



Situating African Indigenous Ideas within Conventional Learning as an Impetus for Knowledge Construction in Africa

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Abstract

Literature regarding knowledge production reveals that Africa can do better than its present state through the exploration and installation of homegrown ideas detached from the Western hold on its academy. This article contributes to this debate by exploring the place of indigenous knowledge within the academy and the challenges facing its popularity within the continent. The article further provides suggestions on how indigenous and conventional orthodox knowledge can cohere towards a more pragmatic knowledge production that can propel Africa's development.

Résumé

La littérature sur la production de connaissances révèle que l'Afrique peut faire mieux par l'exploration et l'installation, dans son académie, d'idées lo-cales détachées de l'emprise occidentale. Cet article contribue à ce débat en explorant la place du savoir autochtone au sein de l'académie et les défis qui s'opposent à sa popularité sur le continent. En outre, l'article propose des manières d'harmoniser les connaissances orthodoxes autochtones et conventionnelles vers une production de connaissances plus pragmatique qui peut propulser le développement de l'Afrique.

Introduction

The concept of indigenous knowledge¹ was first used by anthropologists to explain the existence of other forms of knowledge when it comes to development assistance (Brokensha, Warren, Werner 1980; Lanzano 2013). Development agencies and international organizations picked

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interest in the subject matter to explain their homegrown development programs, more especially those ones working in emerging economies. Also, stakeholders in the areas of agriculture and environment utilized the concept to explain how local knowledge has been used to address peculiar challenges affecting them. However, academic debates regarding the subject matter in the academy began much later. What is obvious is that in spite of all that indigenous knowledge has to offer humanity, it has not gained the recognition it deserves. A number of questions thus arise in this regard. Why is this so? What are the current realities regarding indigenous knowledge in Africa? What are the obstacles regarding its place in knowledge production, how can the subject matter be further explored and utilized for the benefit of Africans and the entire universe? Delving into this area thus becomes important in this discourse.² Alluding to Reij, Scoones and Toulmin's (1996:26) submission that "much effort is expended on designing and disseminating 'solutions', but too little time is spent on understanding the problem", paying attention to this area thus becomes critical. This article seeks to explore the realities regarding knowledge production in Africa as they relate to the issue of indigenous knowledge.

The methodology adopted involves content analysis of secondary data sources from textbooks, newspapers, journal articles and other peer-reviewed internet publications. The article argues that African indigenous knowledge has suffered neglect due to the impact of coloniality and postcoloniality which completely ignore the lived experiences of those in the global south. The article further sheds light on the importance of indigenous knowledge bringing its representativeness to the fore and serving as the moral compass for the collective. Finally, the article maintains that decolonization, as pointed out in the literature, still remains the major way by which indigenous knowledge can find its grip within the existing body of knowledge. However, achieving this involves focus, determination and resilience. Consequently, discourses around the subject should be properly coordinated and managed at the national, regional and continental levels.

Exploring Indigenous Knowledge in Africa

Until recently, indigenous knowledge had been the object of so much criticism and neglect. The perception was that indigenous knowledge was raw and unable to meet the complexities associated with modern thinking. Warren (1991) describes it as homegrown ideas which are different from western knowledge often found and generated from public institutions like the university research centres and the likes. Nyong, Adesina and Osman Elasha (2007:792) defined Indigenous Knowledge as 'institutionalized local knowledge that has been built

upon and passed on from one generation to the other by word of mouth'. Different terms have been used to capture indigenous knowledge in the literature; some of them include traditional knowledge, indigenous traditional knowledge, local knowledge, indigenous technical knowledge, traditional environmental knowledge, folk knowledge, people's science, ethnoscience, local science, traditional science, village science, peasants' knowledge and rural knowledge (Mercer 2012:98; UNEP 2008:21; Williams and Muchena 1991:52). Emegwali (2014) defined it as 'the cumulative body of strategies, practices, techniques, tools, intellectual resources, explanations, beliefs, and values accumulated over time in a particular locality, without the interference and impositions of external hegemonic forces'.

The uniqueness of indigenous knowledge is that it is a representation of people, is a summary of their experiences, whether past or present, and which in turn guide their mode of behavior.³ Dei (2002), while discussing further the concept of indigenous knowledge emphasized on its relevance in shaping the community's relationship with their immediate environment. It is a combination of beliefs, concepts, perceptions and experiences of local people with their natural and human-built milieu. Such knowledge becomes what it is simply because it is a part of the societal survival means; it can be modified through new experiences and transferred from one generation to the other. Indigenous knowledge is a product of long-term habitation in a place by a group of people (Borda 1980); Roberts (1998:59) captures it better when he opined that knowledge is termed indigenous based on the fact that it was 'accumulated by a group of people, not necessarily indigenous, who by centuries of unbroken residence develop an in-depth understanding of their particular place in their particular world'. This is of course indicative of the rigor that went into its production in terms of diversity of ideas, unbiased analysis of such thoughts which in some instances may be bring dissenting views all in a bid to ascertain its validity and more importantly collaborative nature of nonconforming opinions.

Indigenous knowledge can be grouped into three as analyzed by Castellano (1999), namely; traditional knowledge, which is passed on from community elders and goes from one generation to the next. The second type he referred to as empirical knowledge, is a product of careful observation of the activities within the natural, socio-cultural environment. The last one he termed revealed knowledge, the type that comes through dreams, insight and revelation. Hoppers (2005) while explaining African Indigenous knowledge grouped them into two: the empirical and cognitive levels. The empirical level was grouped into the natural, technological architectural and socio-cultural domains. For the natural, he further

unpacked it into ecology, soil, agriculture, medicinal and pharmaceutical. He equally grouped the technological and architectural sphere into textiles, metallurgy and the rest. The socio-cultural domain includes music, art, and conflict resolution among others. The cognitive sphere captures “the co-evolution of spiritual, natural and human worlds” (Hoppers 2005: 4). All the above delineation point to the all-encompassing and dynamic nature of indigenous knowledge in addressing humans and their environment.

Dei (2002), while discussing the importance of indigenous knowledge highlights some basic features. The first one relates to its personalized nature; indigenous knowledge has no claims to universality in that they are personal. The second feature relates to trust in knowledge being connected to the speaker’s integrity and perceptiveness. Others include the mode of transmission of such knowledge, which are usually through oral means and their sharing is directly related to considerations of the responsibility in the use of received knowledge. Besides these, Indigenous knowledge are a product of subject experiences and the inner interpretations of meanings and interpretations. Indigenous knowledge is also all-inclusive and interpersonal. They connect the physical to the metaphysical realms of life; they connect economic, cultural, political, spiritual, ecological and material forces and conditions. Also, indigenous knowledge provides the strength and influence in physical communication as they are expressive and narrative. Equally, they are symbolic in the use of proverbs, fables and tales. Lastly, indigenous knowledge sees collectivism as a manner of thought, highlighting the logic of belongingness with individuals and the land they share. It is not personalized and detached into a collective abstract. It is grounded in a society and a place.

Having explored what indigenous knowledge connotes, what then constitutes knowledge production? Conceptually speaking, knowledge signifies all forms of information production, including technological innovation, cultural creativity and academic advance. They are a set of actions and creativities taken to generate ideas. It is the application of complex and intermittent events and phenomena to address specific issues (Styhre and Roth et al 2002). It is the process involved in bringing out new ideas about an issue; it is an output of a process. It is the difference between what is understood and what needs to be understood for project success (Johnson 2002). The production of knowledge as a process reflects the ingenuities and actions embarked upon in order to come up with ideas (knowledge), new ideas or objects. Within the focus of this discourse, knowledge production captures the realities within higher institution of learning in terms of pedagogical knowledge and research. While the former

appears narrower than the former, both are intertwined to some extent and both are relevant for realizing the central aim of this discourse.

Indigenous Knowledge and the Academy: Some Constraints

Indigenous knowledge emerged within academic debate about thirty years back in spite of its long years of guiding the day to day experiences of Africans. This of course is a reflection of the neglect the subject matter has suffered over time. Nel (2008), attributed its recognition in recent times to the increased awareness of African cultural heritage, the need to situate science within the social and cultural realities of Africans, and failure of development plans in bringing the desired results. At the global level Indigenous knowledge has gained recognition among international organizations namely United Nations Civil Human Rights Movements and others. Within Africa, South Africa has issued policy documents regarding the relevance.⁴ The subject matter has equally gained intellectual attention. Notwithstanding, the achievement is insignificant compared to what it ought to achieve.

The foundation of non-inclusion of indigenous knowledge within the academy is hinged on coloniality and postcoloniality which completely ignore the lived in experiences of the global South. Coloniality's emphasis unilinear and simplistic explanation of society has been cited as part of the undoing of indigenous knowledge. The overemphasis on the supremacy of Eurocentric values and norms such that all other lines of thought and development outside of this frame of thinking were anaesthetized. To the Eurocentric apologists, indigenous knowledge has no explanation to make in the order of ideas because it is crude, unreasonable and lacks rigour. The latter came to address some of the flaws inherent in the former, but it fell into the same error. Postcolonialism emerged as a sensible modification to the modern theories in the sense that it rejects the universal, simplified explanations of society which saw indigenous knowledge as being somewhat 'atavistic, primordial, and backward, and the quest for equity, dignity, respect, and accessibility, superfluous' (Emeagwali 2014:3). Consequently, the theory recognized the complex nature of human experience. Far-reaching oversimplifications may not be able to explain the complex nature of lived experiences of humans, there is need to understand the indigenous, detailed and up-to-date analysis that are beached in spatial and cultural settings (Seidman 1994; Dei 2002).

Postcolonial theory thus raises the issue of identity, variance and representation and the problem of decontextualized power; in a nutshell, it would challenge "consensual rationality, hierarchy and order" that would

act as “universal systems of thought” (Prah 1997:16). Slemon (1995) captures postcolonial discourse as a framework that perceives colonialism as ‘an ideological and discursive formation... an apparatus for constituting subject positions through the field of representation’ while the lived-in experiences of the Africans should be the centre focus of postcoloniality, it has been shifted to the side. ‘Postcolonial theory has become a meta-theory by essentializing ‘difference’ and thus, risks idealizing and essentializing the human subject by privileging the individuation of the self’ (Dei 2002: 6). What postcolonialism does is that it gives a false status to the issue of indigeniety through the enforcement of western ideals and principles on the southern realities thus depriving them any right of history and social interconnectedness. Postcoloniality has therefore numbed the history and identities of Africans such that what is left of them in terms of history and social realities is fragmented, heterogenous and vague (Dei 2002). This of course is obvious regarding the back and forth, indefinite and horrendous dispositions of stakeholders. Africans thus become dreadful in telling their stories, boasting of its feat in handling its affairs over the years have become a difficult task. The history has been made to appear unreal, because postcolonialism has taken over the socio-cultural and economic realities of Africans with explanations that do not in any way capture the realities around them. The academy has served as the platform for the entrenchment of these ideals. This was the submission of Shizha when he submitted that the epicenter of colonial hegemony, indoctrination, and mental colonization,’ and that the decolonization process entails a process of ‘reclaiming, rethinking, reconstituting, rewriting, and validating’ indigenous knowledge, and by implication. Africa’s history (Shizha 2010).

A fall out of the failures of modern and postmodern theories in conferring the needed recognition to indigenous knowledge is evident in a number of ways. One of such is that it has snuffed life out of indigenous ideas regarding the socio-economic and cultural ways of life. A handful of African theorists have postulated home grown ideas regarding the ways of life but they have not become popular as expected. The scholarly work of eminent sociologist, Akiwowo where he propounded the *Asuwada* Theory of Sociation as a contextual episteme for understanding African social knowledge is a case in point. For instance, a number of social interaction theories being overused by Nigerian students and scholars might not be necessary considering the contribution of Akiwowo’s ideas to social interaction. The depth, rigor and relatability of this philosophy to the realities of social interaction in Nigerian culture and that of Africa give it an edge over western knowledge on the topic.

Other African scholars like Nyamnjoh, and others have equally come up with relevant indigenous explanations about African social lives which by now should have become the everyday paradigms for understanding African realities. However these have not gained the needed attention. What modern and postmodern explanations appears to have done in the long run was to create opportunity for inefficiency, poor policy and redundancy within the education sector for African academy and its managers. In Nigeria for instance, post-independence period marked the growth of educational policies meant to popularize and strengthen indigenous ideas. But the outcome of this noble cause was frustrated by neoliberal policies enforced on the policy makers. For example, the Nigerian policy on language education states that “Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English”. (NPE para.15 (4): Primary Education). The reason was to ensure that African children appreciated their indigenous languages, and equally understand whatever knowledge being passed across to them. This policy has suffered serious setbacks; apart from the fact that the policy did not state precisely the ‘later stage’ when the child should change from mother tongue to English, the policy has not in any way been enforced. A number of education administrators didn’t see any reason to enforce these decisions. Teaching children in indigenous language by elites and middle class was seen as barbaric, antisocial and parents patronized private schools where their children would be taught in English language as a sign of elitism. Omojuwa (1997) stresses that the minimum basic requirements for a language to be used as a medium of teaching was not met by many African languages. These challenges became aggravated with the failure of the policy makers to fund education adequately. The popularization of liberal and neo-liberal policies across the globe further justified the corruption tendencies of African governments. They cut funding to certain segments of education and diverted it to some unknown sectors. Africa accounts for only 0.6 percent of Global Gross Expenditure on Research and Development, with South Africa’s share representing as much as 90 percent of this contribution. Consequently, the admission growth within university education continued to outstrip available funding capabilities; unproductive application of funds by both government and higher education institutions began to put pressure on available funds, there was a cumulative waning in public spending per student and ultimately, research and quality investment became unrealistic (Shabani 2013; Okebukola 2015).

One major blow postcoloniality dealt the higher institution also relates to the suffocation of some core fields of humanities within the institutions of higher learning in certain parts of the continent. In some parts of the

continent where such disciplines hold strong influence, contentions along race, what ought and not to be studied and how it should be also constitute a challenge. Disciplines like history, anthropology and the rest having a core understanding of indigenous knowledge lost their influence significantly. Anthropologists and historians have played enormous roles in providing the needed guidance and information for colonialists within the continent and elsewhere (Mafeje 1998; Adesina 2011; Nyamnjoh 2012). In this dispensation, the contributions of these disciplines are needed more than before to further the interests of African indigenous knowledge, unfortunately, this may not be so due to the influence of postmodern discourses. The interests of young people in the study of Anthropology and history in West Africa for instance is not encouraging. Crave for statistical data by development agencies and policy makers to justify postmodernism further made the discipline suffer much attack. In Nigeria for instance, history had to be flavored with other nomenclature like “international relations” to make it appealing to the students, teachers of history had no option to leave the country thus making a study of indigenous ideas for knowledge production more challenging. Africa has institutions and centres within the universities and research centres devoted to the study of African realities, the present realities regarding their proliferation and influence on African academic for knowledge production leaves much to be desired. The centres were created to continuously cross-examine epistemological, methodological, and theoretical lines to the study of Africa, presenting Africa and its people as the focus of such discourses as themes, rather than mere items. Some of these centres in recent times appear to be appendages of social science epistemology that promote western knowledge. The establishment of African studies centres within higher education in the global north is understandable and justifiable; in my opinion, the existence of African studies centres within the higher education on African soils seems not to be fully achieving this aim; they appear to serve as avenues to further strengthen western episteme. This is evident in the continued proliferation of the centres within institutions of higher learning in Africa without its direct influence on western oriented disciplines.

Linking Indigenous and Orthodox Knowledge for Nuanced Knowledge Production

Extant literature has pointed to decolonization as the sole means by which indigenous knowledge can find its footing within the existing body of knowledge. This discourse has been interrogated under different thought patterns ranging from Fanon’s ground breaking work that emphasized on

understanding the historical process of colonization as a means of changing the order; to Ngugi' wa Thiong'o' s emphasis decolonizing the mind (Fanon, 1963; Ngugi, 1986). Dei (2000), for example emphasized the need to challenge imperial ideologies and colonial relations of production, that normally characterize and shape academic activities; removing indigenous knowledge from the academy makes room for the (re)colonization of knowledge and cultures in local milieu and settings (Dei 2000:13). Battiste (2005), while postulating on the linkage between indigenous knowledge and academy also emphasized that 'educators must reject colonial curricula that offer students a fragmented and distorted picture of Indigenous peoples, and offer students a critical perspective of the historical context that created that fragmentation' (Battiste 2005:225). Emerging from these trajectories over the years relates to the need to decolonize the academy, especially the curriculum. However, what has become clear is that decolonizing this sector is no mean feat; the recent happenings in South Africa regarding *fee must fall and decolonizing education* further attests to this. As a matter of fact 'the decolonization of the African Academy remains one of the biggest challenges, not only in terms of the curriculum, teaching strategies, and textbooks, but also in terms of the democratization of knowledge, and the regeneration and adaptation of old epistemologies to suit new post-colonial realities' (Emeagwali 2014). This of course does not suggest that it is impossible. It only calls for a consistent and pragmatic approach. One must take into cognizance that decolonization is a process; this was corroborated by the argument of Laenui (2000) that it is in phases namely the process of recovery of identity, artifacts, language, and cultural information; a process of mourning for what is being lost; dreaming, reformulation, and invocation of other possibilities for research; commitment to including silenced voices; and action that includes strategies for social transformation (Laenui 2000). Understanding this will therefore go a long way in deploying the appropriate tools and strategies.

In view of the above, it is pertinent to note that decolonization cannot be achieved overnight; it didn't come brusquely, it was a planned, calculative event spanning a period of years before it had its toll on the target community; as such, addressing it must equally follow the same trend, though with a more dogged approach. Second, the spread of decoloniality through indigenizing knowledge for knowledge production within the continent of Africa is lopsided; indigenous knowledge appears to gain ground within spaces where racism holds sway. Other parts of Africa where there is no physical presence of racism appears to exhibit a false consciousness about it. Indigenous ideas pervade the nooks and crannies of the continent, what however is lacking is the appreciation and support. In the same vein, a

complete decolonization of knowledge may not be feasible at the moment as no idea can exist in isolation, what is desirable is the coexistence of western and indigenous ideas. Consequently, debates within the academy regarding the decolonization project must first create the needed awareness that will culminate into a strong identification with the subject matter among academics; currently, this appears lacking. There is a continued reproduction of western knowledge without a recourse to the indigenous ideas. Changing the curriculum is good no doubt, it may continue to meet brick walls when policy makers and education managers do not see the need for it. Achieving this can only be possible through a consistent gradual process. The mind must be decolonized and this happens when there is a strong and consistent debate around the subject matter. Knowledge thrives when there is communication. A situation in which the emerging academia in Africa are not aware of the giant strides Africans in time past have taken in all facets of life for survival and to move their society forward is dangerous for African identity and existence within the global world both now and in the future. Obviously, debates have been ongoing; it is however sectional. Many of the studies on the topic appears to be concentrated in Southern Africa and global south; this of course does not preclude the contributions of scholars from other regions of Africa.⁵

Therefore, interrogations around indigenous knowledge should be properly coordinated and managed at the national, regional and continental levels. Revolution at the level of the academy and in the situation of indigenous implies transformation, not only in the curriculum, but also in instructional plans, so that a more collaborative mode of instruction and knowledge balances the teacher-centered approach (Emeagwali 2014). This will be achievable through the moral and financial support of stakeholders. Education funding is generally poor in sub-Saharan Africa, studies on popularizing local ideas thus need the necessary financial support to conduct research and teaching on the subject. Funders sympathetic of this course must be contacted and encouraged to fund research in these areas. Also, academic activities like seminars and lectures within higher education should be geared towards debates around indigenous knowledge. Pan African think tanks in Africa must coordinate and manage activities and debates around these themes at various levels. Workshops and conferences on different themes should be organized by these bodies to bring together scholars on this subject areas in order to network and strategize on the importance of the subject. It must be noted that Africans are the ones to project their ideas, nobody will be sympathetic of their cause. Institutions and centres devoted to the study of indigenous knowledge need to partner the more with higher education. This can be done through seminars and

workshop in partnership with these institutions. The sole aim is to create the needed awareness in the academia, they should set up special funds for researchers and graduate programmes to stimulate interests in this area.

Concluding Remarks

Undoubtedly, Africa has a rich knowledge base. One thing that is clear and needs to be addressed relates to the sense of ease and smugness in the attitude of scholars within African academy to the use of conventional approaches to knowledge production. This in itself has limited Africans in their ability to play a critical role in knowledge production based on the fact that these approaches in itself do not in most instances explain our realities as it ought to. Aside this, the global world usually feels they have nothing new to learn from us if what we keep sending to them what they already know. While conventional knowledge is a product of colonial influence, what is however critical relates to our failures especially in the social science and humanities to break free from these grips, or as the case may be, encourage and situate our home grown ideas into the conventional knowledge. Consequently, what is needed is a strong drive to pool these massive knowledge together primarily for the benefit of Africans and then for the global benefit. This will only occur when there is a concerted efforts at making African appreciate the value. African scholars need to talk more about their indigenous knowledge. Younger generations must be made to appreciate this. Scholars and African institutions have important roles to play in this. Western knowledge has come to stay in the continent indigenous knowledge must equally stay and the academy has an important role to play in this.

Notes

1. Can be referred to as traditional knowledge and sometimes referred to as local knowledge, as the case may be.
2. According to the World Economic Forum, Africa produces only 1.1% of global scientific knowledge. The continent has just 79 scientists per million of inhabitants compared to countries like Brazil and United States where the ratio stands at 656 and 4,500, respectively. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/oct/26/africa-produces-just-11-of-global-scientific-knowledge>.
3. Some of the major areas of indigenous knowledge identified in the humanities include written and oral sources: Documents written on papyrus and parchment, inscriptions on tombs, tombstones, walls and doorways, and graphic representations, pictographic or ideographic writing systems oral narratives poetry, songs, legends, proverbs, interviews etc. They symbolize collective subjects and experiences of human existence. See Emegwali, (2014).

4. See: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rcrt=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwi47qH0vorwAhVxuHEKHbxFBUkQFjAJegQIJRAD&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wipo.int%2Fedocs%2Fmdocs%2Ftk%2Fen%2Fwipo_grtkf_ic_9%2Fwipo_grtkf_ic_9_11.doc&usg=AOvVaw0rXsYxvTydP3wB5JhfzSU
5. For current works see Ndlovu-Gatsheni *Epistemic Freedom in Africa Decolonialization and Decolonization*, Routledge, 2018; *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa Turning Over a New Leaf*, Routledge, 2020.

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