

## SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN AFRICA

*Interview*

### **AFROCENTRIC EPISTEMOLOGY FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**Interview with Prof. Kgothatso B. Shai,  
University of Limpopo, South Africa**



Kgothatso Shai is a Full Professor of Political Science and the immediate past Head of the Department of Cultural & Political Studies at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. He previously served as President of the South African Association of Political Studies (SAAPS). He is also the incumbent President of the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM), where he is also serving as the founding Editor in Chief of the association's flagship Book Series. He is a National Research Foundation (NRF)-rated researcher and the author of three academic books. He has published over 100 peer-reviewed and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)-accredited journal articles and book chapters. His research interests interweave between African politics, international relations, and the politics of knowledge.

In his interview, Professor Kgothatso Shai talks about Afrocentricity as a central theoretical framework and analytical lens that should be applied in African social sciences. He describes his personal way of implementing Afrocentric approaches and discusses the main scholars of Afrocentricity, representing both the continent and those living outside it. He also talks about his experience of presiding over the South African Association of Political Studies (SAAPS) and the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM), the challenges and prospects of these organizations. The interview also touches on the problem of the knowledge hierarchies in Africa, structured by scientific journals, many of which are published in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Africa, Afrocentricity, Scientific Knowledge, Politics of Knowledge, Knowledge Hierarchies, South Africa

DOI: 10.31132/2412-5717-2024-68-3-107-113

**For citation:** Shai K.B. (2024). Afrocentric Epistemology for Social Sciences (Interview). *Journal of the Institute for African Studies*. № 3. Pp. 107–113. <https://doi.org/10.31132/2412-5717-2024-68-3-107-113>

– Dear Prof. Shai, in your numerous scientific papers you often mention ‘*Afrocentric critique*’ [Rapanyane, Shai 2019; Shai 2016; Shai 2020a; Shai et al 2022], ‘*analysis*’ [Legodi, Shai 2018; Shai, Vunza 2021], ‘*perspective*’ [Shai, Nyawasha, Ndaguba 2018], ‘*review*’ [Langa, Shai 2019; Nkuna, Shai 2021], ‘*response*’ [Shai 2020b], or even ‘*dissection*’ [Rapanyane, Shai 2020]. Is it a kind of universal framework that is applicable to all social sciences? From what angle do you view the world from that perspective?

– Indeed, Afrocentricity represents an overarching theoretical framework I consistently employ in political studies and social sciences in its broadest form [Shai 2017; Shai 2023]. I was exposed to this theory by Dr. A.V. Dhliwayo during the year 2010 while I was completing my Masters’ degree (Political Science) at the University of Venda in South Africa. Dr. A.V. Dhliwayo was an external assessor for my Masters’ dissertation, which was based on a blend of realism and idealism [Shai 2010]<sup>1</sup>. Part of his recommendations challenged me to revisit and rethink foreign policy issues from an Afrocentric perspective [Asante 1990; Asante 2003]. I then took the challenge, and up to date, I never looked back. In other words, an engagement with the literature on Afrocentricity led me to a journey of self-discovery. Before my encounter with the literature on Afrocentricity, my previous works reveal a bias towards Africa [Shai 2009].

It is this ontological posture that laid a fertile ground for the clear positioning of my epistemic identity and location. It is common knowledge that, for us as Africans, the choice and use of Afrocentricity as a contextual and theoretical lens is not negotiable. This is because Afrocentricity speaks to the heart and imagination of our genuine epistemic identity. It is our inborn epistemic identity with a track record of resilience in the service for truth and science. Our view is that Afrocentricity is the future of social sciences in Africa and elsewhere where issues, processes, systems, and institutions that are African are studied [Azibo 2011; Baugh, Guion 2016].

– Which scholars have had the greatest influence on the development of Afrocentric epistemology?

– Among others, notable scholars in Afrocentric epistemology include Molefi Kete Asante [2004], Maulanga Karenga [1997], Ama Mazama [2003], Archie Mafeje [2008], Toyin Falola, Dani Nabudere, and others [Shai, Molapo 2015].

As an African-American, M. Asante has been very instrumental in advocacy work and popularisation of Afrocentricity as a theory of social change at a global level. For a long time, he has been operating from enabling intellectual environment in the United States of America (USA), Temple University, to be precise. On several occasions, he has admitted that he is a Diopean, thus conceding the influence of Cheikh Anta Diop’s works on his intellectual life<sup>2</sup>. While Asante’s training is in Communication Studies, his influence has cut across all the Human and Social Sciences.

On the other hand, a fellow African-American M. Karenga’s (a Political Scientist) exceptional contribution to the Afrocentric discourse took the form of the development

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. A.V. Dhliwayo was born in Zimbabwe, got his education in universities in Zimbabwe and Nigeria, taught History for many years at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. Currently, he is on retirement (*Editor’s Note*).

<sup>2</sup> This issue of the Journal of the Institute for African Studies contains an article on the spiritual heritage of Cheikh Anta Diop by L.M. Sadovskaya (*Editor’s Note*).

and application of *Kawaida* as a philosophy of cultural nationalist theory<sup>3</sup>. This is important, given the fact that all theories are rooted within particular philosophies.

Another African-American but a Linguist, A. Mazama stands for Afrocentricity as a paradigm, which is broader in scope as opposed to theory. Among many milestones in the Afrocentric discourse, both Asante and Mazama have been serving for a long time as the co-editors of the *Journal of Black Studies*, a safe and premier publication outlet for Afrocentric scholarship.

A. Mafeje's academic orientation is in Sociology, and his contribution largely captures the African experience of South Africa. His contribution to Afrocentric epistemology takes the form of what he terms Africanity. While there is a lot of convergence among scholars in Afrocentric epistemology, A. Mafeje dismisses non-resident Africans as the bearers of African agency. He argues that Afrocentricity can only be rooted in African indigenous knowledge.

T. Falola is a Nigerian historian based in the USA, the University of Texas, to be precise. He has produced many pioneering works that have broadened understanding of many pressing issues about Africa.

D. Nabudere was one of Uganda's finest political scientists, with a remarkable contribution on the African question, especially in relation to politics, philosophy, and culture. His conceptualization and articulation of Afrikology<sup>4</sup> as a discipline from which Afrocentricity stems cannot be easily matched.

**– If we turn to the earlier origins of Afrocentric theories, to the middle of the 20th century. Last year we celebrated the centenary of the birth of Cheikh Anta Diop, an outstanding Senegalese historian. Throughout his life, he engaged in ideological disputes, even a confrontation, with the founder of Negritude, Leopold Senghor, the president of Senegal (1960–1980). On which side do you align sympathies in this dispute, and why?**

– This is a tricky question! I would prefer not to align myself with any individual but with selected ideas. This is because the ideological quarrel between Cheikh Anta Diop and Leopold Senghor is complex and long-standing. For example, I may align myself with L. Senghor on the question of African identity and unity because of my shared belief that Africanness cannot be restrained by artificial colonial boundaries. Globally, Africans share a common experience of suffering, including the persistent treatment of suspicion. I also have every reason to believe that both Africans of blood and Africans of the land have a role to play in the development of Africa. Directly or indirectly, our fate and future are tied to Africa, which is our only original or ancestral home.

The foregoing argument is not necessarily dismissed by Cheikh Anta Diop. Instead, he extends the line of thought by locating the conceptualization of Africanness or negritude to particular African roots and one of the earliest human civilizations in Egypt. On the question of language, I think that Diop was right. A home language is a heartbeat of culture, which is an anchor for the development of its speakers. Successful countries in Europe and Asia have made it through their languages, which are an expression of their value system. Similarly, African development can be well sustained through African language(s).

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<sup>3</sup> *Kawaida* (a Swahili word meaning “tradition”) is a synthesis of African thoughts and practices elaborated by Maulanga Karenga (*Editor's Note*).

<sup>4</sup> Afrikology is an open-ended philosophy of knowledge production based on the recognition of the achievements of ancient African civilization. The concept was proposed by prominent Ugandan scholar Dani Wadada Nabudere (*Editor's Note*).

However, the bigger challenge is that African languages are not yet fully developed to a point of global competence in the ranks of English. Also, as we attempt to promote African languages, we should do it in such a way that it does not become an impediment for our efficient participation in international relations. As we promote African languages, we should also be mindful of the difficulty of agreeing on a common continental language for the Africans given the existing differences in terms of colonial history. As such, I would argue that African languages should not be seen as competitors of foreign languages such as English and French. The legacy of colonialism and global interdependence demands that they should co-exist and complement one another.

**– In one of your papers, you gave a disclaimer: ‘We (authors of this paper) are all Africans by blood and by geographic location’ [Shai et al 2022: 54]. Does it mean that only local scholars can use this Afrocentric perspective, and that it has no perspectives of universal application?**

– It is our well-considered view that the whole notion of universal application of theories is a lie. Thus, what is often presented to us as universal theories is, in essence, Euro-American theories. Like them, Afrocentricity is a function of situated or context-based truth. The key denominator of Afrocentricity is the African experience, history, and cultural value systems [Shai 2023; Asante 2007; Asante 2017].

Of course, it does not in any way suggest that only local scholars can use Afrocentricity. For example, you will remember that Afrocentricity was also pioneered in the United States of America (USA) and the Caribbean World by selected African-Americans who share an African heritage. Besides this, it should be recalled that the framework of Afrocentricity has less to do with race or geography. That one can be an African based in Africa but not be Afrocentric due to suffering from what W.E.B. Du Bois terms “double consciousness” [Azibo 2011].

**– You are the immediate past President of the South African Association of Political Studies (SAAPS) and also the President of the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM). In such responsible positions, what efforts are you making to enhance the social knowledge in South Africa?**

– SAAPS owns a reputable journal, *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* which provides publishing opportunities for political thinkers in South Africa and beyond<sup>5</sup>. During my tenure as SAAPS President, we organised a national congress, regional colloquia, policy dialogues, and webinars in partnership with like-minded formations. Such platforms are publishing capacity building interventions in their nature. So much could have been done. But the odds were simply not conducive due to the difficult relationship between the Council and Editorial Board.

My stint in SAAPAM Presidency saw the conceptualisation and operationalisation of a successful book series, which expanded publishing opportunities for the epistemic community in South Africa and beyond. This book series adds to the publishing opportunities availed by the referred and accredited *Journal of Public Administration*<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* is published (actually by leading British publishing house Taylor & Francis) since 1974 and is an official journal of the South African Association of Political Studies. See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/cpsa20> (*Editor’s Note*)

<sup>6</sup> The *Journal of Public Administration* is a quarterly journal issued by South African Publishing House Sabinet on behalf of the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM). See: <https://journals.co.za/journal/jpad> (*Editor’s Note*)

This journal has done so much to revolutionise the knowledge industry in South Africa due to its clear transformation agenda.

In short, the signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) have formalised and solidified collaborative activities between SAAPAM and SAAPS and their strategic partners.

– **South African science and especially social journals (African Journals Online, AJOL) and publishing houses are shaping not only national knowledge but act as a structural power for the entire African continent, which was not the case during the Apartheid period, before 1994. What is the nature of this structural power—is it *de-colonizing* or *re-colonizing* Sub-Saharan Africa?**

– I will argue that the dynamics around South African science as structural power reflects a crossroad between de-colonisation and neo-colonialism [Shai 2023; Shai 2022]. Before 1994, South Africa's knowledge industry was dominated by whites, who essentially served as local vanguards for Euro-American imperialism. In the post-1994, the democratic government has done so much to transform the ideational space in such a way that South African science can be integrated into the useful dimension of soft power. The benefits of the knowledge transformation have been felt in South Africa and Africa as a whole.

But this journey has not been easy because even in the new democratic dispensation, the knowledge agenda of South Africa is still largely defined by the minority and in solidarity with their international counterparts [Shai 2017]. The confusion of whether democratic South Africa represents an agency of decolonizing or re-colonising of scientific knowledge cannot be delinked from the fact that agenda setting of national discourse is not set by progressives, and, in fact, it is cascaded locally by the international forces of monopoly capital. Consequently, most academics in South Africa ride on externally set discourse, which sets in motion mis-education and de-education of the nation.

– **Every year, new generations of IR scholars start their careers both in Russia and in South Africa. What recommendations would you propose to strengthen academic cooperation between our countries?**

– I strongly recommend the co-hosting of two Africa conferences per year, one rotating among African cities and the other in Moscow. These conferences will lay a fertile ground for continuous and high-level networking with prospects for long-lasting collaboration in teaching and learning, research, and community service, which may in turn impact diplomatic practice.

*Interviewed by Denis A. Degterev*

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## ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЯ АФРОЦЕНТРИЗМА ДЛЯ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ НАУК

Кготатсо Шай – профессор политологии, в недавнем прошлом возглавлял кафедру культурных и политических исследований в Университете Лимпопо в ЮАР, а также Южноафриканскую ассоциацию политических исследований. В настоящее время он – действующий президент Южноафриканской ассоциации государственного управления и менеджмента, в рамках которой он запустил и выступает в качестве главного редактора флагманской книжной серии. Профессор Шай – автор трех научных книг, входит в число исследователей, деятельность которых учитывается в рейтинге южноафриканского Национального исследовательского фонда (South Africa National Research Foundation, NRF). Он опубликовал более 100 рецензируемых публикаций в изданиях, аккредитованных Министерством высшего образования и подготовки кадров ЮАР. В сфере его научных интересов – африканская политика, международные отношения и политика знаний.

В интервью профессор К. Шай рассуждает об афроцентризме как о центральной теоретической парадигме и аналитической призме, которую следует применять в африканских социальных науках. Он описывает свой личный путь внедрения афроцентричных подходов и рассказывает о наиболее влиятельных ученых-афроцентристах, как представляющих континент, так и живущих за его пределами. Он также рассказывает о своем опыте председательства в Южноафриканской ассоциации политических исследований (*South African Association of Political Studies, SAAPS*) и Южноафриканской ассоциации государственного управления и менеджмента (*South African Association of Public Administration and Management, SAAPAM*), проблемах и перспективах функционирования этих организаций. В интервью также затрагивается тема иерархии системы производства знаний в Африке, выстраиваемой научными журналами, многие из которых издаются в Южной Африке.

**Ключевые слова:** Африка, афроцентризм, научное знание, политика знания, иерархия знаний, Южная Африка

DOI: 10.31132/2412-5717-2024-68-3-107-113

**Для цитирования:** Шай К.Б. Эпистемология афроцентризма для социальных наук (Интервью). *Ученые записки Института Африки РАН*. 2024. № 3. С. 107–113. <https://doi.org/10.31132/2412-5717-2024-68-3-107-113>