

Oludamini Ogunnaike

Burnt Libraries: The Hidden Tragedy of Post-Colonial African Education

This presentation highlights the “hidden tragedy” of the spread of Western education on the African continent: the erasure of nearly all other intellectual and educational traditions—what some scholars have deemed an “epistemicide.” Drawing on examples from Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa (as well as some comparative examples from India), I argue this erasure should **not** be seen as a natural progression or advancement from outdated and less sophisticated modes of knowledge and education to more sophisticated and modern modes, but rather as a tragic loss akin to the loss of a species, language, or entire academic discipline. I will also demonstrate the significant role this epistemicide has played in psychological, cultural, religious, and social uncertainties and instabilities across the continent. Finally, this presentation will explore and critique various efforts to address this crisis of the erasure indigenous knowledge such as the decolonised education movement in South Africa, the Franco-Arabe schools of Senegal, and the competition between Salafi Islamiyya, traditional Sufi, and modern French schools in Mali., and suggest possible improvements.

Specifically, I will argue that the erasure of these indigenous traditions cannot be addressed merely through the addition of a course or subject in modern African curricula. Any pedagogy assumes a certain epistemology, a particular understanding of knowledge and its conditions, as well as an anthropology (what a human being is), cosmology (what the universe is), and metaphysics (what reality is). Because each of these indigenous traditions had/have unique and distinct epistemologies, their pedagogies were/are also distinct. That is, each of these traditions have given rise to various educational systems and approaches to education, which are not easily “translated” into other pedagogies or educational systems. Nevertheless, I believe that these traditions and the different understandings and approaches to education they embody have much to offer us, especially in uncertain times such as these.

Diversity is crucial in the context of uncertainty and rapid change—where one approach fails, another may succeed, and the greater the diversity of approaches, the greater the chance of finding an approach or combination of approaches that may work. In this way, the erasure of indigenous intellectual traditions has resulted in a fundamental homogenization of education worldwide, which has made us more vulnerable to uncertainty and change. If nothing else, this fact alone should cause us to re-evaluate the importance of indigenous educational traditions and move from a paradigm of epistemicide and erasure to one of equal co-existence with modern, Western institutions of learning.