

CONFERENCE REPORTS

“Maybe you are just not angry enough”

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In August 2018, I attended a conference on decolonisation and Africanisation. I was so excited about this conference, particularly because of the keynote speakers. The keynote addresses were not set to be delivered by the usual, traditional speakers who are invited to academic events. They were a combination of exciting, dynamic speakers whom I have enjoyed listening to on different platforms.

The opening keynote address was presented by a prominent traditional healer, who is a frequent guest on South African radio stations. The address was powerful and inspirational and set the tone for the conference. The speaker emphasised the significance of understanding African spirituality and celebrating being an African. The speaker suggested that as Africans, we should not disregard our own ways of being in favour of a foreign doctrine, which has led us astray. She also suggested that the social ills in society are a reflection of how we the people of Africa have failed the individual. The speaker suggested that we return to ourselves by embracing our African spirituality instead of identifying with a foreign religion that finds fault in African leaders. This address was well suited for the conference as it touched on all the conference themes such as decolonisation, identity, spirituality, well-being, etc. The opening keynote address was preceded by a spiritual dance, with the audience invited to participate. A few people stepped out of the room, while some, including myself, stayed inside but chose to watch rather than participate. I chose not to because I had never participated in such a ritual before and to do so for the first time, in that context, would have been an inauthentic performance of my spirituality. It is, however, common amongst many African peoples to include song and dance in ceremonies; inviting all ‘ancient wisdom’, as articulated by the keynote speaker, to these ceremonies. Perhaps considering that the theme of the conference was *De-colonisation and Re-Africanisation: A Conversation*, this kind of opening ceremony was felt by the organisers to have been suitable for the occasion. In this piece I will discuss three points, African spirituality, Africans and Exclusion.

I remember when I started to grow dreadlocks it was considered, by some, that I was making a political statement. At the time, I didn’t understand the politics of hair and simply chose a style that was manageable for me. I remember being called names like “Jah lady” and “African Queen”, “natural beauty” and so forth. Yes! While it was complimentary, it was an imposition of an identity I had not taken up for myself. Additionally, these labels suggested to me that anything else was simply unacceptable. There seems to be an idea of what it means to be African or what it means to black and those that transgress these set standards of blackness can experience ridicule or rejection. It was strange for me that at this conference, in a space where we claim to fight for black people’s ability to think and choose, the parameters for what they may choose are still set for them, only this time set in the name of decolonisation, Africanisation and even black pride.

According to Horsthemke (2004) “Africanisation is generally seen to signal a (renewed) focus on Africa, on reclamation of what has been taken from Africa” (p. 571). While this definition was not the official definition of

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the conference, it speaks to my experiences of the conference. In the effort to de-colonise and re-Africanise, there was no room for a *conversation*. For many at the conference, it seemed as though African spirituality is about going back to a way of being and expression as well as the rejection of *all* that is foreign – the language, customs, and religions.

The rejection of Christianity was particularly emphasised. It came as no surprise to me that Christianity came under the spotlight as a tool that was used by the coloniser to legitimise their oppressive actions. An additional point against Christianity was the image of the blue-eyed, straight-haired Christ that positions black people as inferior. The criticism levelled against organised religion was warranted, however as a Christian who does not believe in the straight-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, I felt it was not the place nor the time to engage with the idea of an African spirituality that includes all faiths. While I can blame my silence on the hostility of the space, maybe I was silenced by own lack of bravery and fear. Fear that I could be wrong and that instead of being corrected, I would be ridiculed for not 'getting it'.

There was also some emphasis on the importance of those who identify as African to at least speak an African language. The danger of such a notion of Africaness is that it results in the exclusion of people who do not speak the language. This is not only the rejection of those whose ancestry can be traced to Europe or America, but limits being African to an aesthetic – in other words, clothing, language, food and expression – and then many, including myself, fall below the 'Africaness bar.'

It seems to me that the performance of blackness is legitimised through the exclusion of others that do not perform this blackness correctly. Amongst these are black peoples who believe in 'foreign gods', black people who do not speak particular languages, and perhaps black academics who are supposedly dependant on their white counterparts. I attended a session where two white colleagues presented their work. At the end of their presentations the floor was opened for questions. Unfortunately, the majority of the audience was not as interested in the presenters' work as they were in the colour of these presenters' skin. The questions raised in this session were less to do with what had been presented, and more about the presenters' legitimacy to be at the conference and to speak on decolonisation. The comments were not based on the integrity of the work presented, but instead on the speakers' right to study black lives. As important as it may be to think through positionalities and interrogate the racialised, gendered, and classed positions of researchers, the dismissal of people based purely on the colour of their skin can be, and is, problematic. Considering the on-going conversations about who can research whom, and what are important truisms in conducting research, the imperative is on us to engage dialectically with what this may mean in the context of de-colonisation and re-Afrikanisation. There was a strong demand for the two white presenters to always position themselves within the decolonial conference which was unfair since there was no such expectation of anyone else at the conference.

What saddened me is the level of anger my colleagues expressed at the conference. Not only was it made clear that the white researchers had nothing valuable to contribute to the conference, but their very presence was disrespectful to the conference agenda. At one point one respondent said to the white presenter that it is time for white people to excuse themselves from 'black spaces'. The respondent went on to say that the insistence of some white people to participate in black spaces would result in war because it seems like the time for civil engagement has come to an end. These sentiments were echoed by another respondent asking the speaker if she had plans to go back home, because there will come a time when all white people are sent back in a boat, as they had done to black people. While anger and frustration is expected and understandable in the face of injustice and untransformed institutions, the levels of anger and frustration directed at individuals, rather than systems, is misplaced. I asked myself in that moment if rejecting the work of white scholars simply on the basis of their pigmentation is the failure to separate the structure from the individual subject. In that moment the university and the conference space – which should be a space for critical intellectual engagement and debate – became a space of hostility. The white colleagues became the oppressors and were almost required to account for all that was wrong with the system.



Academic spaces are, and should be, spaces of intellectual debate, but appear to have become, as in the case of this conference, spaces for like-minded thinkers to speak to one another, agree, and go their separate ways (Connell, 2018). At this particular conference, I felt that most people spoke to one another in one voice – a dangerous, exclusionary voice. A voice so loud and so intimidating, it silenced me. In that space it seemed as though the idea of a decolonial and Africanisation agenda is to shut the mouths of non-black speakers and those regarded as echoing the dominant oppressive voice.

As I sat at the conference, I thought to myself: am I failing the movement? We are the angry black women, and god knows we have plenty to be angry about. But I was not. No, I was simply not angry, or rather not angry enough, as one of the colleagues told me. Perhaps the system that gave me a reason to be angry has also taught me the ‘appropriate’ way of expressing this anger, especially in spaces like this. In academic spaces one ought to express one’s frustration with critical engagement. One is taught to write and speak in the third person where it’s never, “I Refiloe Makama,” but *the author*, where I have separated the ‘research’ from experience, because when the two mirror each other, the anger paralyses. Now what? Here I was in an academic space; a young, black, female, emerging academic, amongst other black academics and I was uncomfortable. I felt like a misfit. Why was I not this angry? Have I missed the plot? Did I not understand the injustices?

The problem with the notion of the mystical, great Africa that once was, is that not only can we not recover it, but it limits Africa’s and Africans’ sense of worth in the past, and thus the need not go back in order to reaffirm Africa and Africans. This still sees colonisation as a point of departure. Africaness is reduced to performance which then leads to research and conversation that simply focuses on traditions, dance, song and/or language; where poverty and disease are paraded alongside cultural dance as the only aspects of the African continent. The Kumbaya version of Africa seems to me to be the Africa that was escribed by colonisers as primitive, uncivilised and it is the Africa we have been fed, the Africa that is centred around the singing and chanting and an Africa that continues in the singing and dancing. The Africa we sell to tourists. I feel quite uncomfortable with positioning myself as an exotic subject with a strange language, in colourful clothes, if any clothes at all, participating in these interesting customs. I wondered how my African identity is wrapped up in my ability to speak Sesotho and keeping my hair natural. Why is being African limited to a particular expression? Clearly this is the kind of essentialist ideology most black scholars try to resist. Have we not tried to resist the ideology that black people, black lives, customs, and traditions are not entertainment for the European gaze? I was quite disappointed that, within an academic space, efforts to decolonise were not centred around producing knowledges about Africa and about the world, or Africa as a site of knowledge production rather than a site to be studied.

In conclusion, from this conference, I take away the significance of celebrating African beauty, and the boldness to speak up about the frustration of being displaced in one’s country. While it is important to reclaim space and languages, one should be careful about, at the same time, taking up another identity that may be oppressive.

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