Citing Africa

Episode 2 - Consumption and Valuation of Knowledge in the Global North and South

Syerramia Willoughby:
This is Citing Africa. Welcome to the 2nd episode of this series from the LSE Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa. My name is Syerramia Willoughby. In this episode of the series, we'll be discussing how knowledge of the African continent is consumed and valued in the North and South. I am joined today by Dr Simokai Chigudu, associate professor of African Politics at University of Oxford. Abidah Ferej, who has recently completed a master's degree at LSE. Dr.Eyob Gebremariam, LSE fellow in International Development and Marie-Noelle Nwokolo, who has recently completed a master's degree at LSE.

So today we're going to be talking about what type of knowledge is disseminated and what is not, by looking specifically at the content of reading lists. Analysing the content of reading lists is crucial, as they inform students about the subject they are studying and set dominant frameworks and ideas. In fact, researchers have determined that students regard reading lists as the single most important study resource.

Montage:
"I'm a student in the Department of Sociology. Our reading list is very Eurocentric, or it has a very American perspective. Very little literature comes from African thinkers and it becomes a little difficult to relate it to my reality, coming from an African country."

"Ok so I am studying in the law department and my reading lists are heavily slanted in favour of western societies, or western legal systems. So, there is basically zero work done, or discussed from the African perspective."

"To be very frank I was very disappointed since arriving here, because I realised that my reading list has been dominated by American and European authors. There is no single mention of authors or books or anything from Africa. And then I am studying International Relations, which is meant to be inter-state relations. Even our case studies have been heavily European and if there are instances of citing from other places, it has always been

Asian countries. But other than that, everything, everything has been based around the European and the American experience."

"I am a student in the Health Policy Department, studying health policy and health economics. My reading lists so far have primarily been from the global North. We've had one or two readings from the global South, when it comes to financing health care specifically in developing countries. But apart from that, there's no other signs of authors from the global South in my reading list."

"I'm a student of International Development, from the International Development Department, Development Management course. My reading list – I would classify it as broadly more global North, more European and you know western based."

"So, I am studying African development, so an MSc in African development in the International Development Department. My specific Africa module – we have African writers, but I would say that they're not the bulk of the readings. And then four more courses that are more just like the broader introduction International Development classes. It is, I would say, maybe 75% North and then actually … no 80% from the global North, and I would say about 20% from the global South. And even if from the global South specifically, it's mainly, I think, just people from Asia. So, there isn't even much of a balance I would say even within the global South."

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However, authors based in Africa rarely feature in northern university reading lists, even in programs such as Developments and African Studies. This lack of representation means that the ideologies and understandings of northern based authors still shape these fields. "The democracy in Africa blog" for example, has sought to tackle this issue by putting together an African Politics reading list, to support Academic colleagues looking for ideas to diversify their course material. In fact, this is one of the reasons why university students across African countries have been calling for a decolonisation of Higher Education. In fact, I would like to start our conversation by actually digging deeper into the meaning of that term. And maybe I can start with you, Abida. As someone who has just completed a master's degree here at LSE, what is that term decolonising the curricular mean to you?

Abidah Ferej: For me personally what it is, is being able to see yourself within the curriculum. Being able to see authors who come from a similar background as yourself, and what that represents for knowledge in terms of who writes about Africa, and what that means about the knowledge that is being consumed about Africa.

Syerramia Willoughby: Thank you! Marie-Noelle, what about you?

Marie-Noelle Nwokolo: My experience is being able to challenge what I would I call a hegemony in knowledge production that usually doesn't represent people from a background that is similar to mine; and showing case studies from countries that are sort of what I'm familiar with or live in but are teaching me what to do. So, it is being able to have that input, that features that cultures, that history and not just, you know, us or people that may look like us. So, it's just having that sort of in-depth input from people that may look like me teaching me.

Syerramia Willoughby: Thank you very much for that Marie Noelle. Well let's get the perspective of the teachers. So Simokai Chigoudou, you are a teacher at Oxford. What does that term decolonising the curriculum mean to you?

Simukai Chigudu: I think I'd highlight at this stage three key elements within a more decolonised academia, for me as a teacher. The first is what we sometimes refer to as the Canon. The Canon is the foundational texts that are sort of laid out in the study of a given topic, in development, in politics, or in any other field. Much of the canonical writing, the works that are considered ground-breaking, come very much from outside of Africa and are often not produced by African writers. So, part of decolonisation is breaking that canon down and diversifying it.

The other question is about theory and more the production of theory. Events that happened within Africa are often the kind of raw material for scholars to go in, to examine and then theorise from elsewhere and often in relation to the global North. And then the third component is the empirical side which is to say, you know, what of the topics that gain currency within development studies and whose concerns do they privilege. And I think that's part of the work of decolonisation – its setting that empirical agenda of what gets our attention.

Syerramia Willoughby: Thank you very much for that Simukai. Eyob, can we hear from you now?

Eyob Gebremariam: I would somehow expand it further than beyond the decolonisation of higher education, I would rather approach it as the decolonisation of knowledge because that is where the key issue is. Even though physical decolonisation has ended in the 1960s, in its formal sense the aspect of coloniality is still in place; where ideas are very much emanating from the west; and the lived experiences and the realities of people within Africa are not given that much importance. I think the decolonisation of knowledge should also reverse the equation.

Syerramia Willoughby: Thank you so much for that. We're going to be talking specifically about reading lists in this episode and our Citing Africa research team has actually been examining Development Studies reading lists across Sudan, South Africa, Ghana and the UK.

So, here's what the Citing Africa research team found. 74% to 100% of cited authors on this reading lists were not based in Africa. Some programmes have no African-based authors on their reading lists. Surprisingly, there was no major variation in representation between reading lists of universities based in Africa and those in the UK. However, South African universities had the highest share of African-based authors cited, with a leading research university achieving a maximum of 26%. Elite universities in the UK had on average the lowest share of African-based authors on their reading lists. 82% of listed authors in the surveyed reading lists are based in the UK and the US.

Eyob, do these results surprise you?

Eyob Gebremariam: No, it doesn't surprise me. It doesn't surprise me on many levels. One, given the fact that most higher education institutions in Africa have been very much under resourced and have very limited capacity or even financial and institutional resources to support their faculty members to do research and even publish in such very well respected and highly rated journals. It's something that's one of the realities. Even though the teaching and the production of students of high calibre has not been that much a problem, because you will definitely find students who did their bachelor's degrees perform very well, and when they do their postgraduate degrees, beating Europe and the US.

But the production of knowledge of such highly regarded articles by the academic staff members of the faculties has reduced because there are not enough resources for that. And you'll definitely find lots of university lecturers or professors having some additional job, like doing consultancy jobs here and there so that they make their Intermezzo so that they survive. So, it won't really surprise me. So the issue is somehow much broader than just simply having something to publish and get cited, or being used as reading list in courses.

Syerramia Willoughby: Speaking to you now as a teacher, Simukai, have these decolonisation debates affected how you put together your reading lists, and speaking honestly how much really has changed?

Simukai Chigudu: The honest answer is yes, it has made some difference but there is also a very long way to go. We in our department, so that's the Oxford Department of International Development, are in a kind of constant and iterative process of reviewing

reading lists in light of these kinds of concerns. They are also very often coupled with concerns about gendered representations on the reading list. Concerns about intersectionality, in other words taking seriously not only gender dimensions but how they intersect with various kinds of other identities, and it's very hard to achieve progress quickly in this regard. So, I think that the ethos and the commitment is there and it's growing and it's something that we're hoping to nurture. But the actual changes are a much slower process.

Syerramia Willoughby: So how do you think you academics in universities in the UK, for example, can build better links with academics in universities in Africa, for example?

Simukai Chigudu: So, I think a few steps are being taken and here I'm going to riff off my colleague Rob Tell Paley who writes about "putting the African back in African Studies". One of the kind, one sort of aspect of low hanging fruit if you like is trying to get more scholars from Africa on editorial boards of major journals, and this reaches a number of different ends. It allows people to publish. They are also able to encourage authors and advise them on styles to get into journals like "African Affairs" or the "African Studies Review" or "Africa". You know the kind of leading journals within the field and the same would be true of development studies journals as well. So I think that's one important step that is relatively easy to achieve.

The other is particularly for things like conferences. I think there needs to be a bit of soul searching about the leading kind of African and Development Studies conferences that take part in Western Europe. I mean, you know let's be honest here. How many of us struggle to get to a conference because of visa restrictions and limitations? Now imagine how much harder that is when you're based in the African continent. So, starting to relocate those and starting to think in a much more deliberate way about these little things that can be done that give platforms, that give voice and that give opportunity to Africa based scholars, is where we begin that work. Of course, the deeper structural transformation which is something that we can come back to is going to take a lot longer. But there are these small things that we can start doing now.

Syerramia Willoughby: So, Eyob, do you have any thoughts on that?

Eyob Gebremariam: The starting point to achieving that is to question the kind of knowledge that we are somehow propagating. The kind of knowledge that we are sending. The kind of knowledge that we're exchanging amongst ourselves. Are we still somehow using the same kind of knowledge from the same kind of characterisation of Africa in the way that it has been taught during the colonial period, or afterwards by those who have had

that kind of power to define what Africa is? Because Africa in the emerging world, the way that is portrayed in the media in the academic world, is totally different from Africa on the ground. The way that people are living their life in each and every way, in each and every aspect of their daily life.

So that kind of the imagined Africa is much more dominant because that's produced by the powerful who have the resource and the narrative or the control of each and every element. Like the concept of development, for instance, has always put Africa as an object to be developed. Right? But people down in Africa in different villages, they may not necessarily have the same kinds of expectation. The same kind of narrative to see themselves as progressing in the future, the way that somebody at University X or Y is trying to put forward. So, I think that element should be something that we need to give much more importance in our understanding of decolonisation, beyond the physical presence of individuals or having someone in Africa being cited or not.

Syerramia Willoughby: So, beyond what we just discussed. Are there any more barriers to having more diverse and representative reading lists?

Simukai Chigudu: Part of it is attitudinal. So changing our orientation and our evaluations of our hierarchies of knowledge which exist. And I don't think we're always forthright or honest in dealing with that. And this is as is partly related to what Eyob was saying about addressing coloniality you know and trying to think about different kinds of epistemology. You know to give an example, a concrete example here, colleagues at the University of Cape Town in their gender institute started the journal “Feminist Africa”. “Feminist Africa” takes a wide range of approaches in how it engages with scholarship on gender within Africa. These are wide ranging philosophical positions. These are giving platforms to many young women, activists and so forth. But it's not coming out of a major publisher, be it Taylor and Francis or Routledge or anything of that nature. A lot of the scholarship, while being highly sophisticated, you know, straddles the personal realm as well as the social and political realm in sort of interesting and creative ways. And yet I almost never see any feminist Africa articles cited in any gender and development course which might be an indictment of me for not having read widely enough. But I dare say it's that approach to a journal without the kind of recognised institutional support is not valorised in the same way that a more, quote unquote, mainstream gender and development publication might be. So, I think that really is one of the barriers.

And then I guess the other barrier that I'd highlight briefly is this question, I guess, of language and philosophy. Now I'm extremely guilty of this because I am deeply steeped in Anglo-centric training and perspectives; and there is no way that I would have the language

skills to write academically in any African language. And yet I recognise in this sense I am part of the problem, and this is also part of a problem of our education systems. How do we start to kind of excavate and bring out and contend with more complex ways of thinking about an African epistemology, if we are not even going to be working with the same tools that we're not able to access folklore and stories? If we're not able to access our philosophical concepts and reasons that are conveyed through language? We can't get deeper into idioms and how people think about time, progress and indeed big words like development. And so, I think that's a major challenge. Mahmood Mamdani has been advocating that the ideal African university mandates language training in any part of critical social science pertaining to Africa. And I think that's something that we need to start taking much more seriously.

Syerramia Willoughby: We're going to come back and get a student's perspective. Marie-Noelle, how important was it for you during your master's course to have diverse and representative reading lists?

Marie-Noelle Nwokolo: Very important actually. And I would say, I guess, for two main reasons. The first being the increase in importance of like knowledge and knowledge production and the global economy. The second is just being able to sort of see myself in these readings and understand a lot of these concepts, in terms of how they relate to an area that I'm very passionate about. So, in terms of knowledge production, we sort of live in a world where not even in terms of a trade and other things like the main competitive factors like knowledge production. And so, if you have a space where we are continuously absent, it just makes it a lot more difficult to think about how we have that sort of competitive advantage without just mimicking the other Western countries or what we're told to do. And so I think for us to be able to sort of get into this idea of the global value chain even for trade and things of that sort, it's very important for us to understand a lot of these histories and cultures and their backgrounds that experiences bring and tell us and how to move forward with that so we can understand our place in the world, and how we can get past where we are right now.

My LSE education, I would say, was a bit of a tricky one, because I didn't always have that representation on my reading list. But I do recognise that some professors made the effort. Right? So, knowledge is about inquiry – you're challenging yourself to look for that yourself as well to be able to bring that into discussions. So, it was definitely one of those tricky experiences, but I think it's very important. It's a difficult conversation.

Syerramia Willoughby: Thank you very much for that. And I think, Abida, that diverse and representative reading lists were probably similarly important to you as well.

Abidah Ferej: There are two sides of the argument here. I think in constructing reading lists what you find is that professors basically define what is important and what isn't important. They basically create that – you're getting students who basically may have some opinion, but technically they are somewhat of a blank slate on certain topics. And as a professor you're basically saying to them this is what is important, and this is what isn't important. And so in creating those reading lists I think it's very conscious, especially when incorporating, say, case studies and referencing specifics nuances – that you're not doing it as an add on. And I think a lot of the time what happens, especially when you're talking about Africa, it's given as this especially in development studies, it's brought in as a slight case that is a little add on at the end, instead of being centred as the primary part of what we're studying.

Syerramia Willoughby: So, Eyob, what do you think are the long-term consequences of these decolonising debates on the wider field of Development Studies?

Eyob Gebremariam: The long-term consequences: it's all about changing the existing power dynamics in power relations. Because knowledge is one of the key instruments of domination, or the key instruments through which that injustice or inequality is sustained. You will definitely have different structural and institutional manifestations of that. So probably in the long term that key outcome would be the key objective of such a movement.

Decolonising knowledge, decolonising higher education is to have that honest conversation – how we need to plan both the present and the future, how we need to understand our past … Mainstream development thinking still somehow portrays Africa like it is the past of Europe, and the future of Africa is what is supposed to be the present Europe. So, the way that we reorient our understanding of history, culture, in time will be very much the key outcome of such kind of process, which will definitely be a very, very difficult task. And that's why we may not see the fruits in any new future. But we should keep on pushing the boundaries.

Syerramia Willoughby: Marie-Noelle, from the student's perspective, what do you see as being the long-term consequences of these decolonising debates?

Marie-Noelle Nwokolo: I definitely think it will have a positive effect on the type of knowledge that we create and put out there, right. Because for me I feel like we had the sort of grandparents that did that, but we've come back to an Africa that won't be quiet anymore. And it's this idea of you, you've been knocking at the door for a long time. We are getting our place in this space and if you won't create that space, I am pretty sure we will build a whole different house on the side. And so, I think that continuing conversations like this are super important and they have that ability to change the conversations that will be add in terms of Development Studies and even other disciplines. I know that is one of those things that will be difficult but I think the conversations should continue through forums like this, and through people continually and continuously bringing it up to professors and teachers flagging that; and just not being silent about that because it does have the potential to shift things and we need to make that shift happen.

Syerramia Willoughby: Simukai, would you like to respond to that?

Simukai Chigudu: Given the pressures that we feel within the university, whether it's various kinds of impact agendas or research evaluation frameworks and so forth, you're constantly being pushed structurally to remain focused on a knowledge production agenda that is set largely within the West, disseminated by the "true" universities and journals based in the West. And I think it's on this count – I'm not terribly optimistic in terms of reversing those trends. But if anything, that pessimism suggests even more ardent efforts to challenge that.

Syerramia Willoughby: Thank you very much to all of you. And it's been a real pleasure. Dr Simukai Chigudo, Abidah Ferej, Dr Eyob Gebremariam and Marie-Noelle Nwokolo. If you are on a Development Studies programme, we'd like to hear from you. This is because we were only able to analyse reading lists from four UK programmes, one from Ghana and one Sudan. Please check the Africa at LSE blog post by Tim Hinane El-Kadi on how to analyse the representation of your reading list, and tweet us via # CitingAfrica.

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