



Research Article

From Colonial Epistemicide To Knowledge Plurality

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Abstract. Colonialism functioned not merely through territorial conquest or economic exploitation but through a systematic reordering of knowledge that produced epistemicide—the delegitimization and displacement of non-Western epistemologies. This study aims to examine colonialism as an epistemological project and to analyze its impact on Indian and Islamic knowledge traditions. Using qualitative library research and critical textual analysis, the paper engages the works of Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to conceptualize epistemic violence operating at psychological, institutional, and discursive levels. Placing these theorists in dialogue with Indian epistemology (pramāṇa) and Islamic epistemology (‘ilm, tawhīd, and adab), the study argues that colonial modernity fragmented holistic knowledge systems and imposed Eurocentric hierarchies of reason. The paper concludes that epistemic sovereignty and knowledge plurality are essential conditions for genuine decolonization and for reconstituting intellectual traditions beyond colonial categories.

Keywords: Epistemicide, Decolonial Theor, Islamic Epistemology, Indian Knowledge Systems, Knowledge Plurality

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism was not only a political and economic enterprise but also a profound epistemological intervention. By redefining what counted as knowledge, reason, and truth, colonial modernity displaced indigenous and religious epistemologies and installed European modes of knowing as universal. Knowledge traditions that once governed ethics, law, metaphysics, and social organization were reduced to the domains of religion, culture, or tradition.

In the Indian subcontinent, colonial institutions transformed living intellectual practices into objects of classification and control. Orientalist scholarship, colonial archives, and modern education systems fragmented plural epistemic traditions into rigid categories. As a result, Indian and Islamic epistemologies were excluded from modern regimes of truth and rendered epistemically inferior.

While postcolonial studies have examined colonial domination extensively, the epistemological dimensions of colonial violence—particularly its effects on Indian and Islamic knowledge systems—remain insufficiently integrated into mainstream academic discourse. This study addresses that gap by conceptualizing colonialism as epistemicide and by placing decolonial theorists in dialogue with precolonial epistemic traditions. The paper contributes to contemporary debates on decolonization by foregrounding epistemic sovereignty and knowledge plurality as foundational to intellectual liberation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs qualitative library research based on critical textual analysis. Primary sources include the works of Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, while secondary sources consist of scholarly literature on Indian epistemology, Islamic intellectual traditions, colonial knowledge production, and decolonial theory. The data are analyzed through comparative and interpretive methods to examine how epistemic violence operates across psychological, institutional, and discursive dimensions and how alternative epistemological frameworks challenge colonial hierarchies of knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Colonialism as an Epistemological Project

Colonialism was not only a material conquest but also an epistemological one. It redefined the coordinates of reason, knowledge, and truth itself. The modern European project presented its local epistemic traditions as universal, displacing other modes of knowing into the realm of myth, superstition, or folklore. This epistemic reordering legitimized imperial rule: if Europe was the locus of truth, then its domination appeared as a moral duty to “civilize” others.

Michel Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge helps reveal how colonialism operated as a regime that produced truth rather than merely suppressed it. The colonial archive—the census, the map, the ethnographic report—did not simply record; it created categories of race, caste, and civilization. The “native” was transformed from a subject of knowledge into an object of study. Walter Mignolo calls

this process the “coloniality of knowledge,” where European epistemology became the measure of all reasoning.

In the Indian context, institutions like the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the colonial survey transformed living traditions into static texts to be classified. The British Orientalists believed that to govern India, they had to “know” it—but this knowing meant dissection, translation, and control. The plural languages of thought—Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, and Prakrit—were reduced to instruments of administration. This new epistemic regime generated the illusion of universality while sustaining the hierarchies of empire.

Precolonial Epistemic Plurality

Before colonialism, the Indian subcontinent was home to one of the most pluralistic intellectual ecosystems in world history. Philosophical and theological traditions—Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, and Sikh—coexisted through a shared commitment to dialogue and commentary. Disagreement did not imply hostility; instead, each tradition sought to refine truth through debate. The Sanskritic practice of *shastrartha* (scriptural disputation) exemplified this ethos, emphasizing reasoned dialogue grounded in textual interpretation.

Islamic and Indic institutions often intersected. Madrasas and pathashalas functioned as complementary centers of learning. Persian, Sanskrit, and Arabic scholars exchanged ideas on logic, grammar, and metaphysics. Under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, translation projects flourished, creating a cosmopolitan intellectual milieu. Works like the *Mahabharata* and *Upanishads* were translated into Persian, while Arabic treatises on astronomy and medicine were rendered into Sanskrit.

Dara Shikoh’s *Majma al-Bahrayn* (The Mingling of Two Oceans) symbolized this cosmopolitan spirit. His comparison of Sufi and Vedantic ideas demonstrated that epistemic plurality was not a matter of tolerance but of shared pursuit. Truth was conceived as multifaceted—approachable through different languages of the sacred. This intellectual pluralism, rooted in ethical openness, was what colonial epistemology later dismantled by introducing rigid dichotomies of religion versus reason and East versus West.

Indian Knowledge Systems and Pramana

Indian epistemology, known as *pramana-shastra*, offers one of the world’s most elaborate reflections on valid knowledge. The word *pramana* refers to the means through which true cognition arises. Schools such as Nyaya, Mimamsa, Vedanta, Buddhist, and Jain proposed distinct yet rigorous methods of inquiry. The Nyaya system emphasized logic and inference; the Buddhists privileged direct perception and the immediacy of awareness; the Mimamsa tradition argued that testimony, especially scriptural, could also yield truth.

What unites these systems is their ethical dimension: knowledge is not neutral but transformative. To know rightly is to act rightly. The classical Indian epistemologist does not separate reason from virtue. Knowledge is a moral practice tied to liberation (*moksha*). Unlike modern empiricism, which often treats the

knower as detached observer, Indian epistemology situates the knower within the web of reality.

Colonial modernity misunderstood this integration. British Orientalists often reduced Indian philosophy to mysticism or theology, stripping it of its analytical rigor. Texts that once functioned as living pedagogies became relics of a “spiritual” past. In this sense, colonial translation was itself an epistemic act of violence—it redefined Indian knowledge within Western categories.

Revisiting *pramana* today allows for a decolonial rethinking of what counts as reason. It suggests that knowledge is not only about correspondence between mind and world but also about the ethical cultivation of the knower. Restoring *pramana* to intellectual discourse is therefore a political as well as philosophical task.

Islamic Epistemology: Tawhid, Ilm, and Adab

Islamic epistemology begins from the metaphysical principle of *tawhid*—the unity of God, and by extension, the unity of all knowledge. In this worldview, to know is to participate in the divine order. The pursuit of *ilm* (knowledge) bridges the rational (*‘aql*) and transmitted (*naql*) sciences, harmonizing reason and revelation. Classical Muslim thinkers developed complex systems for understanding the relationship between intellect, revelation, and the soul.

Philosophers such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) built upon Greek logic but situated it within an Islamic metaphysical framework. For them, reason was not opposed to faith; it was one of its highest forms. Al-Ghazali, often misread as anti-rational, in fact argued that intellect must be disciplined by *adab*—ethical conduct and humility before divine truth. Knowledge without moral restraint, he warned, becomes arrogance.

Colonial modernity fractured this unity by separating “rational sciences” from “religious sciences.” British administrators in South Asia restructured madrasas to emphasize jurisprudence over philosophy, narrowing the scope of Islamic education. What had once been a holistic epistemology became compartmentalized.

Yet the Islamic conception of knowledge remains profoundly relevant for decolonial thought. It resists the secular dichotomy between fact and value, insisting that knowledge entails responsibility. In the Qur’anic sense, knowing is an act of witnessing (*shahada*). This provides a vital corrective to the instrumental rationality of modernity. Re-engaging with Islamic epistemology allows for a vision of scholarship that reunites intellect, ethics, and spirituality.

Indo-Islamic Epistemic Synthesis

The meeting of Indian and Islamic civilizations produced one of the most fertile intellectual syntheses in human history. The Indo-Islamic world was not a space of cultural collision but of creative negotiation. From the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries, scholars traversed linguistic, religious, and philosophical boundaries. The translation movements under the Mughals, the commentarial traditions of scholars like Shah Wali Allah, and the mystical exchanges between Sufis and Vedantins demonstrate a shared pursuit of metaphysical truth.

Shah Wali Allah's *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha* attempted to reconcile reason and revelation, while Dara Shikoh's writings explored the unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*) and Brahmanic non-dualism. These efforts were not about homogenization but about cultivating multiple modes of reasoning within a shared ethical horizon.

Colonial epistemology disrupted this synthesis by creating disciplinary and civilizational boundaries. Western scholars categorized Islamic thought as theological and Hindu thought as philosophical, reinforcing a civilizational binary that persists today. Gayatri Spivak's idea of epistemic violence captures this distortion: to represent the other within one's own categories is to silence them.

Recovering the Indo-Islamic synthesis offers more than historical nostalgia—it provides a template for decolonial epistemology. It shows that plurality is not a threat to reason but its enrichment. The conversation between Sufi metaphysics and Vedantic monism, between *adab* and *dharma*, continues to offer a model for coexistence grounded in ethical recognition.

Colonial Epistemicide as Structured Violence

The concept of epistemicide—literally, the killing of knowledge—captures the institutional and psychological devastation wrought by colonial modernity. It was not an accidental byproduct of empire but a deliberate instrument of domination. Thomas Babington Macaulay's notorious "Minute on Indian Education" (1835) articulated the colonial vision of cognitive hierarchy, declaring European literature and philosophy inherently superior to all Oriental learning. By legislating English as the language of instruction, colonial policy created a class of intermediaries alienated from their intellectual heritage yet dependent on Western approval.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes this process as "the colonization of the mind." Colonial education not only displaced local languages and literatures but also reoriented the imagination itself. The colonized subject began to see reality through the colonizer's categories, internalizing epistemic inferiority. This was not merely cultural but structural violence: institutions, curricula, and archives reproduced the hierarchy of knowledge long after political independence.

Even in the postcolonial era, epistemicide endures in more subtle forms. University syllabi across the Global South often remain tethered to Eurocentric canons. Indigenous and Islamic sciences are relegated to "area studies" or "religion," while Western philosophy and social theory occupy the normative center. The result is what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls the "monoculture of modern knowledge"—a global regime that declares one epistemology universal and all others local.

To confront this, we must reconstruct intellectual institutions capable of sustaining multiple epistemic traditions. Decolonization cannot simply mean inclusion within Western frameworks; it must entail the reconstitution of epistemic sovereignty. In this sense, epistemicide is not only the destruction of knowledge but also the suppression of the right to know otherwise.

Fanon, Mbembe, and Spivak on Epistemic Violence

Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provide complementary frameworks for understanding the psychic and structural dimensions

of epistemic violence. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* reveals how colonial power colonizes consciousness. The colonized subject yearns for recognition from the colonizer and internalizes the epistemic authority of the West. Knowledge becomes not self-expression but mimicry. Fanon's psychoanalysis of colonialism shows that liberation requires an epistemic revolution—a reclamation of the right to define reality.

Achille Mbembe extends this analysis from subjectivity to power. In *Necropolitics*, he argues that colonialism creates regimes of life and death, not only over bodies but over ways of knowing. Entire epistemic traditions are rendered “dead,” preserved as museum artifacts rather than living frameworks of thought. The colonial archive becomes a necropolis of knowledge. Mbembe's idea of “necro-epistemology” demonstrates that epistemicide is an ongoing process: Western institutions curate the remains of colonized knowledge while denying them vitality.

Spivak's intervention adds a linguistic and representational dimension. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, she exposes how even emancipatory discourses often silence subaltern voices by speaking for them. Her distinction between political representation (*Vertretung*) and aesthetic re-presentation (*Darstellung*) underscores how Western theory can appropriate subaltern agency. For Spivak, epistemic violence occurs when the subaltern is forced to appear only within categories legible to the West.

Together, Fanon, Mbembe, and Spivak reveal that epistemicide operates across the psychic, institutional, and discursive registers. Their thought, placed in dialogue with Indian and Islamic epistemologies, invites a broader conception of decolonization—one that seeks not only to resist domination but to regenerate alternative epistemic life-worlds.

The Afterlife of Epistemicide

Even after the end of formal colonial rule, the epistemic hierarchies of empire persist. Postcolonial nations, eager to modernize, often embraced the very models of knowledge production that once justified their subjugation. English remains the global language of academia; the Western university system, with its disciplinary divisions and metrics of impact, defines what counts as research. The decolonial task, therefore, is not only political or economic but epistemological: to unlearn the colonial logic that continues to shape our institutions.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that global justice is impossible without epistemic justice. The monoculture of modern science must be replaced by an “ecology of knowledges,” where different epistemologies coexist and learn from one another. This is not cultural relativism but reciprocal rationality. Indian and Islamic epistemologies, with their insistence on the ethical dimension of knowledge, can contribute significantly to this ecology.

Environmental crises further reveal the costs of epistemicide. The separation of knowledge from ethics has legitimized extractivism and ecological destruction. Indigenous, Islamic, and Indic worldviews once recognized the sacred interdependence of life, an understanding now being recovered through

environmental humanities and posthumanist thought. Decolonizing knowledge thus becomes an ecological imperative.

Sylvia Wynter reminds us that the category of “Man” central to Western humanism is itself a colonial construct. To move beyond it, she proposes a redefinition of the human grounded in plural epistemic genealogies. Decolonization, in this sense, requires a re-enchantment of the world—a reweaving of intellectual and spiritual dimensions long severed by modernity.

Epistemic Sovereignty and Knowledge Plurality

Epistemic sovereignty is the capacity of a people to define their own criteria of truth, validation, and relevance. It does not seek isolation from global knowledge but parity within it. In both Indian and Islamic epistemological frameworks, sovereignty resides not in domination but in responsibility. The Indic notion of *anekantavada* (many-sided truth) affirms that reality can be seen from multiple perspectives, while the Qur’anic concept of *tawhid* recognizes unity within diversity. Both reject the absolutism of singular reason.

Achille Mbembe’s call for a “planetary humanism” echoes these insights. He envisions a world in which humanity is not defined by the West’s self-image but by shared vulnerability and interdependence. A planetary humanism requires an epistemic pluralism capable of sustaining coexistence without hierarchy. In practical terms, this means transforming universities, research practices, and language policies. The decolonial university should not merely add non-Western voices to existing canons but reconfigure its epistemic architecture to reflect multiple rationalities.

Epistemic sovereignty thus demands structural change. It involves reclaiming languages of thought, creating institutions that foster indigenous and religious epistemologies, and developing trans-civilizational dialogues. Indian *pramana* theory and Islamic *adab* offer resources for building such a future—one in which knowledge is both critical and compassionate, rational and relational.

CONCLUSION

Colonialism’s greatest violence was epistemic. By redefining what counted as knowledge, it reshaped human consciousness and global hierarchies. To decolonize, therefore, is to reverse epistemicide—to restore the integrity of plural ways of knowing. The dialogue among Fanon, Mbembe, Spivak, and Indian and Islamic epistemologies reveals that liberation begins not only with resistance but with re-creation.

Fanon teaches that psychological freedom requires epistemic autonomy; Mbembe insists that planetary survival depends on epistemic plurality; Spivak warns that the subaltern must not merely be heard but must speak in her own idiom. Their insights converge in a shared commitment to decolonizing thought itself. Indian and Islamic epistemologies, with their emphasis on ethical reason and unity in diversity, embody this commitment.

To know otherwise is to live otherwise. The recovery of epistemic sovereignty is therefore a project of world-making—a step toward a horizon where knowledge is

shared rather than imposed, dialogical rather than monological, and humane rather than hegemonic.

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