

Epistemic Injustice And Political Marginalization In Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the interconnected phenomena of epistemic injustice and political marginalization in African contexts, arguing that these constitute enduring legacies of colonialism that continue to shape knowledge production, governance structures, and social relations across the continent. Through a comprehensive analysis of diverse literature, we demonstrate how epistemic injustice (manifested through the systematic exclusion, devaluation, and misrepresentation of African knowledge systems and ways of knowing) serves as both a foundation for and perpetuating mechanism of political marginalization. The paper explores theoretical frameworks of epistemic injustice developed by scholars like Miranda Fricker and decolonial thinkers. Our analysis reveals how Western-centric knowledge systems continue to dominate academic and policy spaces, effectively silencing African voices and perspectives while normalising Euro-centric epistemologies as universal. The paper concludes by discussing strategies of resistance and decolonization, proposing concrete measures to advance epistemic justice through educational transformation, institutional reform, and the centering of previously marginalized knowledge systems. This research contributes to ongoing debates about decolonization, restorative justice, and the transformation of knowledge production systems in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: epistemic injustice, political marginalization, decolonization, Africa, knowledge production, colonialism, Euro-centrism

Introduction

Epistemic injustice and political marginalization in Africa represent interlocking systems of oppression whose roots extend deep into the colonial encounter and whose manifestations continue to shape contemporary African societies in profound ways. Epistemic injustice, broadly defined as wrongs done to individuals and communities in their capacity as *knowers* and producers of knowledge, operates through the systematic devaluation of certain forms of knowledge and ways of knowing while privileging others . In the African context, this has historically involved the suppression of indigenous knowledge systems and the imposition of Western epistemologies as universal standards against which all other knowledge must be measured .

The intimate relationship between epistemic injustice and political marginalization cannot be overstated. Political marginalization, which is the exclusion of certain groups from meaningful participation in political processes and decision-making, often finds its justification in epistemic claims about who possesses valid knowledge and who does not. As Mungwini notes, the struggle for epistemic justice is as fundamental to humanity as all other struggles for social justice¹ . This paper argues that meaningful political liberation in Africa requires confronting the epistemic foundations upon which political marginalization has been built and sustained.

The enduring legacy of colonialism constitutes a central focus of this analysis. Colonialism was not merely a political and economic project but also an epistemological one that involved what Ndlovu-Gatsheni terms the "colonization of the mind"² . This epistemological dimension of colonialism created what is conceptualized as the "coloniality of power"³ — a global power structure that continues to privilege Western knowledge systems and modes of being long after formal colonialism has ended. Understanding this historical depth is essential for comprehending contemporary manifestations of epistemic injustice and political marginalization in Africa.

This paper draws on diverse scholarly perspectives to develop a comprehensive analysis of epistemic injustice and political marginalization in Africa. We engage with philosophical accounts of epistemic injustice, historical analyses of colonial

¹ Pascah Mungwini, 'The question of epistemic justice: Polemics, contestations and dialogue', *Phronimon*, 19(1), 2018, 22.

² S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Decentering Coloniality: Epistemic Justice, Development Studies and Structural Transformation', *Springer*, 2025.

³ A. Quijano, *Foundational essays on the coloniality of power*, (Duke University Press, 2015), 10.

epistemology, critical studies of specific domains like accounting and development aid, and emerging scholarship on decolonization. Through this multidisciplinary approach, we seek to illuminate the complex connections between knowledge production, power, and political exclusion in African contexts.

2 Theoretical Framework: Conceptualizing Epistemic Injustice

The concept of epistemic injustice provides a theoretical lens for understanding the relationship between knowledge production and systems of marginalization in Africa. Originally developed by philosopher Miranda Fricker, epistemic injustice refers to wrongs done to individuals or groups in their capacity as *knowers*. Fricker identifies two primary forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice⁴.

Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker receives a credibility deficit due to identity prejudice on the part of the hearer. In the African context, this manifests when African *knowers* and knowledge producers are systematically accorded less credibility than their Western counterparts based on prejudicial assumptions about the superiority of Western knowledge systems. Koch's research on development aid demonstrates how local experts in countries like Tanzania and South Africa are often perceived as less credible than international consultants from Northern donor countries, despite possessing more contextual knowledge and experience⁵.

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when individuals or groups lack the interpretive resources to make sense of their social experiences due to their exclusion from knowledge production processes. This form of injustice is particularly relevant in Africa, where indigenous conceptual frameworks and ways of understanding the world have been systematically marginalized or erased by colonial and neo-colonial knowledge projects. The result is what Mungwini describes as "interpretative marginalization,"⁶ where the sense-making practices of marginalized communities are rendered less intelligible to powerful actors.

Beyond Fricker's framework, decolonial scholars have expanded our understanding of epistemic injustice to include what can be termed structural epistemic injustice. This

⁴ M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.

⁵ S. Koch, 'Contextualising Epistemic Injustice in Aid: On Colliding Interests, Colonialism and Counter-Movements', *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, 2021, 18.

⁶ Pascah Mungwini, 'The question of epistemic justice: Polemics, contestations and dialogue', 25.

concept captures how epistemic injustice becomes embedded in institutions, curricula, and knowledge production systems in ways that systematically privilege Western epistemologies while marginalizing others . The dominance of Western epistemologies is not accidental but rather the product of what was identified as the "colonial package"—a hierarchical organization of people, knowledge, and resources established during colonialism that continues to structure global power relations today by Grosfoguel⁷ .

The concept of Euro-centrism is central to understanding epistemic injustice in Africa. It is the belief, implicit or otherwise, in the world historical significance of events believed to have developed endogenously within the cultural-geographical sphere of Europe. This Euro-centric perspective normalizes Western knowledge as universal while framing non-Western knowledge as particular, local, and therefore of limited applicability or value. The result of which is the systematic destruction of alternative knowledge systems.

3 Historical Roots: Colonialism as Epistemic Injustice

The contemporary manifestations of epistemic injustice in Africa have deep historical roots in the colonial project. Colonialism was not merely a political and economic system but also an epistemological one that involved what recent scholarship has identified as the "distinctive wrong" of colonialism—its epistemic dimension . This epistemic injustice served as both justification for and mechanism of colonial domination.

The colonial enterprise was predicated on what became a systematic denial of the very humanity and cognitive capacities of colonized peoples. As articulated by influential European philosophers including Hume, Kant, and Hegel, African peoples were positioned as inferior in the racial hierarchy of humanity, lacking in reason, history, and therefore the capacity to produce valid knowledge about themselves or the world . Hegel's *Philosophy of History* in particular provided "the most exalted statement of European self-affirmation in opposition to other races, the most elaborate rationalization of European ethnocentrism"⁸. This philosophical foundation provided

⁷ R. Grosfoguel, 'The epistemic decolonial turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms', *Cultural Studies*, 21, 2007, 74.

⁸ B.A. Ogot, *A life of decolonizing African history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 16.

the justification for colonial domination and the subsequent epistemic marginalization of African knowledge systems.

The epistemic violence of colonialism manifested in concrete practices including the suppression of indigenous languages and knowledge systems, the imposition of European education models, and the systematic devaluation of African ways of knowing. For instance, in the accounting context discussed by Lassou et al., the accounting profession was introduced during Western colonialism and evolved in a manner that marginalized Black Africans and continues to do so⁹. Similar processes occurred across other disciplines and domains of knowledge, creating a global division between centers of knowledge production (the West) and peripheries of knowledge consumption (the rest).

The linguistic dimension of colonial epistemic injustice deserves particular attention. As Wa Thiong'o argues, colonialism involved the systematic privileging of European languages while marginalizing African languages as mediums of knowledge production and dissemination. This linguistic domination had profound implications for epistemic justice, as language serves as the primary vehicle for conceptualizing and transmitting knowledge. The dominance of English, French, and Portuguese in African education systems and knowledge production continues to marginalize indigenous knowledge systems that are encoded in African languages.

The political dimension of colonial epistemic injustice involves the systematic exclusion of Africans from political participation based on claims about their cognitive inferiority and inability to self-govern. This political marginalization was justified through what Canavan terms the "denial of coevalness"—the representation of Africans as existing in an earlier, less developed temporal stage than Europeans¹⁰. This temporal othering served to justify colonial domination while naturalizing the exclusion of Africans from political participation.

4 Case Studies and Contemporary Manifestations

⁹ P. Lassou, T. Hopper, M. Tsamenyi, & V. Murinde, 'ChatGPT and accounting in African contexts: Amplifying epistemic injustice', *ScienceDirect*, 2024, 45.

¹⁰ H. Canavan, *So, what's wrong with colonialism?: Understanding colonialism's political, territorial and epistemic injustice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 12.

4.1 Accounting Knowledge and Practice

The field of accounting in Africa provides a compelling case study of how epistemic injustice operates in professional practice. As Lassou et al. demonstrate, the accounting profession began in Africa during Western colonialism and evolved in a manner that marginalized Black Africans and continues to do so¹¹. This marginalization operates through what the authors term "amplified epistemic injustice"—the ways in which Western-centric accounting knowledge and practices are privileged while African approaches are systematically excluded or devalued.

The epistemic exclusion in accounting manifests in several ways. First, accounting research on African contexts remains marginalized in mainstream accounting journals, which are predominantly Western-based and prioritize Western theoretical frameworks and methodologies. Second, accounting education in Africa continues to rely heavily on Western textbooks and case studies, with limited integration of African contexts and practices. Third, professional accounting standards in Africa are largely adaptations of Western standards, with limited consideration of African economic practices and values.

4.2 Education Systems

Education represents a key site where epistemic injustice is perpetuated and contested in Africa. As multiple scholars note, education systems across Africa continue to be characterized by "interpretative marginalization—the exclusion of African knowledge systems and ways of meaning-making from curricula and pedagogical practices¹².

The epistemic injustices in education manifest through biased curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods that privilege Western knowledge while marginalizing African knowledge systems. This includes the dominance of Western literature and philosophy in humanities curricula, the marginalization of indigenous languages as mediums of instruction, and the devaluation of African pedagogical traditions such as oral storytelling and apprenticeship models.

The consequences of these educational epistemic injustices are profound. Students from African backgrounds often find their experiences and knowledge systems

¹¹ P. Lassou, T. Hopper, M. Tsamenyi, & V. Murinde, 'ChatGPT and accounting in African contexts: Amplifying epistemic injustice', 47.

¹² Pascah Mungwuini, 'The question of epistemic justice: Polemics, contestations and dialogue', 25.

excluded from formal education, creating what Fricker considers as the the inability to make sense of one's experiences due to exclusion from knowledge production¹³. This can lead to academic disengagement, identity conflicts, and the internalization of epistemic inferiority.

The decolonization movement in African education represents a significant response to these epistemic injustices. As Mungwini contends, students and scholars across Africa have called for the "re-centering" of Africa in curricula and knowledge production¹⁴. This involves prioritizing Africa as the place and intellectual territory from which philosophical activity takes place, ensuring that African students are steeped in their own heritage before engaging with other traditions .

4.3 Development Aid

The domain of development aid provides another illuminating case study of epistemic injustice in Africa. As Koch's research demonstrates, development cooperation is characterized by systematic credibility deficits for local experts from aid-receiving countries¹⁵. Despite the rhetoric of partnership that has dominated development discourse since the 1990s, power asymmetries continue to shape knowledge production and expertise in development contexts.

Koch identifies how testimonial injustice operates in development aid: "experts from aid-receiving countries suffer a systematic credibility deficit which is closely interrelated with the credibility excess 'international' experts (usually meaning experts from Northern donor countries) profit from"¹⁶. This credibility deficit persists despite the fact that local experts often possess more contextual knowledge and understanding of local problems and solutions.

The historical roots of these epistemic injustices in development aid lie in colonialism. As Koch notes, the social imaginary of Northern epistemic superiority was constructed in colonial times and continues to shape North-South knowledge relations today¹⁷. Grosfoguel's concept of the "colonial package"¹⁸ helps explain how colonial

¹³ M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*, 28.

¹⁴ Paschal Mungwini, 'The question of epistemic justice: Polemics, contestations and dialogue', 28

¹⁵ S. Koch, 'Contextualising Epistemic Injustice in Aid: On Colliding Interests, Colonialism and Counter-Movements', 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷ S. Koch, 'Contextualising Epistemic Injustice in Aid: On Colliding Interests, Colonialism and Counter-Movements', 23.

¹⁸ R. Grosfoguel, 'The epistemic decolonial turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms', *Cultural Studies*, 75.

hierarchies of knowledge and being continue to structure development cooperation, with Northern experts accorded greater credibility and authority than their Southern counterparts .

The structural dimensions of epistemic injustice in development aid are evident in hiring practices, funding arrangements, and knowledge production systems that privilege Northern institutions and experts. Koch notes how procurement and employment practices "keep up the privilege of 'international' experts," effectively institutionalizing hermeneutical injustice¹⁹. This occurs despite rhetorical commitments to local participation and ownership in development projects.

4.4 Healthcare and Artificial Intelligence

The healthcare sector reveals emerging forms of epistemic injustice related to technological development, particularly artificial intelligence. As Ewuoso discusses, the increasing integration of Artificial intelligence into healthcare systems raises complex questions about epistemic justice, particularly regarding what is termed the "Black Box problem"²⁰ .

The "Black Box problem" refers to situations where Artificial intelligence decision-making processes are opaque and incomprehensible to users and patients. This opacity creates what Ewuoso further identifies as three significant gaps: (i) a knowledge/information exchange gap between machines, clinicians, and patients; (ii) a responsibility gap regarding who is accountable for Artificial intelligence generated decisions; and (iii) an informed decision-making capacity gap that undermines patient autonomy²¹.

These gaps have particular significance for Africa given global power asymmetries in Artificial intelligence development. Since Artificial intelligence systems are predominantly developed in Western contexts using training data that reflect Western perspectives and biases, they risk perpetuating "epistemic neocolonialism" in healthcare . This occurs when Artificial intelligence systems developed in the West

¹⁹ S. Koch, 'Contextualising Epistemic Injustice in Aid: On Colliding Interests, Colonialism and Counter-Movements', 23.

²⁰ C. Ewuoso, *Epistemic (in)justice, social identity and the Black Box problem in healthcare* (Al. PMC, 2024), 13.

²¹ Ibid, 13.

are applied to African contexts without adequate consideration of local knowledge, practices, and values.

The epistemic injustices in healthcare mirror broader patterns of epistemic exclusion in global knowledge production. As Ewuoso argues, addressing these injustices requires engagement with decolonial scholarship that challenges the presumed universality of Western knowledge systems²². This includes recognizing how social identity and power relations shape whose knowledge is considered valid in healthcare contexts.

5 Resistance and Decolonization: Pathways to Epistemic Justice

5.1 Theoretical Foundations of Decolonization

The project of decolonizing knowledge in Africa represents the most comprehensive response to epistemic injustice and political marginalization. As Mungwini argues, decolonization involves "reclaiming Africa's position in the conversation of humankind" after centuries of epistemic exclusion²³. This reclamation requires what he terms "strategic particularism"— a philosophical framework that centers African experiences and perspectives in academic projects while challenging false universality claims of Western knowledge systems.

Decolonization is fundamentally about what Ndlovu-Gatsheni²⁴ describes as "decentering coloniality"— disrupting the patterns of power, knowledge, and being that emerged from colonialism and continue to structure contemporary world order . This involves challenging the coloniality of knowledge (the privileging of Western epistemologies), the coloniality of power (global power asymmetries rooted in colonialism), and the coloniality of being (racial hierarchies that privilege Western modes of existence).

²² Ibid. 13.

²³ Pascah Mungwini, 'The question of epistemic justice: Polemics, contestations and dialogue', 25.

²⁴ S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Decentering Coloniality: Epistemic Justice, Development Studies and Structural Transformation', 13

The theoretical resources for decolonisation draw on diverse intellectual traditions including Black scholarship (Du Bois, Fanon, Nkrumah), Caribbean and Latin American decolonial thought (Mignolo, Maldonado-Torres, Quijano), and African philosophy (Wiredu, Gyekye, Oladipo) . These traditions provide alternative epistemological frameworks that center the experiences and perspectives of those marginalized by Western modernity.

A key concept in decolonial thought is what Mignolo terms "border thinking"—the epistemic perspective of those living at the margins of the modern/colonial world system²⁵. This perspective recognizes that all knowledge is situated and partial, challenging claims to universality that characterize Western epistemology. Border thinking represents a way of knowing that emerges from the experiences of those who have suffered systematic epistemic injustice .

5.2 Concrete Strategies for Epistemic Justice

Achieving epistemic justice in Africa requires concrete strategies across multiple domains including education, research, policy, and technology. Based on the analysis of epistemic injustice presented in this paper, we identify several key strategies for advancing epistemic justice:

- i. Educational transformation: This involves decolonising curricula across all levels of education. This includes integrating African knowledge systems and perspectives, promoting multilingual education that values African languages, and developing pedagogical approaches that draw on African traditions . As Mungwini argues, educational transformation should ensure that "African students of philosophy should be steeped in his/her own heritage of philosophy before looking elsewhere"²⁶.
- ii. Research reform: Part of the measures towards the attainment of epistemic justice requires challenging the dominance of Western theories and methodologies while creating space for alternative approaches. This includes supporting Africa-centered research, challenging publication biases in favour of Western topics and approaches, and promoting ethical research collaborations that avoid what Hountondji terms "scientific extraversion" ²⁷.

²⁵ W.D. Mignolo, 'Decolonial?, Postcolonial? What does it mean to decolonise ourselves?', *Decolonizing Modern Languages and Cultures. School of Modern Languages* (Newcastle: Newcastle University Press, 2021), 22.

²⁶ Pascah Mungwini, 'The question of epistemic justice: Polemics, contestations and dialogue', 26.

²⁷ P. Hountondji, 'Scientific Dependence in Africa Today'. *Research in African Literatures* 21(3), 1990.

iii. Policy transformation: This involves integrating epistemic justice considerations into policy development and implementation. This includes recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge in policy domains like healthcare, agriculture, and environmental management, and creating mechanisms for inclusive participation in policy processes . Policy transformation also requires addressing the linguistic injustices that marginalize African languages in official contexts.

iv. Technological development: This must address epistemic injustices embedded in emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence. This requires ensuring that artificial intelligence systems are transparent, accountable, and developed with consideration of diverse cultural perspectives and values²⁸. Technological development should also promote what pluriversality, that is, the coexistence of multiple knowledge systems rather than the dominance of one.

6 Conclusion and Implications

This paper has examined the intertwined phenomena of epistemic injustice and political marginalization in Africa, arguing that these represent enduring legacies of colonialism that continue to shape knowledge production, governance structures, and social relations across the continent. Our analysis reveals how epistemic injustice—manifested through the systematic exclusion, devaluation, and misrepresentation of African knowledge systems—serves as both foundation for and perpetuating mechanism of political marginalization.

The colonial origins of contemporary epistemic injustices cannot be overstated. Colonialism involved what recent scholarship identifies as the "distinctive wrong" of epistemic injustice—the denial of the very humanity and cognitive capacities of colonized peoples . This epistemic dimension of colonialism provided the justification for political domination and continues to structure global knowledge production in ways that privilege Western epistemologies while marginalizing others.

The contemporary manifestations of epistemic injustice across diverse domains—from accounting and education to development aid and healthcare—demonstrate how colonial patterns of knowledge and power persist long after formal colonialism has ended. In accounting, Western knowledge and practices continue to be privileged

²⁸ C. Ewuoso, *Epistemic (in)justice, social identity and the Black Box problem in healthcare*, 13.

while African approaches are marginalized . In education, curricula and pedagogical practices remain largely Western-centric, resulting in what Fricker terms hermeneutical injustice for African students . In development aid, local experts continue to suffer credibility deficits compared to their international counterparts . In healthcare, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence risk perpetuating epistemic neocolonialism through opaque decision-making processes .

The project of decolonization represents the most comprehensive response to these epistemic injustices. This involves "reclaiming Africa's position in the conversation of humankind"²⁹ through strategic particularism that centers African experiences and perspectives . This also requires educational transformation, research reform, policy changes, and technological development that recognize the value of diverse knowledge systems and promote what pluriversality rather than universalism .

6.1 Implications for Policy and Practice

The analysis presented in this paper has several important implications for policy and practice. First, addressing epistemic injustice requires explicit attention to knowledge politics in development policy and practice. This includes creating mechanisms for inclusive participation in knowledge production and recognizing the value of diverse knowledge systems in addressing complex development challenges.

Second, educational reform must go beyond superficial changes to engage in fundamental transformation of curricula, pedagogical practices, and assessment methods. This involves centering African knowledge systems and perspectives while challenging the false universality claims of Western knowledge.

Third, research practices must confront and address the power asymmetries that shape global knowledge production. This includes promoting ethical research collaborations that avoid parachute research, supporting Africa-centered journals and publishing platforms, and challenging publication biases that favor Western topics and approaches.

Fourth, technological development must consider epistemic justice implications, particularly as artificial intelligence and other digital technologies become increasingly integrated into African societies. This requires ensuring that these

²⁹ Pascah Mungwuini, 'The question of epistemic justice: Polemics, contestations and dialogue', 26.

technologies are transparent, accountable, and developed with consideration of diverse cultural perspectives and values.

6.2 Directions for Future Research

This paper has identified several productive avenues for future research on epistemic injustice and political marginalization in Africa. First, more empirical studies are needed to document how epistemic injustice operates across different domains and contexts. While philosophical work on epistemic injustice has advanced significantly, empirical studies remain limited, particularly in African contexts.

Second, research is needed on resistance strategies and their effectiveness in challenging epistemic injustice. This includes studies of decolonization projects in education, research, and policy that can identify successful approaches and potential pitfalls.

Third, comparative research across different regions of Africa would help identify common patterns and context-specific manifestations of epistemic injustice. Such research could facilitate cross-regional learning and solidarity in addressing epistemic injustice.

Fourth, research is needed on the inter-sectionality of epistemic injustice with other forms of oppression including gender, class, and ethnicity. While this paper has focused primarily on geographic epistemic injustice, future research should examine how multiple axes of marginalization shape epistemic experiences.

In conclusion, addressing epistemic injustice and political marginalization in Africa requires confronting the epistemic foundations upon which political exclusion has been built and sustained. This involves challenging the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being that continues to structure global relations long after formal colonialism has ended.

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