



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

THE AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS PROJECT SEMINAR

SETTING THE TONE FOR PROF NKIRU NZEGWU'S LECTURE ON

***"Proper African Woman": Omumu, Disassembling Subordination, &
Reasserting Endogenous Powers"***

UNISA MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS, PRETORIA

28 MAY 2019

Programme Director, it is my great pleasure to participate in the second African Intellectuals Project seminar within a month. Conceptualised in 2008 by myself this initiative is aimed at 'sparking' scholarly reflections over and around some of the pertinent challenges that are facing us as a nation, and as a university.

My contribution today may well be titled *Toward a Gendered and Decolonial Transformation of the Academy*. I hope to present a few

points which I hope will correspond with the scholarship of Prof Nkiru Nzegwu.

In their exposition of the phenomenon Juliet Ucelli and Dennis O'Neil argue that Eurocentrism is a distortion of the consciousness and self-knowledge of humanity, and pointedly by Europe itself that it is the centre of all valid, scientific knowledge and economic progress, and political structures that has come to be known by all of us.¹

Following this logic, the contributions by other provinces of humanity are therefore to be subsumed within the European legacy, which gives the world new cultural products of universal validity.²

In formulating this simple but useful lens through which to examine Eurocentrism Ucelli and O'Neil were drawing on the work of Samir Amin, the late eminent scholar from our continent who bequeathed on us that ever-useful study on the subject, *Eurocentrism: Modernity, Religion, and Democracy: A Critique of Eurocentrism and Culturism*.³

¹ Juliet Ucelli and Dennis O'Neil (1992) Challenging Eurocentrism, *Forward Motion*, Number 1, pp. 34-45

² Ibid

³ Amin, Samir (2010 [1988]) *Eurocentrism: Modernity, Religion, and Democracy: A Critique of Eurocentrism and Culturism*, 2nd Edition. New York: Monthly Review Press

Those who attended the first African Intellectuals Project talk that I gave on the occasion of Professor Molefi Kete Asante's visit on 10 April will recall that I referenced Amin's work even then.

Amin, and indeed many others such as Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiongo, provides us with a solid basis for our own project on the decolonisation of the academy.

I deliberately wish to revisit and emphasise that approach, with the aim of weaving through an argument that seeks to locate what I hope will be Professor Nzegwu's contribution to our broader project.

Celebration and Shame

Programme Director, I wish to ground my contribution against the backdrop of two major developments that have a bearing on the African Intellectuals Project.

First, just three days ago, on Saturday, we were celebrating African Liberation Day, otherwise simply known as Africa Day. For South Africans, this year's Africa Day coincided, and I think the plan was deliberate, with the inauguration of President Cyril Ramaphosa.

When Kwame Nkrumah organised the first meeting of what would later become the Organisation of African Unity on 15 April 1958, and

Haile Selassie hosted the organisation's launch on 25 May 1963, they were realising what had been the ambition of the world-wide pan-Africanist movement - to decolonise the African continent.

As many scholars now note, the decolonisation of the African continent, and the total liberation of her peoples from vestiges of colonialism, is far from over. For us in the academy, the vestiges of colonialism can still be found in the culture of our universities. These vestiges can be found in the curriculum content. They manifest in the colonial research output and knowledge production of our universities.

These vestiges, Programme Director, manifest in how we view society; how we treat people as the 'subject' of our research. They manifest in how we analyse the world, and shape thinking.

This brings me to the second development that I wish to highlight.

In his study of African universities and the reform programmes that they implemented after formal colonialism, Aina provides a useful summary of the challenges and complexities that are brought to bear on our institutions by the strictures of neoliberalism. While not pretending to offer a radical critique of these reforms, Aina's observations 'strike a nerve' and 'buttress' some of the afore-

mentioned reflections. He writes as follows, and I wish to quote him at some length:

The language and practice of reform have always been framed by a managerialist and incremental perspective concerned with operations, processes, and functions. The reform process scarcely attempts to confront values or the power relations inherent in organizations or the fundamental assumptions that define their existence. The reform process addresses efficiency and effectiveness variables and does not question the status quo. For instance, it does not question the racism or hierarchy of the colonial order that surfaced as soon as colonialists began to be replaced with nationals; it does not question sexism or offer affirmative action for women; it does not question the international division of academic and intellectual labor, recommending new laboratories, libraries, and capacity-building for academics without engaging the structures of global academic mobility or the politics of international publishing, the definition of standards, and academic ratings.⁴

The emerging consensus over the limitations of the reforms which we have embarked on over the years has given rise to intensified and

⁴ Tade Akin Aina (2010) Beyond Reforms: The Politics of Higher Education Transformation in Africa, *African Studies Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (APRIL 2010), pp. 21-40, pg. 30

pointed calls for the decolonisation of higher education. We at UNISA are ‘wrestling’ with this harsh reality. Hence, we have adopted a decolonial approach to transformation.

We gather here today as the debate continues within the academy, relating to two disturbing studies; one authored by academics from the University of Stellenbosch, the other co-authored by an academic from the University of Cape Town.

The first study was on the cognitive abilities of so-called coloured women.⁵ The second was on the cognitive ability and intelligence of slave exports from Africa, arguing that those countries which were endowed with higher levels of cognitive ability were more likely to experience lower levels of slave exports.⁶

Whereas the Stellenbosch study has since been withdrawn by the publishing journal, the UCT study still remains, even though the affected lecturer has resigned his position at the university.

⁵ Sharné Nieuwoudt, Kasha Elizabeth Dickie, Carla Coetsee, Louise Engelbrecht & Elmarie Terblanche (2019) RETRACTED ARTICLE: Age- and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women, *Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition: A Journal on Normal and Dysfunctional Development*, DOI: [10.1080/13825585.2019.1598538](https://doi.org/10.1080/13825585.2019.1598538)

⁶ Simplice A. Asongu & Oasis Kodila-Tedika (2019) Intelligence and Slave Exports from Africa, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Economics*, DOI: [10.1177/0260107919829963](https://doi.org/10.1177/0260107919829963)

My interest is not to stand on a pedestal and assume a moral high ground *via a vis* our colleagues at both universities. Instead, I want to caution all of us against doing that.

The fact that I am not able to conduct a detailed analysis of every research output from our own institution makes me to remain circumspect against judging our colleagues. We may also have our own skeletons which might crumble out of our own cupboards.

What these developments point us to and in fact challenge us to do is to accept that ours is a landscape that is still saddled with coloniality.

The fact that colleagues can still '*other*' a section of the population along racial, ethnic, class and gender lines, and view fellow human beings to be less endowed with cognitive faculties suggests that we still have a long way to go in decolonising our universities.

The very fact that the brutality and inhumanity of conquest can be lessened and colleagues can regard such as having been enabled by perceived cognitive inferiority on the side of the conquered is a sad commentary on the coloniality of the academy.

An important observation to be made about these two unfortunate yet illustrative studies is that the Stellenbosch article was written by

white colleagues while the UCT article was written by black colleagues.

What this demonstrates and serves as a major lesson is that coloniality is not, of necessity, a preserve of the white academy. Neither is progressive thinking, again of necessity, the preserve of black academics. This observation therefore serves as a warning against nativism when confronting coloniality, while advocating for decolonisation.

Nzegwu and the Decolonisation Project: Some Possibilities

In bringing together these two background developments I tried to examine the focal areas of Prof Nzegwu's research, and how they may relate to own efforts at decolonising the academy.

Three areas of focus arise in her overall research endeavours. The first is *Feminist and African Women Studies*. The second is *African Philosophy*. The third is *African and African Diaspora Art Studies*.

Let me once remind you that our focus this year with this series on African Intellectuals is to examine the higher education system, and how we may transform it from the current state of coloniality, to one that affords us a decolonised space. In charting this I wish to

concentrate on the first two of Prof Nzegwu's focus areas – *Feminist and African Women Studies* and *African Philosophy*.

In her book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, Bell Hooks identifies what may be termed the 'appropriation of marginal voices'.

In the world that is Euromodern in its hegemonic in its "misrepresentation of the scope and validity of the Eurocentric forms of forms of knowledge", as Lewis Gordon puts it,⁷ there is the danger of the appropriation of marginal voices. Thus, in the struggle for women's emancipation from capitalist oppression, exploitation and patriarchy, the voices of black women face the danger of being appropriated, and their marginality being heightened.

Bell Hooks has this to say about this appropriation: "appropriation of the marginal voice threatens the very core of self-determination and free self-expression for exploited and oppressed peoples."⁸

The need for black women's voices to be differentiated even as they locate their struggle against capitalist patriarchy within the broader women's struggle cannot be overemphasised. This is so because black

⁷ Lewis Gordon (2019) Nkiru Nzegwu: Philosopher, Artist, Art Historian, and Trail Blazer, Black Issues in Philosophy. See <https://blog.apaonline.org/2019/03/05/nkiru-nzegwu-philosopher-artist-art-historian-and-trail-blazer/> (Accessed on 25 May 2019)

⁸ Bell Hooks (1989) *Talking Back: Thinking Feminism, Thinking Black*. Boston, MA, South End Press. pg. 14

women's struggle should not be narrowly understood as only a component part of a Global Sisterhood. Theirs is a voice that is also part of a conquered peoples; a still colonised people in many ways.

What Hooks says next provides the philosophical basis for the importance of this differentiation. This is what she argues further:

The struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice – that way of speaking that is no longer determined by one's status as object – as oppressed being. That way of speaking is characterized by opposition, by resistance. It demands that paradigms shift – that we learn to talk – to listen – to hear in a new way.⁹

What Hooks says echoes what our own Steve Biko articulated more than forty-five (45) years ago when he argued that: “(black people) are tired of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing. They want to do things for themselves and all by themselves”.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid, pg. 15

¹⁰ Steve Biko ([1978]2004) *I Write What I Like*. Johannesburg, Picador Africa

Indeed, the emergence of the African/Black Women Feminist voices was, and still is, a protest by black women, expressing their 'tiredness of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing'.

But how do all these relate to the state of the academy and our resolve to transform and decolonise it?

Towards a Gendered Approach to Transformation

One of the areas that is emerging in our internal discussion as a university is the need to clearly articulate a gendered approach to transformation. There are at least three areas of focus that arise relating to gender within institutions of higher learning.

The first area relates to the positioning of women and whether they are given the same opportunities as men. Within both academic and administrative departments, women are not entrusted with positions of authority. Thus, at the basic level of equity this institution is struggling to 'level the playing fields'.

On the other hand, the very notion of equity as we use it may come under criticism from a class perspective. It may be that concerns and campaigns for equity are advanced from a middle-class perspective, meaning that working class women may become marginalised.

This brings me to the second focal area, which is the interplay between race and gender. This corresponds well with Prof Nzegwu's focus on African/Black Women.

As with class, it is so that black women experience varied forms of oppression and exploitation, which are different from their white sisters. In fact, this is what many black feminists often 'grapple' with.

Dealing with this very matter, McFadden is reported to have argued as follows when the question race came up a few years ago:

Women...need a different kind of modern identity. [One] that is African, that is part of the longer journey that we come from, [but] which also enables African women, wherever they are, to move on, to become people who can function with dignity and integrity in a new world.¹¹

I suspect Prof Nzegwu was reflecting on this complexity of being an African woman when she recently said that being "an African woman is to (be) culturally prepared to handle a lot of roles without having

¹¹ Patricia McFadden, quoted in Mona Phillips (2003) Contesting the Costs of Belonging: A Global Black Feminists Seminar at Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia, *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equality*, Number, Number 58, pp. 59-64, pg. 61

one role define your identity.”¹² In a way, it is this versatility that enables her to adopt and practice multidisciplinary, which further permits her to be a teacher, artist and curator of many projects.

On the other hand, I also suspect that Prof Nzegwu will differ with McFadden on the “gender oppressiveness of African tradition”,¹³ which McFadden would argue exists,¹⁴ while Nzegwu would ask for the evidence thereof. This, for me, is not an attempt to pit two African women scholars against each other. It is, instead, an invitation to a rich debate and reflection that must be heard amongst our scholars, demonstrating the diversity of thought amongst us.

The third area of focus is the culture within the university. Whereas the recent Human Rights Commission looked into areas of racism and bullying, we ought to be concerned when allegations of gender-based harassment of women arise. For us, a single allegation made should be treated as one too many. This is because toxic misogynistic tendencies do not belong within an institution of higher learning.

¹² Quoted in an interview by Eric Coker (2019) Nkiru Nzegwu Receives SUNY Distinguished Professorship (04 April 2019). See <https://www.binghamton.edu/news/story/1761/nkiru-nzegwu-receives-suny-distinguished-professorship> (04 April 2019). (Accessed on 25 May 2019)

¹³ Nkiru Nzegwu (2006). *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*. New York, State University of New York Press, pg. 14

¹⁴ See Mona Phillips (2003) Contesting the Costs of Belonging: A Global Black Feminists Seminar at Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia, *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equality*, Number 58, pp. 59-64, pg. 61

The need to change the culture prevailing within institutions of higher education, including ours, cannot be over-emphasised. In the current case we must confront a culture that undermines and oppresses women, while embracing a new one that opens spaces for women's self-articulation. As Badat notes: "Implementing a social justice vision in education entails establishing new institutions, reconfiguring old ones, and changing institutional cultures and practices."¹⁵

African Philosophy

The final point that I wish to briefly deal with is on the employment of African Philosophy as an epistemological fact. In his article titled *I doubt, therefore African philosophy exists*, Ramose seems to argue that the fact that Africa and her people are an existential should be adequate for there to be an African philosophy.¹⁶ In fact, some may, following on James,¹⁷ argue that the field of Philosophy as we understand it has its origins in Africa.¹⁸

My interest is not to enter the debate whether Philosophy as we know it, or Western Philosophy to be precise, is indeed a 'stolen legacy' from Africa; or whether this theory is wishful thinking. What is of interest

¹⁵ Saleem Badat & Yusuf Sayed (2014) Post-1994 South Africa Education: The Challenge of Social Justice, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Volume 652, pp. 127-148, pg. 145

¹⁶ Mogobe Ramose (2003) *I doubt, therefore African philosophy exists*, *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 22, Issue 2, pp. 113-127

¹⁷ George G.M. James (1954) *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy*, *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2009 eBook. Accessed from

<http://www.thehouseofsankofa.com/books/eBook%20Stolen%20Legacy.pdf>, on 25 May 2019

¹⁸ Ibid

for me is how African Philosophy as we have now come to understand is, should be used as a tool for the decolonising of the academy.

What must also be noted is that, like any Philosophical tradition, African Philosophy is diverse. For instance, one of the sub-fields studied here in South Africa is the African Philosophy of Ubuntu.¹⁹

Focusing on culture, which has relevance to the higher education sector, Nzegwu makes the following argument:

*African philosophy of culture is concerned with the sum total of a people's ways of living, histories, conventions, and practices that have been passed on from generation to generation and that endow them with a distinctive character. This means we have to consider social institutions at different points in time, including the changes produced during and after the colonial period. We need to be mindful that the dialectics of modernity speak about change and traditions in convoluted ways, and that references to tradition are sometimes projections of the present unto the past, projections designed to compel a particular type of action or mark a behavior as authentic.*²⁰

¹⁹ Mogobe Ramose (2002) The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Ubuntu as a Philosophy, in P.H. Coetzee & A.P.J Roux (eds.), *Philosophy from Africa: A Text with Readings*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 230-237

²⁰ Nkiru Nzegwu (2006). *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*. New York, State University of New York Press, pp. 14-15

Inspired by this articulation, our project on the decolonisation of the academy must therefore be grounded on the lived experiences of the people of our country and the continent. Our curriculum and research output must consider, reflect and aim to understand our history, conventions and practices.

Ours should be a project that aims to assist humanity to transition from one epoch of dehumanisation, to one of rehumanisation. Hence, the African Philosophy of Ubuntu, based on the value of a '*me being human because of other human beings*' provides a strong foundation for the rehumanising potential of education.

Taken from a gendered perspective, the African Philosophy of Ubuntu challenges us and equips us in turn to break down patriarchy. It asserts that the humanity of men can only be realised once and only when the humanity of women and children is fully realised, protected and upheld.

Programme Director, it is an honour for us as a university to have managed to bring onto our institution a scholar of Prof Nzegwu's calibre. Let me take this opportunity to welcome her. Allow me also to congratulate her on being chosen to be one of the eighteen (18)

distinguished professors of the State University of New York. We know very well as academics that that is not an easy achievement to attain.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Let me also thank and congratulate the College of Graduate Studies for the hard work that went into securing the presence of Prof Nzegwu, and for the successful organising of this lecture.

On behalf of the Council, Management, Staff and Students I wish to welcome you Prof Nzegwu. We look forward to extracting value from your experience.

Welcome!