

Epistemicide, Institutional Cultures and the Imperative for the Africanisation of Universities in South Africa

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A. The Problem

The thesis that we need to advance is that: The higher education institutional cultures which have been spawned through epistemicide at universities in South Africa perpetuate epistemological injustice and, therefore, their retention is unjustified both ethically and politically. This seemingly 'battle cry' thesis is a function of the fact that despite major transformations which have been taking place and the need for an education system consistent with the emerging socio-political imperatives in South Africa, institutional cultures and associated associational aspects such as groups dynamics have not changed fundamentally and correspondingly. Higher education institutional cultures continue to privilege western symbols, rituals and behaviours imposed as a result of epistemicide. In this sense, academic institutions in South Africa remain stubbornly untransformed despite the fact that the new constitution offer space for constructing a discourse that mainstreams local relevance and vocalises silent voices. In a spirit of self-criticism, this should be seen as a failure to reverse the implications of epistemicide and to appreciate that not only constitutional rights but educational justice should constitute the foundation of transformation and the total overhaul of higher education.

As part of structural transformation and mergers, universities changed their mission and vision statements to appear more politically

correct. This was intended to provide an intellectual focus and a sense of a 'new' identity for the institutions. Among these can be mentioned self-descriptors such as 'premier university of African scholarship', 'first class African university' and 'world class African university'. Despite such self-descriptors which imply a relationship between the university and the African continent, there has been no visible transformation of institutional cultures to reflect such a relationship. This is so because, in the case of mergers, the most important effect of mergers may be, quite simply, the physical combination of two former entities (or the disappearance of at least one of them) rather than a recasting of institutional cultures or programmes or profiles of productivities (Jansen 2004).

This has overlooked the fact that epistemicide closed the African cultural space, hence African culture as a heritage was never allowed to be shaped and moulded. Rather it was presented as some baggage to be thrown away. This Eurocentric attitude simultaneously valorised and affirmed western epistemology and absolved it from its existential and epistemological violence against indigenous epistemology. Therefore, not only the institutional structures but, more importantly, the institutional cultures manifest in university systems and structures were implicated in the colonial-apartheid social formation (Lebakeng & Phalane 2001). In particular two mainstream traditions splintered: a liberal tradition accommodated in the English-speaking universities and a further-entrenched conservative tradition in the Afrikaner universities (Jansen 1991a).

In discussing the impact and legacy of epistemicide on higher education, this article does not focus on the whole spectrum of institutional cultures which include management practices and student politics. Rather, it will be confined to the academic institutional culture, namely, mimetism as illustrated in the philopraxis of university academics and intellectuals. Academic mimetism is a function of the failure to cut the intellectual umbilical cord from the western epistemological paradigm and move away from borrowed discourses.

B. Higher Education Institutional Cultures: Characteristics of Mimetism

Learning institutions are supposed to be created to nurture and encourage the activities of knowledge production, language usage, aesthetics, writing and

other verbal and non-verbal forms of systematic symbolism to support the growing knowledge heritage of humanity. Universities and technikons are the modern institutional forms of this process of knowledge production and dissemination (Keto 2003).

The inauguration of western higher education in the colonies, however, reflected cultural parochialism. Its basic assumption was that a university system 'appropriate for Europeans brought up in London and Manchester and Hull was also appropriate for Africans brought up in Lagos and Kumasi and Kampala' (Ashby 1964). In the light of the preceding quotation, we concur with Ramose (Ramose 2002a) that colonial epistemicide and the consolidation of colonisation were founded upon and continued to thrive on the false claim that only one segment of humanity namely, the Euro-Americans had prior, superior and exclusive right to reason. One of the consequences of the de-recognition of the rationality of the indigenous African anthropon was precisely the upholding of the so-called right of conquest. By virtue of this questionable right the Western colonisers appropriated the sole, unilateral right to define and delimit the meaning of social experience, social knowledge and social truth for indigenous Africans (Ramose 2002b; Lebakeng 2004a). The colonialists' claim to the questionable right of conquest extended not only to the spheres of religion, politics, law and economics but it included the spheres of education. In this sense it was a comprehensive epistemicide.

On this basis, indigenous African epistemology was inconceivable and whatever knowledge emanated from indigenous Africans was considered defective, inferior and in need of being developed and refined through Westernisation. What the colonisers deliberately overlooked was the fact that knowledge is legitimately constituted and become dominant knowledge through a social process rather than because it is. Moreover, they ignored

the unique demonstration of the human genius that people in different parts of the world have employed different pathways to knowledge creation, transmission and dissemination successfully (Keto 2003).

The thrust of Western education was to deny the colonised indigenous

people of South Africa useful and relevant social knowledge about themselves and their world and, in turn, transmit a culture that embodied, and was designed to consolidate dependency and generally undermine the colonised people's capacity for creativity in all the spheres of life (Lebakeng & Phalane 2001a).

One of the fundamental problems facing African scholarship is the dependency syndrome. Little wonder that institutions of higher learning in South Africa were (and still are) copycats whose primary function was (and still is) to serve and promote colonial Western values (Mazrui 1978; Makgoba 1996). Universities in South Africa lack a preoccupative autonomy, and scholarship is essentially derivative. Their defining characteristic is that of the phenomenon of the 'captive mind' or 'mental captivity' since their scholastic roots are defined more consciously and consistently within the framework of the various Western philosophical and methodological schools. Running the risk of being accused of reification, they have a way of thinking that is dominated by Western colonial thought in an imitative and uncritical manner. Among the characteristics of a captive mind are an uncritical approach to ideas and concepts from the West (Myrdal 1957; Bondy 1969; Alatas 1972; Altbach 1977), the inability to be creative and raise original problems, the inability to devise original analytical methods and alienation from the main issues of indigenous society (Bondy 1969; Alatas 1974) and failure to tap indigenous resources such as indigenous languages (Thiong'o 1986; Wiredu 1995). Prah has argued consistently over the years that the absence of African languages has been the 'missing link' in African development (Prah 1998). Paradoxically, African languages continue to be taught in English because of the claim that such languages do not have any scientific concepts in their etymology. Because universities in {South} Africa are enslaved to the preoccupative benchmarks (and blinkers) of the dominant Western scholarship and its methodological paradigms, African intellectual representations are inconsistent with the lived experiences of the majority African people. The dominant curriculum continues to be a source of alienation. Our verdict is that colonial and post-colonial education extremism has been a cognitive and epistemological disaster not only for indigenous Africans but for all those who had to endure it. Often the curriculum does not speak to the experiences of learners since the curriculum does not reflect the philosophical, social and

technological realities of their environment. For instance, despite the pervasive philosophic racism in the philosophies of such philosophers as Locke, Hume, Kant and Hegel, indigenous African learners in philosophy were (and still are) treated to an overdose of the epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of history and even the philosophy of religion and law of these and other Western philosophers (Ramose 1999).

In the light of the above, we propose a reversal of epistemicide through an inscription of indigenous African epistemology and warn that to deny the existence of African philosophy as a basis of African education on grounds of maintaining standards is to perpetuate epistemological injustice. Furthermore, it is apparent that this is no less than the insistence to force us to set aside the question: by what right do the successors in the title to colonial conquest dictate the educational 'standards' for everyone in South Africa? According to Vera, an evaluation of the intellectual thinking behind the standards argument is the fear that most white intellectuals and academics will experience erosion of their power base (Vera 1996). The actual motive for wanting to protect the current standards is essentially to spawn a 'law of inertia of privilege' that guarantees that there is no reversal of epistemicide and reclamation of African epistemology. The reversal of epistemicide will inevitably undermine existing dominant interests and challenge the citadel of western paradigms and scientific epistemologies of knowledge. Hence we should expect processes of circumscribing and preempting the entry into discourse of indigenous African epistemology.

From the perspective of the sociology of indigenous knowledge, the assumptions which constructed Western thought, literature and traditions are not universal but are derived from specific and discreet Western experiences prescribed by specific historical levels of economic and industrial development. Implicit in this perspective is that standards are not universal but contextual. In fact, Western claims to universalism, including universalism of its standards have been exposed as false (Amin 1989; Jansen 1995; Ramose 1997; 1999; Nabudere 2002). Jansen takes issue with the idea of decontextualising the notion of academic standards (Jansen 1995). According to him, standards are tentative, constructed, historical and contextual and, therefore, certainly not universal, permanent, objective, neutral or invariant. This is so because standards are constructed to serve a useful purpose not because they are necessarily true. We can thus conclude

that there is no single fixed or universal definition of standards that may be applied and upheld regardless of context. Clearly, the notion of standards must be subjected to a careful, specific and historically sensitive analysis. Ramose advises that rather than maintaining and applying given academic and educational standards, we need to continually create and redefine them (1997) and this cannot be done in abstracto. Africanisation is essentially part of continually creating and redefining educational standards within appropriate contexts of relevance. In other words, the focus on relevance and usefulness is not antithetical to high standards. More importantly, the imperative for the inscription of indigenous African epistemology into the curriculum and underpinning education with African philosophy is, in the first instance, a question of rights, and thus a matter of natural and historical justice.

C. Towards an African University

In times of crisis the tendency is to revisit fundamentals. The university in Africa is plagued by a plethora of crises: the crisis of identity, the crisis of legitimacy, the crisis of degeneration of research, the crisis of the 'brain drain', the crisis of relevance, the crisis of authority, the crisis of appropriateness of epistemology, the crisis of historical representations and the crisis of student politics. This is symptomatic of a deeper crisis namely, the crisis of the mission of the African university against the backdrop of that university being in Africa but not being an African one by characterisation. This is what accounts for the university in Africa lacking lustre and credibility. These universities have been maligned and lampooned as transplants from the former colonial countries and for being instruments for the transmission of western culture, values and morals. The spectrum of university crises in Africa stems from the fact that the educational systems in the continent have by and large been founded essentially on Western models and have remained so even in the post-colonial era.

Precisely because the condition of the university in Africa remains unchanged since decolonisation we cannot talk of an African university with a distinct African philosophy of education. Any talk of the existence of such a university would necessarily imply that the imposed epistemological paradigms have been replaced. The reality is that the core epistemological

paradigm established through epistemicide remains unscathed and retains its undeserved predominance. This is because the initial interest in asserting the Africanness of universities in Africa which was decidedly expressed in the immediate post-colonial period has dramatically waned without the goal being achieved. In this sense, although there are no obvious protagonists directly opposing or undermining the right to be an African university as was the case during colonisation, this right speaks to such necessity precisely because such a university is yet to be born. In the light of the above, we propose a reversal of epistemicide and warn that to deny the existence of African philosophy as a basis of African education on grounds of maintaining standards is to perpetuate epistemological injustice and cognitive arrogance.

In the light of the preceding section, many African scholars have accused African scholarship of mimetism of the worst kind (Hountondji 1992; Prah 1989) especially mimetic philopraxis (Ramose 1999). Moreover, this state of affairs has spawned various reactions from African academics and intellectuals in South Africa and the developing countries in recent years. What binds these various reactions is what Wiredu calls 'conceptual decolonisation', that is, the avoidance or reversal through a critical conceptual self-awareness of uncritical assimilation of those categories of thought embedded in the foreign language or philosophical traditions which have exercised considerable influence on African life and thought (Wiredu 1995).

Therefore, in advocating for the reversal of epistemicide, we necessarily seek to place indigenous knowledge systems of the conquered peoples of South Africa on the same level of parity with other epistemological paradigms in order to achieve both formal and substantive equality (Ramose 2003; Lebakeng 2004a; 2004b). Because of the struggle for relevant knowledge and resilience of indigenous African epistemology, some elements of these still survive at the periphery of the dominant western educational paradigm in South African academia. Thus, the right to be an African university is a claim to justice. However, we are aware that having a right to something does not necessarily imply having the ability to obtain and realise such a right. Moreover, where such a right is not exercised, it accounts for little in practice. For rights to translate into justice they must be substantive and not merely formal. In this respect, we concur with

Greenstein that Africanisation poses what may well prove to be the greatest challenge to the renewal of South African education in general and curriculum policies in particular (Greenstein 1997). Regardless, the total transformation of higher education institutions in South Africa would remain incomplete without the necessary changes in institutional cultures.

The mimetic and the decontextualised character of the teaching of sociology and philosophy in South Africa and, indeed, of the entire educational system, call for a radical overall of the whole epistemological paradigm underlying the current educational system. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Africanisation, which inevitably contains the deconstruction of Eurocentrism, should not be construed as an absolute rejection of the influence of European thinking on African scholarship but rather as a rejection of assumed European intellectual hegemony.

In order to depart from mimetism or intellectual dependency or derivative scholarship, South Africa and the institutions of higher learning need a domestic intellectual infrastructural capacity to adapt and translate foreign knowledge for local use. This is a critical point in ridding the continent in general and South Africa in particular of intellectual and academic mimetism or dependency.

Dealing with problems of higher education should be part and parcel of reversing epistemicide and establishing intellectual traditions, scholarship and research culture that are rooted in contemporary African imperatives. To depart from mimetism or intellectual dependency, universities in South Africa must, of necessity, Africanise. Epistemologically this should entail jettisoning western epistemological paradigms and mainstreaming indigenous African epistemology into the educational paradigm (Lebakeng & Payle 2003). This should speak to their intellectual orientations stemming from the African social history, by the subject matter that is African societies as the central topic. We will, for purely heuristic purpose, privilege only six levels or components of Africanisation as appropriated from Lebakeng (2000):

(a) The meta-theoretical level of Africanisation refers to the analysis of a shared African world view and includes the ontological, epistemological, paradigmatic and ethical assumptions underlying what is taught and researched in higher education. African academics and intellectuals will

have to stop being derivative and being peddlers of Western assumptions in these areas.

(b) The theoretical level refers to the generation of concepts and theories from African socio-historical experiences and socio-cultural practices. It is noteworthy that here the problem is not that of lack/poverty of theory but that of theorising or under-theorising.

(c) The methodological level refers to the methodological approaches adopted and the assumptions underlying them. This level should not be conflated with that of methods and techniques (which is not discussed here). Rather the two should be subsumed as part of methodology to include philosophical, ideological and politico-ethical issues.

(d) The pedagogical level is also implicated in that the African university should devote more effort to evolving and sharpening teaching methods that are responsive to or consistent with the socio-cultural background and educational needs of African learners.

(e) The empirical level refers to a strict focus on socially more relevant issues particular to the African continent that have, hitherto, been neglected as non-issues. Most problems raised and addressed emanate from the Northern Hemisphere. Herein lies the concern for relevance and appropriateness.

(f) The level of applied knowledge refers to the specification of remedies, plans and policies. Most remedies, plans and policies have been imposed by aid donors and foreign project funders. Thus new modalities of intervention are required so that policy-oriented research and development projects are informed by the needs and aspirations of everyday African social reality such as street children, squatter camps, child and women abuse, landlessness, HIV/Aids and other social scourges.

By so doing African academics and intellectuals will be rejecting the traditional Western scholarship that proceeds from the premise that Africa has no civilisation, methodologies, theories, history or traditions. Moreover,

this will confirm the position that theories, concepts and methodologies can be derived from and nourished by African historical conditions and socio-cultural practices and imperatives. Clearly the issue is not just about including a few African academics in the academy but is fundamentally epistemological in nature (Jansen 1991b). This particular issue speaks to the realisation that universities in Africa – if they are to be truly African universities – should not emulate their cognate institutions in the metropole.

Having advocated for the reversal of epistemicide, we are not oblivious to the prospects and problems of such an undertaking (Lebakeng & Payle 2003). On the one hand, we are aware that not many academics are actually involved in the struggle for the reversal of epistemicide and the affirmation of African epistemology. In fact many have been cowed or convinced to believe that the academic status quo is intellectually of high standards and there is no need to interfere with it. In other words, they have bought into the argument of the protectionists and apologists of ‘things as they stand are good’. On the other hand, we are inspired by the deconstructive intellectual activities of the older generation of African scholars such as Professors Thandika Mkandawire, Dan Nabudere, Archie Mafeje, Peter Anyango, and the late Claude Ake and the emerging generation of African scholars such as Malekgapuru Makgoba, Mahmood Mamdani, Jonathan Jansen and Mogobe Ramose. Their overall contribution has resulted in the general trend of thought which now accepts, acknowledges and affirms the existence of African epistemology. Their intellectual battles led to the appreciation of the fact that epistemology is universal regardless of culture, tribe or race. In this sense the deconstructive component of reversing epistemicide was not a case of being captive to the tyranny of trivia.

D. An Overview of the Concept of Africa and the Global Threat

The centrality of the adjective African in our title necessitates that we preface our submission by stating that there are many senses in which the term ‘African’ is used depending on whether emphasis is placed on skin pigmentation, geographic location or self-declaration/self-definition. In this case, we do not wish to generate an impression that there is a consensus on

who is an African and what Africa is. It is noteworthy that etymologically, the term Africa does not arise from indigenous African people who are the original inhabitants of the continent now called Africa. Rather, its origins are colonial and spoke more to the historical experiences of the West, specifically the Greeks and Romans in their interactions with the peoples of the northern region of the continent (Ramose 2003). In the Western use the term did not immediately refer to the self-understanding of the inhabitants of the region and their indigenous philosophies and epistemologies. The term 'Africa' spoke to the Western European experience with the climate of the continent as a hot one. After all, in the perceptions of Western Europeans the peoples of the continent were merely nonentities without civilisation, rationality and history. This is so notwithstanding the acknowledgement by, among others, Aristotle that some of his philosophy was influenced during his contact with ancient Egypt (Osuagwu 1999).

Thus, despite its initial reference to a climatic dynamics and silence on the identities and epistemologies of indigenous Africans, the term Africa was retained by post-colonial Africans and strategically adopted and extended as a political move towards self-definition, self-identity and self-assertion. Writings of Aime Cesaire, William E. Dubois, Leopold Senghor, Edward Blyden, Frantz Fanon and Cheikh Anta Diop demonstrated efforts towards African self-definition and self-identity. However, most of these earlier writings were essentially political, historical and sociological (Olagoke 1995). We can only wonder if they would have been otherwise given the difference between the political, historical and sociological nature of the environment within which they wrote and current conditions. From these writings Mazrui (1986) identifies two main schools of African reaffirmation. The first one is the school of romantic gloriana which emphasises the glorious moments in Africa's history, defined in measurements such as material monuments, and as represented by Cheikh Anta Diop. However, we find such a presentation of Cheikh Anta Diop unfair since his works took cognisance of cultural aspects. The second one is the school of romantic primitivism which does not emphasise past grandeur but validates simplicity and non-technical traditions as represented by Aime Cesaire.

Mazrui's synthesis of the two positions in his concept of Africa's triple heritage seems to condone classical colonisation of

indigenous Africans by both Europeans and Arabs. According to him, the triple heritage has become a social reality of contemporary African culture (Mazrui 1986). We posit that, it is an imperative of practical realism to situate the two alien cultures of Western European and Arab conquerors in fundamental dialogue with indigenous African cultures. The purpose of this dialogue is to liberate and resurrect indigenous African epistemologies from centuries of epistemicide. By this, we do not mean to espouse either 'romantic gloriana' or 'romantic primitivism'. On the contrary, we seek to reaffirm Africanness in its own right despite the fact that inheriting the term 'African' can be problematic in both ethical and political terms. What, then, are the possibilities and prospects of Africanisation in light of the growing global influences and global issues in knowledge discourse? Moreover, how comfortable are we with the descriptor 'African' prefixing our knowledge?

Globalisation is increasingly becoming the defining characteristic of contemporary nations. In fact, it now articulates one of the dominant characteristics of modern existence (Miller 1991). One cannot make pronouncements or representations on the economy, education, social welfare or any other area of life without reference to globalisation (Lebakeng & Phalane 2001b). So overwhelming is the process of globalisation that it has also spawned a litany of terms bearing the adjective 'global': global system of governance, global society, global consciousness, global civil society, global culture, global discourse, global social agenda, global science and knowledge and so on (Munyae & Munyae 2001).

Regardless of the above, the conceptual status and practical implications of globalisation, especially for developing nations have not been settled. Consequently, the debate on globalisation still rages on as the precise nature and extent of the process remains a matter of tendentious contention. Unfortunately, with no shortage of passion from either side of the divide and neither side prepared to disabuse itself of evaluative and honorific undertones, the debate has sometimes degenerated into an intellectual tavern brawl. From the point of view of sociology of knowledge, it is inevitable that perspectives on globalisation should be shaped by the respective vantage point of those viewing the process. The proponents of the process of globalisation see it as bringing with it opportunities, benefits and great prospects for prosperity to the marginalised regions and nations. In this regard, the process is seen as having inherent enormous potential to enhance

the rewards of sound social, economic, cultural and political policies.

For the opponents of the current patterns of globalisation, the globalising changes are no more than the latest configuration of late capitalism re-ordered to cope with the latest crisis of capital accumulation (Jameson 1991). This is so because although the concept of globalisation is, in historical terms, a very recent one its core features are not. Hence we have the arguments that globalisation is western imperialism coached in a political language that is more acceptable, because 'western imperialism' is less palatable (Amuwo 2001). Others argue that globalisation is actually a third phase of colonialism as it is an extension and strengthening of the unequal social, economic and political linkages established between developing countries and western nations. In other words, the process of globalisation brings with it the same deleterious consequences for marginalised regions and nations as the imperialist era did. Thus, globalisation in the 1990s is neither a historically unique process nor necessarily the harbinger of a world society (Gordon 1998).

Premised on this understanding, globalisation is thus portrayed in the anti-globalisation position as a process that is continuously benefiting only the developed nations and causing untold misery and leading to massive levels of inequality between nations and within developing nations. In other words, developing nations cannot reap gains from globalisation since the benefits of the process are largely bypassing marginalised and poor regions and nations of the world. It is in this sense that globalisation should not be understood as a value-free and disinterested allied force.

Critics of structural adjustment policies have over the years pointed out the fact that short-term adjustment policies are undermining long-term development prospects by destroying the social capacities of the affected countries, undermining the legitimacy of the state, reducing social and physical investment, and worsening income distribution that accentuate conflict.

Thus, parallel to the integrating effects of globalisation has been the incapacitation of the state in developing countries. By this we do not imply that the state is decreasing its presence, on the contrary, there has been fast-paced state-building. The problem lies in that as a result of globalisation the capacity of the state to formulate national policies has been minimised. These developments have telling consequences for countries in Africa in

particular. Globalisation is increasingly emptying the African state, as it is doing with states from developing countries, of the capacity for auto-centric development (Lebakeng 2001). The post-independence state in Africa was the principal hegemonic and organising force in socio-economic and political change (Milazi 2000). The developmental state in Africa played a major role in social, cultural, political and educational issues by taking front-line responsibility in policy formulation and implementation. This is because the post-colonial state in Africa assumed office under tremendous pressure from all sides to drive development. As a result the state had to adopt an interventionist posture in policy, planning and implementation terms. In the post-independence era, African governments went into a frenzy of compensating for the colonial legacy. They built schools, clinics, etc.

Given the history of colonial economic exploitation, racial discrimination, political oppression, cultural alienation, marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and practices and social dehumanisation of African people, to address these problems would require continuous and massive pro-active state intervention rather than an incapacitated and minimalist state. Unfortunately, there is an ideological assault against pro-active state policies (Mkandawire 2001). It is noteworthy that although we support state consolidation for benign purposes, we are not apologists for corrupt post-colonial African states. The lessons to learn and unlearn are many from the problems that confronted such states. Such states became overblown, over-centralised, patrimonial, authoritarian and elitist and constituted the reliable avenue for personal accumulation of wealth by kleptomaniacs. These were internal factors that rendered the African states dysfunctional. However, globalisation is presenting a more lethal threat to the state in Africa.

It is against this background that we see globalisation as a major threat to the development of indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems in South Africa. Thus in South Africa (and other developing countries) where western traditional epistemologies are already firmly established and institutionalised, the state will have to be proactive by massively investing resources and creating space for the development, mainstreaming and legitimation of structures and institutions for indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems. The state, which globalisation threatens to incapacitate and render dysfunctional by taking away its core responsibilities of formulating and implementing national

policies for developmental purposes, will not be capable to execute its functions (Lebakeng 2001). Globalisation thus could be considered as a modern challenge to the enterprise of indigenisation as it leads to the erosion of national policies. Generally speaking, the withdrawal of the state or lack of its involvement will render any discourse on indigenous knowledge futile.

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