

Between the classroom and the marketplace



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Abstract

This paper discusses the value of non-traditional forms of knowledge production, through an exploration of Nigeria's feminist history and the Abeokuta Women's Union.

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“We educated women were living outside the daily life of the people.” - Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti

Some of my favourite stories of solidarity reside in the repository of Nigeria's feminist history. Let me share what I know of the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU).

Initially called the Abeokuta Ladies Club (ALC) in 1932, this social club was headed by local headteacher, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. Selective in its membership, the ALC was mostly comprised of the daughters and wives of the Nigerian elite, convening well-mannered Christian women with money, status, and a Western education. Like most clubs, the ALC's agenda reflected the concerns of its members – social etiquette, charitable works, and sewing, to name a few – all politely discussed over cups of tea and carefully prepared sandwiches. It is hard to imagine this elite members' club as a breeding ground for anti-colonial resistance so, how did this happen? Ironically, we find the answer in a question.

In 1944, a friend asked Funmilayo for help with learning how to read. This question was met with the organisation of literacy classes, created especially for working-class market women who, as Funmilayo wrote, “...carried babies on their backs and farmed from sunrise to sunset.” As the ALC's engagement with market women grew, so did their understanding of gender through the lenses of colonialism, capitalism, sexism – lenses they would have never received without the knowledge and experiences of the market women. Each conversation had, each perspective gained, and each story told, spun and twisted around on another; weaving a tapestry as rich and complex as their lived realities. Here, revolution was born out of women's shared dreams of liberation. The formerly exclusive nature of ALC's membership was quickly exchanged for a more inclusive organisational approach. Market women not only became members, but leaders as well. To increase accessibility (and confuse the British colonial administration), Yorùbá became the organisation's lingua franca and traditional attire was donned proudly by all its members. In 1946, the ALC became the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) women's tax (republic.com.ng/vol5-no3/egba-women-unite/).

At first glance, this has nothing to do with global health. After all, it is no secret that the history of global health is one steeped in colonialism (lshtm.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2022/historical-study-lshtm-its-origins-1960-details-extent-colonial-roots). Starting off as ‘tropical medicine’, global health emerged as European institutions studied population health in colonised countries. Their observations and findings were used to protect colonial rulers from major infectious diseases, ensuring they were healthy enough to sustain – and increase – their authority in the colonies. The knowledge produced around this time contributed significantly to improving their health, creating a normative framework for health promotion and disease prevention. A framework that prioritised the health of certain populations above others.



Untitled by Ayesha Khan, 2021

Over the years, global health has shifted to a seemingly more noble cause, concentrating its efforts on improving health for *all*. Interestingly, the main players in the field remain the same: they are still white, often male, and hail from high-income countries in Europe and North America. What also remains the same are the theoretical frameworks established during colonialism. They shape our ideas and thoughts on how ‘healthy’ and ‘ill’ individuals look and behave. They instruct us to see health as solely biomedical and ignore how it's produced, and affected, by societal structures and power asymmetries. This knowledge, this hegemony of Western, colonial knowledge, drives the decisions and policies that affect the health of certain populations above others

Such sobering truths have engendered growing discourse on ‘decolonising’ global health. So far, this has consisted of heartfelt apology letters from various institutions; paired with promises of a slightly more diverse curriculum, and a couple of mandatory anti-racism sessions for staff. While some may

argue that this is better than nothing, I think that these calls for reform lack imagination. What global health needs right now are conversations that completely disrupt its bloodstained foundations; ideas that dislocate the geopolitical power imbalances and the pharmaceutical monopolies underlying health inequities. Strategies that place decision-making power into the hands of the most oppressed, most marginalised, and most neglected groups in global health, paradigms that confront the deliberate depletion of health systems in the Global South by restoring resources and building infrastructure. We can no longer afford to spend time learning to live with the rotten fruits of colonialism in global health and force ourselves to get used to its rancid stench and bitter taste. If we want to cultivate something sweeter, something healthier – we must dismantle to start all over again.

When it comes to my research, praxis, and philosophy on life, I am inspired by organisations like the AWU. Embodying indigenous values of communality, their activism was founded on their ability to embrace new ways of knowing. Knowing that was not backed with a degree from a Western university. Knowing that was expressed in ancestral tongues and pidgin English, that captured people's stories through gossip, chatter, proverbs, songs. Knowing that many dismiss, that has been routinely silenced and annulled throughout history. Knowing that many do not know about and, thus, cannot fathom the wisdom and innovation that hides in words unsaid. It was the interplay of knowing – from both the classroom and the marketplace – that formed the framework of the AWU's organising. From protests, demonstrations, labour strikes, and petitions, to political engagement and transnational alliances, the AWU's actions resulted in the abdication of the Alake of Egbaland and the temporary abolition of the women's tax. The union continued to contribute significantly to wider anti-colonial efforts while elevating women's voice in socio-political discourse, paving the way for the [feminist movements and activism](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/12/world/africa/nigeria-feminist-coalition.html) ([nytimes.com/2021/03/12/world/africa/nigeria-feminist-coalition.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/12/world/africa/nigeria-feminist-coalition.html)) we see in Nigeria today.

That knowing moves me. It tells me to make space for multiple narratives, to decentre the classroom as the primary site of knowledge production. It teaches me to pay attention to the theory that lies in everyday conversations, in the breakroom, in the salon, in the kitchen. It invites those in the academy – but not of the academy – to do their part; to take advantage of their proximity to the academy's education and resources and use them to serve communities of resistance. It implores us to cultivate solidarity networks, particularly with communities in the Global South, and enhance our collective power. All in all, it welcomes us to approach issues differently, and together.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes that “the academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created.” In this context, I see paradise as the abode of the just, where people's health and lives are no longer undermined by the oppressive -isms and -phobias that underpin our societies. Where healthcare is accessible to all, and where praxis is rooted in love and genuine compassion for those who have been marginalised.

With bell hooks' words in mind, paradise can lie in the exchange of knowledge. Where learning occurs. Where conversations take place and perspectives are changed. Where ideas and dreams are shared, and meaningful relationships are formed.

It's there, right? Somewhere between the classroom and the marketplace