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The Paradox of Academic Freedom: How Decolonisation inhibits the Choices of African Academics

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Abstract

This article argues that rather than advancing academic freedom, decolonisation impedes access to a wide range of possibilities accessible to African scholars. Decolonisation, it is often argued, has the prospect of guaranteeing more academic freedom for African scholars. With curbing the ills of epistemic injustice and violence, epistemicide, etc. as its focal point, decolonisation is ideologically resistant; it discriminates against knowledge from certain quarters historically linked to colonialism. Using the Sartrean existentialist framework of freedom, the article argues that true intellectual freedom consists neither in discriminating against other intellectual traditions nor in undoing the past intellectual injustice. Rather, it consists in creatively transcending the facticity of the past, using all means possible. In transcending colonial facticity, the article argues, African scholars must be enabled to freely choose from a range of available choices regardless of their cultural origins or authorship. The article concludes that epistemic decolonisation can only lead to intellectual isolationism, but isolationism does not promote the culture of academic freedom.

Keywords: Academic freedom, decolonisation, paradox, African academics, Choices

Introduction

The article explores the multi-tiered relationship and intersectionality between the African call for decolonisation and the prospect for academic freedom. It dispels a popular myth in which decolonisation is taken to be a guaranteed pathway to academic freedom in the African context. Given its largely unprofitable exposure to foreign intellectual tradition during colonialism, contemporary African scholarship is awash with the quest to decolonise virtually all aspects of African intellectual life, most especially African concepts, theories, methodologies, curricula, research, teaching and learning, etc. The whole idea of decolonisation in African context is often couched in the need to rescue African intellectual heritage from the claws of Western hegemony to whose apron string it has been tied since the colonial era. Hence, decolonisation evokes the idea of delinking African epistemologies from the debilitating influence exerted on it by the epistemology of the Global North, thereby decentring the latter from its acclaimed knowledge custodianship status over the former (see Mignolo, 2007). In this way, academic freedom is conceived in terms of detachment of the Subaltern consciousness from that of the Centre in a bid to granting the former a full autonomy to pilot its own intellectual affairs without undue influences from sources outside of its own historical, ontological, epistemological, and spiritual origin. Agreeing to Olufemi Taiwo's (2022) position that such conception of decolonisation necessarily leads to nativism and atavism, the current study will argue that African scholarship cannot be deemed free if it is locked up within itself and methodically forbidden from considering knowledges (theories, methods, concepts, etc.) from non-African sources.

As qualitative, library-based, research, the article will employ a blend of phenomenological, existentialist and critical social methodological approaches. Properly applied in the current context, phenomenological reduction allows us to come to terms with the incompatibility of the concepts of decolonisation and academic freedom in two major ways. One, it reveals that, contrary to theoretical contestations currently on offer in the literature, the concept of academic freedom in the African context provides an inexhaustibly diverse array of options from which African academics are at liberty to choose in the discharge of their professional duties. Two, it helps to show that embracing the spirit of decolonisation constrains these boundless possibilities. In the same vein, Sartrean existentialist conception of freedom will be deployed to put the concept of academic freedom into a clearer perspective as an untamed and unbounded human will, untainted by loyalty to cultural idiosyncrasies and unfettered by commitment to filial association or other relational considerations. The critical social theory enables us to rethink altogether the notions of decolonisation and academic freedom with a view to demonstrating that both cannot be consistently held together as the postcolonial African scholarship seems to suggest.

The article is structured as follows. In the ensuing section, the article traces different meanings that the concept of academic freedom has assumed in the course of history of its use. The aim is to show the fluidity of the concept in the history of its discourse. Section three discusses the meaning of academic freedom in the context of the agitation for the decolonisation of the African intellectual tradition. In section four, the "freedom" in "academic freedom" is given a Sartrean existentialist interpretation to underscore the point that academic freedom opens up an inexhaustible array of possibilities for African academics to explore from in the fulfilment of their professional duties. Section five demonstrates how strict adherence to decolonial mode of thought significantly negatively impacts on these possibilities. The last section concludes

on the thought that African scholarship must rethink its stand on decolonisation if it truly cherishes the virtue of academic freedom as both cannot consistently be held together.

The changing roles of academic freedom in history

The history of academic freedom is a history of struggle. In fact, the concept of academic freedom is a concept within the broader concept of academic struggle for autonomy of thought and enquiry. In understanding the nature of this struggle, it is apt to look through history and identify instances in which men and women of ideas have suffered stiffened freedom from the hands of higher authorities of their times. To fulfil the need for a general definition, I adopt the *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s (2025; see also Adu and Odame, 2023) definition of the concept of academic freedom "as the freedom of teacher and students to teach, study and pursue knowledge and research without unreasonable interference or restriction from laws, institutional regulations, or public pressure." This definition appeals because it identifies three components in the analysis of academic freedom: (i.) individuals at the centre of the struggle (i.e., teachers and students); (ii.) the content of the struggle (i.e., pursuit of knowledge through teaching, studies and researches); and (iii.) the stiffening elements against which academics struggle (i.e., laws, institutional regulations, public pressure, etc.). These three components are germane in the ensuing historical analysis of the concept of academic freedom. Given the complicated nature of the concept of academic freedom, I shall identify four historical epochs and show how the issue of academic freedom featured in each of them.

In tracing the history of academic freedom, Geoffrey R. Stone's (2015) excellent essay titled "A brief history of academic freedom" will be a principal guide. In the ancient Graeco-Roman period where it all started, the aim of academic freedom was to provide a safe intellectual climate for free discussions of serious epistemic issues, and, thereby, breaking the shackles of ignorance under which people had lived for a long period of time. Williams (2016; see also Papadimitriou, 2011) traces this fundamental quest to the critical attitude of the trio of the ancient Greek Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who, accordingly, "are all credited with promoting ideals of free speech and free inquiry" (p. 28). Socrates, who spearheaded this struggle, got his fingers burnt having been accused and convicted of "corrupting" the Athenian youths and introducing to them new gods with which the Athenians were hitherto unfamiliar. Socrates considered himself divinely saddled with the responsibility of exposing false wisdom, a task that put him against some of the acclaimed wise men of his time, who, on close inspections, were found to be ignorant about the subject matters for which they were highly reputed. Socrates' eloquent defence of himself against these charges provides classic arguments for academic freedom (Hofstadter, 2017; Stone, 2015; Williams, 2016).

The struggle for academic freedom witnessed another trope of meaning in medieval Europe. The medieval period is specifically significant in the history of academic freedom because it gave birth to the modern university structure in which institutional autonomy plays a central role (Livesey, 2016; Stone, 2015). During this period, the sole aim of academic freedom was to save the academic community from the overbearing influence of religion under which the search for truth was greatly impaired. The medieval intellectual climate was characterized by the heavy domination of religious explanation of natural events which shaped the beliefs and attitude of scholars of the historical period. Also, the dominance of religious attitude of mind in Medieval period made it almost illegitimate to offer opinions that were significantly out of tune with the mood of the period. As Stone (2015, p. 2) notes, "There existed a hard core of authoritatively established doctrine that was made obligatory on all scholars and teachers. It

was expected that each new accretion of knowledge would be consistent with a single system of truth, anchored in Christian dogma.”

The effect of the general influence of religion on medieval scholarship became full-blown in the short period between late medieval and early modern period. Popularly called the Renaissance, the period received an unprecedented pull towards science as scholars began to question basic religious assumptions, intensifying the tension between scientific enquiries and religious authority. One of the notable anti-academic-freedom events of the period was the one involving the heretical discovery of Galileo whose published telescopic observation attracted heinous consequence from the then Pappal regime. For holding a considered opinion that contradicted the official position of the Church, Galileo “was listed as a suspect in the secret books of the Inquisition, threatened with torture, compelled publicly to disavow his views, and imprisoned for the remainder of his life” (Stone, 2015, p. 2; see also Machamer & Miller, 2005). This, among other events, represents a significant historical conflict (see Dickson, 1893; Draper, 1875; Simpson, 1926) between science and religion in which the triumph of the latter was only “justice delayed” and never “justice denied”.

It could, therefore, be argued that the sole aim of academic freedom in the period stretching between the early medieval period and early modern period was to wrestle intellectual powers from the hand of religion and place them where they appropriately belong. Specifically, in the 17th-century Europe, the notion of academic freedom, now fully identified as a virtue within the university community, came as a struggle to liberate knowledge from the encumbrances placed on it by Christian dogmas which had held sway until that period. The vibrant, scientifically oriented, early modern period still found itself largely unable to break free of the superimposition of the medieval curricular system. With events such as the forced resignation of the Harvard’s president for denying the spiritual validity of infant baptism in 1654, a doctrinal practice of the Catholics, it was obvious that freedom of enquiry was severely limited to the extent to which it agrees to the religious doctrines (Stone, 2015). The struggle to orient knowledge along the path of scientific development in the 17th century, even though it suffered some setback in the hands of the Church’s authorities, died hard.

The 18th- and 19th centuries witnessed some moment of respite in terms of the increased freedom of scientific knowledge from undue dominance of religion. The shift towards secularisation of knowledge became more widespread across Europe and America. In the specific case of the American college system, a report has it that “By opening up new fields of study and by introducing a note of skepticism and inquiry, the trend toward secular learning began gradually to liberate college work. The teacher of science introduced for the first time the discovery, rather than the mere transmission, of knowledge into the classroom” (Stone, 2015, p. 2). This not only aided the growth of empirical science and technological advancement during the period, but it also led to the dichotomisation of knowledge into liberal arts and sciences, a key legacy of the 18th-century university to the modern world. Religion largely lost its stronghold on the intellect as scholars began to base their convictions on empirical evidence rather than religious indoctrinations and dogmas.

In the 20th century, there are a variety of factors that stiffened academic freedom. In Africa, for example, there was the factor of military incursion into politics. The university provided one of the major oppositions to this trend. In Nigeria, for example, the strictest opposition to military despotism came from the Nigerian universities’ academics under the aegis of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) (Arowosegbe, 2021). Some members of the union suffered various forms and degrees of persecution and brutality in the hands of

autocratic military leaders, especially in the regimes of Gen. Mohamadu Buhari, Gen. Ibrahim Gbadamosi Babangida and the late Gen. Sanni Abacha of Nigeria. As Jega (1995, p. 251) avows, "Through the violation of academic freedom, the restriction of academic autonomy, underfunding and other adverse policies, military rule in Nigeria has hindered the functioning of the universities, and has drastically curtailed their contribution to positive national development." Aware of the capacity of the Nigerian academics to instill attitude of stiff opposition in their students and members of the Nigerian civil society through propaganda and other unionist apparatuses, successive Nigerian military governments employed all possible antics to suppress all antagonistic opinions especially those emanating from the universities and other higher education spaces.

One of the major measures taken by the military government to exert their controlling influence on the then universities included imposition of military cronies as vice-chancellors in obvious disregard for the extant laws establishing those universities. As Jega (1995, pp. 252-53) recounts,

Vice Chancellors have more or less surrendered the autonomy of the universities to the military authorities, and connived in flouting the university statutes by bending to ministerial directives or inviting the armed forces on campuses to prevent student demonstrations. In turn the regimes have removed Vice Chancellors as arbitrarily as they have imposed them on the academic communities. Thus, many Vice Chancellors, to protect their positions, have opted to become more responsive to the requirements of the state, regardless of whether or not they violate academic statutes, than to those of the academic communities over which they preside. Academics and students go to court quite often to seek protection against violations of basic rights.

Situations such as these kill academic freedom as they unleash terror and fear on the academic community that should be devoid of fear and trembling of any sort. Given the despotic nature of military rule, it was likely that such was the situation across African states ruled by the military in that historic era. As a way of curbing university autonomy, the hitherto meagre public spending on education was further slashed down, making research and academic activities within the universities quite difficult, or, in most cases, impossible to realise. All these manifested in the continuous decline of the academic capacities as some of the expatriates teaching and researching in the then Nigerian universities began to leave in droves, while Nigerian academics who considered the national atmosphere too toxic to blossom began to brain-drain.

Academic freedom in the age of decolonisation: The birth of a paradox

Traditionally, the enmity against academic freedom usually emanates from the outside of the university. The enemies were external forces that undermined the autonomy of the university, its professors and other academics in respect to the contents of their teaching, research and community services. Hence, it could be surmised that the history of academic freedom revolved around struggles against the enemy without, that is, forces external to the university community where freedom is an ideal. Even in cases where agents against academic freedom are recruited from within the university, they were often projected as having been used by their external powers which dictate their modus operandi.

The renewed interest in the intellectual decolonisation discourse among, especially, Global South scholars (Balogun, 2023; Bewaji, 2020; de Sousa Santos, 2007, 2015; Kessi et al., 2020a, 2020b; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), in recent times, has sparked off a fresh perspective on the concept of academic freedom. The emergence of decolonial moods across disciplinary boundaries within African higher education scholarship has brought a paradigm shift in the meaning of academic freedom. African decolonisation discourse has often been framed in terms of an act of intellectual activism aimed extricating or unhooking the indigenous African intellectual tradition from the overbearing influence of Western hegemony (Mignolo, 2007).

Advocates of decolonisation have mapped out two major urgent tasks confronting contemporary African scholarship, one negative and the other positive. First, decolonisation discourse aims to highlight areas in which the autonomy of African intellectual heritage has been grossly hampered using standards that neither originated from African contexts, nor are suitable for application to African specific cases. The second task is to reverse the order that has long been foisted on the intellectual climate of the peripheral intellectual culture through promotion of thinking patterns both grounded in the lived experience of Africans and are natural consequences of the African theory of values. Kessi, et al., (2020, p. 271), make a similar observation when they write that “Decolonizing... is best understood as a verb that entails a political and normative ethic and practice of resistance and intentional undoing – unlearning and dismantling unjust practices, assumptions, and institutions – as well as persistent positive action to create and build alternative spaces and ways of knowing.” Both tasks, if followed through, have the possible consequence of leading to the liberation of African intellectual space. I shall endeavour to explain further each of the tasks as follows.

In keeping with the first task, decolonisation discourse activates an ideological revolt against, or an attempt to curb, the excesses of the Western intellectual hegemony, which has been found to have debilitating implications such as epistemic injustice and violence, epistemicide, and the general peripherisation of knowledge produced in Africa and other nations of the Global South. Decolonial scholars seek to identify the deeply rooted epistemic injustice and violence that Africans have incurred through their contact with the West during colonialism (Anderson, 2017; Bewaji, 2020; Bhargava, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023; Said, 2016; Spivak, 2023). Topmost on the list of consequences of colonialism is the evil of epistemicide. Motivated by de Sousa Santos's (2015) book *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, decolonisation scholars have accused Western intellectual tradition of deliberate extermination of knowledge and ways of knowing (Elias, 2020; Grosfoguel, 2012) that do not align with the latter's standard. Santos (2015, p. 238) insists that the “dominant epistemologies have resulted in a massive waste of social experience and, particularly, in the massive destruction of ways of knowing that did not fit the dominant epistemological canon.”

The entrenchment of the epistemologies of the West as an exemplar to be emulated for production of scientific/universal knowledge form portends some epistemicidal implications on the African home-grown knowledge. Also called the “epistemic line” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), Santos (2015) denigrates epistemicide as murder of knowledge. As a social construct aimed at describing the undermining of knowledge produced by the erstwhile colonial subjects of the Western imperial powers, epistemicide is said to have arisen from the asymmetric power relations between the Centre and the Periphery. In this uneven relation of power, one is said to benefit, while the other is at a loss. However, the loss of the latter is an effect caused by the former's benefits. Santos (2015, p. 92) avers that “Unequal exchanges among cultures have

always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it.” Bewaji (2020) states that the aim of epistemicide is to destroy the existence of its target group’s intellectual heritage. For Santos (2007), the origin of the phenomenon can be attributed to what he calls “abyssal thinking” which, accordingly, “consists in granting to modern science the monopoly of the universal distinction between true and false to the detriment of alternative bodies of knowledge” (p. 47). Hall and Tandon (2017) summarises the problems with the hegemonic state of world knowledge pool, as follows:

The problem that arises from the domination of the Western knowledge system is not only that the ways of knowing, the cultures and the stories of the majority of people of the world are excluded, but that, given the Western knowledge narrative that links some forms of knowledge with progress, science and the future, it looks as though colonialism has disabled the global North from learning in non-colonial terms (p. 13).

In its second task, African decolonisation discourse seeks to achieve epistemic justice, cultural renaissance, intellectual emancipation, epistemological liberation, democratisation of knowledge production and consumption, equitable knowledge economy, etc. (see Balogun and Woldegiorgis, 2025). In fact, this is the ultimate goal of the decolonisation project. However, such a goal cannot be realised except, first, the existing global power structure is dismantled to give room for the hitherto disadvantaged group to join the global table of intellectual powers. Hence, the first task discussed above presents itself as a reflection and critique of the existing order of knowledge distribution. Beyond the identification and critique of the debilitating effects of colonialism on African psyche, the second task seeks to reverse the trend by creating a new world order wherein each culture is at liberty to determine what counts as knowledge and what does not based on standards created by and for itself. Hall and Tandon (2017) have identified ways in which this reversal can be accomplished:

It is time for those of us working in higher education to move beyond our already strong ability to reflect and critique; we are so very skilled in those first two stages of intellectual work. But we must now make the move from reflection and criticism to creation. We can create in our own lives in terms of what we choose to read and share with others. We can create in the organization of new types of courses. We can create new research and learning partnerships with community activists and social movements. We may have a chance to create new academic programmes. Some of us may create new higher education structures. As we move towards creation, we will find much to draw inspiration from (p. 14).

One basic idea continues to resonate through the two tasks identified above. This is the idea of epistemological freedom. Decolonisation literature is replete with arguments purporting to demonstrate the centrality of freedom in the attainment of global epistemic and cognitive justice for the historically disadvantaged peoples in the world (Bhargava, 2013; de Sousa Santos, 2015; Landström, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a, 2018b). To be free epistemically is to be unencumbered by the rigid restrictions emplaced by the existing imperial epistemological paradigms for sorting knowledge into scientific and non-scientific categories. It should be noted that in emphasising the place of freedom in the restoration of African

humanity, other terms have been used such as liberty (Wa Thiong'o, 1992), autonomy (Balogun, 2025), liberation (Dussel, 2003, 2013), etc.

However, a critical review of the ways the notion of freedom is popularly deployed by decolonisation enthusiasts suggests a sense of freedom activated by the removal of barriers or hurdles on indigenous people's way to self-actualisation. It heralds the idea of freedom as independence. This implies that the freedom central to the decolonisation project is freedom from the overbearing and undue domination of the western universalistic or scientifically styled epistemologies. A few evidence in literature will suffice to substantiate this point. In his "Seek ye epistemic freedom first", Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018b, p. 3) defines epistemic freedom for Africa as "the right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism." This is a clamour for the prioritisation of Africa as the centre for African intellectual discourse. It is the disentanglement from the Western intellectual apron's strings in matters of knowledge production, distribution and consumption. The "decolonial turn" is a point in human history where Africa and the rest of the Global South world have found reasons or motivation to cut ties with foreign ideas and ideals, which, for a long time, have enslaved them and made nonsense of their epistemological, ontological and cultural identities. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018b, p. 6) "[A]t the centre of epistemic freedom is demythologizing of both the idea of Europe as a teacher of the world and the idea of Africa as a pupil."

Decolonisation discourse seeks to discontinue the existing global power chain, deeply entrenched within the Eurocentric knowledge ecosystem matrix. It challenges the reign of Eurocentrism in a world populated by both Europeans and non-Europeans. The continuous privileging of the Global North as the global epistemic absolute with its attendant deprivation of the Global South from access to global pool of episteme calls for this discontinuity. Mignolo expatiates this discontinuity in terms of what he calls "delinking", "border thinking", and "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2007, 2009, 2011). These concepts, understood in the context of agitations for epistemic freedom, strengthen the observation that decolonisation's sense of freedom is that of detachment from the status quo. The concept of delinking, for instance, emphasises the need for the indigenous epistemologies to break away from, or part ways with, the imperial cognitive model under which the former continues to suffer epistemic and cognitive injustice (Mignolo, 2007, 2011). It is an effort to put an end to the so-called Periphery's perpetual dependence on the so-called Centre, aimed ultimately at the recognition of other equally valid, non-Western epistemological paradigms. As Mignolo (2007, p.453) puts it, "De-linking then shall be understood as a de-colonial epistemic shift leading to other-universality, that is, to pluri-versality as a universal project."

Other concepts deployed by Mignolo include border thinking – following Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* – and epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2007, 2011). These concepts are inextricably intertwined with delinking. While delinking is the telos, epistemic disobedience is the instrument for its implementation and border thinking supplies the logic for its sustenance. Mignolo (2011, p. 6) declares, "We, the *anthropoi*, who dwell and think in the borders with decolonial awareness, are already on the way to delinking, and in order to delink, you need to be epistemically disobedient." The term *anthropoi*, used in contradistinction to *humanitas*, for Mignolo, represents the historically disadvantaged side of the artificial gulf created by the western intellectuals. In creating this artificial gap, the *humanitas*, through some crooked modernist logic, continue to justify their dominance as a means of setting standards for the *anthropoi* to emulate in their quest to attain *humanitas*-

status. Hence, for Mignolo (2011, p. 7), “We delink from the *humanitas*, we become epistemically disobedient, and think and do decolonially, dwelling and thinking in the borders of local histories confronting global designs.”

The foregoing descriptions of freedom in the decolonial frameworks of Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Mignolo foreground the impression that decolonisation discourse is a restrictive intellectual phenomenon. While it seeks to set free, it, at the same time, limits the extent of scholars’ personal freedom of choice. Here, then, lies the paradox. In seeking intellectual independence through severance from the dominant intellectual tradition associated with the West, the decolonial scholars ironically create a monster that will keep them bottled up within a narrow confine of their own cultural intellectual tradition. This point can be illustrated with Wa Thiong’o’s (1994) decolonisation of the African language. In his *Decolonising the Mind*, Wa Thiong’o (1994) declares his intention to break away from the imperial language (i.e., the English language) as a medium for his scholastic activities. For him, African scholars have failed in their responsibility of “mapping paths out of that linguistic encirclement of their continent”; hence they have come “to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of imperialist imposition” (Wa Thiong’o, 1994, p. 5). The rejection of foreign languages that Wa Thiong’o preaches as part of his decolonial strategies not only represents a move towards what Taiwo (2022) refers to as nativism and atavism, but, more importantly it also forecloses the choice of non-African languages from the range of possibilities from which African scholars have the freedom to consider. Taiwo (2022, p.130) recounts how such attitude of rejection constitutes a hindrance to true epistemic freedom that it aims to achieve:

Given how zealous our decolonisers are when it comes to freeing the colonised from the continuing stranglehold of colonial hangovers, there is some irony in the fact that they may be guilty of condescension towards the colonised, refusing to take seriously the choices that some colonised make when exercising their subjectivity and the autonomy that comes with it.

The point of the above quote is that when African scholars continue to view everything through the colonial lens, they lose sight of some good lessons they could have learnt through a non-parochial and critical engagements with the colonial legacies. This way, in agitating for African intellectual liberation by departing from the erstwhile colonial masters’ intellectual landmarks, we shortchange ourselves of the rich and inexhaustibly vast possible options available for African academics in the achievement of various individual’s life projects. Hence, a denial of their academic freedom. In the following section, I situate the ongoing discourse within the Sartrean existentialist methodology and argue that it presents a better conceptual model of freedom than is readily on offer in the decolonial mode of thinking.

Freedom of choice: A Sartrean approach

Existentialism has been identified with a contemporary philosophical mood committed to the individual’s existence as an embodiment of human freedom. It is a revolt against the abstraction and idealisation of traditional philosophy in which rationality, essentiality and objectivity play a pivotal role. The existentialists’ departure from traditional philosophy is motivated by their conviction that the latter’s approach to philosophy neither reveals nor reflects the most personal aspect of human beings, namely, their subjectivity. Hence, according to Leddy (1957, p. 2), “Taken as an ethico-social phenomenon, existentialism may be generally characterized as a protest against views of the world and policies of action in which

individual human beings are regarded as helpless playthings of historical forces or as wholly determined by the regular operation of natural processes.” The overall aim of existentialism is, therefore, to reposition humanity to the centre of the universe, around which every other thing revolves. For the existentialists, only human beings can be said to truly exist because they alone are aware of their beings; others exist only in the mundane sense of being there, unaware of their being. Although, historically, Soren Kierkegaard is reputed as the founding father of existentialism, it was Jean-Paul Sartre who gave it its current identity, fervor, and fame.

Existentialists do not agree on every issue of common disciplinary interests. For instance, not all scholars designated by the name “existentialists” accept the label, among other things they disagree on. However, there are themes that cut across all existentialist discussions. Olajide outlines some of the themes shared together by existentialist as follows:

The affirmation of the subjective or the individual as the starting point of any meaningful and useful philosophy; the rejection of outlandish speculative or transcendental metaphysics; the insistence that there are no a priori values for man to choose from and consequently that he must in freedom invent his own values, the affirmation that existence precedes essence, the nature and significance of choice, the pride of place given to revolt in the face of an absurd and meaningless life that leads particularly nowhere after an inevitable death and the celebration of suicide as the only serious problem in philosophy (Olajide, 2011, p. 1).

Among these themes, the notion of freedom has assumed the centre stage. Sartre’s perspective on freedom has come to be appreciated above others because of its generation from Sartre’s phenomenological analysis of the Being of humans. Sartre’s notion of human freedom is well grounded in the phenomenological tradition dating back to Brentano, Husserl, and especially Heidegger. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1957) sets out on a phenomenological journey to uncover the existential constitution of human reality. Sartre (1957) identifies two modes of being, namely in-itself and for-itself. On the one hand, the in-itself describes the being of non-conscious objects in the world. These objects exist only in the mere sense of appearing, with no capacity for self-consciousness. The in-itself lacks the capacity for self-motion and reflective activities which characterise the being of humans. For Sartre (1957, p. 74), “The in-itself is full of itself, and no more total plenitude can be imagined, no more perfect equivalence of content to container. There is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the tiniest crack through which nothingness might slip in.” Sartre is here pointing to the rigid mode of being of non-human realities, which explains their strict compliance to the logical law of identity according to which an entity is identical or equivalent to itself in all possible worlds.

The matter is radically different for the for-itself mode of being. In the latter, the mode of being is fluid, malleable, dynamic, constantly changing and defiant to the law of identity. The for-itself mode of being is characterised by self-consciousness, of which Sartre (1957) says “it must necessarily be what it is not and not be what it is” (p. 74). Building on Brentano’s thesis that consciousness always has an object outside of itself, Sartre argues that consciousness aims at objects that are not identical to itself, always reaching out to something beyond itself. How does this connect to existential freedom? Sartre argues that the for-itself is constituted by negation and nothingness, and the attribute of self-transcendence. Consciousness enables human beings with the capacity to *negate* their current reality and assume another. The notion

of nothingness is meant to demonstrate that, given its inexhaustive possibilities, human reality is necessarily nothing as such. It can assume any form at any time. As the centre of consciousness, nothingness reveals a mode of being in constant evolution, and thus, lacking a fixed or predetermined essence. This position finds more expression in Sartre's (1945) *Existentialism as a Humanism*, where he argues that "If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because, to begin with, he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself." By self-transcendence, Sartre means the quality of humans by which they can transcend themselves or aim beyond their current facticity in the achievement of the goals they have set for themselves.

Given the above sketchy structure of the for-itself mode of being, which, somehow, can only be found in human beings, Sartre concludes that the being of humans must be inherently free. That is, insofar as freedom belongs to the realm of consciousness, and consciousness is inextricably bound with subjectivity, it must be the case that freedom and subjectivity occupy a logically identical space and must be inseparable. Hence, Sartre declares that humans are "condemned to be free" to underscore the fact that freedom exists at the heart of the human reality. Humans do not have freedom bestowed on them; they are freedom themselves (Sartre, 1945). Sartre's notion of freedom secures the place of human beings as subjects, capable of making choices and being responsible for the outcomes of choices made. The freedom that the existentialist advocates is the freedom of choice. Significantly, each individual must choose their own value and be committed to it in a world that is totally indifferent to human flourishing. Sartre's popular dictum "existence precedes essence" reveals human lack of pre-determined purpose or goal which guides their lives on earth. In the absence of a fixed essence, the human freedom becomes a tool for navigating the facticity of life, and for creating their own identities, values and meanings through their actions and choices.

Sartre departs from the older, especially, Kantian tradition of freedom as autonomy. Kant views freedom as the capacity to act in accordance with reason and moral principles, rather than being determined by external forces or natural inclinations. For him, human freedom derives from the acknowledgement of moral laws, which are deeply embedded in human rationality. Freedom, for Kant, then, manifests when humans make choices that align with reason and morality. Sartre rejects Kant's formulation of freedom as autonomy because it derives from the assumption of the universality of rationality. Kant believes that humans have rationality as a common property. One may conclude from this that Kant conceives freedom as a quality of our being. Sartre is averse to this style of thinking. If freedom is a quality, then it can be lost. However, as Sartre maintains, this is not conceptually possible because there is no existential situation in which humans do not have freedom to choose. Freedom is not a quality of our being; it is our being (Jones, 2015, p. 88).

Sartre's notion of freedom is not inexhaustibly elastic. It excludes some aspects of human life. To delimit the extent of its coverage, Sartre (1957) proposes a set of realms of existence he calls facticity and transcendence. Facticity represents every aspect of an individual that is not open to the possibility of choice. Martin Heidegger (2010) deploys "facticity" to refer to the concrete, pre-given conditions of human existence that shape our being-in-the-world – *Dasein* in Heidegger's coinage – but which we did not choose. Howells (1998) describes facticity as all the facts about an individual which cannot be changed – age, sex, height, class of origin, race, nationality, for example. These unalterable facts of an individual life constitute a background against which the individual exercises his or her freedom. Hence, freedom does not operate in vacuum; it is a conscious maneuvering through the labyrinth of facticity.

Transcendence, on the other hand, is the capacity of individuals to surpass their situatedness; that is, to aim beyond the current state of reality. The capacity for transcendence makes the individual a being laden with possibilities which arise according to the measure of freedom each individual is willing to exhibit.

In existentialism, the goal of freedom is the attainment of authenticity, a life activated in alignment with one's freedom to live or become as one has chosen. Sartre borrows the concept of authenticity from Heidegger (2010) who, in *Being and Time*, describes authenticity as the act of taking ownership of one's existence in a meaningful way, or in the realisation of one's essence. If existence precedes essence, as Sartre's insists, then the creation of my essence must be conditional upon what I do or fail to do, upon my choice. Authenticity entails understanding your facticity and outlining realistic strategies for transcending it, uninfluenced by external factors. It is a personal interpretation and proper management of facticity.

Thus, if I have had some painful experiences as a child, it is up to me to decide what these mean to me. I can use them as an excuse for going through life feeling cheated or regard them as challenges that will make me stronger. Sartre's point is not that there are no constraints on the ways I interpret my situation, but that constraints and obstacles gain their meaning from me, and since there are indefinitely many possible meanings any situation can have, there is no way to identify any supposedly 'hard' facts that could be said to compel me to see things one way rather than another. (Guignon, 2016)

Decolonisation and African academic possibilities

Decolonisation discourse wields the intensity and sensitivity it has in contemporary African scholarship because of the damage that colonialism is alleged to have caused to African psyche. Its advocacy is chiefly motivated by the quest for Africans to disengage from the inherited colonial order of knowledge production, distribution and consumption, claimed to have profited the Global North to the detriment of the Global South. In this section, I will argue that epistemic decolonisation does not advance the course of African scholars' academic freedom; rather, it inhibits it by shrinking the space available to them to operate as scholars. The consequence of the argument will be that epistemic decolonisation, and academic freedom cannot be consistently held together. If we choose decolonisation, we lose academic freedom. On the other hand, if we choose academic freedom, then we must reconsider our stance on the subject of decolonisation. I argue in support of the second option because it keeps the academic possibilities open-ended for African intellectual participation.

I start by stressing the fact that the event of colonialism cannot be undone in any intelligible way. Colonialism is a historical fact that will not go away however hard we wish it never happened. As a fact, it exists in the mode of the in-itself; it is determined and forever equivalent to itself in all dimensions. Existentially, it constitutes a facticity to all colonised peoples, Africans inclusive, in that it is a choice we never made. However, while colonialism remains one of the Africa's biggest nightmarish facticity, the African attitude to this facticity lies in the mode of the for-itself. African scholars do have the will power to decide what to do with, or what value to assign to, this facticity. At least, two attitudes to the facticity of colonialism may be identified. One attitude is to discountenance the colonial intellectual legacy because it is felt to be unjust, epistemicidal, dehumanising and unfitting for the lived-reality of African people. This is a decolonial attitude. Decolonial scholars seek to root out all

colonial vestiges, especially in African intellectual space, to usher in a new paradigm of knowledge founded on the primordial essence of the African value systems. The decolonial attitude to the facticity of colonialism is widespread among cotemporary African scholars.

The second attitude to the facticity of colonialism is to refuse to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It agrees that colonialism is a historical mistake that should not have occurred. However, given that the post-colonial African reality is an offspring of colonialism, it forms an essential component of the African contemporary life that cannot be discarded merely on the ground of its undesirability. It forms a crucial part of Africa today that requires utmost carefulness when dealing with. Hence, the best attitude to the facticity of colonialism is not to seek the discontinuity of its legacies – this amounts to wasting rich experience that colonialism embeds – but to search for ways in which colonial experience is annexed to the advantage of the post-colonial Africa. This depends on how optimally Africans are able to deploy their agency in the achievement of this goal. This attitude, call it an anti-decolonisation attitude, has not enjoyed great patronage among African scholars, although the few holders of the view have been undeterred in their commitment to it. My argument in this article, motivated by its existentialist values, aligns with the latter view.

Among scholars in the latter category are Olufemi Taiwo and Paulin Hountondji who have been widely criticized for their view that African epistemic salvation does not lie in the backward march to tradition or indigeneity, but in making the best out of the lessons that colonialism offers. Taiwo frowns at the act (art?) of pulling the concept of decolonisation beyond its primary denotation as political independence. For him, decolonisation had already been attained in the 1960s when, at independence, the agency of many African colonies was officially handed over to them by their erstwhile colonisers. What this means, for Taiwo, is that, from that moment on, Africans would now oversee their own affairs, something that colonial administrations had previously disenabled them to do. Designating it “decolonisation²”, Taiwo describes the renewed interest in decolonisation discourse in Africa, as an attitude of “forcing an ex-colony to forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonisation, any and every cultural, political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past” (Taiwo, 2022). This is like fighting an adversary that never exists.

Renouncing the established intellectual guidelines of colonial institutions has the negative consequence of shrinking the academic possibilities accessible to African scholars. Decolonisation seeks to set African agency free from the yokes of colonialism. Yet, in doing this, it abandons the many lessons and opportunities that are locked in the womb of colonial experience. By abandoning these intellectual legacies, decolonisation advocates risk the phenomenon of knowledge stereotyping, which, like every case of stereotyping, is motivated by arrogance and feeling of superiority. This arrogance is self-stultifying in that it subjects the arrogant to a state where development is perpetually unreachable because they fail to look outside of their indigenous knowledge provinces. To forestall this delimiting situation in African knowledge evolution, Hountondji (1983, p. xix) prescribes an African philosophy sufficiently open to accommodate African scholars’ participation in issues of global concern. He says: “We can learn even from the most biased works by anthropologists from Europe and the West; we can learn from Lévy Bruhl and from others whose biases are greater, as well as from the most scrupulous, rigorous, and self-demanding Western Africanists.” Taiwo (2022, p. 130) follows suit: “Once we accept false binaries like ‘the West’ (an idea) versus ‘Africa’ (a place), ‘Western/modern’ versus ‘African/traditional’—with one shunned and the other

embraced—the road leads us directly to nativism and atavism.” Besides its implication for swimming against the tide of modernity, the real problem with nativism and atavism is their tendency to exclude certain forms of knowledge from the legitimate areas of studies or research for African scholars.

The decolonial approach prescribes, as part of its normative framework for guaranteeing Africa’s epistemic freedom, that African scholars desist from considering knowledge forms from some quarters because of their emphasis on, and constant reminder of, your inability, failure, and inadequacies to succeed in acceptable intellectual endeavours. Notice that this approach offers some sense of freedom, namely, freedom from the bad psychical influence of the knowledge forms against which the African scholarship has been yoked since the colonial intrusion. The negative consequence of this freedom is that it restricts the extent to which African scholarship may put its agency to authentic use. The borderline created as a result of the artificial distinction between acceptable and unacceptable knowledge kinds clearly delists some knowledge forms from possible options for African scholars to consider. Taiwo puts this point more succinctly:

when it comes to freeing the colonised from the continuing stranglehold of colonial hangovers, there is some irony in the fact that they may be guilty of condescension towards the colonised, refusing to take seriously the choices that some colonised make when exercising their subjectivity and the autonomy that comes with it (Taiwo, 2022, p. 130)

Taiwo’s position above is existentialist. Adhering to the decolonial model will render many African scholars inauthentic in their approach to knowledge, subjecting African academic climate to a situation in which it remains ever under-developing. Hence, the paradox plays out more vividly in that while decolonisation agitation usually focuses on rescuing African epistemologies from the domineering attitude of Western hegemony, it unknowingly constitutes another tether which dictates the circumference within which African intellect can go. With this, the enemy of academic freedom will be the monster that African scholarship has created for itself, rather than an enemy from outside. It would require another round of decolonisation struggle to fight this monster if allowed to continue unabated. Decolonisation, insofar as it condones the belief that one’s cultural viewpoints on issues are likely to be more credible and most applicable to one’s existential situations, has the propensity to accommodate conflicting ideas, given that there are no paradigms external to them against which their conflicting nature could be detected.

Unlike the decolonial attitude, the existentialist approach leaves out the choice of what counts as profitable knowledge and what does not, to the individual epistemic subject (i.e., the individual scholar). Enabled by the authentic deployment of agency, the subject is not restricted by the binary of We and Others; neither primarily motivated by “a desire to show off” (Hountondji, 1983, p. 44), nor is “dedicated to exposing slights” (Taiwo, 2022, p. 30). It rejects the essentialist assumption subtly underlining decolonial attitude in holding that there is a particular unique way of being African or that there is a uniquely African perspective to every intellectual matter. The existentialist approach maintains that the accident of birth should not be a yardstick for what knowledge is. Real academic freedom comes from a commitment to one’s intellectual progress through exploration of all options available, regardless of their racial origins or authorships. This more liberal approach allows African scholars the much-

required space to exercise their full freedom. This way, they are open to both ends and can draw strength from them.

In choosing the more plausible out of these two approaches, which will serve as the basis for African scholars' attitude to colonialism, the existentialist of Sartre's extraction will urge that we consider one that has more value than the other. Sartre (1945) says: "To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better..." The value most apt for determining a better choice between the two approaches appears to be the amount of freedom allowed by each framework. Freedom of thought/enquiry is essential to the knowledge-generating function of the academia. However, given that the decolonial approach constantly suspects the Global North's academic community of weaponising knowledge against Africa, it drastically reduces the scope of African scholarship by severing it from the mainstream global academic resources. Nuances are the spices of academic game. Unfortunately, decolonisation does not give much room for nuances. Obviously, a scholar who is exposed to both local and global academic resources is better academically equipped than his/her counterpart who is only exposed to local resources.¹ The value of discussing global issues and drawing implications for the respective local contexts far outweighs the value of the original African thoughts and beliefs which may have either been irretrievably lost or have lost its relevance due to the complexity of the current African reality. The cotemporary Africa has been exposed to foreign idea; hence, the challenges it now faces can no longer be exhaustively explained internally.

Colonialism is a sort of blessing to African intellectual heritage to the extent to which African scholarship is ready to take its agency seriously (Taiwo, 2022). This is not in the controversial sense in which it is credited to have brought civilisation to Africa, but rather in the fundamental sense in which it enlarges the cognitive coast of the African intellectual climate. The knowledge form bequeathed by colonialism is a useful addition to whatever indigenous knowledge form there was before colonial contact. This, I think, is what all colonised states have in common, namely, the ownership of, at least, two alternative worldviews, each with a large corpus of useful knowledges. This means more academic spaces and resources for the colonised scholars. The colonisers do not have this alternative. For instance, while a sick indigenous African has the choice between orthodox medicine and traditional medicine, a white person only has the option of orthodox medicine. Such alternatives cut across virtually all sectors of the African life. Rejecting these rich alternatives in pursuit of internal agenda that may have been out of tune with the contemporary configuration of Africa, amounts to wasting valuable resources for advancing African intellectual history.

Conclusion

This article has advocated for a re-consideration of African scholarship's stance on the subject matter of decolonisation. Having established that colonialism is an African facticity, the article identified two attitudes among African scholars in relation to colonialism. The article argued that both attitudes have a common goal of securing African intellectual freedom, although they

¹ I was inspired by St. Anselm's ontological argument here. St. Anselm argues that a being which exists both in the imagination and outside of imagination is greater than a being which only exists in imagination (see Malcolm, 1960). Adapting this to my position in this article, I propose that a scholar who has access to both foreign and local academic resources is greater than one with access only to local academic resources.

differ basically on their notions of freedom and their methods for its attainment. The first attitude, the decolonial attitude, seeks freedom for African intellectual tradition by urging that it separates itself from the apron's strings of the Western hegemonic grip so it could do its own things within its own original methodological, conceptual, even linguistic frameworks. I argued that this attitude limits the choices of African scholars: its desire to discontinue anything that carries the badge of colonial legacies inadvertently leads to the phenomenon of knowledge stereotyping. This thereby removes knowledges from certain quarters from the range of choices that African scholars have in the pursuit of their academic essence.

The second attitude identified is one which views colonialism as a rich experience and as an avenue for African scholars to have alternative tradition from which they can draw inspirations, academic resources, guidance and to which they can contribute. I argued that this approach is representative of the serious seeker of knowledge who must leave no stone unturned in the search for truth. This attitude is preferred over the first because of its liberal attitude to knowledge. The much sought after freedom that Africa scholarship desires will continue to be elusive, argued scholars in this category, if African scholars fail to realise the difference between contemporary and precolonial Africa. Cotemporary Africa, being a product of several historical factors such as slave trade, colonialism, and others, has lost its precolonial simplicity; hence, reflecting on the former requires an elaborate theoretical approach rooted in the contemporary academic practice.

Deploying Sartrean approach to freedom, the article defended the second attitude with the reason that it exposes African scholarship to diverse academic possibilities, which, if well annexed, provide wider space for African scholars to transcend the facticity of colonialism. This way, African scholarship is not constrained within a closed circle of tradition or indigeneity but is allowed to breathe and freely associate with other traditions in fruitful intellectual dialogues, expanding the scope of freedom of African scholars. Does this imply abandoning African intellectual tradition in a blind pursuit of its Western counterpart? The answer is no. Recognising Western epistemologies as a viable partner in the struggle for African intellectual emancipation does not, in any way, commit us to a life of estrangement from the African tradition. There is nothing in the latter that forbids us from holding the former concurrently. Indeed, my rejection of decolonial approach is borne out of its discriminatory disposition against Western intellectual approach to knowledge. The decolonial discrimination may only guarantee epistemic isolationism, but isolationism does not promote the virtue of academic freedom.

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