



# 17<sup>th</sup> BIENNIAL AAPS CONFERENCE 2023

*“Geopolitics of knowledge in the Covid-19 Era:  
a policy window for epistemic tension and self-  
determination in Africa?”*

October 12~14, 2023  
Future Africa Campus, University of Pretoria  
South Africa

**CALL FOR PROPOSALS**

The African Association of Political Science (AAPS) Biennial Conference will be hosted with focus on the theme **“Geopolitics of knowledge in the covid-19 Era: a policy window for epistemic tension and self-determination in Africa?”**. This is a pretext to identify and discuss not only the way knowledge battles framed discourses, practices and policies, but also the circulation of knowledge models and powers in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Indeed, the Covid-19 era is a “gloomy compendium of threats”<sup>1</sup>, a critical time not only exposing deep flaws in national health systems, the global economic and education processes<sup>2</sup>, but it also exacerbated deficiencies in almost every system globally given the dawned reality of public health as the foundation of everything else. For instance, although fighting the virus required cooperation notably on research, innovation and knowledge sharing<sup>3</sup>, the pandemic has also revealed epistemic tensions, highlighting processes through which knowledge is gained or lost on subjects and objects, and how it is socially and geopolitically situated. In this context, it is wrong to assume that “justice is the norm and injustice the unfortunate aberration”<sup>4</sup>. Instead, the pandemic has been a marker of distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods<sup>5</sup>. Epistemic injustice, as a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower, has two expressions: testimonial and hermeneutical<sup>6</sup>. For example, Vivian Altiery De Jesus, Nisreen Alwan, Felicity Callard and Zackary Berger brought to light the testimonial and hermeneutical injustice occurring in global healthcare that signpost disregard for Global South agency<sup>7</sup>. Two occurrences in Africa are good indicators of this epistemic inequality and the disregard it produces.

The first one is the way the World Health Organization (WHO) and the world at large responded to Madagascar’s *Covid Organics*, a traditional preventive and curative remedy against Covid-19 at the onset of the pandemic in April 2020. Although the WHO untested remedy, described by President Andry Rajoelina as “our bulletproof vest in the war against coronavirus”, did not eventually protect Madagascans from Covid-19 deaths, the immediate disregard and dismissal by the WHO is indicative of global epistemic injustice. President Rajoelina’s retort in this regard is instructive: “What is the problem with Covid Organics? The problem is that it comes from Africa”.

The second occurrence is the response of the West to South Africa’s discovery and reporting of a new Covid-19 variant (Omicron) through genomic sequencing. The speed and transparency of the country’s scientific contribution to global good, a sign of scientific excellence, was immediately drowned by a wave of flight bans to and from Southern Africa by many Western countries. Also, the omicron variant, which was considered more contagious and evades vaccines, was quickly analyzed as being potentially correlated with HIV, reactivating the spectra of the continent’s stigmatization with HIV. It did not matter that the five Covid-19 variants at the time emerged from four different continents. Africa easily became the Covid-19 scapegoat even though it was the least affected continent (officially less than 2% of the world deaths) contrary to the grim prognosis of fatalities for Africa at the start of the pandemic.

Although different contexts, these situations raise the issue of knowledge inferiorization, with a deflated level of credibility to therapeutic knowledge whose very processes were subject to questioning. As the world scientists were shelling out hypotheses, from the most serious to the most far-fetched (age pyramid, hot and humid temperatures, cross immunities, optimism, etc.), knowledge from Africa is lampooned with continent expected simply to be a recipient of knowledge products from the West. Although Africa eventually had to depend on vaccines from the rest of the world for its populations, its knowledge products that were largely subjugated in the fight against the pandemic, have become instruments of epistemic de-imperialization<sup>8</sup>. The window of decolonization and decentralization of knowledge appears to be the bearer of crucial stakes in the deconstruction of the global links between knowledge and power historically nestled in the colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Zakaria F., *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, New York, Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc., 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Hamrouni M., al, “Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Geopolitics, Health, Economics, Education and Sociocultural Events”, *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, 15, 2022, pp.935–943.

<sup>3</sup> Woods N., “Global governance: planning for the world after COVID-19”; World Economic Forum, *Challenges, and opportunities in the post-COVID-19 world*. Geneva, World Economic Forum, May 2020, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> Fricker M., *Epistemic injustice: power and ethics of knowing*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Hazlett A., “Epistemic goods”, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-being*, London, Routledge, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Fricker M., *Idem*, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Altiery De Jesus, Vivian V., Alwan, Nisreen, Callard, Felicity and Berger, Zackary (2021) “Listening to Long COVID: Epistemic Injustice and COVID-19 morbidity”. *OSF*

Chen K.-H., *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham/Londres, Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Chen K.-H., *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham/Londres, Duke University Press, 2010.

imposition of Western reason<sup>9</sup>. The covid-19 era and more recent global health challenges seem to be bringing “strength through chaos and crisis”<sup>10</sup>, enhanced by the decolonial emergency<sup>11</sup>.

Indeed, the pandemic is a metaphor and a powerful signpost of these epistemic tensions based on the unprecedented valorization of patrimonial knowledge, challenging the common narratives, and opening to more reflexivity on solutions from the Global North. This tension is based on a plural temporality of knowledge and truth regimes<sup>12</sup> articulating covid-19 to other health crisis and reflecting on the origins, the construction and the circulations of knowledge and its practical and symbolical consequences. It is urgent to reconsider, from a critical standpoint, the consistency of this self-determination celebration and or postulation alongside different national mobilization trajectories around the pandemic<sup>13</sup>. A critical engagement with the assumption of epistemic freedom can be rooted in the problems faced by the translation of this agency into policies, beyond scholarship. The historical and structural prejudice in the economy of African collective hermeneutical resources appeared particularly visible but doesn't necessarily opens to a radical shift in the geography and biography of knowledge. The prominent feature of the knowledge decolonization and epistemic freedom<sup>14</sup> might be additional myths and illusions of freedom in Africa as Ndlovu-Gatsheni suggested<sup>15</sup>. The foregoing raise a key question: is the economy and geopolitics of knowledge credibility and trust challenged by a new alterity within and beyond the pandemic? And if so, how is that opening a space out of subalternity for endogenous policies path?

This conference aims to bring scholars together from an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective to answer these questions, and welcomes panels and paper abstracts addressing notably (but not limited to) other related issues such as:

- Forms and expressions of global epistemic tensions in the knowledge production around the pandemic (s);
- Terms and modalities of African epistemic resistance and contribution in the dignification of African geography and biography of knowledge;
- Issues in Africa's dependency on the West for solutions to global challenges
- Traces of a new (or renewed) distribution of the credibility economy and impact on African scholarship
- Implications in terms of Polity, policies and politics.

The conference is to be held in October 12-14, 2023; the duration of 3 days including the AAPS governance and biennial general meetings.



## AAPS Organizing Committee

- Research Committee of the African Political Science Association (AAPS)
- Members of the South African Association of Political Studies (SAAPS) from selected universities

<sup>9</sup> See notably Fanon F., *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris, Le Seuil, 1971 ; *Les Damnés de la terre*. Paris, Gallimard, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Zakaria F., *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*, New York, Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc., 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Grosfoguel, R. “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms”. *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2-3), March/May 2007, pp.211-223.

<sup>12</sup> See Foucault M., *Leçons sur la Volonté de Savoir – Cours au Collège de France. 1970-1971*, Leçon du 9 décembre 1970, édition établie sous la direction de François Ewald et Alessandro Fontana, par Daniel Defert, Paris, Gallimard, Seuil, 2011, coll. « Hautes études ».

<sup>13</sup> Waele J.M. (dir), *Et la pandémie bouleversa le monde. Les politiques publiques variées face au Covid-19*, courant 2022, Bruxelles, Bruylant.

<sup>14</sup> Santos B. de S., “Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges”, *Review*, XXX (1), 2007, pp. 45–89 and more recently Ndlovu- Gatsheni S.J., *Epistemic freedom in Africa: deprovincialization and decolonization*, New York, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> See Ndlovu- Gatsheni S.J., “Fiftieth Anniversary of Decolonisation in Africa: a moment of celebration or critical reflection?”, *Third World Quarterly*, 33(1), 2012, p.71; but also from the same author *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity*, New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013.



## Location and format

The conference will take place at the **Future Africa Campus**, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

The conference is an in-person event.



## Proposal submission

We welcome submissions from researchers from different disciplinary perspective. The criteria for selection are originality, quality of research, and relevance. Comparative perspectives are welcome.

Paper proposal should consist of a title and 200 words abstract that specifies the research question, methodology, and main findings. As for panel proposals, an abstract of 300 words, with title and themes, as well as the names and affiliations of each panelist with the title of their paper.

The submission can be done by completing this online form:  
<https://forms.office.com/r/YsKUBMxqKj>.

The deadline for proposal submissions is **January 13, 2023** and the information on the acceptance will be available on February 10, 2023. For further information about the conference, please contact [aaps23conference@gmail.com](mailto:aaps23conference@gmail.com).



## Registration

Details of conference registration and fees which shall be tied to AAPS membership fees payment will be made available in February 2023.

**Contact us :**

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