

Pluriversal Decolonization in Open Education: Thinking with Islamic epistemic traditions

How does your session address the UNESCO OER Recommendation?

Increasingly, critical perspectives in open education studies have surfaced the acute need for embracing pluralistic views within our own community of practice (Bali and Cronin et al., 2020). Paramount among these have been a committed - but still woefully inadequate - focus on Indigenous knowledge. In this persisting imperative to decolonize openness, we call for more robust engagement with religious diversity, a lacuna in our field that is evidenced even in this year's conference, which centers UNESCO's Recommendation on Open Educational Resources (OER). These policies and action points make no mention of religion in their focus on diversity and inclusivity.

From Palestine to France, from China to India, and from Guantanamo Bay to the Bay of Bengal, Muslims constitute a large percentage of the world's migrants, refugees, and displaced persons escaping social realities that include everything from outright genocide to pernicious poverty and climate change's growing effects. Moreover, many immigrants have come to Europe and North America only to face institutionalized Islamophobia and racism in these secular democratic nations. Many more Muslims constitute generations of persons who've taken shelter in the camps and bureaucracies of institutions of the UN and other humanitarian groups. Our presentation implicates UNESCO, the UN, and its member states in the global north whose epistemological framing of recommendations, like this one on OER, elide the ways of knowing and worldviews of the very people who they seek to assist and bring together into communities such as "inclusive knowledge societies" (UNESCO, 2012).

Briefly describe your initiative (goals/objectives).

In our presentation, we frame the call for greater attention to religious life as a core aspect of engaging the whole person in pedagogical processes (hooks, 1994) and in decolonizing open educational practices. These are grounded in practical and theoretical terms.

We present the results of an informal survey of popular OER that are actively used in the contexts of our respected works as an open education practitioner and an early career scholar-educator. The goal of this survey is to evaluate successes, shortcomings, and opportunities in existing OER toward a more pluriversalist (Mbembe, 2015) approach to the retention, remixing, reuse, revision, and redistribution of OER. We made use of our own language capacities to think critically with resources in English and French, as well as a less in-depth scan of materials in Urdu, Arabic, and Persian.

A large percentage of Muslims live in the Global South, and a large part of the Global South is composed of Muslims. In Europe and North America, social policies, including in education, have meant that racialized communities - including a large proportion of Muslims in many cases - face circumstances where OER are incredibly salient and necessary. Engaging these communities offers an immense opportunity to continue to build capacities, resources, and support for OER in contexts with large numbers of Muslims.

We adopt a reflexive approach to how protracted elisions and marginalizations in higher education spaces that we categorize broadly as Islamophobia, are part of the problem. We also acknowledge the failure to include race as a focal point for the UNESCO OER recommendations and hope that our focus on faith communities underscores the need to similarly think about racialization and other elisions in their guidelines. Yet scholarship on Islamophobia highlights how unique forms of perduring animosity towards Muslims serve to marginalize individuals and nations alike (Abdelkader, 2017; CCIB, 2018; OIC, 2020).

While being careful not to romanticize or dehistoricize traditions of Islamic teaching and learning, we discuss convergences between existing and customary practices in the Muslim world and current trends in open education. One of these points may be found in challenges to the commodification of knowledge. There are rich Islamic epistemologies and learning traditions that, if taken seriously within higher education, would not only resonate in Muslim communities, but also help undo persistent colonial ideologies in the metropole.

Address lessons learned including successes, challenges and key recommendations.

Success can only be measured in the ways that stigmas around religious ways of knowing (Fadil, 2019), deconstructing open's epistemology (Bali and Adam et al., 2020) and centering Muslims experiences are actively addressed in our field's actions. We must move beyond dated framings of religion as one axis of privilege (e.g., Morgan, 1996) when various forms of religious and non-religious privilege (secularism, atheism, etc.) shape power structures in educational policy and civil society more broadly. These social formations need sustained attention (e.g., Asad, 2003) and must be linked to colonial legacies that distort or efface non-European ways of knowing (Said, 1978). As Spivak (1988) has highlighted,

The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious subjectivity.

At a very basic level, we hope to open the door to Islamic ways of knowing within the open education movement.

One of the key challenges in working on global OER under a framework of Islamic epistemologies, is the vast array of language materials that both exist and must be brought into existence. Our own limitations as researchers and practitioners has limited our survey and engagements to predominantly Anglophone and Francophone resources. While our survey in those languages is not aimed at being comprehensive, our foray into Urdu, Arabic, and Persian materials was even more cursory. Many other languages from Wolof to Malay, Swahili to Uyghur need to be surveyed. Finally, mere translations of works in European languages into these languages do not suffice in bringing true epistemic change.

In this presentation we recommend the inclusion of Islamic epistemic traditions in advocacy in open education policy, and within OERs themselves. This work can help the important work of recognizing and actively working to undo epistemic violence that persists in our community of practice.

Preliminary Bibliography

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