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CRITICAL HUMAN AGENCY IN AFRICA AS A KNOWLEDGE CULTURE: TOWARDS CRITICAL STUDENT AGENCY

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ABSTRACT. In the post-colonial era it is not an anomaly for serious scholars to consider the weighty question of whether there is a defensible African philosophy. In the space of arrested development due to colonial expansion and conquest, some scholars argue that the African subject has not yet rescued an account of a plausible philosophy. This is in part due to the fact that the African subject is schizoid – that is, trapped between the nascent colonial identity and the arrested pre-colonial African identity. As such, any attempt at resuscitating an African identity inevitably bears trace of the colonial ideology superimposed on the emerging African subject. On the basis of African gnosis (or deep, secret knowledge) and a call for indigenous knowledge systems to be held up by Africans for scrutiny – as the foundational focus – the core of this article focuses on critical agency and, more specifically, on how critical student agency might be imagined within the conceptual frame of critical pedagogy. By using the methodological approach of discourse analysis I aim to investigate not only how the physical, human and spiritual aspects of critical agency are revealed in African discourse and agency but, more appreciably, how they work and how this might inform education for the post-colonial subject in the local and universal space.

Keywords: critical student agency; gnosis; discourse; African philosophy; knowledge culture; ideology; imperialist invention; myth; reality

1. Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The theory and method of critical pedagogy became acquainted with Africa through their originator, Paulo Freire, during the continent's postcolonial phase. The political and social climate of the 1960s and 1970s ushered in a rapidly changing ideology, committed to the counter-hegemonic response to advanced capitalism. This historical period was characterized by social movements concerned with transformation, liberation from colonialism, civil

rights, women's rights, gay rights, environmental issues, and anti-war movements. Against this backdrop, Freire suggested critical pedagogy as a process to address social problems through education, and as a means through which society could be transformed along inclusive or participatory, democratic lines. This seemed apropos, since the resistance movements chose to challenge the established, unjust and unequal order apparent in their world. In the majority of the African nations and other third world countries in particular, political liberation would be necessary to overcome the ravages and abuses of colonialism and imperialism (Santos, 2004: 37). Thus Freire's theory and orientation show kinship with the lived realities of the marginal and disenfranchised in Africa and those of his native Brazil. This affinity is due, in part, to the bitter legacies of colonial and capitalist expansion, illustrating that countries under colonial rule (and extending into the post-colonial period) suffered gross underdevelopment (Rodney, 1973). The dependence and underdevelopment of Africa (Mudimbe, 1988) are evinced in the poisoned fruits that capital and colonialism bear in the economic, political, cultural and social turmoil that has become deposited in the South in terms of what Santos (2004: 8) calls the North-South divide.

Thus, to undercut capitalist ideology, Freire's liberatory intervention began when he used reading and writing to aid thinking among economically disenfranchised slum dwellers. The critical dimension in his literacy approach was clear in that he utilized pictures to help illiterate adults interpret the problems of their lives by examining the causes, effects and possibilities of action for change (Freire, 2005: 9, 29, 33). By examining causes, effects and possibilities for change through critical literacy, a central theme in critical pedagogy is hoisted in the form of "conscientization," which, by Freire's definition, means the awakening of critical awareness. This critical awareness is used with literacy to heighten the student's ability to deconstruct the capitalist hegemony of the ruling elite to achieve the goal of developing critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, social transformation and a revitalization of the public sphere (Ellsworth, 1992: 92). As such, Freire's work with the poor in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970) is instructive on the effectiveness of critical pedagogy. Through his work, he determined that criticality involves the student or citizen being critically astute of social relations, social institutions and social traditions that create and maintain conditions of oppression; and being in a position to interpret it, critique it and change it. Consequently, Freire's concept of conscientization and his devotion to the principles of critical pedagogy gave him license to extend his work to the African continent as a strategic literacy advisor in some parts of post-colonial Africa, viz. Tanzania, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome, Angola and Mozambique (Freire, 2005: 12). Therefore, the motivation for this research lies in the basis of reimagining critical pedagogy in Africa through an examination of critical agency as a way to help address

the main problem of how students could use critical agency to reveal the gaps within the current hegemony (in education, culture, media, capitalism etc.) that the dominant ideology has not succeeded in filling, and how this will inform critical theory as it manifests itself in South Africa? Now that I have outlined the theory and application of critical pedagogy, I will begin to align it more closely with, firstly, Hountondji's (1983) conception of African philosophy; and secondly, with Mudimbe's (1988) theory of Africa as an invention of colonial organization.

2. Critical Awareness in African Philosophy

Hountondji questions the universality of the word "philosophy" when it requires a preface or needs to be qualified by "African." Could this mean that philosophy might mean entirely something different based on its geographical application (Hountondji, 1983: 56)? According to him, "African philosophy" is typecast in the literature as the subject of mythological exploration (by Westerners), yet it is necessary for us (Africans) to "retrieve it and apply it to something outside of the fiction of a collective system of thought but to a set of philosophical discourses and texts" (Hountondji, 1983: 56). To illustrate his premise that African philosophy (African philosophy, myth and reality at the time of writing) was viewed primarily through the lens of Westerners like Temples in his work entitled *Bantu Philosophy*, we appreciate the bias and ideology that may obfuscate any defensible account of philosophy in Africa when a Belgian missionary authors the text. Furthermore, the problematic yet unsurprising view that Temples holds of Africans in the Congo is that, for them, "philosophy is experienced but not thought because its practitioners are dimly conscious" (Hountondji, 1983: 56–57). Furthermore, the universality applied to Bantus is to suggest that, in plurality, there can be no hint of individuality or deviation from an imposed norm. Thus the black person is misrepresented as being ignorant, needing an interpreter to translate her thoughts, yet the interpreter sullies the account and formulates his own thoughts within the framework of white theoretical assumptions and Western models (Hountondji, 1983: 57).

However, presenting philosophy in Africa as a caricature is predictable, given that colonialist ideology needed a psychological and cultural basis for anchoring the Christian message in the African mind (Hountondji, 1983: 58). Thus, Hountondji argues that, during the colonial period, philosophy in Africa was "conceived on the model of religion: a permanent, stable system of beliefs, unaffected by evolution, and impervious to time and history" (Hountondji, 1983: 59). Furthermore, Hountondji draws on Odera's work in "Mythologies as African Philosophy" to illustrate the distortions and

deformation that arise when superstition is paraded as religion, and mythology is perpetrated as philosophy; then it logically might follow that dictatorships can be called democracies and pseudo-development can be passed off as development (even civilization). These distortions become fertile ground for ideological confusion, disallowing the dialogue, confrontation and reflection on history that is the hallmark of philosophy. And, as Hountondji proposes, this critical reflection and conscientization (Freire & Macedo, 1987) induce all new thinkers to be nourished from the doctrines of their predecessors and contemporaries by extending or refuting them (Hountondji, 1983: 63). In so doing, arbitrary over-interpretation of social facts is averted and critical thinkers begin to articulate and seek solutions to problems, for example by removing political obstacles that impede democratic liberties (Hountondji, 1983: 67–69). Thus Hountondji's interpretation of a critical consciousness is echoed in Freire's theorizing on the relationship between the oppressed (in this case Africa) and the oppressor (the West), where typical dialogical action is supported in the form of co-operation, unity, organization and cultural synthesis for problem solving in society (Freire, 2005). In direct contrast, the oppressor resorts to antidialogics, which is characterized by "conquest, divide, rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion" (Freire, 2005a: 95). Consequently, the methodological awakening of consciousness via dialogics excites an epistemological relationship with the characteristic trademark of intellectual curiosity, which becomes the instrument to comprehend the object of knowledge (Freire, 2005a). In this way people become empowered to transform their lived experience into knowledge and to use the acquired knowledge to unveil new knowledge (Freire, 2005b).

Advancing Hountondji's notion of philosophy, the further significance of dialogics is seen to foster an exchange between scientists (and educators) to reignite a scientific tradition by rearticulating themes, justifying them, and giving them a more secure foundation in an intellectual effort to know, understand, think and progress beyond the sensational formulations of a Western imagination (Hountondji, 1983: 61). For educators, this could translate into one of the most dedicated efforts to intervene pedagogically and ethically so as to help students discover that the social construction of suffering must be revealed in order to transform it (Freire, 2005a). In this way, of import to educators and students alike is the method by which to operationalize critical student agency, where agency is defined as the expression of the self through thought, action and becoming (Bussey, 2008: 31–38); and wherein the critical agent is described as possessing conscientization, is empowered and engaged in the power of thought to negate accepted limits and to clear the way for new possibilities (Freire, 2005a). So far I have attempted to articulate how philosophy as a critical, reflective (even reflexive) discipline and practice in critical pedagogy might

help clarify critical student agency. Now I shall relocate the focus to Mudimbe's conception of gnosis against the backdrop of Africa as an invention of colonialist impressions, to investigate what effect the order of knowledge might have on critical student agency.

3. The Invention of Africa vs. Critical Reinvention

Mudimbe argues that colonial culture trivialized the richly complex, traditional and spiritual African frameworks and facilitated the social disintegration of African societies by swelling the ranks of the urban proletariat and destabilizing customary organizations (Mudimbe, 1988: 4). Consequently, the new (colonial) social arrangements and institutions ushered in unfamiliar and conflicting attitudes and values on the cultural and religious levels; and the resultant ideological confusion in unadapted minds might have influenced and justified the thinking that African modernity could be considered hybridized (Mudimbe, 1997). To illustrate the savagery and brutality of colonial ideology in the promotion of concepts such as "Sameness" (Western) and "Otherness" (African), literature and paintings such as the artist Hans Burgmair's *Exotic Tribe* depict versions of human beings, the implication being, amongst others, that there are sub-species of humans (Mudimbe, 1988: 6). Therefore, by conceptualizing "Sameness" as Occidental, colonial ideology sought to exhibit how the "world must fold itself, duplicate and reflect itself in a link to form a chain so that things resemble each other" (Mudimbe, 1988: 6). Yet, remarkably unastonishing and horribly offensive was the depiction of "Otherness" in the paintings of Africans as "savage," naked, in bracelets, with curly hair (read ethnic); or how African (exotic) bodies were assimilated into Western painting methodology, resulting in "blackened whites" (Mudimbe, 1988: 8). In so doing, difference became neutralized, but even more sinister was the reformation that assaulted the "exotic" mind, as it has to appropriate this colonizing experience and its terms of reference on an unequal footing.

Further to this, the ideological confusion and host of paradoxes introduced through the colonizing experience mistakenly cast modernity as development, while tradition was downgraded to reflect a poor image of a mythical past (Mudimbe, 1988: 5). Even more telling in the racist modulations and methods of colonial organization is when difference is simply and unscientifically classified in terms of race and identity, which is to suggest that difference or "Otherness" has no ontological and epistemological basis outside of Western classificatory tables and schedules (Mudimbe, 1988: 5). Thus the unequal power-knowledge relationship between the colonizer and the primitive subject is understood on the basis that the latter produces "artifacts (not art) that is characterized as barbarism,

looked at with curiosity and labeled childish, simple, nonsensical and savage” (Mudimbe, 1988: 10). Under these terms, the ideological mapping becomes easy to detect: the domineering, civilized culture then concludes that men are born unequal and justification is given on the basis of the “African’s indolence, unbridled passions, cruelty, and mental retardation” (Mudimbe, 1988: 13). However, as Mudimbe elegantly points out, Western hegemony in an antidialogical and uncritical maneuver, neglects to account for the high civilization displayed in Yoruba statutory, Benin art, Zimbabwean architecture, Hausa statecraft, complex crop domestication in Sudan or sophisticated Dogon astronomical knowledge (Mudimbe, 1988: 13). Thus, from the abovementioned accomplishments, Western “epistemological inventiveness,” and its accompanying “discourse on savages,” calls into question whether “Sameness” could indeed discover anything about “Otherness” (Mudimbe, 1988: 16) if it (“Otherness”) was already there, unless the motives were more treacherous and menacing than an exploratory or civilizing mission. Nonetheless, the capitalist logic of the colonial enterprise, which sought the domination of physical space, reformation of the native mind and integration of local economic history into the Western perspective, brought with it the projection of a particular consciousness to support its unsanitary mission (Mudimbe, 1988). And, in its employ, it used the unscrupulous and speculative theories appropriated from the social sciences (modeled on the more successful and reliable natural sciences) to brandish unscientific concepts such as white supremacy (Mudimbe, 1988). In this way anthropology could defend evolution, conquest, difference (biology, religion), and destiny in assigning things their slot by linking social facts to physical phenomena (Mudimbe, 1988: 15).

However, critical consciousness or conscientization stops us from interrogating the link anthropology has with Western epistemology, since as a science (even a pseudo-science) it depends on a precise frame without which science cannot exist at all (Mudimbe, 1988: 18–19). Hence Mudimbe calls for an Africanist discourse and gnosis, which is not reliant on a Western model, to extract epistemological analysis and a critical understanding of the African past (Mudimbe, 1988: 23). Therefore the knowledge to bring about transformation cannot be sought in the depths and distortions of the “colonial library” (Apter, 2007: 31), as it is already extant in the gnosis of the customs, traditions, proverbs and institutions of African culture, seeking Africans to reinvigorate it for an African, rather than a European, audience. Here, the word “gnosis” is taken to mean esoteric, deep knowledge, self-determined ambition; largely, an investigation of truth, leading to enlightenment after experiencing many diverse forms of knowledge (Moore, 2014). The critical component of gnosis is evinced by the quest to prove every aspect of knowledge, both light and dark, which is contrasted with sheepishly accepting as truth everything we are taught

(Moore, 2014). Thus gnosis becomes an individual, intellectual journey of gradual training, gradual performance, a gradual progression, with a penetration to gnosis only after a long stretch (Moore, 2014). Simply stated, gnosis can be interpreted as the critical agents (who are different from objects) who know and act as creators of cultures that are their own in search of clarity (Freire, 2005a: 40). As such, gnosis stands in contradistinction to the mercantile ideology and political power based on the authority of scientific knowledge under colonialism (Mudimbe, 1988: 16). This alternative way of knowing and being in the world creates a chasm in which critical agency might be revealed as powerful and counter-hegemonic. This chasm creates the space for the “reinvention” or reintroduction of gnosis over “invented knowledge,” and student agency can be re-imagined under these terms, as traditional and spiritual frameworks might reveal how critical agency is operationalized. So far I have explored a critical understanding of African philosophy, as well as the critical dimensions of the order of knowledge and how gnosis might inform and deepen criticality. In the upcoming section I turn to critical agency and resistance, with a strategic focus to try to understand how theory can be unmade when critical, daily experience triumphs as it pierces and demystifies hegemony.

4. How Is Critical Agency Operationalized?

Human agency can be demonstrated through many faculties, so in this section the focus will be on how the power of the mind of non-dominant groups is analyzed thoroughly by Scott (1985: 29) in a study of peasant resistance. He argues that the intellectual sophistication evident in “everyday forms of resistance (foot dragging, false compliance, feigned ignorance, sabotage, character assassination, gestures and silences of contempt) make a shambles of official policies and muddles the hierarchical structure of the community” (Scott, 1985: 34). It is through quiet and anonymous acts of resistance that subjugated groups do not necessarily equate poverty with misery (since it creates a fissure for them to expect the charity of the affluent as a form of cultural decency); or to equate inequality with polarization (Scott, 1985: 63). Scott draws the reader’s attention to the role of human agency, which he believes is a huge error of omission in structuralist thought, since agency exploits the opportunities to confuse the homogeneity claimed by the established order (Scott, 1985: 310–319). To this end he invokes Brechtian forms of class struggle as the basis for the efficacy of the “Weapons of the Weak” (Scott, 1985: 29) because they require little or no planning; they represent a form of self-help, and they avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or elite norms (Scott, 1985: 291). In this form of resistance, even theft is seen as counter-hegemonic, since

subaltern groups impose a compensatory tax on the affluent by appropriating that to which they feel they are entitled. So, when the subordinate groups fissure dominant ideology, they exercise their autonomy to develop their own understandings and interpretations of society, and this is given expression in their dialects; thoughts and ideas; customs; moral principles, religion; and politics. Scott concludes his analysis of the rupturing of hegemony by the underclass by allowing a penetrating appreciation of the view that hegemony always provides the ideas, means or symbolic tools of critique. While hegemony advertises a meritocratic ethos, it instead delivers favoritism and unequal access to superior education; while it promises one man, one vote, it serves corporate interests and allows the media to help dictate election outcomes; while it follows a capitalist economic system, it translates to recession and unemployment (Scott, 1985: 339). These very contradictions of hegemony allow non-dominant groups to betray or ignore the implicit promises of ideology. It is within the space created by these contradictions that human agency sets to work in challenging meritocracy, favoritism, inequality, democracy and capitalism. So the argument offered by Scott pragmatically reveals how human and social agency navigates the complex maze of understanding hegemony, seizing the vacant spaces created by it and resisting hegemony. As a result of this argument it becomes hopeful that students in marginal educational encounters inadvertently already may possess the agency to overcome the strictures of capitalist hegemony. The next question then becomes, if non-dominant students already possess the habits of mind to overcome the current hegemony (in education, culture, media, capitalism), why is it not incorporated to their benefit in their everyday and academic encounters? Thus, to help address the above question, the subsequent section will attempt to address the nature of the agentic force apparent in a methodological approach that might produce positive transformational experiences.

5. The Methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis

One might ask what resonance (if any) there is between critical pedagogy and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and what possible coherence they might have in counter-hegemonic methodology? To begin with, Freire, who conceptualized critical pedagogy as a means to unveil social inequality in an attempt to transform society more equitably, argued that education could be used for liberation or domestication. This means that education, from the point of view of superior power, is subversion and invites false communication, which preserves the status quo (Freire, 1993: 35). Similarly, Wodak proposes that CDA strives to make opaque structures of power relations and ideologies manifest via discourse analysis (Reisigl & Wodak,

2001: Ch. 2). CDA, in its turn as a critical paradigm, analyzes discourse in context to examine the extent to which language, power and ideology work to maintain social hierarchies, whereas critical pedagogy uses consciousness-raising through problem-posing to oppose dominant power and transform oppressive situations (Freire, 1993: 8). In this way, critical pedagogy and CDA swear adherence to one another in that they look at text and discourse historically as barometers of social processes through a discourse-historical approach (Wodak); or a dialectical-relational approach (Fairclough) and its “embeddedness” with elite power; or a socio-cognitive approach (Van Dijk), in which texts act as vehicles for social change, all in the interests of obtaining more symmetrical relations of power (Forchtner, 2009: 4). Following Burbules and Berk (1999: 65), who confirm the belief that society is divided by relations of unequal power, they call for a position held firmly in critical pedagogy and CDA, which is that fostering a critical capacity in citizens is a way of enabling them to resist such oppressive power. And, in its commitment to exposing unexamined beliefs and assumptions in ideology critique, critical pedagogy shows much kinship with CDA as a transformative social justice approach. With the above in mind, the further discussion in the succeeding section will analyze how students could use critical agency to reveal the gaps within the current hegemony in education, culture, media, religion, etc. with a view to establishing how critical pedagogy might manifest therein, and what potential this holds as a socially responsive approach in relation to educational equality. To be more specific, the analysis will be conducted on three cases involving rituals and the discourses and disclosures that derive from these. In each case the analysis will investigate the emergence (or not) of unequal relations of power; whether there are any hidden power struggles (race, gender, class); and lastly, how language might be used to produce or reproduce social inequalities or, alternatively, how language might be used for social transformation. While I have thus far attempted to investigate how critical agency might be revealed via everyday forms of “silent” resistance, and sought to defend the methodological approach of CDA, my attention will now swing to Apter’s study on discourse and critical agency in Africa to broaden the understanding of the structural framework of power and authority so as to illuminate the dialectics of sociopolitical agency in practice (Apter, 2007: 4).

6. Rituals and Discourse as Dimensions of Critical Theory

Apter (2007: 6) warns that not all agency should be so exalted to be powerful and oppositional. So, the special interest here is to unlock the characteristics of human agency that illustrate ways in which every day

practices can be democratized. Apter (2007: 6–10) defines agency as the capacity for effective social action; it is transformative in capacity, context dependent and historically situated, and it culminates in both intended and unintended consequences. From this it could be inferred that human agents have the capacity to fight for justice; that this justice could bring freedom from oppression (in a democracy) at a specific time and place; and all of this action may or may not translate into equality. To bolster his claims, Apter (2007: Introduction) relies on a textured ethnographic study of discourse and critical agency in Africa that lays bare the important role language plays throughout the continent in elaborate forms of oratory, the specialized roles it creates (for example the King’s linguist), and the indigenous theories that account for the power of speech. In so doing, his revelations explode the “tenacious negations that have attached themselves to the continent in the form of being labeled: not civilized, not human, not rational, not moral, not white, not healthy, not even historical” (Apter, 2007: 1). Here the illustration is in the exercise of agency of Africans to challenge claims of inferiority and the injustice it necessitates when reduced to Western conceptions of ontology and epistemology.

While colonialism strove to eradicate African “deep (hidden, powerful, protected) knowledge” that is activated through ritual, Apter (2007: 25) contends that:

the critical power of indigenous cosmologies should not be dismissed since they transcend space, time, agency, and gender; and begin with the form of knowledge that makes ritual powerful.

Human agency is revealed in the ways that priests, priestesses, diviners and herbalists are initiated into the secrets of their work and trained for years in esoteric techniques. In this way they can detect witches, cure infertility, recall the past, influence the future and empower chiefs and kings (Apter, 2007: 25). Through their agency (practices), hegemony is unmade and remade, the status quo is reversed and transformed, and this creates the conditions for political transformations (Apter, 2007: 26). Similarly, Southern Bantu panegyric reveals human agency through praise poets when their statements criticize the very object of their praise (the king or chief) (Apter, 2007: 32). This act illustrates the agency of the tribal poet to tell the community the truth as he sees it, and provides the license to ridicule and criticize with impunity (Opland, 1983: 66–68). While I thus far have provided a prelude of how critical agency is conceptualized in ritual and discourse, what follows immediately below are the specific cases and their complementary analyses to investigate whether critical student agency may emerge from a study of ritual knowledge cultures.

7. Politics of Panegyric: Zulu Praises

Following Apter (2007: 39), praise in the Zulu tradition “acts as an incentive to and reward for socially approved actions, and while they are usually flattering,” they may not always be that. It follows then that critical praise performs a regulatory function when it is directed against incumbents of high office, such as the chief or king, as we shall see below in the case of King Shaka.

The single institution that appears to have retained relative autonomy was that of the *imbongi*, or specialist praiser. The political significance of praise-singing in Zululand under the Shaka is thus underlined by the fact that it constituted the sole voice of opposition, albeit a muted voice, tolerated by the leviathan (Apter, 2007: 43).

To illustrate the power of *imbongi* discourse, overt criticism of King Shaka is found in this excerpt below:

“King, you are wrong because you do not discriminate / Because even those of your maternal uncle’s family you kill / Because you killed Bhebhe son of Ncumela of your maternal uncle’s family” (Cope, 1968: 110, lines 348–350). The historical reference is to the Shaka’s massacre of the Longeni clan (of which his mother was a member), which had ostracized and banished him when he was a boy. In terms of incumbency, the criticism points to his violation of basic kinship values. Shaka is wrong, not because he kills, but because he does not discriminate between kinsmen and enemies. Again, the criticism is a warning – nobody is safe from the Shaka’s deathblow (Apter, 2007: 43–44).

The above excerpt illustrates the autonomy and power exercised by the *imbongi* in the face of the king in what could be imagined as a public space. It is noteworthy to mention that public critique attaches greater criticality and presents superior danger to the speaker, as it is easier for the king to silence his assailants secretly and avoid naked humiliation. Yet the confidence and impunity with which the words are spoken suggest that, even though Shaka is described as being a “leviathan,” the degree of power invested in the *imbongi* is significant, as one would rightfully anticipate that another (lay person) would face sudden death under different circumstances. Put another way, if the *imbongi* did not belong to the class of special praisers, he would be killed for challenging Shaka. The above facts allow us to make an ideological analysis on the basis that, although one might not consider Shaka’s political reign to be democratic, in the instance of the *imbongi* there appears to be an equality of authority in the spoken word, otherwise it would degenerate into mere positive praise without any hint of the confrontation, challenge and reflection we have witnessed above.

Furthermore, the ethical ideology on display leads one to believe that the imbongi does not consider his words carefully and establishes his behavior as being right, and not merely permissible, or else it would not be such a bold declaration before an audience. Additionally, the topic of his rebuke is the violation on the king's part of socio-culturally accepted behavior. Here it could also be noted that the imbongi agrees that violence is acceptable, but he discerns that the king acted unjustly and unethically by violating kinship values. Of particular interest is the absence of what role women might have played, or if they were merely objectified: destroyed in conquest or assimilated into Zulu society (Apter, 2007: 41); if, in the absence of evidence that women were admitted as imbongi, the institution itself can then be regarded as unequal in terms of gender representation, which poses a problem as a form of reproduction of social inequality. In the light of the excerpts, while critical praise holds promise as a socially transformative element, I would venture to say that, if gender equality were considered, critical consciousness would be elevated exponentially. By this I mean that the king would have to contend with discourses on a widely expanded basis that holds him, and society at large, responsible for treating women on more equitable terms. Thus far I have labored to provide an account of "permitted disrespect" (Apter, 2007: 51) through the lens of Zulu praises (or dispraises), which appear to be male dominated. I now shall turn to critical social commentary provided by a group of elderly priestesses in the Oroyeye cult to explore dimensions of critical agency.

8. Critical Discourse and Its Disclosures: The Oroyeye

Apter (2007) introduces us to the political criticism of the Oroyeye priestess by way of Yoruba ritual associations, which are comprised of cults containing complex priesthoods with various grades of titleholders, ritual specialists and devotees (Apter, 2007: 68). In contrast, the cult of the Oroyeye is relatively simple, consisting of eight untitled women. As he (Apter, 2007: 68) describes it, they:

invoke the power of their deities to remake and revise the body politic during elaborate annual festivals, the powers of Oroyeye priestesses are explicitly punitive. Their task as social critics is to expose, abuse, and, in the most serious cases, curse malefactors, mobilizing the force of public censure and condemnation to bear upon their misdeeds and reputations. The consequences of such criticisms vary, ranging from the immediate payment of a small fine to save face in response to mild teasing to full-fledged ostracism, exile, and death resulting from the most serious abuses (eebu) and curses (epe).

While Apter describes the stratification of the Oroyeye priestesses as simple, their social, ethical and political power is anything but simple. As illustrated in the direct reference above, these aged ministers, via the power of their deities, personify a somewhat legal ideology by socially exposing, abusing and cursing wrongdoers in the community. The ethical basis for their chastisement sweeps across class boundaries, as they do not discriminate according to status or office, which again bears testimony to their power and authority, as they themselves are not considered among the elite cults. Under any other type of logic their supposedly marginal status could be seen as an impediment, since they would remain outside of the protection of the more politically and socially powerful actors in the community. Furthermore, within Western frameworks their advanced age and gender would render them less agentic, yet within the ritual framework (imbued with the power of deities) they assume one of the most powerful positions. Additionally, the respect and autonomy they enjoy correlates with the magnitude of their influence, since they decide on the fate of transgressors – as negligible as paying a fine or as significant as death. Thus, their challenge and confrontation of those who infringe on the values and interests of the community demand transformation and penitence and carry with it the promise of redirecting unethical behavior. Ideologically speaking, their haloed ethical and epistemological positions provide political equality, if not indeed superiority, while their gender and economic status would have invalidated such superiority. In this instance, critical agency is invested in “unconventional” subjects through the authority of divine beings, but in the employ of the community for greater social cohesion through socially accepted behavior. Consequently, this act of agency serves to highlight the issue that the priestesses’ criticisms are not merely for self-aggrandizement or the abuse of power, but for a greater social good. In sum, I have attempted to explore critical agency by way of an epistemological turn in which deities empower priestesses to expose and transform socially unbecoming behavior, Now I shall move to an analysis of sexual politics, when sexual repression vented through critical agency.

9. Sexual Politics

So far, Apter’s cases have provided a glimpse into critical agency in Africa through the vantage point of adults, but in this section I will advance closer to the goal of imagining critical agency by students, as the protagonists in the upcoming case are youth observed during a nighttime wrestling match.

The town of Oroyeye (where the aforementioned priestesses also live) is divided into two camps: the Isaoye, who are indigenous, versus the Odoalu, who emigrated into Oroyeye at the time of the nineteenth-century wars

(Apter, 2007: 78). On the night of the wrestling match, the atmosphere is described as jovial but tense, as reputations rise and fall with each match (Apter, 2007: 78). Apter (2007: 78) explains that, “while the young men fought with their bodies, the young girls fought with their words: praising the winners with flattery and insulting the losers with abuse.” Even though the obvious intention was to provoke anger in the loser, the insults were cast in the spirit of a joke. Furthermore, Apter (2007: 83–84) portrays the charged ambiance that night as:

In what was a gendered division of ritual labor, young men of Isaoye and Odoaiu fought each other to defend the reputation of their respective sides, while young women abused each other to defame the reputation of the opposing side. The sanctioned obscenities were clearly uproarious, the vulgarities unthinkable in any other public context, yet the game was played for real stakes. For the young men, victory meant a bigger reputation and better chances with the eligible young women. Meanwhile, the young women could vent their tongues and curse their rivals while surveying the available male talent. By overstating female sexuality, by permitting the impermissible in hyperbolic ritual discourse, and by disclosing that which is ‘normally’ repressed, young men and women could initiate sexual liaisons in that dangerous twilight zone of premarital experimentation.

The complexity of the scene above is abundant with symbolism and paradox. With limited adult interference, the youth negotiate the match on their own terms through self-expression and autonomy. What might have been sanitized and ethical conduct in the context of an adult audience is abandoned and, particularly in the case of the young women, obscenities and vulgarities quickly substitute “ethical” behavior. Apter interprets the scene as male political competition through wrestling, running parallel to female sexual competition through song, whereas I construe it as a wider power struggle based on clearly defined age and gender roles. What would have prevented the women of wrestling the rival group of female residents? Thus not too much can be attributed to the women in relation to critically transcending gender roles; however, it should be conceded that the vitriol of their words might be seen as liberating and empowering (perhaps even brawny). And, while the men fought with their bodies and might not always win, the women would have constant success by debasing the losing males and the opposing females, further enhancing their sense of personal victory and liberation. Thus honorable mention should be given to the symbolism inherent in the scene, since what appears to be a wrestling match in reality may be far more: Firstly, both the indigenes and the strangers are fighting a historic battle over spatial inheritance and legacy, with each trying to

legitimate their right to be there. Secondly, the same contention and animosities may transfer to inter-group social (romantic) relationships. In these terms, the youth are negotiating the same complexities and anxieties that the adults in Oroyeye might be trying to resolve. However, the sophistication in the way that the youth diffuse the inter-group tensions and rivalries by converting open rebuke and social sanction into jokes, and by converting violently physical fights to sport, reveals the relative sociopolitical equality between the groups. Moreover, the aggressive words in the songs of the young women illustrate their power through their choice and ability to seize opportunities that are prohibited under normal conditions. In sum, the youth in the above case confront, challenge and transgress the socially acceptable rules imposed by adults and critically express their political and sexual power as a sign of their autonomy and independence. Thus far I have sketched scenarios of how critical agency is operationalized in Africa, and now I propose to align each specific case to how critical student agency might be conceived of, as well as how these actions might be seen as counter-hegemonic and informed by knowledge of a ritual culture.

10. Findings and Conclusion

Firstly, the specialist praiser is epistemologically located within traditional Zulu culture and his critical agency is exercised when, in a public space, he physically opposes the king. His agency is activated by him using his voice to tell King Shaka how he (the king) violated kinship values. Whereas this critical action potentially could cost him his life, we can assume that he is emboldened to reflect critically because his position gives him such authority. Thus, as a critical agent, he informs a subaltern notion of how hegemony can be unmade. By virtue of his position he unapologetically challenges and criticizes the unjust actions of the king, creating an opening for the king to reflect and reconsider his actions and their potential effects as the potential erosion of culture. Likewise, critical student agency may be envisioned when students begin to question and interrogate problems in their everyday lives as they relate to unequal power relations or injustice. For example, students might criticize the Western epistemological basis for what is taught in school and call for greater representation and respect for African cultural, religious and scientific traditions, which they should stand prepared to criticize as well. In this way, Western cultural hegemony becomes problematized and students are induced to seek alternatives that provide greater clarity and possibilities for progressive action and transformation.

Secondly, the non-dominant, mature female priestesses occupy a public space in their counter-hegemonic approach to social critique. Their critical agency is stimulated, as they use their spiritual wisdom and voice to deliver

pronouncements that expose, abuse and curse wrongdoers. The power in their critical agency has the potential to result in death for the offenders of the values and interests revered in the community. Additionally, their agency is assigned to them spiritually, yet is not used in a self-interested or egotistical way, but works in the interest of social justice. Epistemologically, this case could reveal to critical students the different ways knowledge can be sought, for example gnosis, which opposes standardized testing and year-end exams as the marker or pursuit of knowledge. Further to this, the priestesses shatter many Western conventions in thought, action and becoming: they are subaltern, yet they possess the spiritual intellect to redirect even the powerful in the community. Also, the female Oroyeye ministers compare more favorably than women in Western culture, who occupy asymmetrical power relations, with males being most dominant in society. Thus, the priestesses provide a glance at how critical students might think and act differently when the media or capitalist relations of power are not allowed to organize their reality, but they themselves are at the helm of establishing the causes and effects of their problems in order to solve them and transform their lives.

Thirdly, critical agency is on public display when the youth engage in sanctioned obscenities and acts of “violence.” In this case, the youth exercise their agency through their bodies and voice by way of their political power in the case of the males, and through sexual power in the case of the females. Therefore, in a knowledge system that allows youth to positively and effectively channel repressed emotions, student agency becomes emboldened to the point where students are given the chance to interpret and critique their own problems in order to diffuse physical and sexual tensions. As exhibited by the youth in Oroyeye, the intellectual sophistication of the women allowed them to use complex metaphors to challenge their opponents with the power of words, to interpret historical animosities, and to impose social ridicule. The youth culture as seen above negotiates meaning on their own terms and disrupts a hegemonic standard that sets up the media or capitalism to define youth and their needs. Similarly, critical student agency that refuses a capitalist ideology that commodifies youth and reduces their political power to purchasing power has the potential to allow critical students to become “beings for themselves,” rather than “beings for the other” (Freire, 2005: 72). As such critical students become positioned to experience political liberation, employ critical reason, become products of non-authoritarian pedagogy, seek political education, and be instrumental as student activists (Marcuse, 1964). Thus far I have endeavored to illustrate how critical student agency might be envisioned when seen within the framework of critical agency in African knowledge cultures. In the aforementioned examples of critical agency, the agents operated within specific and empowering, enabling cultural contexts, displayed criticality

and engaged in action that brought about transformation. As such, it could be imagined that the agentic student is atypical of the less conscious student, who simply accepts the status quo and continues to perpetuate it, and its inherent injustices and inequalities.

However, Apter cautions Africans with the warning that it is necessary to overcome the colonial invention of Africa, and to recuperate the African personality and consciencism (Nkrumah, 1970: 89–113) through studies of decolonizing agency by way of resistance in poetic and prophetic voices of self-expression; and empowerment in ritual and armed struggle (Apter, 2007: 101). In the light of the global expansion of capitalism, nationalism may soon replace universalism, and now begins the foray into one of the more profound questions regarding post-colonial identities that have as yet not recovered their pre-colonial national identities. In this article I have attempted to address the question of how non-elite South African students (as human agents) might reveal to us a sort of deep knowledge of lived reality that is empowering to the point of shattering colonialist, imperialist and capitalist hegemony to reclaim their democratic rights in the present time. As such, in this mammoth task we could depart from the point of view that colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, class, race and hegemony are not part of the natural world, and therefore can be labeled as social constructs and thus subject to human agents in terms of interpretation, assimilation and resistance. The implication therefore is that agentic students might hemorrhage destructive, socio-historically constructed definitions of their reality to fight for a measure of equality if provided with a specific context in which to achieve this, armed with critical consciousness and prepared for critical action that brings about transformation.

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