Discourse on Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Sustainable Socio-economic Development and the Challenge of the Academy in Africa

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The Problematic

A major intellectual fallacy of our time is the continued fatuous assertion that knowledge systems were introduced to the African continent through colonialism. The incontrovertible fact is that colonialism introduced western knowledge systems, as a particular form of knowledge, through imposition and systematic attempt to destroy indigenous knowledge systems (Lebakeng 2004). This was underpinned by a specific philosophical-cultural package: a package that denied the humanity – as encapsulated in the past, history and civilisation – of indigenous African peoples. Denying the humanity of other peoples by the colonisers has always been a way of justifying oppressing, exploiting and/or exterminating them.

With colonisation and the resulting epistemicide and linguacide, indigenous African epistemologies and languages, which were clearly an estimable treasure prior to colonisation, were not tapped into. Rather, they were marginalised and denigrated at the expense of those deriving from the Judeo-Hellenic heritage. As such, indigenous African knowledge as an instrument of development, and African languages as a means of transmission and instruction did not receive the needed attention in colonial Africa. This meant that indigenous African discourse was excluded from policy formulation in the social, economic, judicial, constitutional and educational areas.

From the point of view of western colonialists, indigenous African knowledge systems, as 'inferior' forms of knowing, were to be replaced by contrived or universalised knowledge systems derived from western scientific traditions. Essentially, these systems were suffocated because they were pejoratively and contemptuously considered to be part and parcel of a barbaric African culture by a dubious determination based on who had power rather than their intrinsic merit/demerit or ability/inability. Since colonisation, African cultures have been associated with primitivism and paganism and, as such, were incriminated as the root cause of socio-economic underdevelopment in Africa. In this regard, development on the continent was seen as a process of acquiring western-style systems, standards, expertise and problem-solving methods (World Bank 1998). Development was premised on a contrived status which posited western knowledge systems as universal. Flowing from western understanding and conceptualisation of indigenous African knowledges, country development policies would typically focus on the adoption of 'western' practices with a view to modernising the society and transforming the productive sectors. This position overlooked fundamentals about the nature of knowledge as identified by, among others, Okere, Njoku and Devisch 'that all knowledge is first of all local knowledge' (Okere, Njoku and Devisch 2005).

Previously, knowledge production on the continent became characterised by Eurocentric ethnographic reference (Lebakeng, Phalane & Nase 2006), and African intellectuality was decoupled from its sociality and polity. Inevitably, conspicuously missing in this calculus was the role of indigenous African knowledge systems which was assumed to be negative. This omission was not accidental but fundamentally consistent with colonial discourse on conquest. The implications here are quite clear for the doubting Thomases and sceptics that: Africa's contemporary problems of underdevelopment are not a product of flaws in the continent's indigenous African knowledge systems. After all, these were neither antithetical to technological enthusiasm to innovate and invent nor scientific curiosity to discover.

Notwithstanding the bleak picture painted on the relationship between western science and indigenous African knowledge, some of the indigenous African science and technology innovations have survived the deliberate onslaught by hegemonic western scientific influences. Such survival is a function of the resistance and choices made by Africans to protect their natural environment and knowledge heritage. Nonetheless, like the biblical Pharaoh, western science has been hardening its heart by refusing to recognise the status of indigenous African knowledge epistemologically, ontologically and cognitively.

It is germane to point out at this juncture that there is generally recognition of the role and impact of Islam on the African continent (Olaniyan 1982) and the fact that, like its western colonial counter-part, it wrecked havoc on the continent. In North Africa, Nubians and other indigenous African ethnic groups were physically and culturally annihilated through Arabisation and Islamisation. In fact, historically, the Arab-led slave trade of Africans predated the Atlantic Slave Trade of the West by about a millennium. The common denominator between them was that they both challenged the humanity of Africans through domination, pillage and misrepresentation. Although its impact on the social fabric and history of Africa is very significant, it has generally been underestimated and underplayed by many scholars. Among the reasons for this could be included inclusive Pan-Africanist sentimentalism. In this sense, the hybridised vulgarity Mazrui refers to as AFRABIA, implying a historical convergence of Africa with the Arab world should be properly understood as a result of conqueror-conquered relationships. It is because of such aspects of his writings that Mazrui is considered to be a 'vacuous' intellectual if not an intellectual salesman of Islamic values.

It is against this background that contemporary African philosophical rationalisations and political representations should be understood. Not as essentially a negation, but a profound affirmation, of indigenous African knowledge systems through reversal of both epistemicide and linguacide. Hence the need for a project that speaks to and engages African authenticity: one that is not just combative but more importantly liberatory. Admittedly, and with all its im-posed obstacles, the post-colonial era provides a poignant strategic opportunity to reverse epistemicide and linguacide, and duly reclaim indigenous African knowledge systems.

Despite the current global knowledge landscape resulting from epistemicide and characterised by hegemonic discourses necessitating a significant thrust and major reconfiguration and reconstruction, Mbembe (2001; 2002) clearly rejects/resists the Africanisation and nativisation project as an antidote. Mbembe fails to historicise, theorise, conceptualise and contextualise nativism, and the broader objective of Africanisation, within its objective socio-economic and political realities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2007). As documented and acknowledged, the African response to Western representations of Africa has been through the articulation of notions such as negritude, Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance.

The Relevance of Indigenous Knowledge in Sustainable Socio-economic Development

Historically, it is exactly two decades since the concept of sustainable development was launched into the political arena. Since then, it has become the watchword for international aid and development agencies, the key jargon of development planners, recurring theme of conferences and the slogan of developmental and environmental activists (Le'le' 1991). The concept developed in the face of seething problems besieging the African continent and other regions of the developing world. Although there are various definitions of the concept, it is most commonly and widely used to mean 'meeting the needs of the present {generation} without compromising the ability of future {generations} to meet their own {needs}' (WCED 1987). The operative word is 'sustainability', which implies continued existence, in the long-term, of a situation or condition. Comparatively speaking, sustainable socio-economic development is a fundamental departure from the concept of development that was narrowly defined to mean economic growth engendered by a rapid and sustained expansion of production, productivity and income per head.

However, despite being the development paradigm of the 1990s, the concept of sustainable development has been subjected to telling strictures for what is perceived to be its contradictions and implications. According to Le'le', for ac-tivists the concept is said to (i) overlook the suffering and poor around the world who suffer from environmental degradation, (ii) fail to question the ideology of economic growth and, (iii) be an ideology imposed by the wealthy industrialised countries to introduce stricter conditions and rules on aid to developing countries (Le'le' 1991). In other words, the concept is characterised by an 'incomplete perception of the problems of poverty and environmental degradation, and confusion about the role of economic growth'.

Since the early 1990s, a number of conferences and workshops around the world have helped to raise the awareness of the importance of indigenous knowledge in sustainable development. There has also been progress in moving indigenous knowledge from the realm of folklore into the development domain (World Bank 1998). There is currently an acknowledgement of the limitations which both epistemicide and linguacide have imposed on development in Africa. In fact, scanning the literature points to the fact that the theme of utilising existing knowledge to create appropriate solutions runs through development literature (Puffer 1995). It may not be accidental that the growing interest in the potential contribution of indigenous knowledge to sustainable development is becoming manifest at the time when current development models have proven unsuccessful. Millions of marginalised African people all over the continent are still excluded from the mainstream of development initiatives, processes and end-goals.

It would appear that what is complicating the relationship between indigenous knowledge and sustainable development is that the literature on indigenous knowledge does not provide a single definition of the concept. The problem of lack of a single definition derives from using indigenous and traditional and local interchangeably or synonymously. Indigenous knowledge is, generally speaking, the knowledge used by indigenous inhabitants of a land to make a living in a particular environment (Warren 1991). Local knowledge refers to the knowledge possessed by any group living off the land in a particular area for over a period of time but not necessarily indigenous to the land. Contrary to some prejudiced assertions about its backward and static nature, indigenous knowledge is creative, experimental and constantly incorporates in selective manner outside influences

and inside innovations to meet new conditions. Indigenous knowledge is dynamic and results from a continuous process of experimentation, innovation and adaptation. In this way, it recognises the need, on one hand, for cultural continuity and, on the other hand, for reform and change. Indigenous knowledge is cultural knowledge in its broadest sense, including all of the social, political, economic, technical, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of an indigenous community's way of life. It is precisely this dynamic nature that has not allowed indigenous knowledge to fossilise into historical oblivion.

Indigenous knowledge, in all its ethnographic sense and particularism, is important for several reasons. First, it can help communities find the best solution to a development problem by being an appropriate appraisal for development paradigms being implemented in the continent. Second, it represents the successful ways in which people have dealt with their environment (Puffer 1995). Third, it is closely related to survival and subsistence and provides a basis for local-level decision making in various fields of activities. Fourth, it plays a major role in truly participatory approaches to sustainable development. Fifth, harnessing indigenous knowledge provides firm development underpinnings. Sixth, it is critical to conflict resolution regarding disputes arising from competing claims to land by returning refugees and internally displaced persons. Seventh, building on indigenous knowledge systems contributes to local empowerment and development, increases self-sufficiency and strengthens self-determination (Thrupp 1989). Eighth, it provides a powerful basis from which alternative ways of managing resources can be developed. Ninth, tapping into the intellectual resources associated with indigenous knowledge is not only cost effective but also relevant and indispensable for environmentally and ecologically sensitive activity. Tenth, indigenous knowledge provides the basis for problem-solving strategies for indigenous/local communities, especially the poor (World Bank 1998). Eleventh, indigenous knowledge represents an important component of global knowledge on development issues and helps to leverage other forms of knowledge so that poverty and other ills can be addressed jointly with the poor. These are some of the reasons why it is important to build on the indigenous, as argued in a collection edited by Masoga and Musyoki in 2004.

According to the 1998/1999 Development Report, knowledge, not capital, is the key to sustainable social and economic development. The challenge for the development community is to find better ways to learn about indigenous institutions and practices and where necessary adapt modern techniques (i.e., global best practices) to the local practices. Only then will global knowledge be rendered relevant to the local community needs (World Bank 1999). According to Burford, Ngila and Rafiki, the greatest threat to the economic stability, and one might add, to sustainable socio-economic development, of the African continent is the gradual erosion of indigenous knowledge and the accompanying destruction of natural wealth – plants, animals, insects, soils, clean air and water – and human cultural wealth, such as songs, proverbs, folklore and social co-operation. This robs people of their ability to respond to social and environmental change, both by removing the resource base, and by attacking the foundations of human identity (Burford, Ngila & Rafiki 2003). We thus posit that the goal of sustainable development in Africa calls for re-acknowledgement of the power and contemporary relevance of indigenous knowledge and its systematic integration into development policy formulation and education systems.

As an ideal towards which African people should strive, this imposes a number of challenges with serious implications. Among these challenges could be mentioned the need to reclaim indigenous knowledge systems of Africa. This is important because indigenous knowledge is increasingly being seen as central to sustainable socio-economic development and rational resource use. There appears to be a growing awareness in developing countries all over the world that, after years of Western science hegemony and continued and persistent 'underdevelopment', the reality is that indigenous knowledge is, indeed, the 'missing link' in sustainable socio-economic development. Such reorientation is in stark contrast to the traditional views that saw knowledge as a major obstacle to development.

Additionally, such an understanding of development would require that received wisdom about the meaning of progress, in particular the identification of 'development' with western industrialisation be critically revisited and debunked. As Mafeje advised, we need to abandon American

instrumentalism and positivist notions about development (Mafeje 2001).

Notwithstanding the rosy picture painted regarding the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems, it is critical to note that indigenous knowledge is not to be romanticised or nostalgically embraced as a panacea. Although Africa has a relatively rich body of indigenous knowledge and related technologies which are embodied in the continent's cultural and ecological diversities, not all indigenous practises are beneficial to the sustainable development of a local community. Not all indigenous knowledge can *a priori* provide the right solution for a given problem. Typical, and somewhat controversial, examples are slash, burn agriculture and female circumcision.

An approach that is romanticised could lead to a lack of historical perspective and failure to appreciate that there are aspects of indigenous knowledge that need to be dispensed with. What this means is that although indigenous knowledge systems are desirable, feasible and necessary, it is important that they are subjected to serious epistemological appraisal. After all, the objective is not to replace universalism with particularism but to locate the particular as a central component of the universal. Due to the interdependency of various cultures, the concept of indigenous (which is not specific to any cultural context) is becoming flexible and its fluidity allows little room for autonomous, internally coherent and self-contained cultural wholes, particularly in the post-colonial world. Hence, indigenisation discourse in *sensu stricto* is difficult to sustain. Given this state of affairs, Africans cannot and should not call for essentialising discourses and approaches. An exaggerated cult of cultural, original, national or religious identity can easily degenerate into essentialism, and in turn, create a jaundiced and exclusionary culture of 'we' and 'them'. Nonetheless, the failure of 'modern' approaches to development has called for a fresh and urgent search for more appropriate and effective ways. Herein lies the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems.

A critical challenge is to leverage indigenous and global systems effectively to resolve development problems (Payle & Lebakeng 2005). At this point we do not wish to indulge in the debate as to whether indigenous knowledge should be integrated into the mainstream or whether

it is a science which is separate from what is considered to be mainstream but still equal. Elsewhere, we articulate the position that the latter is the case (Lebakeng & Payle 2003). However, despite methodological approaches, that does not preclude intersection between the two as the core of both is the desire to negotiate and navigate nature for the benefit of humanity. This is so despite the legendary impact of scientific advancement on mankind.

Challenges Facing the African Academy

Historically, colonisation with the 'right to conquest' as the principal feature of the relations between conquerors and conquered, manifested itself concretely in the sphere of education as epistemicide and linguacide. Among the central questions which immediately come to mind are the following: (i) to what extent have African universities succeeded in their knowledge production, in producing relevant indigenous African knowledge? and (ii) what are the epistemological paradigms under-girding university curricula? Given the experience and reality of the university in Africa since western colonisation and its victimisation, such as in the case of Sankore during the Moroccan invasion in the 1590s and the decision to deport several of the university's scholars, there is a deep disconnect between higher education institutions and various fields of social practice. These universities are characterised by theoretical extroversion as a result of being steeped in western intellectual traditions and epistemology (Houtoundji 1997), and colonial languages are the mode of communication and articulation of issues. This has given rise to a telling distinction that since colonisation and the post-colonial period, there are hundreds of universities sited in Africa but no African universities.

Such universities generally ignore not only the ancient history of the continent and its important contribution to world civilisation, but also indigenous African systems of knowledge in philosophy, religion and government (Qunta 2007). Clearly, the colonial knowledge production and orientation dominate and characterise the development of universities in Africa. Pedagogy in African universities is still fraught with misrepresentations and distortions regarding African history and civilisation. From an early age, students learn the major western scientific interventions, and rightly so, but seldom do they learn about indigenous African inventions and innovations developed by institutions and communities within their respective countries. And when local contributions are indeed taught, these are referred to with terminology which may generate contempt rather than respect for indigenous African people and their innovative genius. This perpetuates and feeds the idea of a hierarchy of knowledge, with science at the top of such hierarchy, rather than an understanding that there are various pyramids of knowledge, each with its own logic (Ramose 1998). Yet, as Okere so poignantly points out, science remains only one of the many forms of knowledge and the west only one of its producers (Okere 2005).

Since independence, the role of African education has been inextricably interwoven with the quest for national development and modernisation. The relationship between education and national development in Africa continues to be a question of critical concern in many countries. Hence, following independence, African governments invested heavily in educational expansion and diversification. The inherited colonial systems were expanded and modified to serve new economic and social needs identified by African governments. However, this did not help to improve the lives of the majority African people. For the most part, educational policy decisions and implementation remained highly centralised and reflected the will of ruling elites. Results have not matched expectations and educational systems have, in most cases, caused new problems for nation-building. The reform of inherited educational systems that largely functioned to maintain the colonial order of dependency and elitism has been an essential part of this task (Woolman 2001). Their main objective has been to recouple and reconnect African intellectuality with its sociality and polity.

Despite this state of the academy in respect to the nature and production of knowledge, numerous African scholars, academics and intellectuals have noted and challenged the unpalatable derailment of the development of indigenous knowledge, neglect of traditional practises and marginalisation of local institutions in Africa. These scholars, academics and intellectuals have demonstrated that western received wisdom is not sacrosanct and needs to be reviewed by seeking indigenous truths and knowledge. They emphasised the need for the African academy to move from savaging to salvaging indigenous African knowledge. Among those who have been involved in ensuring that a strong indigenous Africanist recollective tradition affirms itself continentally could be counted Claude Ake, Paulin Houtondji, Es'Kia Mphahlele, Archie Mafeje, Wamba dia Wamba, Dan Nabudere, Mogobe Ramose, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Sophie Oluwole, Jacob Ade Ajayi, Okere Theophilus, Wole Soyinka, Kwesi Prah, Kwame Gyekye, Victo Ocaya, Odera Oruka, Theophile Obenga and Kwasi Wideru. The list is illustrative but hardly exhaustive.

Given the variations in their intellectual projects and their intuitive sense of discretion in both their conceptualisations and representations, these scholars could not be said to have represented a singularity of epistemology or methodology. Their common denominator is that they were all not serviceable to western epistemological paradigms. This, in contrast to the younger generation of academics and intellectuals, is thus often perceived as muted and distant to the struggle to reverse epistemicide and linguacide.

Whether one refers to it as opportunism or careerism, the fact is that it is an existential reality: knowledge production is now being driven by the imperative of globalisation whose core values come down to profit-making. It is noteworthy that despite the accomplishments of some of this older generation, African universities lack a conducive environment to retain high-class scholars. The replacement of individuals with appropriate academic leadership by technicists and managers in the form of directors, deans and vice-chancellors has not helped the situation. Accordingly, Mazrui identifies a need for young Africans to struggle to conquer African self-contempt which arose as a psychological by-product of Eurocentrism (Mazrui 1978).

Moreover, currently the indigenisation of academic and intellectual discourse is conducted under the conditions of socio-economic and political crisis across the continent. Education, especially higher education, became the main target for structural adjustment policies. The effects and impact of structural adjustment are seen in the fact that education is now geared towards the market. There is a strong role played by corporate or commercial interests in driving research. With regard to students, the tendency is to be

extrinsically motivated by utilitarian or bread-and-butter issues such as to pass examinations with the anticipation of securing a job or promotion. Added to this, the global economic order has continued to under-develop, impoverish and indebt the African continent. Universities have been among the first casualties for budget cuts, especially in the social sciences, arts and humanities.

As a result of the combination of the above factors, the condition of mimetic and de-contextualised character of knowledge remains unchanged in post-colonial Africa. This necessitates a new research agenda within the African academy and an emergence of a conscientious intellectual cadre to carry it through. That agenda must speak to the mainstream, and protect indigenous knowledge and its main means of transmission, the African languages as a critical link to sustainable development in Africa. Resolving theoretical and conceptual issues about the identity of indigenous African knowledge systems is in fact one of the many challenges confronting African philosophers, historians, sociologists, educationists and anthropologists.

From the above issues of epistemology, it is important that we now turn to those of language. Our point of departure is that colonial education was responsible for the promotion of European languages to the detriment of African languages and the resulting linguistic configuration that legitimised and produced the unequal division of power and resources between speakers of the former and those of the latter (Mwandemere 2007). As such, the issue of African languages in education is part of the continuing reflection on the reform of African education systems. Cultivation of oral and written fluency in African languages is important in building self-esteem, preserving culture and advancing the literary output and identity of African peoples. Busia (1964) argues that schools could only preserve and transmit African culture by maintaining African languages. The importance of African language development is further underscored by the historical reality that early nation-building in Europe was closely linked to the cultivation of vernacular languages and literature. These experiences led the contributors to *Between Distinction and Extinction: Harmonisation and Standardisation of African Languages* edited by Kwesi Prah to argue that without respect for what

Prah calls 'the door into peoples' culture, without the use of indigenous languages, development cannot be realised.

However, twenty, nineteen, nine and seven of the fifty-three member states are classified as Francophone, Anglophone, Arabophone and Lusophone respectively. This state of affairs means that, four decades after political independence, the status of African languages leaves much to be desired. Several obstacles are said to hamper the use of African languages in education. The following are commonly used arguments: (i) that African languages have limited capacity to express technical concepts; (ii) that African languages do not have a vocabulary that is developed enough to be languages of scholarship and instruction at higher levels in the educational system; (iii) lack of reference books and reading and educational materials; (iv) negative attitudes towards African languages, which continue to be widespread because the languages of the former colonial countries have remained the languages of power; (v) that the diversity and multiplicity of African languages have created a sort of dangerous African Tower of Babel. Many of these so-called obstacles have been exposed as a farce. For instance, the myth of the African Tower of Babel has been challenged and a theory posited that most of what are regarded as autonomous languages are really dialects which can be put into wider clusters enjoying a significant degree of mutual intelligibility (Prah 1998).

Clearly, these clusters can only be harmonised and grow through use, and not mere aspiration. Unfortunately, market discourse and practice in higher education have resulted in many instances of the closure of departments of languages because they are not considered to be cost-effective and useful in an instrumentalist sense. Obviously, such closures and cut-backs for funding for fields such as the arts and humanities threaten exactly those fields that are central to the goal of restoring the African heritage in the form of African epistemologies and African languages.

Concluding Remarks

We should take our point of departure from the preamble of the World Declaration on Education for All (WCEFA 1990) that: 'traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right, and a capacity to both define and promote development'.

Isn't it the time that Africans took seriously the reminder from an African wit in the person of the late distinguished South African social scientist Professor Archie Mafeje regarding the guiding principle in Socratic thought: Know thyself? Only when Africans know their own history, contributions to world civilisation can they appreciate indigenous African knowledge systems.

Clearly, Africanisation holds that different foundations exist for the construction of pyramids of knowledge. It thus disclaims the view that any pyramid of knowledge is by its very nature superior to all the others (Ramose 1998). Therefore, inscribing the African experience in the construction of knowledge and the design of education in Africa is recognising the necessity for the authentic liberation of Africa in the post-colonial period (Ramose 2002). This would require that Europe, including its (post)colonial discourse should be decentred from the learning experience, research and knowledge generation (Teffo 2002).

Indigenising the academy is not going to be an easy task since the academy is implicated in the colonisation of indigenous people (Ka'ai 2005). Moreover, given the intellectual power relations, the task is going to be long and pregnant with intellectual resistance and casualties.

Already there are those who claim to sympathise with the broad concerns of indigenisation but doubt the existence of protagonists in the post-colonial era. According to their argument, the debate of 'indigenity' only made sense in the context of colonial domination or rule. What is being overlooked in such arguments is that, clearly, the university in Africa as an extension of the epistemological paradigm of the conqueror remains fundamentally unchanged in decolonised Africa. That this theme continues to preoccupy the minds of many African scholars and intellectuals is more than an indication that the basic issues have to date not been satisfactorily resolved or even adequately addressed. This in itself speaks to the ethical and political necessity to assert the right to be an African university through the reversal of both epistemicide and linguacide.

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