On Monastic Seclusion:
Producing the World from an African University

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Abstract

A key aspect of the critique of the colonial legacies of higher education in Africa remains the inequalities engendered by everyday life pressures, and the consequences for scientific practice. This paper provides reflection on the scientific lives of African scholars by critically examining the social contexts and conditions under which knowledge production occurs, especially in universities in low and middle-income countries. I am particularly interested in the social dynamics and local pressures that underpin the practice of scholarship, the strategies deployed to negotiate monastic idealism, and the possible ways in which these both impact and shape debates and the knowledge produced. Overall my aim is understand how scholars negotiate and sustain voice, dignity and intellectual respectability within the precarious context of this social violence.
Introduction

This reflection was originally written within the context of a project on scientific subjectivities in Africa, at a time when our precarities were more predictable than now during the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus was particularly on scholars located in or from Africa, whose tools and working conditions needed to be juxtaposed with the pressure to perform and global push for what is defined as “excellence”. During the first, and as you can imagine, rushed presentation of the paper, as is always the case with conferences and workshops, a few colleagues expressed their disappointment with two main limitations with the paper. The first related to the original title “on monastic idealism” and the fact that the paper had done very little to critically engage with that important theoretical idea which is at the heart of this reflection central to how we imagine the university, its work and purpose today. The second was a frustration from other academics, especially nerds like myself from the African continent, about my argument that monastic seclusion was a far-fetched ideal for scholars in the continent. Furthermore, my argument that the idea of the university, especially as espoused by John Henry Newman had long died, having been replaced by higher education, and now near impossible was, understandably, considered preposterous.

This is indeed a difficult time to be thinking. Apart from the mental and emotional exhaustion provoked by the uncertainties of Covid-19 and the end of lockdowns, preventive measures, return to business, there is something vile and unethical about the thought of being lost in the luxury of intellectual abstraction in the midst “bare life” and “states of exception” (Agamben). As colleagues and I have argued “it is also hard to imagine, in such difficult circumstances, that people have the time and fortitude to prioritise what could be seen as intellectual abstraction, as they have done in recent times when major events took the spotlight, be it Brexit, Trump’s 2016 victory or mass protests such as #Occupy, #BlackLivesMatter or #RhodesMustFall.” At the same time if we are not going to reflect now and put our intellectual tools to public good, then when? Should the university’s response to crisis be panic? Or should we just shut down and take in what is happening to us, or in spite of us? As colleagues and I pointed out “One thing is clear: academic debate and pluralism can help us grapple with the many uncertainties provoked by the virus. The epidemiological data is emerging, but still limited. Even more obscure are the socio-cultural, political and economic implications of the pandemic.” It is for this reason that I accepted to continue with this discussion, also as a show of solidarity with those struggling to make the idea of the university relevant during this pandemic. This moment presents us with a multipronged existential threat that must be resolved before the return to business, which we all know and hope should be everything except the usual. We cannot just sit back and wait for a new dispensation to be fermented. We have to be part of resolving the now, and imagining tomorrow.
Thinking without tools

The story of this idea begins just outside of Dakar. It is August 2018 and I am into my second year as the Head of CODESRIA's Publications and Dissemination Programme. CODESRIA – Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa is an independent Pan-African research organization established in 1973, primarily focused on the social sciences in Africa. Amongst its many objectives are promoting and combating the fragmentation of knowledge production through promoting and facilitating research and knowledge production in Africa, strengthening the institutional basis of knowledge production in Africa, and promoting the publication and dissemination of research undertaken by African scholars. As the Council's charter indicates, it is committed promoting and defending the principle of independent thought and the academic freedom of researchers in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

The intellectual infrastructure of the organisation was heavily shaped by key scholars such as Samir Amin, Thandika Mkandawire and Achille Mbembe (all men) whose mandates as head of the organisation radically transformed thinking on the continent and trained new cohorts of scholars. It was also in the course of this period that the organisation established its now signature think institutes/workshops, extracting scholars from across the continent and secluding them in Dakar (and other African cities) for a determined period to do robust debates and reflections in communion with like-minded colleagues from different parts of the continent, guided by “elders”. Many scholars on this continent and now in the Diaspora are graduates of this CODESRIA “monastic” model. My first academic experience and travel to another African country, and my encounter of and training in Pan-African thinking was through CODESRIA. In 2003, I was invited to participate at the CODESRIA Child and Youth Institute, focusing on the theme African children and youth within the context of HIV/AIDS. My academic trajectory until date has been shaped by the encounters during that monastic adaptation which offered me a temporary respite from the daily routine of life in lively Gaborone. So, in 2016 when I was invited to serve the council and, through that, the continent, I took the opportunity, albeit with reservations.

CODESRIA Publications began three years after the Council was established and served as one of the main sources of social science academic literature on/from the African continent. From the 1980s onwards CODESRIA publications were made available free of charge to African universities and research centres until the late 1990s/2000s when global financial crises and technological advancements in the publishing industry especially through Internet dissemination redefined publishing. Over the years the Council accumulated a backlog in the programme, composed of manuscripts and a rich collection of published material from its over forty years of knowledge production. The vignette around which this reflection is written was part of our efforts deal with that backlog, but particularly to strengthen the institutional basis for knowledge production and decolonize through academic book donation to African university libraries where scholars can occasionally isolate and practice
social distance from their everyday chores and obligations to perform monastic idealism.

In August 2018, my dissemination manager and I visited the library of a newly established university in Senegal, intending to donate books to the institution as contribution to Pan-African knowledge production and circulation, especially in Africa. It was difficult to locate the place, so the Director of the library asked us to meet her at a central place where we were guided to the collection. She picked us up at the University’s main conference centre, located near one of the Carrefours in the town, from which we were driven through the backyard of the neighborhood to see the ‘Central’ and ‘Main’ library, even though temporary. We were not only struck by the distance it took to arrive at the place itself, but also by the infrastructure housing what should be the nerve centre of the university. The entire library composed of three, roughly 3 metres long shelves located in a tiny room of a small bungalow rented by the university to temporarily house the collection while the main library was under construction. This ‘Main’ library was meant to service the entire university, including the medical school, engineering, humanities and social sciences faculties. Young readers – students – crowded around small tables in the corridors of the building, where other empty shelves were standing waiting for books. In one room, unopened boxes of books – knowledge – sat waiting to be accessed and catalogued, but also satisfying the desires and appetites of mice, roaches and other opportunistic insects. There were no reading rooms, so every table and empty shelves in the corridors were being used for reading. One of the rooms housed a few computers, which the Director told us, was available to users on request and supervision, also given the limited number of computers, and the maintenance cost.

I was saddened by the sight of library users desperately battling to access and consume knowledge, in a place unequipped with the infrastructure to quench that thirst for knowledge. It brought back memories of my university days in the mid-nineties, during which I completed undergraduate studies without the ‘luxury’ of using the few, mostly old books, available in the small library wing that was still under construction during my studies – and also mainly composed of random books donated by philanthropists, and therefore very little access to specialist and the most recent publications. The first time I entered a library, and entire building dedicated to the curation and consumption of books and other publications was in October 2002 at the university of Botswana when I began my MA degree in Development Studies. Until then, we had relied on the benevolence of professors whose conference and workshop opportunities gave them access to books and photocopies of books and other articles that were then further circulated to us through what was referred to as ‘handouts’ placed at photocopying shops around the university area, and in other instances, readers/exam guides called ‘polycops’ put together by academics, but forced upon their students as pre-requisite for passing or validating courses.

What is a university without a library? What is a university without publishing
house? What is a university without its own journals? What is a university without a seminar series and a critical mass of active scholars? What is a university without readers? What is a nation without a vibrant knowledge production ecosystem? What is a continent without knowledge circulation? Late Cameroonian intellectual, Bernard Fonlon wrote at the heart of the ecstasy about independence in the 1960s/70s African continent that scientific endeavor through strengthening higher education institutions was central to Africa’s liberation. In his treatise entitled *The Genuine Intellectual*, dedicated to every freshman, he maintained that a university without knowledge production infrastructure – library, bookstore and publishing house – was nothing less than a glorified secondary school.

**The crisis of knowledge production**

A 2018 report by Elsevier measuring the research performance of 8,500 research institutions and that of 220 countries worldwide, demonstrates that even though Africa has by far the strongest growing scientific production – that is, 38.6 percent over a 5-year period from 2012 to 2016, and equally records the fastest growth in authors – that is, an astounding 43 percent over the same period, Africa generates far less than 1% of the world’s research. According to this study, the bulk of Africa’s scientific production originates from Algeria, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa and Tunisia, with South Africa, not surprisingly, singled out as the highest research output producing country on the continent; particularly due to the position it continues to hold in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (Duermeijer, Amir and Schoombe 2018). Another study, this time in South Africa, demonstrates that even though publication counts increased from 0.39 in 1996 to 0.69 in 2015, the social sciences contribution is only 14.4%, with the largest proportion of scientific contributions in South Africa made by the natural sciences (38.3%), followed by the medical and health sciences (23.4%), and engineering technology (15.0%) (see M&G Online Edition, 06th October 2017).

Public defunding and disinvestment in, and subsequent privatization of education, particularly higher education resulted in a total collapse of the Panafrcian knowledge project, nation building education initiatives and development programmes fostered by most post-independent states. From elementary right up to tertiary education, public disinvestment in especially professional and vocational colleges resulted in the neoliberal ‘professionalisation’ of teacher training colleges, and the subsequent devaluation of these institutions, which became instrumentalised by elites for political rewards. By the end of the 1980s across the continent, universities became instrumental in the state’s project to contain unemployment, as they were now required to produce graduates with practical skills for the market economy (Nkwi 2007) leading to the mass marketization of the education sector, and further collapse of the university scientific project. Nyamnjoh and Jua (2002) already demonstrated how the academic project quickly collapsed in Cameroon following further controls on freedoms of expression, forcing many scholars to either risk imprisonment, self-sensor or emigrate. This flight of intellectuals from the continent to Europe and America’s top colleges, also known at
some point as 'brain drain', deeply affected African universities as spaces of scientific work and epistemological enterprising (see Paul Zeleza’s work on mobility of African scholars).

The defunding and subsequent closure of university presses, even at some of the continent’s top performing universities, and as well disinvestment in school libraries and intellectually grounded national text book programmes for schools and universities, and as well the gradual disappearance of refresher courses and further training programmes for school teachers and academics badly ruptured the continent’s knowledge ecosystem, resulting to the production of a particular kind of scientific subject today, and context that continues to pose serious challenges today to interventions aimed at redressing this situation. In the end, as happened with other sectors of the economy, Africa has become the dumping site for subsidized finished knowledge products, second hand goods, to the extent that even local people sometimes joke derogatorily that ‘we’ (that is Africa) have become the dumping site for what they describe as ‘second hand’ Western expertise and expatriates. An example of this dumping is the recent statement of principles for the sale of rights in African territories for non-african scholarly publishers endorsed by the ASA and ASAUK, which while revolutionary, basically treats the African continent as a knowledge charity case requiring its intellectual heritage curated abroad to be repatriated back to the continent, and also knowledge produced on the continent to be made available to the continent affordably and without strings attached. More than sixty years following independence, Africa contributes less than 1% to global knowledge production, despite the exponential growth of scholars in the continent, currently amongst the highest globally with 34% (see Elsevier).

Monastic Idealism as response to knowledge crisis

To resolve this conundrum interventions have sought to address several key challenges, but mainly focusing on capacity building and institutional support, and especially extracting scholars from the distractions of their networked lives, and locate them within a space where they can practice of experience monastic seclusion. For example, I have over the years been part of initiatives organising writing workshops and retreats for students and academics alike. At the University of Cape Town which I joined in 2012, writing workshops take a select group of scholars and students to the Stellenbosch mountains where they are expected to be secluded from their everyday university and home life, and therefore focus on the business of intellectual work. CODESRIA’s Research, Training, grants and fellowships, and as well its Publications and Dissemination programmes also grew out of a need to provide a strategic intervention to resolve the crises facing universities and higher education in Africa following structural adjustment (see Ogachi Oanda and Ebrima Sall). The small Masters and Doctoral grants programmes provided supported for student dissertations, also as a strategy to develop and build the next generation of African social science and humanities scholars. The CODESRIA institutes operated as Panafarian think workshops and laboratories, extracted African scholars from the teaching burdens and administrative controls of
their institutions, and bringing them to Dakar in a kind of semi-monastic seclusion for a period of 4-6 weeks to critically reflect on and experiment with ideas and concepts. I was a beneficiary of this tradition, having participated in the 2003 Child and Youth Institute as a Laureate while pursuing my MA studies at the University of Botswana. Some of the best-edited collections in the CODESRIA Publications catalogue were produced out of these workshops. Institutes such as Bellagio, and now the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS), Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) and the many centres for advanced studies and institutes growing on the continent also operate on this medieval principle of monastic seclusion, requiring scholars to be disembedded from their daily lives, that is to become nerds, so as to ensure both efficient and effective scientific production. Other initiatives such as Carnegie’s African Humanities Programme (AHP), and various fellowships in the African Studies Centres across Europe such as the Nordic Africa Institute and the African Studies Centre in Leiden all work on the idea that to resolve Africa’s knowledge production challenge, scholars must be given time out so they can temporarily focus on academic production.

I grew up in a Christian home, a pious community and a very religious home. My mother and her family are deeply devoted Catholics, while my father and his family are staunch Presbyterians. So, it is not surprising that I was attracted to the priesthood during my adolescence. My siblings and me accompanied by mother to church in the early mornings for mass, and then when we returned home, accompanied my father further for the service at 9am. In the later years, one of my brothers became a priest, and is today rector of a revolutionary seminary here in Nairobi. Last year, I had the opportunity to spend several days with his brothers here in Langata, in a revolutionary model of ‘embedded monasticism’ where the principle requires his seminarian students to practice independence, and the missionary community rooted in community. My brother explained that monasticism, the code on which the priesthood is founded, particularly that relating to monks and nuns and a manner of living dedicated to seclusion, required radical rethinking; as it dislocated priests from the communities they should serve, and as well separated them from the social relations that are necessary for legitimating them as valuable social beings in their communities.

This model is meant to resolve what is referred to in the literature on religion as ‘the monastic paradox’. This is the tension between the requirements for monks to withdraw into pious spiritual and ascetic seclusion, and the obligation to serve and be embedded in society. Monasticism is a religious way of life that requires renunciation of the attractions of worldliness through seclusion and devotion to spirituality. In fact the word ‘Monk’ originates from the Greek word ‘monachos’, which means alone. Monasticism is thus a mode of life subjected to strict regimes, rules and religious practice, and today, religious orders, requiring poverty, humility, chastity and obedience, especially as a means to achieving a particularly end. The life of monks until the Middle Ages in medieval Western Europe was spent in prayers and work, and then later in writing and the copying of important texts by hand. That the early libraries grew out of this context is not surprising, but also
provided a foundation for the growth of scientific and academic life that is still deeply embedded within the architecture of monasticism.

The idea of the university and monastic idealism

Newman’s idea of the university was, without surprise, grounded in the monastic idealism. As David Mills (2019) points out “Erudite and elegant, it became the exemplary defence of a humanistic university education.” Newman, a clergyman, saw the university as an end in itself, rather than the means to an end. It was a place for people, a guild of thinkers, dedicated to the sole purpose of intellectual work or scientific endeavor, with multiple disciplines and fields interacting and seeking to speak to each other. The university, like monasteries was to be independent and separate from religious or church authority, even though he believed strongly, not surprisingly, that dedication to religious truth and service to God constituted a condition for any proper knowledge undertaking. In other words, even though ‘independent’ from church authority, religious discipline and cannons underpinned its life. Monasticism was its mode of being with dedication to knowledge through God as its idea. That this became the thesis and key idea around which many cathedral schools and later universities were founded is not surprising. In fact, prior to the development of cathedral schools in the 11-12 century, monastic schools were dominant as the places of learning and higher education. It was only later on that Cathedral schools in competition with Monastic schools began to recruit teachers who focused and dedicated time for research and thinking on specific topics and questions. Both Paris (founded in 1105) and Bologna (founded in 1150) emerged out of this ideology. The University of Bologna was organized around students who wielded a lot of power including selecting their teachers, while the University of Paris was organized around masters or scholars who determined the curricula amongst other things. At the core of these was the idea of the university as a guild or fraternity, hence with a particularly distinct ethos. That many of these early universities which adopted this monastic ethos such as Oxford continue to be ranked amongst the world’s top universities today, implies that Newman’s idea of the university and its implicit monastic ideal will continue to form our imagination of the academic project.

The model of the teaching and research-intensive university that has now become the dominant form of higher education emerged in 19 century postwar Germany from the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Humboldt advocated for research and rigorous intellectual debate to be at the core of teaching, and for academic freedom and rigorous independent research to be central to the work and life of universities. Interestingly, it is the exclusiveness of the university as a preserve of an exclusive elite that popularized the idea into the 19-21 centuries, leading to the massification that we currently experience. The modern university is the means to an end, creating elites and producing neoliberalism’s workers and consumers. Within this context, high performance, grounded in monasticism is one of the key requirements for academic success.
Despite the paradox of elitism, successful academic praxis is expected, and even required, to operate within this framework of seclusion, retreat into the laboratory or field, renunciation of worldly attractions, and pious devotion to library work, philosophical reflection and a life dedicated to knowledge production. The expression nerd as a figure is the ideal academic subject. It is used to describe people who are obsessive about intellectual work, and religiously dedicated to the academic life of studiousness, resulting to an individual without social intelligence, disconnected from society, obedient to the principles of science, but with an abstruse lack of social skills. Nerds are often represented as introverted, unstylish, unattractive, awkward and socially embarrassing. This epitomizes a life of seclusion from worldliness, and associated with high academic performance and production. The ideal academic is a nerd. The ideal academic is Sheldon Cooper and his friends in the TV show, The Big Bang Theory. This is a luxury that cannot continue to be afforded on the continent.

For some time now, and especially during the #RhodesMustFall and the #FeesMustFall movements, a key critique of the consequences of colonial legacies and continuities into the post-apartheid era is what has now entered the global lexicon as either simply ‘Black Tax’ or ‘the black tax burden’. Monastic seclusion requires and frames a neoliberal elite subject disembedded from their daily lives and responsibilities – that is one without the burden of ‘black tax’, even if this is only just a momentary retreat. This is difficult to practice within a context wherein the subject obtains social value as a networked, interdependent and deeply socially embedded subject with social solidarity and strong ethics of care. Disembodying these social subjects from that context has the potential of being destabilizing. Epistemological work emerges out of a context, and hence worldliness and social networks should be treated as a source of value rather than a burden, and therefore accounted for in academic assessments. As Gibbons et al. (1994: 2) have argued in their highly debated work on the new modes of knowledge production, “nothing recognisable as knowledge can be produced outside of the socially dominant form.” This is part of the challenge with the decolonization project – that is, how to create an academic space and produce networked scientific subjects coded with the burden of social interdependency.

This is not an African exception. The increasing burdens of social expectations on academics and knowledge producers remain core to the critique on managerialism introduced during the commercialization of universities worldwide (see Mahmood Mamdani 2007). In fact, feminists have long demonstrated how in the West university life, academic praxis and increasing demands for exponential intellectual production quadruples university women’s jeopardies, and as well the burden of care they are already forced to perform at home, because of the extra care work rendered to students, colleagues and parents struggling with the increasing challenge of mental health, depression and other social predicaments. Within the context of decolonization, as part of what can be termed ‘the black women’ (or black man’s) burden, this care is the burden of black women. In fact the university and its violence operates as an accomplice to the subjugation of women and other
minorities, through strategic process and modes of production and accounting for intellectual work that are not oriented towards the scientific subject as a socio-culturally networked being. For this kind of subject, monastic seclusion is an act of precarization, that distabilises and further devalues the person as a valuable social being. As Anne Allison has argued about the burden of neoliberal modernization in Japan, precarity's toughest punishment is on social relations, and feelings of disconnectedness from the valuable social relations that provide social security for persons. The current formulation of the scientific subject and praxis of monastic seclusion does not provide the context for scientific growth, precisely because it is contrary to the scholar as an evolving social member of a cultural context.

**Conclusion: On Complaining**

I thought about how best to end this reflection, but settled on the idea of finishing off with complaining. In June last year, a colleague and myself were interlocked in a debate or call it a kind of a small fight about ‘complaints’ and ‘complaining’. This was particularly with respect to discourses on publishing and African knowledge production challenges and the continuous blaming of the West and the unfair and imbalanced power of its knowledge infrastructure on the growth and visibility of knowledge systems and outputs in the South, and how to address this conundrum. Fred stated, probably in frustration, and rightly so, that ‘we’ Africans must stop complaining and begin to act, like some are already doing on the continent.

Allow me to complain. To be African and to be academic, and then to do science and to think the world from the continent, especially from the space of an African university is impossible. I want to complain that too many times the voices and ideas of African academics fail to develop, mainly pertaining to an unfortunate misalignment between academic praxis and context. I want to complain that the ethos and ideal of monastic seclusion that is at the core of intellectual production is a rare luxury unaffordable and inaccessible to African academics, especially those located and working in universities on the continent. Interventions therefore need to focus on supporting and building scientific subjectivities (identities and biographies) that take seriously and strengthen the value of intellectuals as socio-culturally and politically embedded and networked persons. This requires listening to particularly feminist and other minority critiques of the academic endeavor as alienating, dehumanizing and overburdening – much of which has remained ignored because of the manner in which these have been coded as ‘complaining’ and therefore, irrelevant.

Sara Ahmed writes that the term ‘complaining’ has a negative connotation and conjures a particular kind of annoying figure who needs to be ignored and silenced. As she writes, “Being heard as complaining is not being heard”, because of the conception that complaining comes out of character and therefore personal – it is just who the figure of complaining is, that is nagging. However, a complaint is often present in the experience of the figure of the complaint, and hence, as she writes, “a complaint comes up because of what has already come up”. How complaints are
treated relates to how those who abuse power are rendered to account. Consequently, a complaint is in a way, a ‘weapon of the weak’. Because “the story of a complaint is often a story of exhaustion”, a complaint in itself is the story of action being taken. As she writes, “Warnings about the costs of making a complaint can function as attempts to stop a complaint from being made.” Like postcolonial studies, decolonisation and the critique of knowledge production, academic life and the violence of intellectual modes of production are often treated as either ‘complaining’ or shelved within an exhausting process as ‘complaints’.

The colleague and myself were both part of an expanded panel of ‘experts’ on knowledge production and the challenges of publishing and dissemination today in Africa. During that discussion, I amongst many things, made the point that Plan S, Europe and Coalition S’s most brilliant response to the commodification and privatisation of knowledge, was going to reproduce already existing inequalities in global knowledge production; and will further mute voices and devalue what Raewyn Connell (2007) terms Southern Theory, a reference to social thought produced by intellectuals in colonial and postcolonial societies in the Global South. My point was simple. That the 4IR and its promise for better partnerships and collaborations (see Klaus Schaub 2017) was already reproducing and operating on the same inequalities and imbalances that shaped production processed in the three previous industrial revolutions, where Africa mainly participates as subaltern and working class – that is, the supplier of labour and raw materials for the new knowledge economy. Across the continent, knowledge production is characterized by intensive labour and employing rudimentary tools, with terribly appalling working conditions. Apart from difficult and failed processes of decolonization which continue to transform academic institutions on the continent as “potted plants in green houses” (Nyamnjoh 2012), the austerity measures or structural adjustment policies introduced to resolved the 1980s economic crisis directly targeted and crippled Africa’s knowledge ecosystem and infrastructure beyond repair (see further Mahmood Mamdani’s Scholars in the Marketplace).