happened to possess them (like China, India, or the Islamic world), they became an object of study' (Mignolo 2000, 304). This position reveals the trivialising conception of African and other non-European episteme as a consequence of European ignorance. Fazil Moradi's coinage, 'Catastrophic Art', also speaks to the colonial epistemic marginalisation and call for an

openness to multiple epistemologies (Moradi 2022, 247). Europe's lack of awareness of the cultures of scholarship contributed to the neglect and refusal to accept whatever was considered epistemologically unfamiliar. The 'Locus of enunciation', as Mignolo argues in his book *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, is the positionality of the speaker, which 'is as much part of the knowing and understanding processes as are the data for the disciplinary [...] construction of the "real"' (Mignolo 1995, 21). The lack of a receptive disposition towards culturally unique positionality, and how Africans inform their locus of enunciation, was a contributing factor to epistemicide in Africa. In religious parlance, Mignolo argues that 'when a limited number of people feel they are appointed by God to bring (their) good to the rest of humanity. That is [...] the provincial pretence to universality' (Mignolo 2007, 493).

The universalising mission was part of the 'colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo 1999, 239) that privileged and held in high esteem certain institutional apparatuses of knowing and managing other's knowledges: 'Cultures of scholarship were precisely what people outside Europe either lacked [...] or if they happened to possess them (like China, India or the Islamic world), they became an object of study' (Mignolo 2000, 304). On the contrary, scholars such as Didier Kaphagawani, in response to this quest for legitimacy, were critical of African philosophy and observed that:

African philosophy is, as accepted by philosophers in Africa, still in its embryonic stage. As such it has yet to establish not only a tradition, as some scholars in Africa as well as elsewhere would have us believe, but seemingly several such traditions (Kaphagawani 1998, 86).

Even the philosophical expedition that Placide Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy* (1948) sought to articulate is often understood or interpreted as a colonial bias and imposition of epistemological measurand on African philosophy. The crux of Tempels's account is to show and articulate that the Bantu people have a philosophy of their own that informs their conception of reality. In view of the colonial gaze, Tempels's commitment could be interpreted as an attempt to grant Africans an epistemological access.

The doubt casted on external attempts to articulate African philosophical realities has its origin in colonial oppression and power, and this is the reality that has persisted within philosophy over centuries. It is important to note here that I do not impose a singular philosophical position on Africa. Eze rightly argues that:

The African experience, however, has never really been a monolith, on the continent or abroad. From Amo to Nkrumah to Du Bois, from Equiano to Locke to Senghor; continental and Diaspora modern Africans found a 'language'- largely based upon their awareness of a collective entanglement with the history of the modern West, and their objectification and 'thingification' (Verdinglichung) by this West – and so have also always individually and collectively struggled in multifaceted and pluralistic ways against the oppressive tendencies within European capitalist cultures, and the illegitimate colonial structures that crush Africa's initiatives on the continent (Eze 1997a, 15).

The move away from the illegitimate colonial epistemological structure does not only, as D.A. Masolo puts it, 'expose[s] the diversity and pluralism of African identities, thus undermining the tenets of Pan-African ideology and the culturalism of Western ethnology' and advance the 'thesis [...] that the practice of philosophy is often culture relative in many more ways than is readily accepted' (Masolo 1997, 296). With this, Masolo offers an insight on how Africans can address the crisis of epistemic identity. It also opens a new

door to challenge the structural epistemicide of which Africans continue to remain victims. I have already established that the colonial gaze sees Africans as 'pre-scientific and to lack critical, abstract and independent thought as well as logic as it was understood by the Western world, the West was said to be scientific, critical, abstract and independent as well as being objective' (Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru 2013, 43), and the quest for legitimacy was a necessary response. Whether the quest for legitimacy was a success remains a debate in need of proper engagement. Decolonisation, as a theoretical frame, is in vogue because it seeks to move beyond Western episteme and make visible, perhaps after having been successfully restated through the quest for legitimacy, the theoretical frameworks of Africans. The goal is to promote a commitment to context and the theories that emerge from the lived realities of that context.

Reaction and mimicry

In this section, I argue that the nature of African philosophy has been predominately based on reaction and mimicry. It is perhaps understandable and justifiable, especially in light of the history of colonial invasion and epistemicide in Africa. Whether this excuse holds within a decolonial theoretical era is indeed questionable. As a point of departure, I unpack what I mean by reaction and mimicry and how they speak to the argument I make in this section. In 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', Homi Bhabha (1984) observes that 'Mimicry is [...] the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power' (Bhabha 1984, 126). He also notes that 'mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal' (Bhabha 1984, 126). This disavowal emerges as a result of the lack of commitment to the authentic self. A reality that is similar to what wa Thiong'o refers to as the loss of memory when he notes that, 'when we say that a person has lost his or her memory, we are talking of a real loss of those traces that individuals use to make sense of what is happening to them' (wa Thiong'o 2003, 59).

In view of Bhabha (1984) and wa Thiong'o's accounts, I understand and use mimicry in this article in the sense that it reveals a conscious or unconscious adoption or commitment to methodologies, theories, and ways of understanding reality that are different or not obtainable in one's context or cultural reality in ways that result in epistemic loss. It will be ridiculous to argue that all kinds of commitment to methodologies, theories and ways of understanding reality are necessarily mimicry in the futile and undesirable sense. While such commitment might sometimes reveal an absolute lack of ingenuity, it could also be necessary, and it is only necessary mainly on the ground that they do not undermine, subvert, impose one world view or theoretical position (often considered to be 'superior') on another world view (considered to be 'inferior').

Reaction on the other hand is understood as a response to a given idea or conception that speaks to a situation(s), position, and/or event(s). The nature of reaction and mimicry are not necessarily violent, but I argue in this article that they are potentially violent in nature. The violence I refer to here is an epistemic kind. Miranda Fricker (2007) offers some important insights on how to conceptualise epistemic injustice and epistemic violence. In her work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, she makes an interesting link between epistemic practices and how they bring about power for subjects who

are epistemically situated (2007, vii). She shows how justice and injustice are important dimensions of epistemic life. It is in light of this position that I consider reaction and mimicry, understood as epistemic responses, as potentially violent. Similarly, and more specifically, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, x) argues that the reality of decolonialisation shows that 'African people found themselves engulfed by a "postcolonial neocolonised world" characterised by myths of decolonization and illusions of freedom'. Ndlovu-Gatsheni maintains that epistemic freedom from the snares of the 'postcolonial neocolonised world' can be attained through an act of rebellion; in his words, 'This will require an epistemic rebellion that enables the formerly colonized people to gain self-confidence, enabling them to re-imagine another world free from Western tutelage and African dictators that enjoy Western protection' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013a, 263–264). The goal for Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013a, 264) is to promote a new imagination that liberates both the colonised and the coloniser. This is the only way they can explore and actively engage in developing their own alternative conception of the world.

Keeping in mind the essential questions that need to be posed as we envisage a future rid of the colonial epistemic hold on epistemic visibility in the Global South, the fundamental concern here is captured in De Sousa Santos's (2007, 49) position when he writes:

How can we identify the perspective of the oppressed in real-world interventions or in any resistance to them? How can we translate this perspective into knowledge practices? In search for alternatives to domination and oppression, how can we distinguish between alternatives to the system of oppression and domination and alternatives within the system or, more specifically, how do we distinguish between alternatives to capitalism and alternatives within capitalism? In sum, how can we fight against abyssal lines using conceptual and political instruments that don't reproduce them? And finally, a question of special interest to educators: what would be the impact of a post-abyssal conception of knowledge (as an ecology of knowledges) upon our educational institutions and research centres?

Identifying the perspective of the oppressed has been a major challenge over the years, and the reality of mimicry and reactions have thwarted and continue to hinder attempts at bringing about the needed changes, and a genuine emancipation from the colonial gaze. Consider scholars like Nkrumah, Césaire and Nyerere, among others, whose political philosophies were direct rebuttals against the colonial gaze, and the hope was to formulate what they considered to be new and suitable for Africans. While scholars like Nkrumah's insistence on 'consciencism' was an awareness that entailed a blend of the new with the old, Nyerere (1968) insisted on a radical departure from the colonial epistemic supplantation and a return to that which is uniquely African. Theoretical frameworks such as that of Cheikh Anta Diop's *Nations Nègres et Culture* were not only revolutionary or merely anti-West, they also sought to convince Europe of her historical guilt towards Africa and beckon an obligation towards rectification (see Ekpo 1996). The point of this article is not to undermine or consider these emancipatory attempts as void and without any real epistemic substance. On the contrary, I argue that the failure of most theoretical and practical political propositions of most African leaders was largely due to their conceptual origins, which make reaction and/or mimicry inevitable. It is a state that responds to colonial epistemic violence by perpetrating a new kind of violence. In other words, inherent in any attempt to retort risks a certain absorption in the epistemic fabric of the colonisers, which inevitably results in either mimicry or reaction. The point

I make here is that colonial epistemological imposition is a deliberate epistemic distraction from an effective commitment to theoretical sources in Africa.

The way forward appears uncertain and the past is now unrecognisable. This is why even 'the traditional defence of traditions', as Mignolo puts it, 'should be constantly contested at all levels, including the cultures of scholarship and the parochial defence of disciplinary, even under new paradigms' (Mignolo 2000, 203). This is partly because what is often considered 'uniquely African' is unrecognisable. For Edward Said (1993, 1):

Appeals to the past are among the most common of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions – about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities.

Said goes on to add that 'Culture, like history, is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures' (Said 1993, 260). It is very difficult to think of culture in the way Said proposes, especially when one considers the reality of colonialism and the epistemic structural oppression that still lingers in Africa. Different from Said's position, there are scholars who have been emphatic about the right disposition that Africans must assume towards the Western gaze, and here I think of Ekpo's (1996) article, 'How Africa Misunderstood the West: The Failure of Anti-West Radicalism and Postmodernity'. Ekpo (1996, 3) observes that various epistemic attempts on the part of Africans to elicit a moral response from the West, which he also refers to as the 'Essential West' have not resulted in any genuine response. The relentless 'clamour for reparations seems to be the logical culmination of the Afrocentric's relentless trials and conviction of the West' (Ekpo 1996, 5). Ultimately, Ekpo argues that the West's understanding and desire for power makes Afrocentric trials and conviction a futile endeavour not worthy of any further pursuit.

The ongoing history, understood here 'as both a discourse of knowledge and a discourse of power' (Mudimbe 1988, 188), of Africa and its relationship with the West simply shows that the imposition of a single narrative has made epistemologies from African subordinate to the epistemological self-referential, biased and monolithic outlook of the West. Through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007, xiv) also notes that history carries within it traces of 'prejudice'. 'Prejudice in this sense is not a conscious bias but a sign that we think out of particular accretions of histories that are not always transparent to use'. Thus far, I have shown that the colonial gaze is woven into its ideological positionality of Africans, and the African obsession with this gaze has hindered socio-political growth and a real commitment to the epistemic resources that could be harnessed from Africa. While referring to this gaze, Toni Morrison argues that African American male thinkers:

justifiably write books about their oppression. Confronting the oppressor who is white male or white woman. It's race. And the person who defines you under those circumstances is a white mind – tells you whether you're worthy or what have you. And as long as that's your preoccupation, you're defending yourself against that. Reacting to it. Reacting to the definition – saying it's not true (in Leve 2012).

Instead of the above preoccupation with what white people think about Black people, Morrison proposes an alternative gaze that brings to life and reveals the truth within the African American communities.

Towards a new epistemic disposition

Attempts toward a new order potentially risk another fall into the trap that I have thus far tried to avoid. Perhaps, as Edwin Etieyibo and Jonathan Chimakonam propose, it is necessary to enquire about:

The primary and overarching question guiding this project [...] What sorts of progress have been made and are being made in African philosophy following the end to the metaphilosophical debate about its existence, nature, and substance in the decades past? (Etieyibo & Chimakonam 2018, 71).

More so, it is important to also explore ways in which the growth is sustained and the point of departure does not begin with a critique of Western philosophies, but on a commitment to understanding, engaging, appreciating and furthering various unique African epistemes.

Furthermore, Etieyibo and Chimakonam (2018) argue that the imminent danger is that African philosophy has adopted Western understanding and continues to measure itself based on the number of outputs, research, and so forth, as opposed to a commitment to the core values, beliefs and epistemes that reveal the true nature of African philosophy as it is grounded in African cultures. The point I make here is that to genuinely understand the state of affairs in African philosophy, there is a need to return to the core values of African traditions, with the intention to understand and appreciate these values uninfluenced by the pressure that characterised the negative influence of the colonial gaze. In other words, the way forward is in the past. The present is laden with colonial ideological workings that permeate every facet of our societies and blinds us from our true self. The colonial gaze deeply adulterates the yardstick for self-valuation and holds Africans accountable to what is deeply alien and removed from their cultures and values. It is a gaze that does violence and injustice because it makes Africans victims of a borrowed lens; a lens that does not reveal the truth about the realities of Africans.

In an article titled 'Is African Philosophy progressing?', Ada Agada (2013) argues that a genuine attempt to ensuring progress in African philosophy entails 'making it a tradition that will command universal respect by the radicalisation of individual initiative with ethno-philosophy serving only as the foundation of our 21st century inspiration' (Agada 2013, 239). Two important points emerge from Agada's proposition. First, Agada appears to impose a foundation that may not necessarily be the experience of many in the 21st century, especially in light of an increasingly multi-cultural society. He does state that the philosophy must emerge from human experiences as it is an investigation into human realities (Agada 2013, 243). As opposed to a commitment to ethno-philosophy, a coinage from African philosophical attempts to justify its existence, understood here as a necessary foundation, does not appear convincing. I interpret Agada's endeavour as an attempt to present the history of African philosophy in a systematic way. Perhaps one way of thinking about African philosophy and its history is to first think about African traditions and values; second, the quest for legitimacy (to which

ethno-philosophy belongs); and third, philosophical themes in Africa. To be clear, the ethno-philosophy Oruka, Tempels and Hountondji propose played a different role from the traditional values that I refer to in African traditions and values. Ethno-philosophy was intended to justify the existence of African philosophy, while African traditions and values were based on African reflections on their reality. The conflation of both ethno-philosophy and African traditions and values misses the point.

Now to the second point. Agada's attempt to respond to the question 'Is African philosophy progressing?' commits to a universalist project. This is a futile endeavour, inherited from the colonial epistemology of universalisation. This is because universalising entails a standard that necessarily adulterates, amplifies, or de-emphasises, exaggerates and so on, in order to suit the gaze and epistemic rubric of the West. Different from Agada's view, the commitment should be that of engaging with the intellectual curiosity that African realities present within their context. The distraction of universalisation is not unique to Africans. Universalisation distracts us from a genuine commitment to context, and authentic and meaningful engagement with questions emerging from Africa. Africans are victims of the colonial universalising mission in ways that make the commitment to particularity urgent.

We are reminded that the 'gregarious phase of Western thinking' arrived in parallel to emerging 'discourses of truth relating to nature, the specificity and forms of the living, and the qualities, traits, and characteristics of human beings. Entire populations were categorized as species, kinds, or races, classified along vertical lines' (Mbembe 2017, 16). These classifications had their roots in a context that didn't consider difference as necessary for authentic existence owing to its universalising mission. One could argue that the desire for epistemic assertion does not necessarily mean alienation. In light of an ongoing systemic epistemicide and marginalisation, perhaps it is time for African scholars to embrace alienation rather than mimic and/or commit to reacting against Western epistemologies. This position does not only offer theoretical persuasion, but there are also socio-political implications that could be deduced from a new epistemic disposition that I propose. Here, I speak to the politics of self-victimisation that have been imposed on many African states, where leaders blame the West for realities that are within their control. Most times, the politics of self-victimisation is an ideological tactic that distracts, obscures, and justifies the realities of oppression. There are instances where the colonial gaze is invoked and weaponised in Africa, and to my mind, there is a need for a new disposition to this gaze in a way that removes it from the centre.

Thinking about the colonial gaze from the view point of the conception of ideas, it is clear that singularity is essential to the nature of ideas. This was a major critique that cast doubt on the existence of African philosophy. Menkiti rightly observes that whereas most Western views:

abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description 'man' must have; the African view of man denies that a person can be defined by focussing on this or that physical or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather, 'man' is defined by the environing community (Menkiti 1984, 171).

The same can be said about ideas. In most African cultures, ideas are often attached to the community and they are never singular in nature. The community, as the locus of

enunciation, always has a direct or indirect connection to an idea. Among others Oruka's adoption of and attempt to justify a singular outlook of epistemic rendition in Africa does injustice to the authentic fabric of epistemic formulation in Africa. This point resonates with Godwin Sogolo (1993), who sets out to offer an account of the essential differences between the African and Western positions. He rightly argues that the African conception of 'man' 'refers to a set of beliefs or pictures of man in the form of empirical generalisations' (Sogolo 1993, 190). With this, Sogolo firmly disapproves of any formulation of personhood that has an appeal to universal conceptualisation. He holds this position because he seeks to critique the emphasis on theory (abstraction) over experience. He writes:

There may be some intellectual satisfaction in formulating a general theory or theories of human nature but it appears that the manifestation by a community of any theoretically-implied human characteristics stands more significant. The point of significance here does not lie in some abstract understanding of what man is capable of becoming, but on the actualisation of his potentials and capabilities.

In discussing epistemicide in Africa, it is important to become alert to the various ways that academic spaces in Africa are sites that house ideological victims who have become custodians of colonial measurands in ways that does not promote epistemological access in Africa. They consciously or unconsciously, do this through gate keeping. We risk a new kind of epistemic violence through the neglect of our unique context, informed by the false narrative of the modern, in search of an individualistic commitment to the colonial agenda by reaction and/or mimicry. African philosophy, traditional and modern, is a narration and evaluation of African concepts. These ideas are based on African experiences and observations. As Kwasi Wiredu rightly observes, 'Contemporary work in African philosophy has a certain richness deriving from its unavoidably comparative character' (Wiredu 2003, 91). This is different from Pixley Seme's position during his University of Columbia's talk titled, 'The Regeneration of Africa'. Seme says, 'I would ask you not to compare Africa to Europe or to any other continent' (Seme 1906, 1). He goes on to add that his invitation was 'not from any fear that such comparison might bring humiliation upon Africa' (1906, 1). It is important to add that the comparative character, when needed, must not undermine the African locus of enunciation, especially as it pertains to its epistemic power and ideological significance. A commitment to authentic epistemic representation is important. This resonates with Bhabha's (1984) invitation to caution that 'The desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry - through a process of writing and repetition - is the final irony of partial representation' rings through the argument that I make here.

Conclusion

The goal of this article is to reveal the violence that is done through the reaction to and mimicry of Western ideas. In many ways, I propose a return to the African context, with the hope and desire to understand and allow the uniqueness of African epistemes to shine forth. African philosophers have not sufficiently committed to the terrain that they exist in and originate from. This is largely due to the obsession with the Western gaze. The neglect of context does epistemic violence, and the commitment to understanding once context based on theoretical accounts that are removed from one's unique context risks mimicry.

In some ways, this article is also a victim of the colonial gaze, and I hope that it becomes a beacon of hope for a new path that disengages from the imposed theoretical ideology that constantly forces African philosophers to become harbingers of mimicry and/or reaction, a distraction from the truth. As Achille Mbembe puts it, ‘the colonial gaze [...] serves as the very veil that hides the truth. Power in the colony therefore consists fundamentally in the power to see or not to see, to remain indifferent, to render invisible what one wishes not to see’ (Mbembe 2017, 111). Toni Morrison’s advice to African Americans also echoes: ‘take away the gaze of the white male. Once you take that out, the whole world opens up’ (in Leve 2012). The goal therefore is to commit to, with the hope of experiencing once again, the knowledge and power embedded in various philosophical themes that emerge from the African context, and be driven to engage these themes without doing the violence that hinders the opening up that Africa needs.

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Note on contributor

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