

## **Publishing Africa: Towards Re-Building A Disobedient Publishing Ecosystem**

Divine Fuh  
HUMA – Institute for Humanities in Africa  
University of Cape Town  
divine.fuh@uct.ac.za

There is a thing around the neck of the knowledge ecosystem across Africa. A knee that for decades, especially following the continent's post-independence and structural adjustment crises, has brutally asphyxiated and prevented the knowledge economy from breathing. Despite recording one of the highest increases in academic authors, and having circulated some of the most compelling and critical writers globally, the continent's publishing infrastructure still remains largely unacknowledged, under-used, and under-resourced, particularly by its own intellectual community. Even with the most recent resuscitation of the knowledge decolonisation and decolonial movements, the large proportion of African scholars continue to publish abroad.

This "extraversion" – that is, the practice of curating knowledge for the Euro-American community and seeking to be relevant internationally rather than locally – is also provoked by the collapse of the continent's knowledge production infrastructure, following the introduction of structural adjustment and austerity measures from the 1980s onwards. These measures, as Mamdani (2007) has argued unleashed scholars into a neoliberal marketplace, transforming scholarship into a commodity as researchers, departments and various knowledge institutions on the continent began to compete for revenue from the development machine, and thus attuning their curriculum and practices to the dictatorship of that market.

The fact that almost all of the continent's research funds were/is channeled through foreign aid and development assistance radically shifted and redefined the epistemological priorities of Africa's postindependence decolonial project. As Mkandawire (1990) has pointed out, "development" is bad science, especially pertaining to its persistent emphasis on economic transformation, and the dearth of a valuable theory of society. It is therefore not surprising that decolonial epistemologies are some of development's major casualties, as they are undermined by enterprise whose key goal is philanthropy, evangelism and saving souls. That the continent's knowledge infrastructure such as university presses, libraries and teacher training programmes were development and austerity's first homicides, is not surprising. Hontoundji (1989) observes that this epistemicide, that he terms "extraversion", is pernicious and mainly theoretical, "the fact that we allow the content of our scientific production, the questions we pose, and the way we deal with them to be preoriented, predetermined by the expectations of our potential readers" (also see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

Mbembe (2001, p.32) notes that rituals of extraversion are “rooted in a series of institutional, financial, and even symbolic apparatuses whose function is to propagate, within local societies, the main signifiers of international society. As apparatuses of subjection, their goal is to discipline the natives and to socialize them in a new art of living in relation to the world. This is especially so, because colonization is a cultural imperialism project that thrives by strangling endogenous cultural and creative infrastructure, particularly knowledge ecosystems such as publishing. Those of us, like myself, who are obsessed with the signifiers, symbols and rituals of “extraversion” are best described as epistemic évolués or assimilés. We are, as Mamdani (1993) and Nyamnjoh (2012) designate, are like “potted plants in greenhouses” – that is, those whose epistemic balls have been crushed by log-established international standards of excellence and quality such as currently systems of knowledge triage such as rankings and citation indexes.

Decolonisation is above everything else an attempt at cultural restoration and restitution. That is, an epistemic struggle that emphasises and requires a return to endogenous archives in order to restore ontological dignity. Bgoya and Jay (2013) contend that publishing is central to any society’s identity, autonomy and transformation process, as it “reflects a people’s history and experience, belief systems, and their concomitant expressions through language, writing, and art. In turn, a people’s interaction with other cultures is informed by this written identity.” As Zeleza (quoted in Bgoya and Jay 2013, p.17) emphasizes, “Books constitute crucial repositories of social memories and imaginations, containing the accumulated cultural capacity of society, of its accomplishments, agonies, and aspirations.”

That Euro-America became the preferable site for curating knowledge by African and other Southern scholars is not a coincidence. As various critical reflections on the generation of African scholars/academics demonstrate (see Mkandawire 1995, Nyamnjoh and Jua 2002, Anyidoho 2008, Mwangola 2008, Mapaya 2016) we are familiar with and therefore deeply connected to the “odour” of our imperial patriarch (Mudimbe 1982) and therefore must constantly return to it for validation. We have, if one may say, epistemic daddy issues. To survive, we need to “disobey and de-link” (Mignolo 2011, Dabashi 2015).

Two months after taking over as the head of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)’s publications and dissemination programme, I was involved in a delicate, complex and complicated situation with an established academic and a publishing house. The academic, an elder and founding member of the community’s intellectual agenda and research development programme was both disappointed and displeased, and rightly so, with the manner in which their manuscript had been handled. Produced from one of the organisation’s activities in the late 2000s, it had taken more than five years for the book to be processed. Once completed by the contributors and submitted to the publications and dissemination programme, the project leader insisted, and convincingly so, that the manuscript preferably be entrusted to an “international publisher”, the construct so frequently used for undermining the continent’s humble

efforts at dismantling dominant epistemic orthodoxies through publishing and disseminating from the African continent.

Even before joining CODESRIA, I had become accustomed, particularly through my work as the founding managing editor of *Langaa rpcig*, to a nagging question from anxious researchers and authors from the continent and across the world: is your outfit international? There was a constant anxiety, particularly amongst the most established and successful scholars, and rightly so, about the extremely slow process of publication. The fear of dissipation – that is, the risk of their brilliant intellectual contributions strangled by a ruined and dilapidating publishing infrastructure, especially the perceived murkiness of the editorial and peer-review process seen to be sustained by suspicious political ruses.

It was this perceived “obscurity” of the continent’s publishing outfits that worried many authors, particularly the fact that they were located in a small African town, disconnected from Euro-American knowledge institutions and, without the dissemination infrastructure or publishing ecosystem seen to be part of a global system that worried many. It continues to push even the best of those whose seminal work strongly challenges knowledge orthodoxies, to entrust even the most powerful decolonial critiques to leading “international” publishers outside the continent – for quality, visibility and prestige. This epistemic embarrassment is perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of our decolonization era.

While at *Langaa rpcig*, researchers in Bamenda itself, across the country, this continent, in the diaspora and globally were often quick to point out when invited to submit a manuscript that this publisher, *Langaa*, was simply something located just here in Bamenda, in “our” backyards, hence the notion that it could not be anything serious or be taken seriously. It wasn't international, enough. Even the best of acquaintances could not understand why they should consider such a radical knowledge enterprise by “small boys” as anything serious, and therefore international. Particularly so, because the persons managing it were part of their everyday realities and interactions, people they knew, and therefore devoid of the cultural capital, “distinction” (Bourdieu 1984, 2010) and hyperreality (Baudrillard 1981) to be fantasized as international – global and valuable. A sacred inheritance of our colonial experience is the modeling of books as aspirational (Appadurai 2004) objects of modernity. The packaging of books, the places of publication, the brand names of particular publishers are signs of worthiness, achievement and a neoliberal version of excellence.

Nyamnjoh (2004) one of CODESRIA’s most successful directors of publications contends, “many African scholars seeking to fulfill the academic requirement of publishing cannot but perish” due to industry practices that give them “a critical choice between sacrificing relevance for recognition, or recognition for relevance.” He notes that academics, just like politicians are aware that obscure publication channels especially from small towns and with low-circulation, combine with other hierarchies to ruin the value and visibility of ideas, ensuring that they perish even after publishing. It was partly this trepidation that was at the centre of the tension

with this eminence grise and many others over their different publications. With a spectacular backlog of close to a thousand identified manuscripts, we had created a notorious reputation for being a mortuary for ideas and research. Yet, every year we continued to receive numerous manuscript submissions for our journals, book series, and from our intellectual activities.

I interpreted this as a sign that people valued the brand and therefore wanted to publish with us, had heard about the practice of using us and our quality control mechanism as a stepping stone to publish elsewhere, but especially the dilapidating state of the disappearing academic publishing infrastructure on the continent that was forcing particularly emerging scholars to the few remaining academic publishers like CODESRIA and Langaa. Furthermore, neoliberal university promotion politics across the continent meant for the sole purpose of international rankings in order to achieve the recognition of “excellence” was provoking an intellectual “hunger games” for association with anything international. These intellectual “hunger games” were meant to bypass and render irrelevant the laborious old-fashioned process of preparing ideological delicacies, which require slow and careful work.

There is a long history of this kind of “extraversion” in CODESRIA, like with many publishers on the continent. Of “high quality” manuscripts produced from the organisation’s research programmes, but considered by authors to be better suited for international publishers, where they insist, there would be editorial reliability, transparency and efficiency. At the CODESRIA bookshop, library and archives, you would be surprised to discover that some of the most celebrated books and ideas today were born in CODESRIA through its intellectual activities, or originally published by the organization and then became famous when published “internationally”. Interestingly, these books carry the same content and use similar distribution channels/networks, with the only difference being the publisher brand names and places of publication. Researchers and their citations seem to prefer a publication with the place of publication as Paris, London, New York or some obscure town in Euro-America than one featuring CODESRIA, Langaa, Makerere or African Minds as brand name, and Dakar, Bamenda, Kampala or Lagos as place of publication. In cases of co-publication, the Euro-American publisher and their cities were privileged in the order of names on the covers, a subtle politics of visibility that researchers often overlook. These mechanisms of epistemicide are partly responsible for Africa’s low contribution to global knowledge production, as not everything that counts on the continent can be counted, just as is the case that not everything that can be counted counts.

The professor in this story wanted their work published and their ideas circulated. They sought to count and be counted, and therefore avoid epistemicide. The publisher, a renowned Euro-American name, charged the organization an exorbitant fee for the production and distribution of the manuscript in what it seemed to define as loyalty to an established partnership. This, despite the publisher having accompanied the publications programme since its founding, and also despite the manuscript having been produced from a funded CODESRIA activity. And to add insult to injury, the publisher offered a publication contract to the book’s editor in

which all rights to the intellectual property, that is this continent's intellectual heritage and wealth, were totally surrendered to this "international" publisher, in exchange for the ostensible prestige of being part of a global brand and receiving one complementary copy.

This is both the predicament and dilemma of many writers on the continent who have no choice but to sacrifice their decolonial and radical knowledge politics for relevance and recognition. As Nyamnjoh (2004: 333) observes, "they face a critical choice between sacrificing relevance for recognition, or recognition for relevance".

Coming fresh from #RMF, #FMF and #BLM movements I clumsily threw in a spanner in the works to tickle the imagination of the publisher, and ultimately gerrymander the murky process that me and my colleagues in the publications programme were reluctantly pursuing. The surrendering of intellectual property rights to this publisher I explained, was a difficult thing to do. It was in contradiction to the programme's mission and mandate to curate and give visibility to knowledge by Africans on African issues. I explained that the transfer of knowledge and intellectual property from Africa to the West continued to be at the heart of critical discussions about our post-colonial condition, and that CODESRIA was established as a critique of this deeply imbalanced model. As a result, knowledge produced by the programme and the council is not just intended for worlding distinct African voices but also because of a commitment to a Pan-African political project, articulated through publishing, research and other intellectual activities. It was important to understand the implications of ceding African intellectual property to a private Euro-American company. Above all, it was crucial ascertain that market pricing politics and practices did not deny Africans accessibility to this important book that we also wanted to associate with our name.

As you can imagine, this disruptive gerrymandering created a tension and the observation that I had accused the publisher "of imperialism and robbery of African intellectual property" which, to be honest was the intention. Frustrated, and rightly so, by this attempt at strangling their intellectual hard work, the editor requested for intervention, asking: "Isn't CODESRIA a powerful Pan African organisation, able to engage with foreign institutions without losing its soul and values?"

This is perhaps one of the most vexing questions about the continent's knowledge economy. A simple response is that it is possible but difficult. Hontoundji's (1989) work demonstrates the challenges of deconstructing hegemonic knowledge systems without infrastructure, often resulting in epistemic surrender. He argues that just as economic activity, "scientific and technological activity, as practiced in Africa today, is "extroverted," or externally oriented." Hontoundji posits that this quest for relevance and recognition ends up translating into epistemic vagrancy, as "African or Third-World scholars are tempted to address issues that are primarily of interest to a Western public and, in one way or another, relevant to the state of knowledge in the West". He observes that this obsession to participate and be associated with the international compels African scholars to "remain permanent scientific tourists", a condition he also refers to as "institutional nomadism".

In the end, we are left with no other option for survival than epistemic disobedience and de-linking. Mignolo (2011) insists that there is no escape from hegemonic knowledge regimes and the coloniality of power through dependency on Eurocentric categories of thought. As the fundamental ethos of epistemic disobedience, he sees de-linking as a radical step away from the delusional search for “newness” within parochial Euro-American knowledge. As a consequence, “epistemic disobedience” alters our familiarities and transports us to another place, a different starting point and to alternative spatial sites of struggle and building, rather than seeking epistemic freedom within the same constraining interface.

The “Postcolonial Network” frames knowledge activism as the act of disrupting “colonial systems of knowledge production that sanitize narrative according to a universalized set of values and standards, set by a few, for all.” Its objective is to “actively challenge hegemonic norms that cause injustices for authors and readers” worldwide but especially in ‘the South’ through changing the modes of knowledge cultivation, production and distribution. Advocacy initiatives, campaigns and public dialogues such as the Africa Book Collective’s “Read African Books” intervention, CODESRIA’s previous editorial and skills development policy to never reject manuscripts but rather invest in developing them to the point of publication, the initiatives of major academic publishers such as Langaa rpcig, African Minds Trust, and the Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, amongst others, to aggressively invest in locally producing and globally disseminating knowledge of and on Africa, increasingly in other languages as is currently done by Mkuni na Nyota are productive and constructive actions in the direction of knowledge activism.

On joining CODESRIA and through that, the Committee of Management of the African Book Collective, we took a stubborn commitment to continuously “make noise”, disrupt and therefore begin the process of shifting the narrative and leveling the global publishing playing field. Together with allies in ‘Northern’ institutions, we began the process of centring publishing at the core of intellectual and epistemic debates about African studies and decolonisation. The increase in publishing and knowledge production streams, panels, workshops and, soon, conferences is an indication of awareness, recognition and the growing commitment to this knowledge activism. African studies journals such as Journal of African Cultural Studies, African Affairs, centres for African studies, organisations such as the International African Institute, African Studies Association of the UK, African Studies Association of Africa, ECAS, the Lagos, Ghana and East African studies associations now place publishing at the heart of their intellectual agendas. The push to reform journal and series editorial boards, even amongst what continues to be considered as “top international” publishers, are encouraging outcomes of knowledge activism and early steps towards de-linking and epistemic disobedience. Increasingly a stubborn collective is building insisting on publishing from the continent and adopting citation practices that privilege conversations and ideas from the continent. Some “northern” publishers have also begun to realise the importance of placing their brandnames after those from this continent in co-publication projects.

It is these small infrastructural steps that will reorient the knowledge ecosystem to jumpstart disrupted and asphyxiated processes of “introverted” epistemic mainstreaming. This continent’s epistemological contributions to thinking the human condition need ventilation. The process of rehabilitating “Southern theory”, repatriating and reintegrating epistemic évolués is unfolding. If this is happening, and at a faster pace, it is due to the deployment of feminist transformative strategies and methodologies. In fact, it is a dynamic collective of feminist knowledge activists whose strategic politics, constructive interventions and solidarities that span the globe and allow knowledge activists the safety of a community of troublemakers, killjoys and complainers that is the catalyst of this new disobedience momentum.

As should be expected, this stubborn politics of disobedience and de-linking is, and will continue to face resistance from a group of people who enjoy having their knees on the neck of the continent’s knowledge infrastructure and ecosystem. Some allies of this group have formed the dirty habit of coding these important epistemic disobedience conversations about the political economy of knowledge production, particularly publishing, as “merely wallowing in futile complaint”. This familiar coding of activism as “complaining”, meant to hush, undermine and stifle knowledge activism, is at the core of the kids of toxic gerontocratic practices of silencing that combine with well known tendencies to dismiss and frame critiques of knowledge hegemonies as laziness, empty talk, ethnoscience, lacking in incoherent theory, and therefore unproductive.

Such pathetic politics of dismissiveness are remnants of a resilient and unsalvageable phallographic philosophy of single erections that is typical of toxic patriarchy. It is manifest in writing, peer review processes, oppressive administrative and management practices that unfairly stand in the way of knowledge dissemination, amongst others. Sadly, as research and experience has shown, this kind of toxic patriarchy is the preserve but not the monopoly of particular corporeality; and having a particular kind of oppressed and disadvantaged form does not always lead to progressive politics. The structural and personal violence disseminated by this masculinity type continues to inhibit diverse attempts at epistemic restitution through an insistence on world making through its lenses and on its own terms.

But, as Lorde (1984) has already cautioned “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Dabashi (2015) insists that it is not our responsibility to habilitate the provincially and decolonial epistemic illiteracy, insecurities and emotional incompetency of the resistance. Knowledge activism is an act of complaining. It is an exercise in dismantling through disobedience and de-linking, and thus an attempt to undo hegemonic toxic knowledge systems through the deployment of alternative methodologies. Knowledge activism is the pedagogy we need to power ventilators for epistemic breathing and healing in a system that has mastered the art of intellectual asphyxiation.

Again, this kind of knowledge complaint work, like all others, comes at great costs to states of mind, careers, reputations, friendships and especially damaging to those aspiring to join the ranks of epistemic and intellectual évolués. Ahmed (2014) writes,

“complaint means committing yourself, your time, your energy, your being, to a course of action that often leads you away from the work you want to do even if you complain in order to do the work you want to do.” Ultimately, she argues, it is the kind of “non-reproductive” work that must be done to halt the cloning and reproduction of a toxic system.

If, as the resistance wants to make us believe that this is all empty talk without groundedness, then knowledge activism is the kind of lie that must be told repeatedly and consecutively, over and over again, until the point at which it becomes validated as the truth. But this lie of the productive value of epistemic disobedience must be vigorously retold and promoted by knowledge activist with self-preservation. As Lorde (1988) argues individual and collective practices of self-care and healing are in themselves radical political acts and should be at the core of revolutionary activist struggles. As Ahmed tells us, the work of complaint never stops with a complaint also because complaining allows us to discover other complaints and complainers in the system, and especially that the particular complaint being made has been in the system, unattended, silenced and its authors ostracized. It is for this reason that she recommends, “creating complaint collectives in order to create a shared record or to share experiences.” Knowledge activism is an attempt at bringing together de-linkers and disobeyers to create a shared record, share experiences, but also deploy strategic interventions to disrupt the epicentres of hegemonic knowledge systems and projects.

Decoloniality is a cultural politics. It is a cultural project, embedded in our personal and collective politics; an attempt at mainstreaming new pedagogic practices of thought and embodiment. To imagine an alternative world that increases the value of certain ontologies and epistemologies requires that we de-link and disobey. This disobedience means that our appetites and aspirations for particular kinds of distinctive prestige and this addiction that we have cultivated towards global excellence will have to change. The rewards will be different, and scholars are bound to be invisible to “international” audiences, and therefore descend into what could be perceived as “slow death”. In other words, decolonizing the knowledge means that we must be prepared to deny ourselves the luxury of the ultimate promise of modernity – *progress*, especially as conceived through imperial imagination, we are addicted to. This denial is an essential act of de-linking and permanent rupture from epicentres of epistemic violence, rather than a temporary new experimental situation.

Knowledge activism continues with the work that decolonial knowledge compliant collectives have been undertaking. If we must return to the African archives and everyday creativity and spontaneity for epistemic healing and restoration, as Mbembe (2001) continues to argue, to tease out alternative modes of thinking human futures (Mbembe 2015), then we must also take seriously its politics and practices of organisation and activism – complaint. We are a continent of complaints and complainers. The resistance must become accustomed to this kind of disruption. Hontoundji (1989) concedes that resisting this temptation is near impossible, and the fact that this call for resistance is mainly directed at us in the South is revealing



of the difficulty of lifting the knee that continues to press down on our attempts for knowledge liberation, especially publishing.

To advocate for epistemic liberation, and returning to the African archives to challenge and shove off the suffocating hegemonic knees behind our epistemic necks, and not embrace the every day ontological practices and politics that accompany these epistemologies is to deny existence and do as Fanon has stated, “white skin, black masks” Epistemic liberation is not just about what we write, but also the embodiment and celebration of a cultural politics that is often rendered useless because of the ways in which it makes it difficult to be read and decoded. But it also means radically changing our politics to resist our addiction to academic and epistemic internationalism.

Bio:

Divine Fuh is a social anthropologist from Cameroon and Director of HUMA – Institute for Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town. He joined UCT in 2012, from the University of Basel where he was a Researcher in the Chair for Research and Methodology at the Institute for Sociology. His research focuses on the politics of suffering and smiling, particularly on how urban youth seek ways of smiling in the midst of their suffering. He has researched Botswana, Cameroon, Senegal and South Africa. His current work focuses on the political economy of Pan-African knowledge production, and also on AI and the ethics of care in Africa. He was Director of Publications and Dissemination Programme at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa CODESRIA from 2017-2019. He has taught at the universities of Basel, Cape Town, Western Cape, Stellenbosch, and has been visiting lecturer at the Universities of Brasilia, Tokyo, and Gaston Berger. He was trained at the Universities of Buea in Cameroon (B.Sc), Botswana in Gaborone (MA), and Basel in Switzerland (PhD). He has been a visiting fellow at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin (ZMO), and guest at the African Studies Centre Leiden. Divine is Founding Managing Editor of Langa Research and Publishing, has been Chair of the Council of Management of the Africa Book Collective, and current Co-Chair of the Global Africa Group (GAG) of the World Universities Council (WUN).