

Editorial: Race, Power and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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This project on Race, Power and Indigenous Knowledge Systems has its origins in a series of themed discussions by Pietermaritzburg-based staff in what was then the School of Politics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. These discussions were a regular feature of our Friday afternoons in 2011, with staff taking it in turns to suggest discussion themes for any given Friday. On one particular afternoon, a participant had recently returned from a series of workshops hosted by the Makerere Institute of Social Research. He cited an important contribution to the Makerere debate, namely, Mamdani's argument that subordination to Western paradigms dehistoricizes and decontextualizes African experience. In light of this abiding problematic, what is needed in Africa is,

a scholarly community that is equipped to rethink – in both intellectual and institutional terms – the very nature of the university and of the function it is meant to serve locally and globally (Mamdani 2011).

Interestingly, a speaker at an 'Africa Day' workshop hosted by the University of Cape Town in 2011 argues along similar lines. According to Olukoshi, local embeddedness is a prerequisite for construction of a significant African presence in the global community. The addition of a distinctively African contribution to global discourses should be conceptualized 'as a self-confident project, not a reactive project' (Olukoshi 2011).

At a subsequent discussion, a participant suggested that we incorporate African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) in our discursive trajectory, bearing in mind Kom's articulation of,

the desire on the part of Africans themselves to create an autonomous framework for the validation and appropriation of a local body of knowledge which could help them better to perceive their environment and construct a context for living which is suited to their own aspirations (Kom 2000).

In an historically and cognitively complex quest for internal legitimation that does not by definition isolate and 'exoticize' Africa, the question of what constitutes indigenous knowledge is seminal, and cannot be abstracted from the legacy of colonialism. For Masolo (2010), the colonial meaning of indigenous is based on the dichotomy of the subject, the colonial administrator or researcher, and the colonized object. Fanon (2001) argues that this dichotomy is racialized such that the object is black and the subject is white.

A third, and related discursive theme suggested by a participant targeted the interface between power and knowledge which, given Africa's history of exogenous appropriation and exploitation, too often incorporates dichotomized constructions of racial identity in tandem with the binary division of knowledge systems into superior/inferior categories. The subjugation of local or indigenous ways of doing and knowing was a major component of the colonial and slaver modes of production. The dichotomized world view that imperialism brought to Africa was contingent on a bifurcated theory of knowledge. In its crusade for certainty, Cartesian rationality disembedded and petrified its object. The result was a subject who was alive but disembodyed, and an object that was embodied but dead. Philosophers such as Polanyi (1962), Bourdieu (1990), Marglin (1996) and Masolo (2010) claim that this is only one form of knowledge system. According to these philosophers, knowledge systems can be broadly divided into two: explicit (*episteme*) and tacit or implicit (*techne*) knowledge systems. These two categories of knowledge are evident in the fictional and poetic writings of Armah (1979), Kunene (1981) and Ngugi (1985), among others. Armah, Kunene, Marglin and Masolo argue that the ideal is the unity of these two categories.

The advent and dominance of Trans-Atlantic slavery, West European industrialization and colonialism was accompanied by the hegemony of Cartesian rationality or *episteme* and the marginalization of *techne* or implicit knowledge. The dominant knowledge system joined forces with religion to

fuel industrial revolution in Western Europe and colonialism in South America, Asia and Africa (Armah 1979; Kunene 1982; Toulmin 1990; Tambiah 1990). For the colonized, the civilization that was guided by exogenous knowledge lacked humanness. Thus, anti-colonial struggles were attempts by the colonized to reclaim not only their territory but also their humanness or Ubuntu. That the struggle continues in the 21st century is a testament to the persistent mission of the (neo) imperial centre to define Euro-North American epistemes as the only forms of globally legitimate knowledge, thereby relegating other forms of knowledge, whether spiritual or temporal, to a disempowered periphery.

That said, the re-creation (or re-invention) of a ‘golden age’ of idealized African societies and cultural traditions blighted and pillaged by the traumas of the slave trade and colonialism is not the path we should take to a re-apprehension of Africa and ourselves. As we gaze into the past, Ayi Kwei Armah advises us not to fall into the trap of limiting the past of these societies to their slavery and colonial past. He argues that we should not,

focus so exclusively on the trauma of genocide as to forget that there was life before trauma ... [we should] look at what was there before trauma, and incorporate a knowledge of that too, deep and real, into a historically accurate, inclusive apprehension [of our identity] (2006:253).

This ‘deep and real’ knowledge is what Masolo (2010) calls indigenous knowledge. Yet, as Masolo warns, we should not succumb to an extremely restricted perception of identity in the postcolonial era. The imposition of a monolithic ‘African identity’ in a postcolonial era is a problematic inherited from resistance discourses in which it is assumed,

first, that all formerly colonized persons ought to have one view of colonialism behind which they ought to unite to overthrow it; second, that the overthrow of colonialism be replaced with another, liberated and assumedly authentic identity.

Thus, an outcome of the ‘deeply political gist of the colonial/postcolonial discourse’ is that ‘we have come to think of our identities as natural rather than imagined and politically driven’ (Eze 1997). In similar vein, Appiah

(1992) advises us not to succumb to the ‘reverse discourse’ of nativism and cultural nationalism. To engage in reverse discourse is to mimic imperial techniques of harnessing ‘authentic’ knowledge and cultural heritage in service to power¹.

After successive Friday afternoons engaged in these thematically inter-linked debates, members of the Politics discussion group decided to expand our discursive vistas, cast our net wider, and thus to organize a conference (funded by the College of Humanities) with the aim of attracting diverse and wide-ranging contributions from scholars in a variety of academic disciplines. The conference was held in July 2012 on the Pietermaritzburg campus; it provided the inter-disciplinary material for this themed issue of *Alternation*.

We have arranged the contributions to the journal in three categories: race and identity; Indigenous knowledges (epistemological connotations and social transformation); Indigenous knowledges (pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial). In the spirit of Armah’s 1984 essay we believe these essays contribute to Africa’s being as ‘circular or even a spherical continuum’ (37). Like points on a seamless ball, they all make their individual but different contribution to the whole.

We begin with four papers which all, in their different ways, creatively and critically address perceptions of race and identity. The transition to democracy in South Africa promised a non-racial society. After almost two decades of ‘transition’ there are still questions about the effectiveness of the government policies used, beneficiaries, losers, and identities of post-apartheid subjects. Using Kopano Matlwa’s novel, *Coconut*, Gugu Hlongwane interrogates the pitfalls of the black elite post-apartheid project. Colonialism devalued indigenous ways of being while purveying ‘whiteness’ as social ideal. Inferiority complex is thus a key component of the post-apartheid black person’s personality. Educational institutions,

¹ For literature in this genre, see for instance Abraham (1962). An ardent supporter of independent Ghana’s first President, Kwame Nkrumah, Abraham argues in favour of the politically instrumental uses of culture. ‘I wish to put forward culture as that knock-down rhetoric by means of which political objectives are sold’ (1962:37). See also Chinwizu (1987) who advocates the conscious and selective use of African traditions in nation building projects, engineered by political and intellectual elites.

especially private schools, are seen by the black elite as a means to achieve material goals. While these institutions may enhance the black elite's human capital, the ahistorical and negrophobic curricula kill them spiritually.

In *Township Textualities*, Megan Jones explores the complex manner in which the social landscape of post-apartheid South Africa is both altered and unchanged. Following Chipkin, she argues that class aspirations do not erase race identification. While suburbia no longer is necessarily a white domain, townships – and their ‘architectures of intimacy’ – continue to be a black domain. Drawing on three major conurbations – Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban – Jones affirms the symbolic energies and mutualities of urban life while also recognizing persisting structures of difference.

Using Lawrence Blum's understanding of racism, Bernard Matolino interrogates the claims of black racism in post-apartheid South Africa. For Blum, racism is primarily about inferiorizing and antipathy. Matolino seeks to ascertain the impact that black racism might have on white people. Given power dynamics between blacks and whites, Matolino concludes by claiming that blacks can only be ineffective racists.

Ted Sommerville utilises Ogbu's socio-historical theory in his investigation of the academic performance and perceptions of a cohort of medical students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine. While statistical analysis of students' marks show apparent race-based differences, Sommerville argues that these differences are a surrogate for other inequities such as class, family background, and language. The study's findings have significant implications for government's and educational institutions' equity policies.

The issue then moves on to four papers loosely grouped together in the category of Indigenous Knowledges (epistemological connotations and social transformation). The papers offer individually distinct but equally innovative perspectives and findings. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Nontyatyambo Dastile expound the advantages of decolonial epistemic perspectives, which they denote a Pan-African antidote to - and method of combating – (neo) imperial technologies of subjectivation. Decolonial epistemic perspectives, they argue, embodies thinking that calls for the opening up of a plurality of epistemologies to enrich and transform human experiences. They locate their preferred episteme in Africa and the Global South, and argue that it is a viable and liberating alternative to (a crisis-ridden) Euro-American epistemology.

H.O. Kaya uses secondary sources and experiences of North-West University (South Africa) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal to interrogate the challenges and prospects of integrating African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) into higher education. The article notes that the integration of AIKS into higher education faces challenges such as inadequate AIKS qualified staff, reference material, and limited institutional support among others. In spite of these challenges, Kaya acknowledges emergence of an understanding among different stakeholders of the importance of AIKS for sustainable livelihood and development.

Using multilogical framework and a sample of seventeen custodians of isiZulu culture, Nadaraj Govender, Ronicka Mudaly and Angela James argue that this integration of AIKS into higher education can be and should be facilitated through the participation of the custodians of indigenous knowledges such as amakhosi (chiefs), izangoma (diviner-spiritualists) and izinyanga (diviner-herbalists) among others. The result of this research, a critical appraisal of scientific and spiritual practices among some KwaZulu-Natal communities, poses challenges to academic communities.

Ronicka Mudaly and Raesa Ismail deploy the sociocultural theory of learning and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development to address these challenges. Using a sample of thirty pre-service science teachers, Mudaly and Ismail interrogate different themes associated with educating culturally sensitive science teachers. These themes include: what to teach, rationale for choosing specific topics to teach, and the conditions that enable culturally inclusive education to be effective.

Five papers in the final category – Indigenous Knowledge Systems (precolonial, colonial and postcolonial) – showcase an enlightening combination of philosophical critique and empirical research. Oritsegbubemi Oyowe investigates the link between social power and communitarian conception of personhood. Oyowe argues that the search for and the articulation of a distinctive African conception of personhood are motivated by a struggle for power. Given that the communitarian conception of personhood depends on social power, the co-existence of a socially engendered personhood and communitarian egalitarianism is questionable.

Sakiemi Idoniboye-obu and Ayo Whetho point to the ambiguity embedded in the idiom that underlies Ubuntu, which is, 'a person is a person through others'. In every day practice this can be interpreted in at least two ways. The first way is, 'You are because I am', while the second way is 'I am

because you are'. The first interpretation leads to a socially sensitive worldview, while the second interpretation leads to a narrow and ego-centric worldview. The authors argue that the latter interpretation underlies the behavior and practice of the post-colonial political elite.

Utilising the Rwandese tradition of Umuganda as a case study, Penine Uwimbabazi and Ralph Lawrence point to the distortion of Umuganda by colonial and postcolonial regimes. Umuganda is a Rwandese 'traditional practice and cultural value of working together to solve social and economic problems for mutual benefits'. Turned into forced labour under colonialism, and into an exploitative developmental ideology by post-colonial states, Umuganda was used as an essentialist ideology that facilitated the 1994 genocide. The post-genocide regime in Rwanda continues to use it as a tool both for nation building and compulsory labour.

Nicola Jacobs, Desireé Manicom and Kevin Durrheim reference post-apartheid South Africa's domestic labour market as a case study to explore the ideological use of a key nodal point of Ubuntu to justify exploitation. Undergirding Ubuntu as an ontology, epistemology and an ethic is relationality. In post-apartheid South Africa, this communal ethos of helping others as helping oneself is used to justify unpaid labour.

Finally, heeding Armah's advice that no society's story begins with trauma, we conclude this issue with Ndubuisi Christian Ani's paper. Commencing with a critique of imperial epistemologies, Ani excavates Africa's ways of being and knowing that existed before slavery and colonialism. Ani uses religion and intuitive knowledges as examples of Africa's holistic ways of knowing. This theme of holistic ways of being and knowing reverberates in most of the essays in this issue. Ani suggests that we re-evaluate these ways of being and knowing that were subjugated by slave and colonial modes of production.

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