Towards Authentic African Higher Education based on African Epistemology

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Abstract

Aim. The purpose of this article is to challenge the notion that a largely Eurocentric education is the best one for African universities. It is not by any means suggested that Eurocentric notions should be discounted, but rather that African education should be devoid of any form of subordination and be allowed to assume its rightful equal place and space, in an interconnected global education arena alongside a range of epistemologies and ontologies.

Methods. A literature review was conducted on the topic and the researchers surveyed scholarly articles, books, and other sources relevant to the area of research. The review conducted to a lesser or greater extent enumerates, describes, summarizes, issues relating to the theme.

Results. Knowledge should be sought for its value to communities through individuals and it should perpetually produce sensible, empathetic, and responsible citizens. African education must inter alia reflect a multiplicity of perspectives and notions that are grounded on local knowledge.

Conclusion. The existing form of Eurocentric university education in Africa certainly has defects when viewed Afro-centrically**.**

Originality. Decades after the demise of colonialism [if it has in fact ended], African universities still embrace a Eurocentric epistemological paradigm and are for the most part consciously or unconsciously disparaging or ignoring Indigenous African knowledge systems. This is far from liberating, and it is argued in a novel way that what is required is a vigorous promotion of African scholarship which is infused with African values, philosophies and knowledge that can also be promoted to our erstwhile colonisers and others.

Introduction

Decades after the demise of colonialism it is now high time that African universities seriously promote the notion of becoming truly African. This means that African knowledge and its rich traditions and values should be passed on. In this quest, the article examined existing literature that tackles the notion of African epistemology. One should of course not lose sight of the fact that the term African epistemology is certainly not a continental universal notion because there are many cultures in Africa that have significant differences. It is thus somewhat of an over-simplification to speak of a pure African epistemology. This means that nature and scope of knowledge in Africa are diverse and one cannot simply assert that epistemology should be exactly the same across a range of cultural contexts with people emanating from diverse backgrounds. What is common of course, is that people from many backgrounds inhabit Africa and modernists argue that one cannot simply negate the existence of alien cultures dwelling amongst indigenous Africans. What is needed is for African epistemology to assimilate whatever is of value from Eurocentric and Western notions of epistemology so as to have the best of all worlds – the traditional and the inherited. There must thus not be a hegemony of European and Western epistemology, but what is best for Africa and its advancement (Khaphagawani & Malherbe, 2000).

An epistemology is required which reflects Africa and which allows students to express their feelings and beliefs on how knowledge is applied in the communities in which they live. In the context of education at any level, and especially at institutions of higher learning, it is essential to guide students in the academic aspects of their studies but equally important is the promotion of desired indigenous stances and behaviour for an ethical social existence. Sadly, the Global North is seemingly disinclined to share in the concentration and accumulation of wealth that was generated by colonised labour from the South after many centuries of exploitation and domination of the latter by the former – to make things worse, the current neo-liberal policies followed represent a persistence of the notion of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003). It is also evident from the Eurocentric approaches adopted by universities (Horsthemke, 2004) that indigenous knowledge and African ways of comprehending the issues in life have been side-lined to suit European and western objectives. A non-Africanized curriculum which is underpinned by Eurocentric epistemology will have a negative effect on student identity and solid African character development (Mazodze et al., 2021).

People generally perceive reality in diverse ways and have different worldviews. There are also numerous ways of learning and knowing. Acceptable knowledge in Africa requires a knowledge system which is gro-

unded on the cultural context and knowledge community in which students live. Eurocentric and Western knowledge cannot make any form of exclusive claims on truth issues, or indeed claim to be superior. In African communities, knowledge has always been grown in a social learning process with attention paid to the role of indigenous people in knowledge accretion. With the advent of colonial Eurocentric epistemologies, this has changed substantially. However, the African worldview is different from others "in so far as it is grounded in and grows out of African history and culture" (Atta-Asiedu, 2020).African universities for the most part mimic Eurocentric and western thinking and follow its epistemology. While there may well be some Africanised curricula, these are certainly blended with dominant Eurocentric notions resulting in feeble African curricula (Grosfoguel, 2011). Culture is of course a lived reality or ontology, while our epistemology, and all our espoused axiological values are the aspects that should be informing our education, not some Eurocentric-Western notions. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) alludes to the fact that epistemology is utilized to reinforce the uneven power relations that exist between the Global North and the Global South. He also stresses that the politics of knowledge production cannot be deliberated upon without considering the very negative impacts of colonialism on Africa.

Colonial education was generally used to alienate the colonized people from their indigenous knowledge. Its purpose was to serve the mainly economic development interests of the colonisers. Thus, colonization transformed the African education systems towards the promotion of colonial culture and identity. There was inter-alia degradation of natural resources, human rights violations, the imposition of capitalism, rapid urbanization, and changes in the social systems of living. Hountondji (2002) speaks to the notion of epistemic liberation by saying:

> To learn anew to be free intellectually and politically, that to me was the current requirement. This liberty presupposes the reassessment of the status that had been worked out, the paradigms that had been established, and the canons of thought that had been developed for us. Shutting ourselves up in our cultural past – a purely apologetic relation to our heritage would respond exactly to what is expected of us. In this regard, nothing will be more Euro-centred than a febrile nationalism that would be content to hold up the treasures of African culture to the face of the world by congealing them, mummifying them, freezing them in their muggy eternity. (p. 190)

Afrocentricity should embrace the notion that African ideals should be core in any investigation that entails African culture or behaviour (Asante, 1987).

African cultures should both directly and indirectly influence the production of knowledge, however curricula and teaching and learning models tend to embrace Eurocentric and Western colonial values, its culture and also the content of syllabi on offer (Auriacombe & Cloete, 2019).

Eurocentric Epistemology

It is the primary function of all institutions of high learning to seek truth and to generate a spirit of lifelong learning in students as they prepare to serve their communities. It follows therefore that African indigenous epistemology should be part and parcel of the education that students acquire and whatever is taught, should reflect prevalent cultural values and norms that have in the past been essentially marginalised. Education in Africa is however, for the most part grounded on an epistemology and ontology that is Eurocentric and Western. This is true of the South African education, and more so at university levels (Gwaravanda, 2019).

Consequently, other conceptions of knowledge in education are labelled as being inferior and relegated to the side-lines and ultimately suppressed. This means that the diversity of peoples is disregarded. Freire (1970) argues that dehumanization, marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but equally those who have stolen it. This reality is a misrepresentation of the vocation of becoming more fully human. There is no critical reflection and a total negation of what indigenous knowledge can add to society. This calls for an urgent decolonisation of epistemology in Africa and for a needed break from the highly invasive Western notions of knowledge and western cultural hegemony (Mazodze et al., 2021). Western epistemology disregards the lived experiences of Africans. Yet, Africa has always been an important source of rich information for knowledge production (Dei, 2011). A decolonized curriculum must place the African and South African experience at the core of all teaching, learning and research. It should also integrate African epistemic perspectives, knowledge and thinking and place them on par with the current "hegemonic Eurocentric canon" (Savo, 2018, p. 2).

For one, Western epistemology tends to be individualistically oriented while in African society, there is a strong communalistic worldview (Nicolaides, 2015). One's cultural and societal worldview is developed around knowledge, beliefs and values in life which drive one's understanding and how they perceive the world around them and their place therein (Wangoola, 2000). However, by only employing a Eurocentric epistemology an erroneous assumption is made that development can only be realised when people follow the same trajectory or linear path (Tucker, 1999). Such an analysis is flawed and is merely a "…fabricated Euro-Western cultural ideology which is entrenched in a reductionist Euro-Western interpretation of progress" (McDonnel, 2014, p.103). Onyewnenyi (1993) calls for Afrocentrism and asserts that:

> Afrocentrism, which means African centred-ness, does not violently confront any person or people, but is a resolute attempt to put the records right. It is about placing African people within their own historical framework. It is a demand that the contributions of Africans in all areas of civilization be reflected in world history (p.18).

In Africa, there is a range of values and practices through which people authentically discover their various roles in relational, communal, societal, environmental and mystical world experiences. All societies, including those in Africa, are crafted on a collection of values and norms through which people are anticipated to live. The African norms as espoused in the notion of Ubuntu, allow for the creation of principles, conventions, ethical and cultural values. These constitute a philosophy that is aimed at directing human beings to be ethical in all their dealings (Nicolaides, 2022). All people, including Africans have a right to be treated as

…exhibiting a superlative non-instrumental value. Alternatively, a human rights violation is a failure to honour people's special nature, often by treating them merely as a means to some ideology such as racial or religious purity or to some prudentially selfish end (Metz, 2011, p. 27).

The role of Ubuntu in African society is significant. It possesses an inherent altruistic value which is important in promoting accord in society. The interests of all role players are important and find expression in a distinct collective worldview *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which is compelling in fashioning a sense of community, benevolence and sharing. African centred epistemology should be grounded in the Ubuntu if it is to restore and promote the human dignity and worth of African communities. The adoption of the philosophy of Ubuntu, in especially Southern Africa, has shaped impartial and self-evaluating communities (Uwizeyimana, 2020). Ubuntu stands at odds with the narcissistic ethic of self- preservation and ego-centricism which pervades western nations (Nicolaides, 2022). Fanon (2004) correctly explained that Africa needs to reclaim its stolen heritage.

Secondly, Western epistemology arrogantly disparages Indigenous African knowledge and the general African worldview. Africans are considered to be backward and seen as impediments to any meaningful future continental development. Western epistemology is projected as highly objective and seen as upholding universal impersonal categorisations that are assumed to be applicable globally (Gwaravanda, 2019). Coloniality has had a pernicious influence in all of its expressions whether local, national or even global and its Eurocentric epistemology has generally been reproduced in anti-systemic actions and ideal thinking around the world, It is imperative to distinguish epistemic location from social location.

The fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations does not automatically mean that she/he is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location. Precisely, the success of the modern/colonial world-system consists in making subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of the colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 5).

During Africa's quest for liberation from colonial oppression, there were already plans afoot in some countries to decolonise both formal and informal education. An Africanised epistemology of education was part

and parcel of the development plans of states including Ghana and Nigeria (Frehiwot, 2015), but for the most part a Eurocentric agenda persists.

Wiredu (1980) states:

> Contemporary Africa is in the middle of the transition from a traditional to a modern society. This process of modernisation entails changes not only in the physical environment but also in the mental outlook of our peoples, manifested both in their explicit beliefs and in their customs and their ordinary daily habits and pursuits. Since the fundamental rationale behind any changes in a world outlook is principally a philosophical matter, it is plain that the philosophical evaluation of our traditional thought is of very consideration relevance to the process of modernisation on our continent. (p. x)

African Universities Today

There is an epistemological dominance when Eurocentric and Western epistemology is presented as being superior. African students may consequently feel they are lesser beings when compared to their western counterparts as they find themselves thrust into education which "…reproduce and redistribute Euro-Western knowledges and beliefs globally" (McDonnel, 2014, p. 3). Chilisa et al. (2016), define epistemology and ontology such that each country should ultimately bear the responsibility to promote their own knowledge based on their local and national social, cultural and political conditions. In 2015, South African students started a movement to decolonize higher education.

> The fact that the students are at the forefront of the campaign for decolonization and not the university leaders, academics, and administrators, tells a lot about the state of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa and the continued maintenance of the hegemonic status quo when it comes to the knowledge, teaching, learning and research at the country's universities (Savo, 2018, p. 1).

Colonialism used epistemology and education to debase colonised peoples. It simultaneously devalued their cultures and humanity in order to retain dominance (Césaire, 2000; Freire, 1985). There is a need to decolonize the curricula at African universities. As Shokane and Masoga (2018) argue, what is required is education in which indigenous knowledge is considered and local culture and contexts integrate culturally sensitive aspects. An Afro-sensed approach must prevail to challenge the hegemony of the western and Eurocentric epistemology. Fanon (2004) asserts that colonial education was utilised to misrepresent the past and ruin the future of the colonized. Education of the west with its inherent fundamentalism should not be replicated at universities. African epistemology and indigenous knowledge must be allowed to dominate (Poe, 2007). This is not a call for the total elimination of every aspect of Eurocentric epistemology. It is a call for a critique of Eurocentricism. It is also a call for consideration of plurality of perspectives. This is to suggest that African epistemology should

assume its rightful place in epistemological arenas. An integration of African and Western epistemology should account for a multi-dimensional and unified approach to the understanding of reality (Nwosimiri, 2019). Knowledge and one's interaction with the universe "has the same expression in all cultures either as moral, aesthetic, metaphysics, epistemology, science or logic" (Ozumba, 2015, p. 152).

Afrocentric Epistemology and the Way Forward

There can be no further delays in privileging African epistemologies and epistemologies of the South. This requires strong capacity building and conscious drives toward appropriate teaching and learning. The "absolute necessity" of the dominant paradigms and ideas must be brazenly challenged. This challenge should be based on meticulous research.

Molefi Kete Asante (1980) affirms that Africa needs its own rational norms and Afrocentrism and he thus contests Eurocentrism. This is mainly because an Afrocentric approach will uphold the status of Africa's rich history and its various illustrious civilizations, and it is of necessity opposed to the Eurocentric and Western domination and the current epistemological imperialism which prevails on the continent.

Unless it is urgently transformed, the higher education system will continue to structurally enslave the African child and deprive the World of key epistemological essence because of academics shirking their responsibilities. It is necessary to establish scholarship that speaks directly to the plethora of severe socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by the African majority on the continent (Seepe, 2017). We also need to be cognisant of the fact that African epistemology is not exclusive in orientation.

Nwosimiri (2019) reflects:

> …within African epistemology there is a knowledge-gap on the justification of belief and epistemic claims. The knowledge-gap here is that the advocates of African epistemology neglect some essential issues when it comes to epistemic justification. They want to neglect the idea that both the internal and external idea of justification is needed in order to arrive at a coherent and well-founded account of epistemic justification. This is because externalism complements internalism. Hence, both the internal and external notions of epistemic justification are crucial to the task of epistemic justification in African epistemology. (pp. 28-29)

Africans cannot allow the status quo to remain as is. To do so will be allowing the epistemicide of African indigenous knowledge. However, use of some concepts and ideas from Eurocentric and Western epistemology to enhance African concepts should be welcomed. Forms of knowledge in epistemology are generally universal and surpass cultures even though they may originate in specific cultural contexts and have diverse foundations (Gyekye, 2004).

There is ongoing epistemic injustice in African universities through the domination of Eurocentric and Western knowledge models (Ndofirepi & Gwaravanda, 2019). It is evident that a change is required in which there is a true sense of self-determination and social justice (Chilisa, 2012) and especially when considering research and how it is conducted. What has been done in academia under colonization needs to be deconstructed and the many falsities and distortions of Africa and her peoples need to be rectified towards a promotion of the truth (Chilisa, 2012). An Afro-sense needs to be instilled in our higher education landscape (Shokane & Masoga, 2018). This means that Africa and its authentic rich history and lived experiences need to be given their rightful place in an Africentric approach to education (Nyamweru, 2016).

Eurocentric and Western epistemology is certainly not superior to any other epistemologies. African students must still be able to operate effectively in the complicated and interlinked globalised arena. We need to educate our students on the many issues enveloping South Africa and Africa in general, and of course the world at large. The higher education system needs to rapidly promote the restoration of education that speaks to the lived experiences of black people and communities as well as their social realities. Promoting Eurocentric and Western epistemology in higher education will continue to promote structural imbalances and inequalities in broader society. But in promoting African epistemology, and in seeking to regain Africa's "…humanity [which is a way to create it], [we must not] become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both" (Freire, 1970, 44) and true "leaders and people are somehow reborn in new knowledge and new action" (Freire, 1970, p. 181).

The Preamble of the South African Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences (2011) illustrates the child entering the university gate of 2030,

… she is confident that she is not driftwood and that her clans come from a long way back. She will be bilingual, and her mother tongue and her English will be interchangeably strong – she can write and she can talk and, if need be, compose poems on periodic tables. She will be exposed to a deeper understanding of diversity, and to the experience that Others from both far and near are wonder-full in their own ways. She will come to meet quite a number of them; if she needs a semester to study the poetry of Aimé Césaire in the original because her Caribbean (n.p.high school teacher inspired her to do so, she might take a semester off to study in Dakar or Cairo or Paris. If she wants to strengthen her quantum physics, there will be Hyderabad, Beijing or Stanford. If she wants to take a breather from complicated equations about the stress modulus in variegated metals, she could do an elective on VhaVenda art or the Nando Song Cycles of the ironsmiths of the past. She will be an engineer, but the humanities and the social sciences will have played their parts in the making of a good and educated engineer. And she will look back and wonder about the dark times and the times of confusion that her parents speak about, and hopefully she will stop with a smile at the thought of that interregnum year of her birth. (n.p.)

Decolonising the Curriculum

For the South African university student of 2030 to "get there" would amongst others mean that she enters the university system already an African. She understands the way African metaphors are linked to sentiments of alienation, historiography that traces how polities and clans emerged after the decline of Great Zimbabwe and how people lived – who moved where, and how her clans, their own oral poetry and memory fit into the bigger picture. More specifically, serious Afropolitan and cosmopolitan spaces where, for example, the Gandhian metaphors of appreciating the wonders of others are concretised without losing integrity. Transoceanic African senses of the aesthetic and the sublime: to comprehend Aimé Césaire fully entails reading him in French, and to do so, an Africa-wide system of student mobility in which the African colonial divides of francophone, lusophone and anglophone disappeared. Furthermore, a new global geography and an ability to be unafraid of boundaries, and a system that allows for trans-cultural competence. Additionally, interconnectivity to the Nando Cycles: songs of the clans of ironmongers and smiths of the areas from the Soutpansberg to the Limpopo; secret songs of their craft and their apprenticeship passed on from generation to generation. In other words, decolonising the curriculum.

Decolonising the curriculum implies that all academics irrespective of their level on the organisational matrix, need to create spaces and make resources available for a meaningful discourse amongst all members of their institution on how to best envisage expression of all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum. The emphasis on what is taught should be grounded in African epistemology. This would help to ensure that what is taught relates meaningfully to students. The global content of such curricula would draw in and privilege an African perspective. In other words, the development of curricula would entail updating the current curricula to ensure that it embeds African epistemological vantage points. While some institutions have incorporated indigenous knowledge in their content, it remains largely on the periphery. What is called for is to reimagine the courses in such a way that indigenous knowledge occupies pride of place in the curricula. It is about ensuring that curricula serve as a catalyst for the creation an equitable and sustainable social order (Osman et al., 2017).

A postcolonial indigenous research model is needed and it ought to be informed by social ontologies, epistemologies and axiology (Chilisa, 2012). The process of decolonising education requires institutions to establish strong symbiotic links with communities. Such linkages are vital for contextualizing knowledge, and for obtaining a deep-rooted understanding of what occurs on the ground. Students need to be further encouraged to think "Africa-first", through community involvement and reconnected with their African roots.

Claude Ake (1979) argues that Western social sciences continue to play a part in Africa being viewed as underdeveloped and as inhabited by lesser beings so as to support further exploitation and subordination, and this must come to an end. We should bear in mind that Africa has indeed been the cradle of many scientific and philosophical achievements which the Western world has appropriated as their own. For example, he stresses that many great intellectual minds of 'the West' such as inter alia, St. Augustine, (a saint in the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Communion), Origen (A Christian scholar and theologian), Philo (the Alexandrian philosopher) and Plotinus (the founder of Neoplatonism) were in fact Africans.

African principles of truth, justice, harmony, and balance, better known as the principles of *Ma'at*, originated in the Old Kingdom of Egypt period (c. 2613 – 2181 BCE), and remain the ethical and moral foundation for African peoples. Accordingly, Africans are to reflect divine harmony by assuming a spirit of quietude, reasonable behaviour, cooperation, and a recognition of the eternal qualities of existence. Strict adherence to the principles of *Ma'at* allows for feelings of secureness with the world and with the divine plan for all creation. Reversely, one must suffer the consequences which one would have brought upon oneself.

The key components of curricula which comprise competences include knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. They are interrelated in the development of content. To this end African epistemology must be fundamental for skill development (Osman et al., 2017). Students should be encouraged to apply their knowledge. Theory must find practical expression in the curricula as part and parcel as a pedagogy (Schon, 1991). Importantly, students must inter alia, understand the key social, environmental and economic challenges and complexities faced by Africans at the local, national and regional level. Solutions applied to these issues must be African-centred. Students should thus be required to analyse facts, create ideas, state their opinions, compare and make inferences while evaluating arguments (Chance, 1986) as they solve societal problems from an Africanised stance while respecting diversity and reinforcing tolerance in society towards meaningful transformation. All learning should consequently be across any boundaries.

We need to stand up to the current realities in higher education provision and recognise that there are diverse populations inhabiting Africa that can and should learn from one another in an equal playing-field. Currently, Eurocentric and Western epistemologies are dominant by far (Chukwuokolo, 2009). Decolonising and transforming the curriculum requires careful consideration and well-planned actions. Education in Africa should reflect Africans as the main social group in Africa, while not negating the rights of others. The current monocultural Eurocentric Western view of the world in Higher Education has not served Africans well. The use of indigenous paradigms is important from a constructivist perspective, but this is not to suggest that Eurocentric and Western paradigms should be removed.

This is because the limits among paradigms may to a relatively large extent be porous. What is suggested is that Europe/the West, and Africa, should learn from one another. It is about time that Africans assume the responsibility ensuring that their views and voices assume the centre stage. In doing so, indigenous languages should be developed to become languages of science, mathematics, and technology. This will enable them to be used as languages of instruction in an in an academic context.

Conclusion

The dominance of Eurocentric and Western epistemology education in Africa is an outcome of colonialism. Africans have no choice but to challenge this dominance as part of the restoration project. The restoration project entails re-centering African epistemology and indigenous knowledge in education. The decolonisation of epistemology will empower African epistemology to flourish and be elevated to its rightful place in the sun.

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