



Sociology of Knowledge in the Era of Academic Dependency in Africa: Issues and Prospects

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Abstract

In recent years, sociology of knowledge – especially in terms of knowledge production, circulation and consumption – has been dominated by the global North, leaving the Third World, Africa included, in a dependent position. Many scholars have described this continued academic dependence as part of overall colonial and postcolonial relations between the centre and periphery, where the former is seen as the thinker, actor and speaker for the latter. There have been various critical agitations for the indigenisation of (social science) knowledge in order to liberate the Third World from the academic dependence that has been in force since the period of African colonisation. This critical review article summarises major contributions and different dimensions of the academic dependency paradigm within the social sciences. The relevance of social science on the continent of Africa, the nature and origin of academic dependence, as well as key areas that require adequate attention for the emancipation of social science knowledge in Africa are discussed. A reinvention of African scholarship is vitally important for epistemic freedom from intellectual dependence. African countries should not give up their exclusive local practices and norms, and must document and preserve them for the present and future generations. They must generate ideas, terminologies and research technologies that are amenable to African social realities.

Résumé

Ces dernières années, la sociologie du savoir – notamment la production, la circulation et la consommation du savoir – a été dominée par le Nord global, laissant le Tiers-Monde, y compris l'Afrique, dans une position de dépendance. De nombreux chercheurs ont décrit cette dépendance académique continue

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comme faisant partie des relations coloniales et postcoloniales globales entre le centre et la périphérie, où le premier est considéré comme le penseur, l'acteur et le second, comme le locuteur le premier est considéré comme le penseur, l'acteur et le second, comme le locuteur. Diverses initiatives critiques pour l'indigénisation du savoir (en sciences sociales) tentent de libérer le Tiers-Monde de la dépendance académique qui en place depuis la colonisation africaine. Cet article critique passe en revue les contributions majeures et les différentes dimensions du paradigme de la dépendance académique dans les sciences sociales. Sont discutés la pertinence des sciences sociales sur le continent africain, la nature et l'origine de la dépendance académique, ainsi que les domaines importants qui nécessitent une attention particulière dans l'émancipation des connaissances en sciences sociales en Afrique. Une réinvention de l'érudition africaine est d'une importance vitale pour la libération épistémique de la dépendance intellectuelle. Les pays africains ne devraient pas abandonner leurs pratiques et normes locales exclusives, et doivent documenter et les préserver pour les générations présentes et futures. Ils doivent générer des idées, des terminologies et des technologies de recherche adaptées aux réalités sociales africaines.

Introduction

In recent times, the call for a sociology of knowledge (the study of the influences of prevailing ideas on societies as well as the connection between human thoughts and the cultural context where the thoughts emanate from) that can address both transnational social phenomena and international scholarly exchanges has been a key focus of scholars within the multi-paradigmatic discipline of social sciences. The call was a reaction to the unequal relationship between Western centres of social science and the global South, in addition to the wholesale application of Western methods of studying and learning social sciences to African settings without due adaptation.

There is yet to be a consensus on the possibility of the emergence of a truly internationalised social sciences disciplines. A number of scholars in the global South think that the field of sociology is full of colonial and universalistic premises; and subject to the legacy of Euro-American parochialism. The pervading assumption of mainstream sociology is that the types of knowledge produced in the West are superior and therefore worthy of emulation. The problems of imbalance in knowledge production, circulation and consumption between the West and the rest of the world are part of the academic dependency paradigm in the social sciences. This is often referred to as captive mind syndrome. This term indicates the application of Western methods of studying the social sciences to Third World settings 'without the appropriate adaptation of imported ideas and techniques' (Alatas 2006:30;

Gamage 2016; Onwuzuruigbo 2018). This kind of uncritical imitation of Western social science is described by Syed Alatas as a sign of continuing intellectual domination. It 'pervades all levels of scientific enterprise including problem-setting, analysis, abstraction, generalisation, conceptualisation, description, explanation, and interpretation' (Alatas 2006).

Academic dependence, as a theoretical tradition, has its roots in dependency theory and the cultural imperialism debate of the 1960s but it has continued to resonate in the works of scholars in the global South such as Akiwowo (1983), Alatas (2003), Cardoso and Faletto (1979), Dos Santos (2019), Frank (1967) and Omobowale and Akanle (2017), among others. These scholars have interrogated the question of the internationalisation of knowledge and the place of the global South's intellectual communities in the equation and have called for the incorporation of indigenous knowledge. Alatas, drawing from Dos Santos's (1970) definition of economic dependency, referred to academic dependency as:

A condition in which the knowledge of certain scholarly communities is conditioned by the development and growth of knowledge of other scholarly communities to which the former is subjected. The relations of independence between two or more scientific communities, and between these and global transactions in knowledge, assumes the form of dependency when some scientific communities (those located in knowledge powers) can expand according to certain criteria of development and progress, while other scientific communities (such as those in the developing societies) can only do this as a reflection of that expansion, which generally has negative effects on their development according to the same criteria (Alatas 2003).

In Nigeria in the 1980s, Akiwowo mooted the indigenisation of sociological knowledge and social science knowledge in general through his postulation of a theory of sociation. However, this effort has yielded few dividends as inequality continues in the way sociology is practiced in the country in terms of teaching, research, publication, and knowledge construction in general.

The 'unpopularity' of Akiwowo's idea could also be attributed to the intellectual dependency of the periphery on the centre. Social scientists in general and sociologists in particular in the global South have a seemingly strong belief that knowledge from the world centre – where there is a concentration of technically trained personnel in the universities, corporations and state – is more 'authentic'. This reflects in practices such as academic travel, patronage and sponsorship, publication and the formation of research networks where the centre calls the tune. Consequently, the outcomes of such relationships in the form of ideas, knowledge, terminology and research technologies get exported from the metropole to the periphery.

In this article, I examine this theme in more detail in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, based on a review of relevant literature. This article examines academic dependency and its manifestations and gives an insight into how academic dependency can be overcome in the global South without discounting the benefits of academic globalisation. Sections explain social sciences in Africa; describe the nature and origin of academic dependency; identify contemporary issues requiring immediate attention and which are capable of showcasing the relevance of social sciences in Africa if well addressed; discuss the universalism and indigenisation debate; and finally, recognise key areas that need attention and correction for the emancipation of social sciences and the realisation of epistemic freedom in Africa.

Social Sciences in Africa

Generally, the focus of social science is on the behaviour of human beings in relation to their physical and social environment. Variations in social science across the globe are inevitable because human beings live in different environments and environment influences human behaviours. But the understanding of people in society can result in notable changes in a society. The study of society has enabled the adaptation of people in world societies.

The 'formal' study of human behaviour in Africa began when Europeans, led by the Portuguese, came to Africa in search of knowledge (and later raw materials for their growing industries). The coming of the Europeans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was not without prior understanding of the indigenous people they encountered. Their understanding of African societies, in particular, was achieved through the works of ethnographers and explorers. However, social sciences as an interdisciplinary area of inquiry did not grow in African countries until few years before their independence. And many of the disciplines making up the social sciences were imposed, serving the interest of their European masters. After independence, many African countries, if not all, probably failed to align their curriculums with the uniqueness of African cultures.

The present hegemonic position of Western social science was not achieved in a day, but is the outcome of continuous subjugation of Africa and other disadvantaged continents of the world. This began right from the time Europeans set out to explore other continents of the world through 'voyages of exploration'. With this domination and marginalisation, the limited roles played by social sciences across the continent of Africa have been unevenly distributed. For example, South Africa is now the outstanding research leader in the region, and she has, by far, the highest research output of any country in Africa, well ahead of Nigeria in the West, Egypt in the North, and Kenya in the East (Andrews & Okpanachi 2012; Mouton 2010).

Nature and Origin of Academic Dependency

Academic dependency is the result of the uneven structure that undergirds the generation, production, circulation and consumption of knowledge within the global system. In this unequal relationship, the 'big powers' in terms of economic and social resources are also regarded as the core or 'big powers' in the social sciences (Arowosegbe 2008; Mkandawire 1997). The social sciences, which were created and championed by Western scholarship, are sources of academic and cultural dependency.

In a bid to understand the nature of knowledge production and consumption processes, one major paradigm has emerged in both academic and popular discourse in recent years. Scholars of the dependency paradigm have identified the United States of America (USA), Great Britain and France as the dominant knowledge countries (Omobowale et al. 2014). African social scientists have decried the existence of dependency, both in the structure and practice of social science disciplines in general and in sociology in particular. They have at different times joined voices with scholars from other countries in the global South to condemn the dominant Eurocentric mode of knowledge production and to call for the 'indigenisation' of social sciences instead. According to these scholars, any attempt to define academic dependency will result in discussion of a related idea – intellectual or academic imperialism (Alatas 2003; Fouad 2018). Academic imperialism was linked to economic and political imperialism, which refers to a policy and practice of domination through military conquest and subjugation of colonial subjects by more advanced nations since the sixteenth century. As long as the control and management of the colonised required the cultivation and application of various disciplines such as history, linguistics, geography, economics, sociology and anthropology in the colonies, academe too can be referred to as imperialistic (Alatas 2003).

An understanding of dependence is hinged on the origin of the social sciences. Generally, the expansion of social sciences in developing societies is influenced by and is a reflection of its development in the United States and to a lesser extent in Great Britain, France, Germany and Japan (Andrews & Okpanachi 2012; Gamage 2016). According to Onwuzuruigbo (2018), the bastion of orthodox social science, the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment, were entirely a European project and experience. This, to him, is a critical factor explaining why the existing corpus of social science knowledge has continued to arrogate power to Euro-American societies and cultures, which are expected to be emulated by all, both in structures and processes. Adopting the same historical analysis, Alatas (2003) indicates that academic imperialism began in the colonial period with the setting up and direct control of schools,

universities and publishing houses by the colonial powers in the colonies. He states that the political and economic structures of imperialism generated a parallel structure in the way of thinking of the subjugated people. Third World academic dependency means the dependency of ideas; technologies; theories and concepts; academic journals, aid; and investment in education on the Europeans and Americans. These dimensions of dependency have hindered the growth of scientific enterprise in the Third World.

Omobowale et al. (2014), writing on the 'dependence on western academic journals' as a dimension of academic dependence, stated that the structure of exchange between the West and the rest of the world ensures that the scholarly regulatory indices (e.g. impact factor and journal indexing) are dominated by the metropolis. The majority of the journals with impact factors and that are indexed in high-ranking databases are Western, while most of the journals in the peripheral countries are somewhat 'derecognised', making them 'sub-standard' and of 'low quality' in the Western-dominated global academic system. Having a number of publications in 'international journals' is one of the conditions put in place by universities' appointment and promotion committees in Africa. The desire for promotion makes some scholars choose to avoid the critical review processes of high-impact journals and to patronise instead fee-charging and low-quality 'offshore' journals (Omobowale et al. 2014).

Similar to this is the psychological dimension to dependency, where the dependent scholar is more a passive recipient of research agenda, methods and ideas from the social science powers. This is due to a sense of intellectual inferiority compared to the West. There is, therefore, a centre-periphery continuum in the social sciences that corresponds roughly to the North-South divide (Andrews & Okpanachi 2012; Fouad 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). Because of the perceived superiority of works produced at the centre, knowledge from the centre commands more attention and acknowledgement than works produced elsewhere. The centre is therefore seen as a place from where influence radiates, from the nineteenth century through to the twenty-first century (Muller 2016; Schopf 2020). Today, emphasis has remained mostly on knowledge produced about countries of the global South rather than being considered as sites of knowledge production and theoretical debate.

According to Beigel (2011), academic dependency is nourished in the social studies of science, critical epistemology and ontological stance, as well as in comparative studies of higher education. It encompasses the unequal structure of knowledge production and circulation that has emerged historically along with the international scientific system. This structure comprises symbolic, material and institutional processes, mutually related, and

which have produced different paths of academia building. In the periphery, these combinations are the historical result of national and regional responses to internationalisation – particularly given the diverse roles played by the state in scientific development and higher education.

Contemporary Themes and Issues in African Sociology of Knowledge

Contemporary societies of the world have indeed achieved great things, especially in the field of science. Comparing twenty-first century achievements in the field of science with those in early modern society, one will find it easy to conclude that a ‘better’ society has emerged. For instance, the creation of a global world with the help of the Internet and other innovative technologies; the establishment of formidable academic discipline; and the emergence of international organisations, among others, are some of the achievements recorded.

However, further comparison of (social) problems of the present dispensation with earlier centuries will reveal the rise of new problems which are arguably beyond the control of ‘science’. In other words, the coming of the ‘new’ science is not without corresponding problems that are social in nature. Good examples of these are internet fraud; the faster spread of (incurable) diseases; human trafficking and migration problems, all emanating from modern transportation; dependency on a world scale allowing the centre to feed on the periphery, making the latter dependent on trade with the former; coups d’état as an outcome of modern political structures; illiteracy and poverty being the outcome of Westernisation (or what is called modernisation); among many other social problems. Given these problems and their particular manifestations on the continent of Africa, the relevance of social sciences in Africa (an African sociology of knowledge) cannot be overemphasised. African social problems require African social science. It should be remembered that modern European social sciences emerged from the responses to many socio-political and socio-economic problems prevailing at the time, such as the Industrial revolutions. It is therefore vitally important to recognise that a formidable and relevant African sociology of knowledge is required for academic and social emancipation.

Universalism and Indigenisation Debates

Universalism and indigenisation debates arose in response to one of the most important epistemological questions in the social sciences and especially sociology, which is whether Western social or sociological theories and concepts are truly universal. The founding fathers of sociology prided

themselves in a discipline that would pursue universal theories and methods just as in the natural sciences. From this once dominant but now beleaguered standard, sociology has at least developed, if not 'matured', more in some societies than in others. This makes for different flavours of knowledge in diverse societies. According to Smelser (1998), this development may result in Western European Sociology, North American Sociology, Third World Sociology, Socialist Sociology, or a sociology associated with a specific country or nation such as France, China, Yoruba, or Zulu. Smelser considered the indigenisation of sociology unhelpful as it might engender a 'sociology of nothing', losing its initial focus. But these different levels of the development of sociology in different societies have generated difficulties in universalising scientific knowledge, leading to the indigenisation thesis.

The general consensus among the indigenisation school is that Western social science knowledge is laden with Western interests and values, limiting its universal applicability. Oommen (1992) stated that the internationalisation or universalisation of social science or sociology is more or less like the ongoing process of modernisation, and one rooted in the discipline's colonial origin. Far from accepting a single dominant methodological perspective, Oommen argues that indigenous knowledge has been, and continues to be, an important impetus for creating intellectual freedom in the social sciences.

While we cannot jettison the importance of colonialism in the establishment of sociology in Third World countries and its continued influence on the practice of the discipline, a call for the indigenisation of sociology must recognise and address the huge global inequalities in the production and consumption of sociological knowledge (Oyekola & Oyeyipo 2020). Writing on the study of sociology in Nigeria, Onwuzuruigbo (2018) stated that its history is in part the history of colonialism and the globalisation of Eurocentric social science as well as the history of decolonisation politics and the establishment of university education in Nigeria. This is true because most early departments of sociology were manned by expatriates or Western-trained Africans, who relied largely on Eurocentric curriculums. Hence, he argued for the indigenisation of sociological knowledge.

Need for Indigenisation of Social Science in Africa

A call for epistemic freedom or the indigenisation of social science in Africa continues to grow as social problems become increasingly multifaceted. Social science remains the hope for the emancipation of Africa. Many problems evident on the soil of Africa are peculiar to the continent and social in nature and require social remedies; there are levels of social relevance to be applied in solving African problems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a; Onwuzuruigbo 2018).

In other words, social sciences remain a viable tool for social reconstruction and development. There is a need for African social scientists to approach the discipline with the view to making it an instrument of social emancipation and development instead of extending its oppressive and colonial expansionist terrain. The following areas need consideration for the liberation of African social sciences from its oppressive and suppressive state.

Teaching: New Curriculums

Until African educational curriculums are designed primarily to understand and to meet the needs of African people, African emancipation is questionable. Educationally, much was accomplished by the Euro-Americans to change Africans' ways of thinking and to undermine Africans' dignity and pride. For instance, African students were taught that Africa had no past and that it was rescued from its dark state through the arrival of the European colonisers. Fuglestead (1992) quotes Hugh Trevor-Roper as saying, in the early 1960s, that Africa had no history until the arrival of the white people. African history was only the history of white people on the continent. Africans grew up to glorify the West and to look down upon African culture and consequently became inculcated with a permanent inferiority complex (Andrews & Okpanachi 2012; MacKenzie 2011). This notion needs to change by evaluating, upgrading, revamping and reinventing long-standing educational curriculums that not only praise the North but also downgrade Africa. This requires loyal intellectuals to design curriculums that suit the unique needs of Africans.

It can be said that the Third World nations of the past are the lucrative business empires of the First World. The story is true even today. Colonisation in its new avatar is persistent and it is never-ending. The developed world with its thirst for economic booty is all set to invade the developing and less-developed in newer forms by expanding its corporate academic schools. To avoid this, the education system in place for each Third World country should take into consideration the culture of its people. Culture should be seen as a resource because it is the base from which people form identities. If our students are still appreciating what is from the West above what constitutes their own, we will continue to be seen as lacking direction.

Serious steps toward improving the quality of education are vital. This can only be achieved if the didactic and one-sided teaching which is common at all levels in the Third World is discontinued (Andrews & Okpanachi 2012; Hountondji 1997; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018b). First, teachers need to be better trained, and monitored so that they do what they have been trained to do. Second, the provision of more and better learning materials in local

languages is required. Third, there is a need for the provision of libraries with supplementary learning material so that school pupils and college students can read around a subject, and learn to think for themselves. Libraries with a range of material that will encourage reading for pleasure and self-learning are essential elements in innovation. The starting point is getting all these materials written and published. Several interactive and innovative teaching methods have come into force. Yet the developing world is obsessed with monotonous, rigorous mugging-up methods that purely and painfully try to test the knowledge and memory levels, forgetting the reasoning, analytic, problem solving and interactive skills. This results in lack of leadership qualities, creativity, imagination and common sense among students. They are learning purely for the marks, grades and getting ready for the job market – but have meagre socialising skills. To get rid of this traditional system, we need to have a proper blend of theoretical and industrial course curriculums. There is a need to introduce both practical and theoretical aspects in assessing students.

Professional Mentorship

Some African scholars have made their mark both at the continental and inter-continental levels. Some notable ones are emerging with the hope of becoming internationally relevant. However, their relevance will live forever if they are able to transform their professional aspirations to becoming mentors to younger African scholars. African scholars are fond of being trained on the soil of Africa and delivering their services off the shores of the continent, not to serve their people but to serve the interests of their foreign employers. This ‘brain drain’ means Africa has lost many resources (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018b; Oyekola 2018). Instead, these highly known and upcoming scholars should think beyond the present by sacrificing what they can now for the sake of what later generations will become.

Research Relevance

It is important to differentiate between ‘practical’ and ‘theoretical’ social sciences. By practical, we mean social science that is capable of influencing policies, able to direct policies towards the right course and suitable in meeting the needs of people. On the other hand, theoretical social sciences are achieved through the publication of scholarly works, sometimes without minding whether they are relevant to the needs of the people or not. What is needed now is practical social science – the one that will enable scholars to come to terms with the challenges facing them and enable policy-makers to recognise the kinds of support needed and to redesign research co-

operation programmes where necessary. This will require the governments of African countries to collaborate with relevant bodies such as university authorities to make funds available for research that centres on discovering and understanding our own society and people from our own perspective and with our own interpretation of reality. In Nigeria, it has been observed that there have been no known federal government efforts since independence to commission indigenous scholars in the humanities to carry out an in-depth study of the culture and peoples of Nigeria in all its ramifications with the aim of using such information as a benchmark for nation-building (Sule 2008). This experience is not much different from other countries' experiences. There is a need for proactive and protracted efforts to tackle this. One way to address this is to approach it at the structural level where the solution lies in the awareness, will, and resolve of politicians, bureaucrats, and administrators. The structures of academic dependency cannot be dismantled. To decolonise knowledge and academia as a whole, south-south cooperation is a promising way of establishing a non-dependent academia. Rather than depending on the West, countries in the global South should intensify collaborative efforts in areas of research and development, idea building, publication outlets and increased investment in education.

Scholarly Publications

The area of scholarly publication also needs to be developed. Compared to the world standard, Africa's contribution to the world's publications is insignificant (Andrews & Okpanachi 2012; Mouton 2010). Mouton has documented Africa's share of world science as measured in papers published in ISI-indexes. The paper revealed that Africa's share has been declining steadily over the past decades. In his analysis, Tijssen (2007), shows how sub-Saharan Africa fell behind in its share of world science production from 1 per cent in 1987 to 0.7 per cent in 1996. And the little that is produced is not evenly distributed across the continent, with South Africa taking the lead (Mouton 2010). One of the possible reasons is that in Africa, until academics have been able to publish articles in the so-called Euro-American (or international) journals, they are less likely to be considered for promotion or higher positions. This has caused African journals, produced by the academics' own institutions, to be looked down upon. While there is not total disagreement with this method of promotion, it encourages foreign intellectual domination. A new orientation is required especially by encouraging African publishing houses. It is important to note that there are several worthwhile publishers that can be patronised on the continent thereby discouraging academic dependence and promoting African-centred scholarship (Andrews & Okpanachi 2012).

Summary and Conclusion

An attempt has been made to explain the relevance of social science on the continent of Africa, the nature and origin of academic dependence, contemporary themes and issues in African sociology of knowledge, the universalism and indigenisation debates, and the need for the indigenisation of social science in Africa especially in the areas of academic curriculums, professional mentorship, research relevance and scholarly publications.

This article argues that a rethink to reinvent African scholarship is important for epistemic freedom from academic dependence. This requires reformulating guidelines on the ontological and epistemological foundations of social science in Africa, training and encouraging mentors that will champion African scholarship on the continent and developing good management of research universities and institutions that will be most relevant to Africa and for Africans without mimicking the already established knowledge about the West. It also requires the introduction of a programme to indigenise the sociology of knowledge in Africa and untie it from the ideological imprisonment of Western theories. Lastly, it is necessary to learn African epistemological orientations in order to unlearn the dominating ideas of the West so as to relearn the sociology of knowledge that will be most relevant to and for Africans. This will allow the southern nations to explore and popularise their indigenous knowledge.

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