The Imperative of Africanising Universities in South Africa

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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.

The idea of indigenization and the issues raised in the raging national debate, such as endogeneity, context-sensitivity and relevance, directly speaks to the right to be an African university. However, there are many who are still intrigued by the idea of the ' right to be an African university' . The argument is made that ' the right

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 stubbornly resisted transformation, has reversed epistemicide. In fact, the South African academia as seen in its institutional 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 preoccupation 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 intellectual enterprises, the central characteristic of these historians has been their refusal to be carried away by and to endorse the dominant knowledge systems of the colonial conquerors. Rather, they engaged in vigilant, combative and uncompromising deconstruction of historical distortions which were conscripted into the service of the colonial project. But this engagement has to be understood 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 philosophical crotchets about the African continent; its " lack of civilisation, history and moral values" .

Therefore, the younger generation of African scholars can only condemn such intellectual icons at their own peril ' for spending too much of their intellectual careers' demythologizing European colonial historiography on Africa and demonstrating the existence of indigenous African knowledge systems and history prior to colonisation. Clearly, it is not only combative but a liberatory act to expose the tendentious nature of European colonial historiography.

My direct contention is that without appropriate historical memory and historical 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 dispensation. For instance, in the immediate post-1994 South Africa, the result of overlooking the historical perspective in the educational sphere has been the false and misleading but commonly held stratification of higher education, especially its university subset, as either merely black/disadvantaged or white/advantaged.

Such descriptors emanated from an incorrect historical understanding regarding the development, nature and role of universities in colonial-apartheid South Africa. After all, descriptors, like metaphors, are conjured up to give an organizing pattern to matters. In theory, they are supposed 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 analysis indicates that the real problem of universities 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 universities 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 inscription of indigenous African epistemologies in education. The resistance of underpinning universities with African philosophy, on grounds that this threatens standards, is to perpetuate cognitive and epistemological injustice. Our observation is that the intellectual thinking behind the standards argument is the fear that most white intellectuals and academics will experience erosion of their power base. The actual motive for wanting 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 Africans. 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 essentially from a very low base' . Little wonder that there are various attempts at circumscribing and pre-empting the entry into the dominant discourse of indigenous African epistemologies.

From the perspective of the sociology of indigenous knowledge, the assumptions which constructed European thought, literature and traditions are not universal but are derived from specific and discreet European experiences prescribed by the level of economic and industrial development. Implicit in this perspective is that standards are not universal but contextual. Academic 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 historically sensitive analysis. Some scholars have advised that rather than maintaining and applying given academic and educational standards, we need to continually create and redefine them.

The right to be an African university, which implies Africanisation, is essentially part of continually creating and redefining educational standards within appropriate context of relevance. In other words, the focus on relevance and usefulness is not antithetical to high standards. Rather, the imperative for inscribing indigenous African epistemologies into the curriculum and underpinning education 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 Professor Mafeje was always measured in his writings and was never comfortable with ideas lacking in substance. Until he passed away, he remained particularly respectful of his sizeable and highly conscious 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.

* Lebakeng, T.J. (2007). Archibald Boyce Mafeje: a tribute to excellent scholarship. Tribute. February. pp. 30-32.