A Relevant Education for African Development—Some Epistemological Considerations

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Abstract

This paper argues that education in Africa is the victim of a Western epistemological export that takes the form of science as ideology and hegemony. Under the Western epistemological export, education in Africa and/or for Africans has been like a pilgrimage to the Kilimanjaro of Western intellectual ideals, the tortuous route to Calvary for alternative ways of life. Sometimes, with rhetorical justification about the need to be competitive internationally, the practice has been for the elite to model education in Africa after educational institutions in the West, with little attempt at domestication. Education in Africa has been and mostly remains a journey fuelled by an exogenously induced and internalised sense of inadequacy in Africans, and endowed with the mission of devaluation or annihilation of African creativity, agency and value systems. Such cultural estrangement has served to reinforce in Africans self-devaluation and self-hatred and a profound sense of inferiority that in turn compels them to 'lighten their darkness' both physically and metaphysically for Western gratification. The paper argues that the future of higher education in Africa can only be hopeful through a meticùlous and creative process of cultural restitution and indigenisation even as African scholars continue to cooperate and converse with intellectual bedfellows in the West and elsewhere. If Africa is to be party to a global conversation of universities and scholars, it is only appropriate that it does so on its own terms, with the interests and concerns of ordinary Africans as the guiding principle.

Résumé

Le présent article pose comme postulat que l'éducation en Afrique est victime d'une exportation épistémologique qui présente la science comme idéologie et hégémonie. Conformément à cette logique d'exportation épistémologique occidentale, l'éducation en Afrique et/ou pour les Africains est comparable à un

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pèlerinage au Kilimanjaro des idéaux intellectuels du Nord, comme le chemin tortueux du calvaire, à la recherche désespérée de moyens de survie. Parfois, sur la base d'une rhétorique justificative quant à la nécessité d'être compétitif sur le plan international, la pratique pour l'élite a toujours été de calquer l'éducation en Afrique sur le modèle des institutions éducatives de l'occident, sans le moindre effort d'adaptation. L'éducation en Afrique a toujours été et demeure largement un parcours alimenté par un sens d'inadéquation induit et intériorisé de manière exogène chez les Africains, avec pour mission d'annihiler le sens créatif, le dynamisme et les systèmes de valeur des Africains. Cette aliénation culturelle n'a servi qu'à cristalliser chez l'Africain le sentiment d'auto dévaluation et de haine contre soi-même, ainsi qu'un profond sentiment d'infériorité qui à son tour l'oblige à «éclaircir sa noirceur» tant physique que métaphysique pour faire plaisir à l'occident. Cet article soutient que l'avenir de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique ne peut être prometteur que s'il subit un processus de restitution et d'inculturation culturelle méticuleux et créatif, bien que les intellectuels africains continuent de collaborer et de converser avec des collègues intellectuels du Nord et d'ailleurs. Si l'Afrique souhaite participer au débat mondial des universités et des intellectuels, il n'est que convenable qu'elle le fasse en ses propres termes, avec pour principe directeur les intérêts et les préoccupations de l'Africain ordinaire.

Introduction

Development for Africa is a theme fraught with a multiplicity of Western-generated ideas, models and research paradigms, all with the purported goal of 'alleviating poverty'. This discourse is carried on mainly by economists and other social scientists who limit the question of development to the problematic of achieving economic growth within the context of neo-liberal economic principles. Notwithstanding the fact that there are now novel paradigms of development that search for solutions under the theoretical rubric of 'alternative development', the problem is rarely studied in a holistic manner.

One of the important aspects of economic growth and development is investment in human capital, or more simply put, investment in education. But education is not just the inculcation of facts as knowledge but a set of values that in turn appraise the knowledge being acquired. When the values are not appropriate for progress, the knowledge acquired is rendered irrelevant and becomes merely cosmetic. In this paper I propose to show how the values acquired during the colonial era that teach the superiority of the West have set the tone for the imbibing of knowledge. The obvious result is that the knowledge needed for African development is rendered irrelevant by a dysfunctional set of values. In this regard, development in Africa is greatly hindered and retarded. Hence, the need for Africa to revisit the dominant epistemological underpinnings of Western education

that are not always sensitive to the predicaments and expectations of ordinary Africans.

Dominant and Dormant Epistemologies in Africa

In a recent publication, I raised the issue of the problematic nature of the dominant Western epistemological export to Africa in connection with witchcraft and the occult (cf. Nyamnjoh 2001). The export reduces science to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' preoccupation with theories of *what* the universe is, much to the detriment of theories of *why* the universe is. By rendering science 'too technical and mathematical', this epistemology has made it difficult for those interested in questions of *why* to keep pace with developments in scientific theories (cf. Hawking 1990:171–175), and increased the risk of branding as 'intellectual imposture' the appropriation of scientific concepts by philosophers and other 'non-scientists' (cf. Sokal and Bricmont 1998). Such a narrow view of science has tended to separate the universe into the physical and the metaphysical or the religious, and to ignore the fact that people are ordinarily 'not content to see events as unconnected and inexplicable'. In other words, this epistemology has little room for popular cravings to understand 'the underlying order in the world' (cf. Hawking 1990:1–13). Although science has since moved beyond this limited version to contemplate 'the big bang and black holes', and 'a quantum theory of gravity' (cf. Hawking 1990), its narrow and hegemonic 'certainties' of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continue to make waves and to inform the social sciences, attitudes, policies and relations in general, especially between the West and the rest.

I have argued that this Western epistemological export has serious weaknesses, especially when compared with the popular and more traditional epistemologies of the African continent. It tends to limit reality to appearances, which it then seeks to justify (without explaining) with meta-narratives claiming objectivity and a more epistemologically secure truth status. Under this kind of epistemology, reality is presented as anything whose existence has, or can be, established in a rational, objective manner, with universal laws operating only in perceived space and time. In the social sciences, such a perspective has resulted in an insensitive pursuit of a *physique sociale*, informed almost exclusively by what the mind (Reason) and/or the hierarchy of senses (sight, taste, touch, sound, smell) tell us about society and social relationships. The science inspired by such an epistemology has tended to celebrate dichotomies, dualisms, teleologies and analogies, dismissing anything that does not make sense

in Cartesian or behaviourist terms, confining to religion and metaphysics what it cannot explain and disqualifying as non-scientific more inclusive epistemologies. The world is perceived and presented as dichotomous: there is the real and the unreal. The real is the rational, the natural, the physical and the scientific; the unreal is the irrational, the supernatural, the religious, the metaphysical and the subjective. This epistemology's logic is simple: if truth is one and universal, then there should be a one best way of attaining it; and those who have been there before are the best guides of the rest still in search of truth. This evokes the image of a Jacob's ladder to Heaven, where those highest up the rungs are best placed to tell everyone else what paradise is or could be. We may all be blind and animated by partial theories—like 'the six blind men and the elephant', but some are more likely to claim authority and to silence others about the nature of the universe and the underlying order of things, thanks to the hierarchy of blindness made explicit in this epistemology.

This dominant epistemology has engendered theories and practices of social engineering capable of justifying without explanation almost everything, from colonialism to neoliberalism, through racism and imperialism. Whole societies, countries and regions have been categorised, depending on how these 'others' were perceived in relation to Western Cartesian rationalism and empiricism. The epistemology has resulted in disciplines and fields of studies that have sacrificed morality, humanity and the social on the altar of a false objectivity. In other words, it has allowed the insensitivities of power and comfort to assume the moral high ground, dictating to the marginalised and the disabled, and preaching salvation for individuals and groups who repent from 'retrogressive' attitudes, cultures and practices. As an epistemology that claims the status of a solution, there is little room for introspection or self-scrutiny, since countervailing forces are invariably to blame for failure. The assumption is made here that such messianic qualities have imbued disciples of this epistemology with an attitude of arrogance, superiority and intolerance towards *creative* difference and appropriation. The zeal in them to convert creative difference has not excluded violence as an option, for the epistemology from which they draw knows neither compromise nor negotiation, nor conviviality. To paraphrase Okot p'Bitek, the ways of your ancestors may be good and solid with roots that reach deep into the soil, their customs neither hollow, nor thin, nor easily breakable or blown away by the winds; but this does not deter the epistemology and its disciples from inviting you to despise these ancestral customs and world view, in favour of foreign customs you may not even understand or admire (p'Bitek

1989:19). Because this epistemology is closely entangled with ideology and hegemony, it leaves little room for critical thinking even as it celebrates Cartesian rationalism. The result, quite paradoxically, is an emphasis on doing rather than thinking, and all attempts at serious questioning are rationalised away. This is well captured by Okot p'Bitek in the following excerpt from his *Song of Lawino*:

> My Husband
> Has read at Makerere University.
> He has read deeply and widely,
> But if you ask him a question
> He says
> You are insulting him;
> He opens up with a quarrel
> He begins to look down upon you
> Saying
> You ask questions
> That are a waste of time!
>
> He says
> My questions are silly questions,
> Typical questions from village girls.
> Questions of uneducated people,
> Useless questions from untutored minds.
>
> My husband says
> I have a tiny little brain
> And it is not trained,
> I cannot see things intelligently,
> I cannot see things sharply.
> He says
> Even if he tried
> To answer my questions
> I would not understand
> What he was saying
> Because the language he speaks
> Is different from mine
> So that even if he
> Spoke to me in Acoli
> I would still need an interpreter.

My husband says
Some of the answers
Cannot be given in Acoli
Which is a primitive language
And is not rich enough
To express his deep wisdom.
He says the Acoli language
Has very few words
It is not like the white man's language
Which is rich and very beautiful
A Language fitted for discussing deep thoughts.

Ocol says
He has no time to waste
Discussing things with a thing like me
Who has not been to school.
He says
A university man
Can only have useful talk
With another university man or woman.
And that it is funny,
That he should stoop so low
Even to listen
To my questions (p'Bitek 1989:65-66).

Popular epistemologies in Africa are different. They create room for *why* questions, and for 'magical interpretations' where there are no obvious explanations to 'material realities' (cf. Moore and Sanders 2001). To them, reality is more than meets the eye; it is larger than logic. Far from subscribing to the rigid dichotomies of the dominant epistemological import from the West, the popular epistemologies of Africa build bridges between the so-called natural and supernatural, physical and metaphysical, rational and irrational, objective and subjective, scientific and superstitious, visible and invisible, real and unreal, explainable and inexplicable; making it impossible for anything to be one without also being the other. They constitute an epistemological order where the sense of *sight* and *physical evidence* has not assumed the same centrality, dominance or dictatorship evident in the Western export's 'hierarchies of perceptual faculties' (van Dijk and Pels 1996: 248-251). It has equal space for all the senses, just as it does for the visible and the invisible, the physical and metaphysical. The real is not only what is observable or what makes cognitive sense; it is also the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental or the inexplicable (Okri 1991). In

this epistemological order, emphasis is on the whole, and truth is negotiated, something consensual, not the result of artificial disqualification, dismemberment, atomisation or mutilation by a science of exclusion.

In this popular system of knowledge, the opposite or complement of presence is not necessarily absence, but invisibility. Thus, as Mbembe (1997) argues, understanding the visible is hardly complete without investigating the invisible. We misunderstand the world if we 'consider the obverse and the reverse of the world as two opposite sides, with the former partaking of a 'being there' (*real presence*) and the latter as 'being elsewhere' or a 'non-being' (*irremediable absence*) or, worse, of the order of unreality' (Mbembe 1997:152). The obverse and its reverse are also linked by similarities which do not make them mere copies of each other, but which unite and at the same time distinguish themselves according to the African 'principle of *simultaneous multiplicities*' (Mbembe 1997:152). In others words, far from merely being the other side, the mask or substitute, of the visible, the invisible is in the visible, and vice versa, 'not as a matter of artifice, but as *one and the same* and as external reality simultaneously—or as the image of the thing and the imagined thing at the same time' (Mbembe 1997:152). The questions here, of course, are, What role could Africa's less restrictive epistemologies play in the issue of development, and has not the wholesale import of the modern West's epistemology so ensnared the dominant class elements of African society that they treat it as if it were some kind of invincible magic? Nowhere is this more evident than in the African attitudes to the educational systems and values of the West that exist in the European world and are transplanted directly onto African soil.

Education as Cultural Violence in Africa

The Western epistemological export, translated into educational systems and curricula, takes the form of science as ideology and hegemony. Under it, education in Africa and/or for Africans is like a pilgrimage to the Kilimanjaro of Western intellectual ideals, but also the tortuous route to Calvary for alternative ways of life (cf. p'Bitek 1989; Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986; Mazrui 1986, 2001; Mamdani 1990, 1993; Copans 1990; Rwomire 1992; van Rinsum 2001). The value of education in Africa is best understood in comparison with the soft currencies of the continent. Just as even the most stable of these currencies are pegged and used to taking nosedives in relation to the hard currencies of the West over the years, so has the value of education on the continent. And just as African presidents prefer to beg and bank in foreign currencies—ignoring even banknotes

that bear their own faces and stamp of omnipotence, so is their preference
for the Western intellectual and expert over locally produced expertise.
Sometimes with justifying rhetoric on the need to be competitive
internationally, the practice since independence has been to model
education in Africa after educational institutions in the West, with each
country drawing from the institutions of the immediate past coloniser,
and/or from the USA (Crossman and Devisch 1999:20–23; Mazrui
2001:39–45). The elite have, 'often in unabashed imitativeness' and with
little attempt at domestication, sought to reproduce, even without the
finances to sustain, the Oxfords, Cambridges, Harvards, Stanfords and
Sorbonnes of England, the USA and France (cf. Mazrui 2001:39–8). Some,
like the late Presidents Banda of Malawi, and Houphouët-Boigny of Côte
d'Ivoire, have sometimes carried this craving to ridiculous proportions,
seeking to be identified exclusively by europhilia in education and
consumption. Education in Africa has been and mostly remains a journey
fuelled by an exogenously induced and internalised sense of inadequacy
in Africans, and endowed with the mission of devaluation or annihilation
of African creativity, agency and value systems. Such 'cultural
estrangement' has served to reinforce in the Africans self-devaluation and
self-hatred and a profound sense of inferiority that in turn compels them
to 'lighten their darkness' both physically and metaphysically for Western
gratification (Fanon 1967:169). Nyang has captured this predicament as
'a pathological case of xenophilia', whereby Africans are brought to value
things Western 'not for their efficacy but simply because of their
foreignness' (Nyang 1994:434), and persuaded to consume to death their
creativity and dignity, their very own humanity (cf. Soyinka 1994).

This process of culturally uprooting Africans, has been achieved often
through literally uprooting children of the well-off from their communities
and nurturing them in boarding schools, 'almost like potted plants in green
houses' (Mamdani 1990:3). '*The European Other* haunts the *African Self*
from a young age in a post-colonial school' (Mazrui 2001:41). Okot p'Bitek
captures this reality eloquently through Lawino, protagonist in his *Song
of Lawino*, who laments the fate of young men who have lost their manhood
in classrooms where 'their testicles were smashed with large books!' Even
her husband, rendered blind by the libraries of white men, has lost his
dignity and authority by behaving 'like a dog of the white man', lying by
the door to 'keep guard while waiting for left-overs' from the master's
table. Her husband has lost his 'fire' and bull-like prowess, and has
succumbed to living on borrowed food, wearing borrowed clothes, and
using his ideas, actions and behaviour 'to please somebody else'. He may

have read extensively and deeply and can challenge the white men in his knowledge of their books and their ancestors of the intellect, but to Lawino, this has come at a great price: '...the reading has killed my man, in the ways of his people. He has become a stump. He abuses all things Acoli, he says the ways of black people are black' (p'Bitek 1989:91-96).

Examples abound of African countries where a foreign visitor in the heart of the 'African jungle' suddenly finds him/herself surrounded by a group of Latin speaking lads and lasses, who are ready to challenge his/ her 'Westernness' with classical knowledge of Aristotle, Caesar, Plato, Shakespeare and other symbols of Western intellectual and cultural traditions. These mini-Etons (Sorbonnes, Oxfords, Cambridges, Harvards, Stanfords) in the bush are set up by europhiles eager to stay competitive internationally or simply to demonstrate excellence in the knowledge systems of the West, by measuring up. They spend a sizable portion of the enfeebled national budgets on tutors imported from the West and paid European rates, to instruct the children of the well-off on how to excel in what is often irrelevant locally. In the long run, neither the children of the lowly and poor, who in effect cannot afford the same chance to excel in this type of xenophilia, nor the children of the well-off schooled in such appetites, are in a position to contribute towards solving Africa's pressing problems in a way meaningful to the bulk of the population. The latter, having spent all their time learning to do what they do not need, and the former, having been relegated to pose as custodians of dying traditions which the elite shun, and which at best, are thought of only as a means of 'base' entertainment by the urban-centred elite and their foreign guests and tourists. If and when there is any attempt at domestication, this is hardly pushed beyond the point where students are force-fed by state-appointed pro-establishment professors and administrators doctored versions of culture and history celebrating the heroic feats of so-called *founding fathers* and/or the dominant groupings of their 'nation-states'.

From independence to date, 'African universities have been successful in Africanising their personnel but not their curricula or pedagogical structures to any real extent' (Crossman and Devisch 1999:11). The assumption has been that because one *is* or *appears* African, one is necessarily going to be critical of Western intellectual traditions and rituals in one's teaching and research, and would offer a menu more sensitive to local realities than what is served in Western academic institutions. But this is far from being the case, as even the hundreds of universities created after independence have stayed 'triumphantly universalistic and uncompromisingly foreign' to local cultures, populations and predicaments

(cf. Mamdani 1993:11–15). There has been little effort at domestication or 'an epistemological shift' informed by the 'awareness that the site—or community-specific knowledges tie in with the grammatical and lexical structures of a given language, local cosmologies and worldviews' that 'must be allowed to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the universalistic stance and some of the essentialist fixities of modern science' (Devisch 2002:7). The reality is a double alienation, first by ill-adapted academic traditions internalised through an education of extraversion, and second by repressive state structures.

A good case in point of excellence at irrelevance in education is provided by the late Kamuzu Banda's Malawi. In a BBC television documentary broadcast 9.30 pm, Tuesday, September 8, 1987, Malawi was singled out as an example of a country which had established a school that resembled Eton of England. The school, named Kamuzu Academy, was situated in the Kasungu District in the Central Region of Malawi, President Banda's home area. This school, nicknamed by some critics 'Eton of the Bush', was built in 1981, and imported all its education equipment from the UK and South Africa. When the school was short of chemicals or other equipment, those concerned had to drive for at least five hundred miles to acquire new ones. The school had cost no less than 15 million British pounds to build, and needed not less than 1 million pounds a year to run. The students, whose table manners would put many a working class Briton to shame, were made to believe that no one is truly educated unless s/he knows something about the ancient world, which should not be mistaken to mean the ancestral world of the African (pregnant with primitive savagery and to be treated with disdain), but the world of Julius Caesar, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates and other founding fathers of Western intellectual traditions.

If ancestors are supposed to lay the path for posterity, inviting Africans to forget their ancestors was an invitation for them to be born again and socialised afresh, in the image of the West, using Western-type academic institutions and rituals of ancestral worship. This renewal, in tune with Western values and institutions is achieved, by the West

> *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to [its dominance]; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself (Eagleton 1991:5-6, original emphasis).

Only through such strategies of legitimating could the West 'wipe the blackboard clean' by turning its African students into slaves of Western definitions (cf. van Rinsum 2001). As Eagleton argues, since nobody is ever '*wholly* mystified' or 'a complete dupe', an ideology can only succeed if those it characterises as inferior actually learn to be inferior. 'It is not enough for a woman or colonial subject to be defined as a lower form of life. They must be actively *taught* this definition, and some of them prove to be brilliant graduates in this process' (Eagleton 1991:xv, original emphasis).

All teachers in Kamuzu Academy were white, recruited directly from Britain, and, of course, paid British rates at a time when few local teachers could make ends meet with their own salaries in soft local currencies. As Mazrui noted of the entire continent a year before the BBC documentary was broadcast, commitment and the sense of vocation were dwindling among teachers in Africa, who were 'often underpaid and in some countries they were not paid at all for months on end', and who were sometimes forced 'to look for moonlighting opportunities to give them an additional livelihood' (Mazrui 1986:204). Meanwhile, in Malawi, imported teachers on three-year contracts lived in European-style bungalows with salaries in hard currencies. Little has changed for good, much for worse. Almost everywhere, the consultancy syndrome has triumphed over traditional academic values such as excellence in teaching, research and publication. University professors who have failed to migrate, are forced to postpone academic excellence to a later date. 'They would rather not be wasting their time publishing and perishing', and even the most inspiring of them 'are working under conditions that stymy their creativity and fail to challenge their students' (Onyejekwe 1993:3).

English was and still is the main language of instruction at the Kamuzu Academy. Not only was Chichewa, the national language, not taught, students were forbidden to speak it in the Academy. Writing about Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o shows just how widespread this practice was. The postcolonial instructors who inherited condescending English attitudes to local languages, continued 'to ban African languages in schools and to elevate English as the medium of instruction from primary to secondary stages', and did not hesitate to mete out corporal punishment to and extort fines from students 'caught speaking their mother tongues' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1997:620). Invited to address the OAU at Addis Ababa, Ali Mazrui insisted on doing so in Kishwahili, but there was neither translator nor switch button envisaged for one of Africa's most widely spoken languages. 'You needed to see how the Heads of States were bewildered, but I had passed my message across' (Mazrui 1986 BBC *The Africans*

series). This practice gave English and other Western languages status by associating them with civilisation and enlightenment, and made African languages inferior in the eyes of the African students born into these languages. Unlike Somalia, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya and Botswana, many an African country has yet to demonstrate in principle and practice that literacy, even at primary school level, does not necessarily mean knowing how to read and write a Western language. Only a few African countries have bothered to adopt policies that encourage education in African languages, and even this limited number have tended to confine the importance of local languages to primary and secondary school education, thereby accentuating the remoteness and irrelevance of universities to the bulk of the population. With perhaps the exception of Tanzania, there is hardly a single sub-Saharan African university that 'offers a full diploma programme with an African language as principal medium of instruction' (cf. Crossman and Devisch 1999:7).

At Kamuzu Academy, where the neo-Etonians were trained to recite Shakespeare and glorify the classic philosophers of the West, the library that housed the classics was deliberately designed in the image of the Library of Congress in the USA. There was Western influence everywhere; an influence so successful that in a debate about whether or not Western influence corrupts, sixty-seven students 'felt' that it did not, while only fifty-five students 'felt' it did. Perhaps by the time they had imbibed an awful lot of Latin, Classical Music, Western History, Literature and Etiquette, and consumed enough McDonaldised entertainment television, not as many as one of them would 'feel' any longer that Western influence corrupts. As the presenter of the BBC documentary observed, the students knew more about Europe than they did of Malawi, so much so that once in a while, the teachers had to carry out field trips with the students 'partly to bring their own country home to them'. Parents, he went on, sacrificed too much for their children to acquire values and an education, which were alien to their cultures of origin. This, of course, is hardly news to other Africans who have drunk from the well of 'Modern Education' in similarly Western-styled institutions modelled on the colonial educational system with 'its heavy literary and non-technical emphasis' (cf. Mazrui 1986:233).

There are basically two ways of journeying to the West. One can undertake the journey physically or one can do so psychologically with facilitation from education and the media. Either way, one still succeeds in imbibing Western influences. Western-style training at Kamuzu Academy-type institutions is not just to compensate for the real West

where these students have not been yet. It is seen as preparing them for
Europe and North America, where they ultimately have or yearn to go to
make use of the skills they have acquired. Thus, if at the Kamuzu Academy
they were being taught all about Sunday barbecues, swimming pools,
table etiquette, the classics, suits, ties, horse riding and straw hats (or
how to be the complete gentleman or lady *à l'anglaise*), this was to purge
them of that presumed backwardness that has qualified Africa to be termed
'the Dark Continent' par excellence, and Africans as people desperately
in need of salvation from a *mission civilisatrice* (cf. Magubane 2004;
Schipper 1990a&b). It is hard to imagine African students who have gone
through all these stages of Westernisation, returning home to bear the
misery and poverty of un- or under-employment with a stiff upper lip.
Brain drain has been an inevitable consequence. As Mamdani observes,
in its craving for centres of learning and research of international standing,
Africa has produced researchers and educators with 'little capacity to
work in surrounding communities but who could move to any institution
in any industrialised country, and serve any privileged community around
the globe with comparative ease'. The failure by the educational system
in Africa to contextualise standards and excellence to the needs and
conditions of Africans has resulted in an intelligentsia with little stamina
for the very process of development whose vanguard they claim to be
(Mamdani 1993:15). A McDonaldised educational system is too
standardised, uniformised and detached to be in tune with the predicaments
of ordinary and marginal Africans thirsty and hungry for recognition,
representation and upliftment.

The quest for Western academic symbols of credentialism—sometimes
termed *diplomania* (cf. Robinson 1981:176–192)—and respect for
qualifications obtained abroad have characterised postcolonial Africa.
Africans are still very much dependent on ill-adapted curricula, sources
and types of knowledge that alienate and enslave, all in the name of
modernity. Sometimes it does not matter whether or not school libraries
are empty, since a full library may well be of little real relevance to the
pressing problems and specificities of the continent, in terms of
perspectives and contents. Education for Africans has, in the main, tended
to be an exercise in self-evacuation and the devaluation of all that took
pre-colonial generations, wisdom, cultural creativity and sweat to edify.
The fact that Africans have placed and continue to place a very high
premium on getting educated in the West has only compounded the
problem.

In South Africa for example, despite numerous local universities and
a relatively long history of university education, a doctorate from Britain
is still valued higher than anything obtained locally. Like other Africans,
South Africans instinctively ask one another or others: 'Where did you
do your degree?', and depending on the university you name, you could
be treated as a superior, an equal or an inferior by a fellow academic. If
the doctorate holder is credited with the capacity to devalue those without
PhDs ('Pull him Down' syndrome), PhD holders who graduate from
Western universities are considered to be less 'Phenomenally Dumb' than
those from local universities whose ignorance, purportedly, 'Piles higher
and Deeper'. These amusing but telling puns tell the story. Some Africans
would rather graduate from Oxford, Harvard or Sorbonne for example,
even if this means changing their specialisations to accommodate the
limited academic menu offered in these heavyweight Western universities.
Africans continue to flood Europe and North America to research aspects
of their own countries which normally are best studied back home in
Africa, mostly for the prestige and status that studying abroad brings.
Parents continue to send their children to the West for education, with the
conviction that a degree even from a commercialised and second-rate
Western university is worth a lot more opportunities than one from a
purportedly top university in Africa.

Epistemological Consequences of Irrelevant Education

The extraverted nature of African education in general has favoured the
Western knowledge industry tremendously. It has allowed Western
intellectual traditions and practitioners to write themselves into the past,
present and future of Africa as civilisers, saviours, initiators, mentors, arbiters
(Fonlon 1967; Chinweizu 1987; Mudimbe 1988; Schipper 1990a & b;
Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1977; J. and J. Comaroff 1997a; Crossman and Devisch
1999; Mbembe 2000a:7–40; 2001:1–23; Magubane 2004). Europe and
North America have for decades dominated the rest of the world with its
academic products. Focusing on the social sciences, Frederick Gareau,
an American sociologist of knowledge, has noted that the West has been
consistently more advanced and expansionist than the underdeveloped
and dependent regions of the world. In the late 1980s, he remarked that
American social science, in its 'unrelenting one-way traffic', was able to
penetrate countries with cultures as different from its own as those of
France, Canada, India, Japan and the Republic of Korea (Gareau 1987:
599). The African continent should be included in his list. This penetration
has given American social science a 'privileged position' with 'a very

favourable export balance of communications' or 'talking without listening'. Not only is there little importation, American social scientists ensure that 'incoming messages are in accord with American socio-cultural norms'. This, Gareau observed, 'betrays an ethnocentric, inward-looking fixation', with little preference for anything foreign: 'if foreign, a preference for the Anglo-Saxon world; little concern for Continental Europe, and indifference or hostility towards the Second and the Third Worlds' (Gareau 1987:598–9).

Focusing on the discipline of International Relations, and writing ten years later, Kim Richard Nossal makes exactly the same observations. Nossal notes that text books in this area 'portray the world to their readers from a uniquely *American* point of view: they are reviewed by Americans; the sources they cite are American; the examples are American; the theory is American; the experience is American; the focus is American; and in … [some cases], the voice is also explicitly American' (Nossal 1998:12). This makes it extremely difficult for thinking critical of American assumptions or (mis)representations of the rest of the world finding suffrage in mainstream American academic circles or in other circles for that matter, given America's impressive academic export record. In this connection, perspectives sympathetic with the predicaments of Africa have suffered a great rejection rate by university curricula, reviewers for publishers, and academic peers who stick to their conceptual and methodological spots however compelling arguments to the contrary have been.

Understood in terms of the centre-periphery perspective, the favourable 'export balance' for American social science is explained by the spread of American political, economic and cultural values after World War II. Following the war, America, as a superpower, exported its cultural values, through educational aid and the social sciences. "In this way, the US exported its social science sects abroad both by training social scientists in the homeland and by sending experts abroad. The expense incurred was often borne by the United States government or by private foundations" (Gareau 1987:602). In this way, America has been able, over the years, to use its doctrine of Free Flow of Information as a 'highly effective ideological club' to promote its political, economic and cultural values by whipping 'alternative forms of social organization' into a ridiculous defensiveness (Schiller 1977). In Africa, it has managed to dwarf the cultural legacies of former colonialists from Europe, including in higher education where American nomenclature and *manière de faire* have gained prominence (cf. Mazrui 1986:247–8). The advent of the internet and its purported equalising potential for the developing world,

does not seem to be achieving much in redefining unequal flows of information and cultural products between the West (epitomised by America) and Africa, the internet's significant impact notwithstanding (cf. Nyamnjoh 1999; Olorunnisola 2000; van Binsbergen 2004).

Such dependence, in Africa, is compounded by the fact that the production of social scientific knowledge requires huge funds for university infrastructure from lecture halls to libraries, computers, laboratory equipment and research facilities, which not even the best scholars and institutions on the continent can afford easily. In terms of infrastructure and finance, well-endowed institutions like the University of Botswana and the historically white universities of South Africa are rare exceptions (cf. Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004). What this means in practice is that most of the time African scholars are forced to consume not books and research output of their own production or choice, but what their affluent and better placed counterparts in North America and Europe choose to share with them at the peripheries. Cooperation takes the form of Western universities calling the tune for the African pipers they have paid. Collaborative research has often worked in the interest of the Western partners, who, armed with assumed theoretical sophistication and economic resources, have usually reduced their African collaborators to data collectors and research assistants. And this concerns even the field of African studies, where Western Africanists appear as gatekeepers and Africans as gatecrashers (cf. Mkandawire 1997; Berger 1997; Zeleza 1997; Prah 1998). Because the leading journals and publishers are based in the West and controlled by Western academics, African debates and perspectives find it very difficult getting fair and adequate representation. When manuscripts by Africans are not simply dismissed for being 'uninformed by current debates and related literature', they may be turned down for challenging conventional wisdom and traditional assumptions about their continent (cf. Cabral et al. 1998; Mkandawire 1997). The few African academics who succeed in penetrating such gate-keeping mechanisms have often done so by making serious sacrifices in terms of the perspectives, methodologies and contextual relevance of their publications and scholarship (cf. Prah 1998:27–31). Unlike Steve Biko under Apartheid South Africa, they have had to conform rather than perish from daring to 'write what … [they] like' (cf. Malusi and Mphumlwana 1996).

Migrating to the West often does not help, and could indeed exacerbate the problem. It has been observed that the most prominent voices in African studies today are 'diasporic intellectuals' whose 'inspiration comes perhaps more from nicely subtle readings of fashionable European theorists…than

it does from…current local knowledge of the cultural politics of everyday life in the postcolonial hinterlands' (Werbner 1996:6). Little wonder that the study of Africa continues to be dominated by perspectives that privilege analogy over the historical processes that should qualify Africa as a unit of analysis in its own right (Mamdani 1996: 12-13). As has been observed, there is hardly ever a discourse on Africa for Africa's sake, and the West has often used Africa as a pretext for its own subjectivities, its self-imagination and its perversions. And no amount of new knowledge seems challenging enough to bury for good the ghost of simplistic assumptions about Africa (Mbembe 2000a:10-21, 2001:3-9; Comaroff 1997b:236-322; Schipper 1990a&b; Magubane 2004). In this sense, a Western epistemological export that marries science and ideology in subtle ways for hegemonic purposes has dominated social science in and on Africa, and coloured perceptions of Africa even by Africans. This dominant epistemological export has not always been sensitive to new perspectives that question conventional wisdom and myopic assumptions. It has stayed largely faithful to a type of social science induced and informed more by fantasies, prejudices, stereotypes, assumptions, ideologies or biases about Africa and Africans (cf. Nyamnjoh 2001). Given its remarkable ability to reproduce and market itself globally, this epistemological export has emptied academia of the power and impact of competing systems of knowledge by Africans (cf. Mudimbe 1988:x-xi). Mudimbe notes that 'Even in the most explicitly 'Afrocentric' descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer' to 'categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order', as if 'African *Weltanschauungen* and African traditional systems of thought are unthinkable and cannot be made explicit within the framework of their own rationality' or 'epistemological locus' (Mudimbe 1988:x). Although research on and in Africa has shaped the disciplines and our convictions of a supposedly universal truth (cf. Bates et al. 1993:xiii-xiv), the quest for such universality has meant the marginalisation of African alternatives. What obtains has been nothing short of an epistemological imperialism that has facilitated both a Western intellectual hegemony and the silencing of Africans even in the study of Africa (cf. Copans 1990:305-395; Zeleza 1997; Obenga 2001).

Under the dominant epistemological import from the West, most accounts of African cultures and experiences have been generated from the insensitive position of power and quest for convergence and homogeneity. Explicit or implicit in these accounts is the assumption that African societies should reproduce Western ideals and institutions regardless

of feasibility or contextual differences. Few researchers of Africa, even in African universities, have questioned enough the theories, concepts and basic assumptions informed by the dominant epistemological import. The tendency has been to conform to a world conceived in the image of the West without the rest (Chinweizu 1987; Mafeje 1998:26-29). Often missing have been perspectives of the silent majorities deprived of the opportunity to tell their own stories their own ways or even to enrich defective accounts by others of their own life experiences. Correcting this entails paying more attention to the popular epistemologies from which ordinary people draw on a daily basis, and the ways they situate themselves in relationship to others within these epistemologies (cf. Nyamnjoh 2001). It also means encouraging 'a meaningful dialogue' between these epistemologies and 'modern science', both in its old and new forms (cf. Devisch 2002).

Providing for Popular Epistemologies in the Study of Africa

The Western epistemological import has survived in the continent more because it suits the purposes of the agents of Westernisation than because of its relevance to understanding African situations. Those who run educational programmes along the Western models they have adopted are seldom tolerant of challenge, stimulation, provocation and competing perspectives at any level. They protect their intellectual spots jealously, and are ready to deflate all 'saboteurs' and 'subversives'. They want their programmes to go on without disturbance, and would only select as lecturers or accept and sponsor only those research questions and findings that confirm their basic assumptions on scholarship and the African condition. But African universities, academics and researchers have the responsibility to challenge such unfounded assumptions based on vested interests and hidden agendas.

This is an easy task by no means, especially since scholars in Africa rely on these very agents of cultural devaluation of Africa to fund and disseminate their research. Few in positions of power and control would accept research that is critical of them, especially in a context where relations of unequal exchange with the outside world have already diminished that power and control considerably. They are more likely, therefore, to sponsor only such research that would produce results that justify their position and/or help them in their defence when challenged. To paraphrase Susan George, it matters little how many 'mistakes' mainstream researchers or theorists make or how insensitive to the predicaments of ordinary people they are, for 'protected and nurtured by those whose political objectives they support, package and condone, they

have a licence to go on making them, whatever the consequences.' Through the university institutions they create and fund, the powerful are able to perpetuate their ideologies by ensuring that only people with the 'correct' ideas are recruited and/or retained to work there (George 1992:109 and 168-171). Neo-liberals and their institutions of legitimation for example, know only too well that in order to penetrate people's heads and acquire their hearts, hands and destinies, they have to make their ideas part of the daily life of people and society, by packaging, conveying and propagating these ideas through books, magazines, journals, conferences, symposia, professional associations, student organisations, university chairs, mass media and by other means (George 1997).

Yet domestication as a dialogical epistemological shift can only begin to take shape if research by Africans critical of conventional wisdom in academia is greeted with recognition rather than censorship, caricature or derision (cf. Obenga 2001:49-66). Only by creating space for African scholarship based on Africa as a unit of analysis on its own right could scholars begin to correct prevalent situations whereby much is known of what African states, societies and economies '*are not*' (thanks to dogmatic and normative assumptions of mainstream scholarship) but very little of what '*they actually are*' (Mbembe 2000a:21; 2001:9). Accepting the research agendas of African scholars may be not just 'a matter of ecumenism or goodwill', but also the beginnings of a conversation that could enrich scholarship in the West and elsewhere (cf. Appadurai 1999:235-237). Only the forging of this mutuality, partnership or interdependence would help re-energize African scholars and allow for a building of a genuinely international and democratic community of researchers. In this regard, Arjun Appadurai sees a future of profound internationalisation that invites academics across the globe to a conversation about research wherein 'the very elements of the ethic could be subjects of debate, and to which scholars from other societies and traditions of inquiry could bring their own ideas about what counts as new knowledge and about what communities of judgement and accountability they might judge to be central in the pursuit of such knowledge' (Appadurai 1999:237).

Global conversations and cooperation among universities and scholars are a good starting point in a long journey of equalisation and recognition for marginalised epistemologies and dimensions of scientific inquiry. But any global restructuring of power relations in scholarship can only begin to be meaningful to ordinary Africans through educational institutions and curricula that are in tune with their predicaments. In this connection, academics and researchers from and on Africa cannot afford to be blind

to the plight of African scholarship whatever the pressures they may face, and regardless of their own levels of misery and need for sustenance. Nearly three decades ago Fonlon (1978) made a plea for the African university as a place for genuine intellectuals dedicated to the common weal. Thus, for African universities and researchers to contribute towards a genuine, multifaceted liberation of the continent and its peoples, they ought to start not by joining the bandwagon as has been their history, but with a careful rethinking of African concerns and priorities, and coming up with educational policies sympathetic to the needs of ordinary Africans (cf. Copans 1990, 1993; Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004). Mamdani (1993: 19) refers to rooting African universities in African soil, and Mafeje calls for a move away from 'received theory or contrived universalism', to an 'intimate knowledge of the dynamics of African culture[s] in a contemporary setting' (Mafeje 1988: 8). There is need for an insightful scrutiny of current curricula—their origin, form, content, assumptions and practicability; and then to decide whether to accept, reject or modify accordingly. The future of higher education in Africa can only be hopeful through a meticulous and creative process of cultural restitution and indigenisation even as African scholars continue to cooperate and converse with intellectual bedfellows in the West and elsewhere. All initiatives in this regard must be encouraged, and Peter Crossman's and René Devisch's *Endogenisation and African Universities* survey—premised on the assumption that only through greater adaptation to local and national socio-cultural contexts might African universities overcome some of the functional difficulties they currently face and make themselves more relevant to the needs of the countries and peoples they serve (Crossman and Devisch 1999)—could serve as a good starting point for those with research interest in this area. This is especially important, given that the relative advance in the indigenisation of the teaching of history and geography in Africa, is yet to inspire similar efforts towards making curricula for other social sciences more contextually relevant (cf. Crossman and Devisch 1999). If Africa is to be party in a global conversation of universities and scholars, it is only appropriate that it does so on its own terms, with the interests and concerns of ordinary Africans as guiding principle.

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