

Still Engaging Issues: Wisdom, Experience and Theoretical Ideas for the Future

Combative as it could be, compared to the immediate chaos out there as super-powers are fighting and positioning in anticipation of another new post era, intellectual work can still serve as something like a safe house. It is work that can be done quietly in one's privacy. It is work in which one can shut out the shouting, the pundits and the lies. This does not mean that scholarly work does not have its own lies and show of anxiety. It simply means that there is a heightened awareness and consciousness that demand a much deeper sense of principles and commitment, and less of petty politics, but more of time input.

The more debate I listen to over our global economic future, the more certain I am that regional and global inequalities between nations will not find a balance in the near future. The changing economies driven by the fight for energy supply show that the main super powers are in for major economic adjustments, and developing countries might have to fend for them-selves. In this, I am glad of the aspect of my work that is focused on indigenous knowledge. The future suggests that this is the locus of self-sufficiency and sustainability. The scholarly challenge then is to tease out a dialectics with democratic participatory progressive future from this socio-cultural grassroots perspective.

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Theorising working democratic perspectives at the base is the frequently proffered alternative to the inequalities and disadvantages manifested in broader organisations that were once seen as a magic wand for regional, continental, international, and even global unity. In relation to grassroots Africa, regional institutions of integration such as NEPAD, APRM, AU, AUC, and the various regional organisations of West Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, Central Africa, Northern Africa and the Sahel are designated instruments of regional and continental integration for socio-economic development. They like the international organisations such as BRICS, etc. present the problem of inequality between member nations, especially with Africa in the international and global ones. Lacking the power of strong self-financing, participating nations also have the problem of weak member investment and having to rely outside for financing.

With much emphasis on regional integration as a solution to democratic participa-

tion and cooperation, it is necessary to tease out the question of inter-linkages between financial institutions and these regional organisations for integration, more particularly, how they serve weaker member states and people at the grassroots. The tokenistic presence of very few women points to more exclusive boys clubs and therefore more inequalities and poverty at the grassroots. We need to rethink the philosophy of regional integration. Is it political or ethical given the facts of local, national and international competition? Whose interest in the end really is served in these relationships, sometimes in spite of the political goodwill motivating some of these organisations?

A rethinking of the philosophy of regional integration includes the examination or the considering of the place of national culture in trade and politics beyond market values. There is usually strong recommendation for the use of indigenous products or a respect for local production, manufacture and local markets. In other words, local markets are the economic and cultural live-veins of Africa and the second home of women at the grassroots. Therefore national culture is a political and not a moralising issue. What would African folk traditions say at this vital local - global level concerning the decline of their textile industry, for exam-

ple? This is a most interesting question, seeing how structurally important textile like language is to African cultures, myths and religions.

Needless to say, our concerns continue to revolve around issues in relation to an African-focused perspective or an Africa-centeredness. It is from this perspective that I was theoretically inspired by my colleagues during CODESRIA's 40th Anniversary Conference in Dakar, Senegal in 2014. The theme of the conference was "Building on 40 years of Research and Knowledge Production in Africa". I can see that theoretical advances have been made in the past few years from the presentations of my learned colleagues, and in a remarkable Africa-centered direction. Ebrima Sall sums it up very well by saying that Africa has taken up the issue of autonomy, setting its own lens from which to engage issues. This means that to theoretically stand strong, we must archive and build a strong research foundation, and think Africa. These are not completely new ideas, but the doing is what feeds on the new, and a follow-up to the work that were done by great African scholars who are now leaving us in their persons, but passing on their precious and invaluable works.

I am particularly grateful to have been present to learn of the General History of Senegal Project (HGS) from its coordinator, Professor Iba Der Thiam, former Vice President of the National Assembly of Senegal. Amongst an impressive list of professors, Heads and Directors of Research Centers and Associations, he made the wishes and recommendations of those giants of African Studies to come true. They must be dancing in their graves. I too feel proud that I have been a scholar of the great scholar Cheikh Anta Diop. It was a great day. Professor Thiam was magnificent as he unfolded the plan for the HGS project. Senegal has a mass of knowledge like all African nations, yet, little of it is known, due to lack of documentation and archiving. The HGS project aims to produce 50 to 60 volumes of documentation in all national languages and involve 150 committed researchers. Many of these researchers will also come from the grassroots. The research will focus on indigenous knowledge, history and experiences of slavery, and all periods of history. Several committees will be formed and experts, researchers and scholars from everywhere are invited to participate, as

the project has the full backing of the government of Senegal. According to Professor Thiam, the Ministry of Culture will publish the volumes, including a Dictionary of Senegal. CODESRIA was invited to participate, and Fatima Harrak graciously acknowledged that Senegal and her government have always supported CODESRIA and its scholars. That is a good thing, given that this support is unconditional.

Here then is a formula for documentation and a challenge to other African countries that already have not embarked on such a necessary and important project. This kind of documentation is different from the work produced in the UNESCO History of Africa series due to the focus of input from indigenous knowledge. Empty spaces in the documentation of indigenous knowledge systems remain a vexing problem for intellectuals in research and theoretical work about Africa. This is particularly in the work of decolonisation and the issue of autonomous knowledge production, the ground on which we stand to converse and take on discourses. It pertains to what we bring from Africa to the intellectual bargaining table, or discourse table, if you prefer.

Such a project that covers all periods of history, delving into indigenous knowledge and the experiences of forced enslavement, voluntary and forced migrations would provide much needed resources for further development and advancement of existing theories. Theories of African Matriarchy, Gender, pan-Africanism, Afro-diasporism, Afro-cosmopolitanism, African Renaissance, Ethnicity, Negritude, Race, Class, Afro-centrism, Hybridity, Nativity, Identity, Representation, Syncretism, Créolité, African Feminism, Sexuality, Holism, post-Coloniality, African economic and political theories, Development, Environmentalism, etc. would benefit from a bottom up discourse with an input from internal indigenous knowledge systems. It will mean that at all time African contributions will remain the subject and focus of discourse.

Some Key Points with Theoretical Implications

Souleymane Bachir Diagne put forward the idea of a future that we will succeed in inventing together, rather than a future that will happen. He therefore called for a

renewed strong and pragmatic pan-Africanism. Diagne emphasised the term postulate in relation to the process of preparedness for the future. Postulation can be seen as a keyword that captures thinking and planning for the future. Jimi Adesina preferred the term or the idea of endogeneity in Social Sciences for understanding ourselves in ethnographic data toward a deeper knowledge of the subject. Otherwise it is dilution. This term dilution is important and speaks to the problem of empty spaces, and the questioning of the quality and relevance of imposed ethnographic data. It is about subject self-knowledge. Fatou Sow tied activism around the neck of feminism, and therefore focused on gender equality, which really is basic to everything. While Elisio Macamo insisted on the importance of constructive theories, Diagne saw the importance of inventing project tools for the future. He also would have us bring in folk traditions. For Macamo it is about now; it is about working and strengthening the working tools of young scholars.

Thinking Africa involves learning from indigenous texts, as Shamil Jeppie pointed out. To that I added that it also involves theorising indigenous gender, and that recognition and citation of Africans are essential to acknowledgement of theoretical contributions and further advancements of ideas and scholarship. It was generally agreed that there is a bad practice of skipping local theoretical productions and looking to the North. A deeper look into Africa's own history is important, for example on the question of women's empowerment, there is internal evidence of women who fought for their rights since the 6th Century.

In Issa Shivji's distinction between nation-building and national liberation, he placed theoretical emphasis on newness. Self-definition involves the process of finding a new society and creating a new self. This perspective easily exposes the existence everywhere of the unfinished tasks of revolutions. Presumably, he is saying that things do not standstill from where a revolution was aborted because reactionary forces step in and take over. Therefore, there is need for a new one, and that is how to bring about the creation of a new society and new selves. I think that Samir Amin is saying something to Shivji when he says that the revolution has not changed the system, but the

people. This is the case of the state holding up the revolution, and being regressive about change.

Puleng Lenka Bula pointed out a difference between a relevant and an irrelevant revolution. A relevant revolution advances the community. There was good general discussion with the suggestion of reconsidering theories of revolution. We need to distinguish between an upheaval and a revolution. A national populist revolution is not necessarily democratic. It is good to hear old gurus of theories of the state and the peasantry revisit old disputed grounds. This is more so in the complex and chaotic contemporary with interesting dynamics of social and border compositions and the usage of technology. Current upheavals are not like what we might now call the romantic times of class perspectives and the idealisation of peasant revolts throwing up romantic heroes, revolutionary leaders, poets and intellectuals! What is spoiling and dirtying revolutions, one might ask? It's food for thought. We really should pay close attention to Akosua Adomako Ampofo's clever phrasing of the question of "how to get young people to fall in love with CODESRIA". His point is about relating to the young generation who are interested to know and those interested in advocacy. On the question of the future, his term Afro-futures seems to me quite adequate, complementing emergence, postulation and even anticipation, all of which are active, and not just inactively waiting to once again be acted upon, like an object. I have used the term possibilities to convey the same ideas.

Shahida El-Baz rightly reminded us that globalisation is imperialistic, and that the hands of revolutionaries are tied. There only can be the truth of free choice for the people of African. Democracy can only mean freedom. This is a good reminder to the theorists. It is the same for OSIWA, a dear partner to CODESRIA. OSIWA believes in total liberation and the total development of the continent of Africa. Theory and practice should be in the service of truth. AAWORD too is a female partner to CODESRIA and Faye like Sow placed emphasis on the theme of gender equality and social justice, highlighting the threat on women from fundamentalists. It is even clearer now the

need to do more work on girls, as fundamentalism of all persuasions abuse girls. Violence on women also includes violence on girls. Yet, as Ayesha Imam pointed out, there is lack of policy for girls. I do not think that there are adequate theories for girls either. It is therefore important to re-engage with women and girls and their issues at all levels.

Women and girls have a strong presence in the agricultural sector of economies. Sam Moyo called for a return to the broader questions of development, the agrarian question in particular. This is a valid concern, given the shift of focus to the infrastructure and interesting theories around regional integration, trade and finance. Moyo pointed out that there is an intensification of neo-liberalism and large-scale capitalism necessitating serious concerns about land grabbing and food sovereignty, a point that was repeatedly emphasised by others. Samir Amin reiterated the dangers of capitalism and its use of military control in an imploding situation. He just sees implosions everywhere: China's globalisation, and imploding systems in Africa, north and south. What are his proposed solutions? He calls for a progressive democratisation of society, non-alignment on globalisation and constructive development, and like Moyo, food sovereignty.

Given all these issues that are symptomatic of imperialisms, Dzodzi Tsikata considered the questions of thought liberation and critical consciousness in order to be free from the so-called partners from the West. Similarly, Lennart Wohlgenuth suggested a change of attitude and the need for Africans to actually attack globalisation, not just complaining about it. Even though there is a suggestion to set clear standards, explicit values and transparent interests, it means having African perspectives and theories. Wohlgenuth prefers that this would be done aggressively. Adebayo Olukoshi rather than the suggested term aggressive, brought in the term emergence as a new term for alternatives and possibilities for the future, that is the future that according to Diagne we don't just sit and wait for, we postulate. Aminata Diaw agreed by insisting that Africa should make its own claims since capitalist development is not viable. The manifestations of capitalist non-viability are in lots of inequalities, population

growth, the market and China's presence in Africa. Pan-Africanism presents an alternative.

Manthia Diawara in my opinion works very much within the domain of the humanities, and possibly for this reason cannot be too pessimistic, but seeks openings, especially those of states and borders. This is why he contradicted Amin's theory of economic implosions due to the practice of capitalist economies by African states. For him, the examples of Nigeria and Benin are not on the same levels of development to predict their implosions. Instead, through the insertion of culture, we can begin to think Africa and the questions of nationalism and the nation-state. There is this tension between theorists of culture paradigms and those of the economy. To which do you attribute change? Such a question might suggest over-dichotomisation, since material reality is usually a lot more complex with overlaps and in-betweens.

Similarly, Frebus Wong's classificatory division of two civilisation paradigms between obsolete and ecological is dichotomous. Under obsolete, he lists the characteristics of power, profit, mega city and the western imagination of democracy, while rural, town and city are some of those of ecological. He also distinguishes between water cycle and carbon cycle. Agreed that capitalism, particularly advanced capitalism, as the main economic ideological practice of certain civilisations is not sustainable and eventually leads to depletion and collapse. The whole world does not neatly divide into these two paradigms, as there are clusters of some of these categories all over the place. However it is a useful conceptual tool toward a workable ecological and environmental theory for sustainability. His main critique however is on Eurocentric representation of Africa when Africa does not fall under the obsolete or destructive kind of civilisation.

More Issues toward Theorisation: My Observation

It is important to consider why policy papers are different from critical analytical academic ones. Perhaps it is related to the distinction between consultancy and academic research, something that many African scholars have moaned about. Limiting situations compel consultancy.

There are problems such as the specificity of directives and the power control by funding agencies. Works, papers, reports and documents serving this purpose indicate that material problems are so real and so close, at the expense of theory and postulations that mistakenly appears a thing of privilege, when it is not. A theoretical engagement is concerned with a different sense of outcomes and lessons learned in a long genealogy of empirical data and discourse. Generally not anticipating, postulating and contesting future outcomes leave alternative thinking and resistance stunted. We can see why usually there is a general complaint about lack of theory. Theory is time consuming and a long road to travel in a context of underfunding, poor infrastructural and material resources. The much promoted arrangements of partnership between African and central institutions abroad are not necessarily a good solution, given the popular opinion that Africa must claim ownership of her own works and determine her own freedom and futures. She cannot do so by unequal and asymmetrical partnerships. I do not mean to entirely dismiss the richness of co-operation, but simply suggesting the alternative of building up and strengthening African institutions.

African institutions include political and democratic processes. Current manifestations of violence call for new ways of theorising conflict, violence, upheavals, terrorisation and post conflict nations. There seems a general berating of the failure of western liberal democracy paradigm, when we can recall an earlier conclusion that there is no other alternative (TINA), so what now? We do need Africa-driven analyses of the inadequacies of the western liberal democracy paradigm in the context of different African economic, social, cultural and religious histories, taking into account the problems of violence and corruption. What direction for Africa? What alternative politics? Hopefully, a focus on Africa and suggestions such as home grown and in-house alternatives will not be misunderstood as prescriptions for African isolation. They are recommendations to return to decentralisation, inclusiveness, accountability and participatory democracy and development. They are recommendations to bring into the big picture nitty-gritty details of the varied lives and systems that make up and constitute the grand narrative at all levels, from the local to the national to the international. The use of indigenous languages is important, as Africans at the grassroots are

not silent about issues that concern and affect them. New analysis of changing civil societies and change necessitate a bottom up involvement of the people or citizens.

Africa attracts much intellectual interests, and sympathies for her past negative experiences. In addition, there also is encouragement to move forward on her own terms. Language is a topic of particular interest, and the production of knowledge in indigenous languages. More importantly, there is a concern about how such knowledges fit into the fight for modernity. Can there be classics within this genre as standards of African legacy that we can be proud of? The use of the term fighting for the place of indigenous knowledge within modernity is a clear indication that colonialism is not over and the work and task of decolonisation and liberation continue. With archives, ancient and indigenous manuscripts in various centers, the work of documenting and translation breathe new life into them, and they come to life again, revealing their epistemological significances.

We can use our own resources to continue the project of decolonisation. We can use our own resources to build the tools of our independence, projecting into the future what we want to be.

Méthod(e)s: African Review of Social Sciences Methodology



Méthod(e)s: African Review of Social Sciences Methodology is a bilingual, international multidisciplinary journal publishing articles on social sciences research methodology in English and French. The journal also welcomes during the first stage of its selection process paper proposals in Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese and Mandarin Chinese.

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