Epistemicide and Its Legacy in Education

It is important to unashamedly declare from the outset that I am in sympathy with, and therefore an advocate of the core concerns of the proponents of Africanisation of universities in South Africa. In this regard, the recurrent theme of my academic and popular articles has been the issue of Africanisation of universities in light of colonial epistemicide and valuecide fostered by Eurocentric paradigms on one hand, and the imperative for indigenous knowledge to inform and underpin social policy and development trajectories in South Africa on the other. Given the longevity and quantity characterizing white colonial-settlerism in South Africa, epistemicide was comprehensive and extended to all spheres of life, including religion, politics, law, economics and education.

Historically, European colonisation was justified on the basis of vacuous claims that when Europeans first came to the southern African part of continent, they found a territory that was empty, unknown and un-owned. By virtue of its status as such, such a territory invited the attention of those who wanted to know and own it. Ownership, here, entailed both claiming possession of and imposing one’s knowledge systems on such a territory. This defining mantra of colonial historiography had serious implications for South Africa, as it had for the entire African continent. For instance, it necessitated claiming and, thereby filling of the country with European moral philosophy, social values, cultural traditions and economic fundamentals. But this also meant that in their self-serving wars of conquest, which did not meet the requirements of both the right to wage war and the ethico-legal imperatives in the conduct of war, the invading colonialists destroyed indigenous African social institutions and customs.

With regard to the South African academia, epistemicide inaugurated intellectual parochialism and resulted in intellectual extroversion in which raw data was exported, theories were uncritically imported and categories on local conditions were superimposed. Academia became an imposition and extension of the epistemological paradigm of the colonial conqueror. The thrust of Western education was to deny the colonised indigenous people of South Africa useful and relevant social knowledge about themselves and their world and, in turn, transmit a culture that embodied, and was designed to consolidate dependency and generally undermine their creative capacities.

In many ways, colonial epistemicide has been an indispensable trigger for re-affirmation by indigenous African people. Although historically preceding the period, in South Africa the call for indigenous knowledge heightened with the advent of post-apartheid education and the need for an educational philosophy that would reflect a renewal and redirection towards the rest of Africa, African cultures, identities and values. Since then the debates on indigenization of knowledge in South Africa have been so emotive and polemical. Not only its content and purpose but also its very possibility have been, and continue to be, the subject of understandably passionate exchanges.

Teboho J. Lebakeng
South Africa Mission to the UN
New York, USA
to be an African university’ presupposes
that someone is denying this ‘right’ and
therefore this argument only made sense
in the context of colonial-apartheid, but
not in a post-colonial environment. It
would be naïve to assume that the South
African academia, which has so stub-
bornly resisted transformation, has re-
versed epistemicide. In fact, the South
African academia as seen in its institu-
tional rigidity and cultural conservatism,
remain insulated and has not benefited
significantly from intellectual expositions
and philosophical projections coming out
of the continent. This is despite the few
‘top’ African scholars recruited to teach
at a number of universities in the country.

Importance of Historical Memory

The importance of appropriate historical
memory and historical imagination and
practice (as an antidote to the colonial
historical project) has been the preoc-
puation of a number of post-independence
African historians, especially the Dar es
Salaam School of History, the Ibadan
School of History and the Diopian
Africanity. Despite variations in their in-
tellectual enterprises, the central charac-
teristic of these historians has been their
refusal to be carried away by and to en-
dorse the dominant knowledge systems
of the colonial conquerors. Rather, they
engaged in vigilant, combative and un-
compromising deconstruction of histori-
cal distortions which were conscripted
into the service of the colonial project.
But this engagement has to be under-
stood dialectically since in deconstructing
the Eurocentric colonial project, they also
reconstructed Africanity. They challenged
and debunked well-encrusted negative
notions and systematically eroded a
number of misconceptions and philo-
sophical crotchets about the African con-
tinent; its “lack of civilisation, history and
moral values”.

Therefore, the younger generation of Af-
rican scholars can only condemn such
intellectual icons at their own peril ‘for
spending too much of their intellectual
careers’ demythologizing European colo-
nial historiography on Africa and demon-
strating the existence of indigenous Afri-
can knowledge systems and history prior
to colonisation. Clearly, it is not only comb-
bative but a liberatory act to expose the
tendentious nature of European colonial
historiography.

My direct contention is that without ap-
propriate historical memory and histori-
cal imagination, the academia in South
Africa will continue to depose rather than
pose vexing questions relating to higher
education and its relevance in the new
political and socio-economic dispensa-
tion. For instance, in the immediate post-
1994 South Africa, the result of overlook-
ing the historical perspective in the edu-
cational sphere has been the false and
misleading but commonly held stratifica-
tion of higher education, especially its
university subset, as either merely black/
disadvantaged or white/advantaged.

Such descriptors emanated from an incor-
rect historical understanding regarding the
development, nature and role of uni-
versities in colonial-apartheid South Af-
rica. After all, descriptors, like metaphors,
are conjured up to give an organizing pat-
tern to matters. In theory, they are sup-
posed to help explain what is going on,
but in practice are often meant to shape
responses to policy. Essentially, descriptors
carry an acknowledged political freight
and perform a political purpose.

Given that South African historiography
is still fundamentally colonial, a wrong
diagnosis and a wrong prognosis were
inevitable. An appropriate historical analy-
sis indicates that the real problem of uni-
versities in South Africa has been that of
the right to be an African university. This
right was denied through a process of
degrading and marginalizing indigenous
African knowledge systems. In the post-
apartheid era, such a process takes place
through resistance to transform universi-
ties to meet the critical requirements of
the transforming society.

The Myth of Standards and the
Search for Alternatives

In the light of the above, we propose a
reversal of epistemicide through an in-
scription of indigenous African
epistemologies in education. The resist-
ance of underpinning universities with Afri-
can philosophy, on grounds that this
threatens standards, is to perpetuate cog-
nitive and epistemological injustice. Our
observation is that the intellectual think-
ning behind the standards argument is the
fear that most white intellectuals and aca-
demics will experience erosion of their
power base. The actual motive for want-
ing to protect the current standards is
essentially to spawn a ‘law of inertia of
privilege’ that guarantees that there is no
reversal of epistemicide and reclamation
of African epistemologies. The reversal
of epistemicide will inevitably undermine
existing dominant interests and challenge
the citadel of European paradigms and
scientific epistemologies of knowledge.
For instance, an African wit reminded us
recently that “Apartheid created a self-
satisfied culture among white South Afri-
cans. Because they could put down blacks
through force of law, white South Africa
did not imagine that they would not make
the grades internationally. And so they
continued talking about standards but
especially from a very low base”. Little
wonder that there are various attempts at
circumscribing and pre-empting the en-
try into the dominant discourse of indig-
enuous African epistemologies.

From the perspective of the sociology of
indigenous knowledge, the assumptions
which constructed European thought, lit-
erature and traditions are not universal
but are derived from specific and discreet
European experiences prescribed by the
level of economic and industrial develop-
ment. Implicit in this perspective is that
standards are not universal but context-
ual. A cademic standards are tentative,
constructed, historical and contextual
and, therefore, certainly not universal,
permanent, objective, neutral or invariant.
Clearly, the notion of standards must be
subjected to a careful, specific and his-
torically sensitive analysis. Some schol-
ars have advised that rather than main-
taining and applying given academic and
educational standards, we need to con-
tinually create and redefine them.

The right to be an African university,
which implies Africisation, is essen-
tially part of continually creating and re-
defining educational standards within
appropriate context of relevance. In other
words, the focus on relevance and use-
fulness is not antagonistic to high stand-
ards. Rather, the imperative for inscribing
indigenous African epistemologies into
the curriculum and underpinning educa-
tion with African philosophy is, in the first
instance, a question of rights, and thus a
matter of natural and historical justice.
These are key issues the South African
academia should not only acknowledge
but, more importantly, begin to address.

It is in appreciation of the need for such
natural and historical justice that Profes-
sor Mafeje was always measured in his
writings and was never comfortable with
ideas lacking in substance. Until he
passed away, he remained particularly re-
spectful of his sizeable and highly con-
scious African scholarly and intellectual
constituency. Hence, his extraordinary mind is reflected not so much in the volume but in the quality of his intellectual contributions. His ability to marry scholarly pursuits with a life-time pan-Africanist political commitment made him a liberatory thinker who never compromised on his intellectual responsibilities in pursuit of knowledge, in particular the indigenization of African discourse. As seen through many intellectual confrontations and conversations with his continental and international opponents and detractors, including his memorable brawls with Professor Ali Mazrui and later Professor Sally Moore, self-preservation was not Professor Mafeje’s hallmark.

Professor Mafeje’s personal contributions and legacies to knowledge and scholarship – from the deconstruction of Eurocentricism to the (re)construction of indigenous knowledge – have blazed a new trail for younger and future African social scientists. Indeed, it is incumbent upon them to stand on the shoulders of this intellectual giant in order for them to see further. More importantly, the challenge for universities in South Africa is to begin to introduce learners to his works. Anything less is a travesty of and a dishonour to scholarship in the context of the knowledge struggles raging on in the South African academy.