Mobilising History for nation-building in South Africa: A decolonial perspective

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges facing people in the process of becoming South Africans today is that of building a cohesive national identity out of diverse and competing national, cultural and ethnic aspirations and identities that were never imagined as belonging to a single nation-state. This challenge has been made worse by the fact that the advent of the post-apartheid dispensation came with liberal democratic values of diversity, tolerance and various forms of freedom such as those of choice, association and speech. All of these freedoms have brought about an impediment to the cultivation of the spirit of patriotism, common belonging and unity among the peoples meant to become South Africans. While a number of obstacles have been identified in the quest to develop a sense of common belonging among the peoples who occupy the cartographic space known as South Africa today, the question of knowledge production and its divisive role in the making of South Africa has not yet been comprehensively addressed. This gap needs to be addressed urgently with specific reference to the field of producing historical knowledge because the manner in which historical events and narratives are imagined and reconstructed in South Africa today has the potential to constrain and/or enhance common belonging. This article is a decolonial epistemic perspective on the production of historical knowledge in South Africa and it argues that a decolonised historical narrative can possibly lead to the emergence of a cohesive South African national identity.

Keywords: History; Decoloniality; Nation-building; Eurocentrism; Knowledge production.

Introduction

In addition to the fact that the Third World suffered colonial domination in the political and economic spheres of life, this part of the world also experienced colonial domination in the field of knowledge production. Thus,

ever since the dawn of Euro-centred modernity, the processes of knowledge production "for" and "about" the indigenous peoples of the Third World have always been characterised by a relationship of dominance and subordination and/or resistance. With the demise of juridical administrative colonialism and the advent of the so-called "postcolonial world", the question that needs urgent attention is that of whether the manner in which knowledge production has been taking place in the colonial past in the countries of the Third World has opened up to accommodate the aspirations and needs of the previously colonised people. This question is quite significant because knowledge production is crucial to many of the political, economic and social developmental needs of the peoples of the Third World. Thus, knowledge production is crucial to developmental aspects of the Third World such as peaceful coexistence, self-determination, economic prosperity and many other "concrete manifestations of freedom" (Gordon, 2011:101) that can serve as markers of the emergence of a truly "postcolonial world".

In a country such as South Africa, the question of knowledge production is quite crucial to the challenge of national identity and peaceful existence among the peoples who never imagined themselves as belonging to a single national identity. The post-apartheid South Africa, like many other postcolonial African states that emerged out of the divisive colonial experience, is in the process of crafting a solid and cohesive national belonging. But the question that needs urgent attention is that of whether forms of knowledge that previously served to divide the peoples of South Africa have been transformed to support the spirit of unity and common belonging among the peoples meant to become South Africans. This is quite important with specific reference to the production of historical knowledge in South Africa because the manner in which the histories of the peoples meant to become South Africans is imagined and narrated in the present tends to divisive.

This article is a decolonial epistemic perspective on South African history and it advocates an inclusive and "pluriversal" approach to the production and dissemination of historical knowledge in the post-apartheid South Africa. The article is predicated on the idea that events of the past have a special place in the memory of society and as such, the manner in which the past is imagined, reconstructed and disseminated in the present can either unite or divide the people meant to become South Africans. However, in order to convincingly advocate for the decolonisation of South African history, it is important to motivate why history is important for identity construction in

the first place.

History and the politics of identity construction

History is quite an important subject for identity construction. According to scholars such as Friedman (1992a:207), this is mainly "because the politics of identity consists in anchoring the present in a viable past" and "the past is, thus, constructed according to the conditions and desires of those who produce historical textbooks in the present". In other words, this means that "all history including modern historiography is mythology" because "history is an imprinting of the present on to the past" (Friedman, 1992b:837). In post-apartheid South Africa, the question that emerges out of this understanding of history is that of whether the manner in which myth-making in the present is imprinted on to the past enhances or prevents the construction of an inclusive national belonging. This is quite vital to examine because the formation of a new national identity that unites populations can be impossible without recourse to some myth-making. What this means is that "without myths, memories and symbols by which to mark off group members from 'strangers'" (Smith, 1984:288), it is difficult to cultivate a sense of common belonging within a newly conceived national identity such as that of being South African, especially among groups of people and individuals who never imagined themselves as part of the same nation.

In postcolonial African states the objective of colonial discourse was "to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha, 1994:70). This has led to the emergence of different historical discourses such as the liberal, nationalist and Africanist historiography, among others, so as to counter the dominance of colonial historiography. However, the question that needs to be answered is not that of the role played by different historiographical projects in the past in terms of rectifying the colonial history which distorted and disfigured the histories of the oppressed, but is that of what role do anti- and pro-colonial historiographical traditions play in the present. This question is quite significant because anti-colonial and pro-colonial historiographical projects during the colonial period were developed out of certainties about existence of colonial domination and resistance to it, but the advent of the idea of a "postcolonial world" means that the usefulness of dominance versus resistance discourse needs to evaluated against the new challenges such as the construction of inclusive nationhood.

By and large, the question of usefulness of historiographical constructions predicated on grand narratives of colonial and/or anti-colonial struggles is further complicated by the advent of post-modernist and postcolonial theoretical premises that have rendered the metanarratives of history simplistic and superficial. While the question of the role of anti-colonial and pro-colonial historiographical traditions with specific reference to the task of nation-building in the present is quite important, the usefulness of these historiographical traditions can only be gauged after the idea of a "postcolonial world" has been examined. This is mainly because the idea of a postcolonial world itself has since been challenged by different scholars such as Grosfoguel (2007:219) and Spivak (1990:166) ever since its advent. The following section, therefore, grapples with the question of the myth of postcolonialism and its implication for knowledge production in general. Thus, the following section begins by demonstrating how the production of knowledge within formerly colonised states is generally underpinned by coloniality. But in order to successfully unmask coloniality in the production of historical knowledge in countries such as South Africa, it is crucial to first demonstrate the differences between the idea of coloniality and colonialism.

The myth of postcolonialism and the coloniality of knowledge production

One of the fundamental questions confronting knowledge production in general and the production of historical knowledge in the African continent as a whole today is that of coloniality. Coloniality is a power structure that survives the end of direct colonialism and continues to sustain asymmetrical power relations and conceptions of humanity through racial, gender, sex, religious and ethnic hierarchisations. The question that emerges from this understanding of coloniality, instead of colonialism, is: Does the manner in which historical knowledge production takes place, within what is today dubbed postcolonial Africa, reflect and accommodate the worldviews and aspirations of all who live in them or does it only present Euro-centric worldviews and voices on African history?, This question is quite important because during the colonial encounter between Africans and Europeans, the voice of the European settler, particularly the literate missionary's voice, constituted itself as the major source for historical reconstruction of African history (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011:93). But to comprehensively answer this question, there is a need to further explicate the concept of coloniality and its usefulness in demonstrating the need to decolonise historical knowledge

within countries of the non-Western world such as South Africa.

The concept of coloniality is quite important in understanding colonial forms of domination beyond classical juridical administrative colonialism. Thus, according to Grosfoguel (2007:219):

> One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world. This led to the myth of a 'postcolonial' world. The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in place over a period of 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same 'colonial power matrix'. With juridical administrative decolonization we moved from a period of 'global colonialism' to the current period of 'global coloniality'. Although 'colonialism administrations' have been entirely eradicated and the majority of the periphery is politically organised into independent states, non-European people are still living under crude European exploitation and domination. The old colonial hierarchies of European versus non-Europeans remain in place and are entangled with the 'international division of labour' and accumulation of capital at a world-scale.

The above articulation of coloniality simply means that the celebration of the removal of juridical administrative colonialism tends to obscure the continuity between the colonial past and many other invisible "colonialisms" in the present. These include the colonisation of knowledge – a development that can hinder unity among the peoples of formerly colonised nation-states such as South Africa.

Coloniality survives classical colonialism. According to scholars Maldonado-Torres (2007:243):

> Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to a long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day.

The concept of coloniality, unlike the critique that underpinned classical colonialism, unveils the mystery of why, after the end of colonial administrations in the juridical-political spheres of state administration, there is still continuity of colonial forms of domination. This is mainly

because the concept of coloniality addresses the issue of colonial domination, not from an isolated and singular point of departure such as the juridical-political administrative point of view, but from a vantage point of a variety of "colonial situations" that include cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression of subordinate racialised/ethnic groups by dominant racialised/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations (Grosfoguel, 2007:220). This holistic approach to the problem of colonial domination allows us to visualise other dynamics of the colonial process which include among them "colonization of imagination" (Quijano, 2007:168-178), "colonization of the mind" (Dascal, 2009:308) and colonisation of knowledge and power.

The idea of the colonisation of power and knowledge is quite crucial in that it explicates why, despite the advent of post-apartheid South Africa, knowledge production in subjects such as history, the views and voices of the formerly colonised peoples are marginalised in historical narratives. The concept of coloniality of power enables us to understand coloniality in ways that go beyond the Foucauldian concept of "disciplinary power" because through the idea of the "colonial matrix of power", the concept of "coloniality of power" views the modern world as a network of relations of exploitation and domination through technologies that affects all dimensions of social existence including knowledge production. According to Castro-Gomez (2002:276):

> *The concept of the 'coloniality of power' broadens and corrects the Foucauldian concept of 'disciplinary power' by demonstrating that the panoptic constructions erected by the modern state are inscribed in a wider structure of power/knowledge. This global structure is configured by the colonial relation between centre and periphery that is at the root of European expansion.*

The significance of the concept of coloniality of power, therefore, is that it enables the peoples of the Third World to understand the relationship between the power structure of colonial domination and knowledge production. Thus, the concept of coloniality of power is inseparably intertwined with that of knowledge which speaks directly to epistemological colonisation of the non-Western peoples through the processes of displacement, discipline and destruction of their knowledges. In the case of South Africa, where the former colonisers and the formerly colonised have resolved to reconcile and live together after the demise of juridical administrative apartheid, the question that emerges out of understanding how coloniality permeates knowledge production is that of whether this peaceful co-existence in the day-to-day relationships is extended to peaceful co-existence of "ecologies of knowledges"

about the past in the field of knowledge production. This question is quite significant because epistemic violence has the potential to affect the physical and social co-existence of the people.

By and large, the rhetoric of objectivity and universality has served to sustain the epistemicide of the peripherised knowledges. Coloniality in the field of knowledge production has tricked a number scholarly endeavours that sought to reverse Western hegemony by hiding the "locus of enunciation" (Grosfoguel, 2007:213) of the subject that speaks even if that subject perpetuates the subordination of the worldviews of non-Western peoples. In other words, through what Castro-Gomez (2003) referred as the "point zero" strategy, Euro-centric points of view come to be projected as a neutral "god-eye view" – a point of view that represents itself as being without a point of view and as such, even the marginalised subjects find themselves perpetuating their own marginalisation in the field of knowledge production through pursuing myths such as "objectivity" and "universal truths" that are beyond time and space. According to Grosfoguel (2007:213):

> By delinking the ethnic/racial/gender/sexual epistemic location from the subject that speaks, Western philosophy and sciences are able to produce a myth about a Truthful Universal knowledge that covers up, that is, conceals who is speaking as well as the geopolitical and body-political epistemic location in the structures of colonial power/knowledge from which the subject speaks.

What all this means, is that the hegemonic Western worldview tends to succeed in making the subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones that are located on the dominant side. The quest to decolonize history for nation-building is therefore not about the actual people who produce historical knowledge *per se* but is about the epistemic location of the narratives that dominate the field of knowledge production. This is mainly because it is possible for the people whose histories are the subjected to denigration to partake in the production of colonised versions of history. In other words, the key to the process of decolonising history lies in the colonised subject's capacity to shift what Gordon (2011:95) referred to as "the geography of reason" and practise what Mignolo (2009:159) termed "epistemic disobedience". It is this disobedience and the ability to "unthink" Western epistemic virtue that will enable the non-Western subject to activate his/her agency when articulating his/her version of history.

The Quest to trancend "struggle histories" for nation-building in South Africa

It is beyond dispute that the manner in which past events and activities are narrated, imagined, packaged and disseminated can either serve to unite or divide the people of South Africa during the process of nation-building. This is mainly because the manner in which historical discourses are constructed has the potential to unite or divide people along racial, ethnic, sexual, generational and gender lines. For instance, in the continent of Africa in general, the power of distorting historical events was particularly demonstrated during the colonial and apartheid eras where the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983:211-262) by colonial powers was deployed to achieve a colonial strategy of "divide and rule" in order to dominate the indigenous peoples of Africa.

In Southern Africa, the imagination and packaging of pre-colonial historical events such as the *mfecane* were deployed to prevent concerted action against colonial domination by dividing people on ethnic lines. In the *mfecane* discourses, ethnic groups such as Zulus and Ndebeles are portrayed as violent, barbaric, primitive and monstrous people who caused untold suffering in Southern Africa while other ethnic groups such as the BaSotho and Shona are generally presented as peace-loving victims of "bloodthirsty savages" and "war-mongers" (Epprecht 1994:114)

While the purpose of inventing and packaging history such as that of the *mfecane* during the colonial and apartheid South Africa was done in order to "reify African "tribalism" and justify apartheid" (Epprecht 1994:113), the problem is that the continued existence of such historical narratives in the post-apartheid era can prevent unity among the peoples meant to assume the new national identity. In South Africa, this predicament is made worse by the fact that nation-building projects and programmes, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that took place after the advent of a democratic era, only sought to reconcile the people to become South Africans along racial lines. This was done while neglecting the historically-rooted gender, generational, ethnic and sexual aspects of disunity and conflicts among the people who are meant to constitute the new inclusive South African national identity. One can, therefore, argue that this grave oversight can lead to the proliferation of anti-nation attitudes and behaviours such as patriarchy, tribalism, sexism, rape and generational struggles which can delay of the emergence of a truly inclusive South African rainbow national belonging.

In light of the evidence of how historical events and narratives have been packaged to cause disharmony and justify oppression during the colonial and apartheid eras in Africa in general and South Africa in particular, the question that we need to ask ourselves today is: To what extent has past patterns of inventing and packaging history for disunity and domination been reversed and re-directed towards the attainment of an inclusive common belonging by the postcolonial and post-apartheid governments? This question is quite important because the cumulative effect of divisive invented historical knowledge can render it a structural constraint upon which new articulations of historical knowledge fall into the trap of repeating the same divisive knowledge even if the context has changed to that of seeking inclusive nation-building.

In South Africa and Africa in general, the question of "unthinking" colonial knowledge has always been a problematic one. The resistance to colonial historiography has tended to fall into the trap of articulating the same ideologically-charged colonial historical narratives mainly because the new anti-colonial articulations of history tend to be predicated on the old colonial versions of the past. For instance, the attempt to re-articulate history by nationalist historians during the colonial and post-apartheid era have tended to rely on historical knowledge and evidence of colonial historiography by missionaries and colonial sources of the past whose ideological positions have always been questionable. This predicament calls for a fundamental paradigm shift in the practice of teaching, writing and narrating history in post-apartheid South Africa in such a way that subjugated historical narratives and imaginations of the past are made visible for the purposes of constructing a cohesive national identity in South Africa. This approach to the production of historical knowledge of the peoples who are meant to become South Africans in the postcolonial era is critical in that, if taken to the right level, it can crowd out those pre-existing colonial historical narratives and interpretations of history that have served to divide rather than unite the various peoples of South Africa.

By and large, one of the problematic historiographical constructions that need urgent attention is that which narrates African pre-colonial gender structures as sexist, conservative and driven by patriarchy. Such stereotypical historical narratives are dangerous for nation-building in two ways. Firstly, such historical narratives can be manipulated by abusive African men today to oppress women in the name of "tradition". Secondly, it creates a wedge between

men and women as well as between generations. While the narratives about African pre-colonial gender relations do not provide a useful basis for nation-building today, what needs to be understood is that the relations between men and women in pre-colonial relations cannot be conceived as generally underlined by a patriarchal ideology of power. Thus, for instance, pre-colonial societies such as the Igbo in Nigeria had matriarchal structures whereby girls were included in a protective women culture headed by matriarchs. According to Amadiume (2002:43), in the pre-colonial Igbo dual-sex political system, the titled women were central to consensual decision-making and controlled market places. In addition, to these "consensual decision-making systems" in African pre-colonial societies, it can be noted that societies such as the Igbo had goddesses, which means god was not only imagined as male as in Western religious terms of Christianity. This history, together with that of the role played by women in anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles, can serve to bridge the gender and generational relations in the search for a truly inclusive national identity in countries such as South Africa in the post-apartheid era. But in order to develop an inclusive historical archive and narrative towards the attainment of an inclusive and cohesive national belonging in a country as South Africa, it is vital for marginalised members of the society, such as women, particularly black women, to produce history from their own *loci* of enunciation. This will lead to a pluriversality of knowledges rather than universalistic kinds of historical narratives that have dominated colonial interpretations of the past.

Conclusion

In light of what has been discussed above, the question that needs to be answered is: What, then, should a decolonised South African history be? A decolonised South African history will ideally consist of ecologies of different historical narratives that do not assume any pretence to objectivity and universality. This kind of a historical narrative will enable the peoples who are meant to become South Africans to determine and select those memories that makes them feel good about who they are without being subjected to a false notion of objectivity. However, a co-existence of ecologies of historical knowledges and narratives in South Africa will not be possible unless different historical narratives are cleansed of hate speech that have since been promoted in some of the colonial historical versions of the past.

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