

What students should know about the humanities¹

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Abstract

The purpose of the present writer is multiple. It is (a) to consider the core philosophy and politics underpinning the teaching of the humanities in the light of the "right to conquest"; (b) to sum up the key features of the struggle for epistemic decolonisation by the African intellectual icons; and (c) to identify the responsibility of a new generation of African scholars in giving meaning and relevance to such disciplines. Pursuant to these issues, the thesis advanced here is that due to the history of colonisation and the attendant epistemicide in Africa, there is an ethical and educational necessity to inscribe African epistemology and philosophy of education in the teaching and practice of the humanities. The implications for such inscription speak to the need to address epistemic injustice and cognitive dissonance suffered by African students in the learning of such disciplines. Methodologically, the paper does not look at a particular discipline but takes a broad generalisation about the humanities, based on desk-top resource material and reflexivity of the author's positionality.

Keywords: Epistemic injustice, epistemicide, African scholarship and humanities

Introduction

This paper will first look at the socio-historical context within which the disciplines of the humanities emerged and some of the key European figures who inaugurated epistemicide and its results. The second section focuses on the lessons emanating from the situation of the "right of conquest" and how the disciplines shaped on the African continent. In light of this, the third section locates the African intellectual icons in their struggle to claim sovereignty of African scholarship under determinate conditions of post-coloniality. This struggle was informed by Western conceptions of reason which considered only certain people, specifically Europeans, as rational, and thus dehumanised large segments of subaltern populations by excluding them from having the capacity to reason.

The humanities in socio-historical perspective and the ruins of epistemicide

From the onset, it is important to point out that the progenitors of the disciplines we call the humanities were central in the process of Western rebirth and imperial expansion to the colonies. As they emerged within the context of scientific invention and discoveries, these disciplines were developed and employed to diagnose and, where possible, to prognose the social complexities and complications of Western societies arising out of attempts to adjust to and take advantage of the impact of technological advancements. The disciplines played a critical role in articulating the effects of social disruption and maladjustments, while also exploring solutions and revealing

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opportunities (Lebakeng 2001). In keeping with the scientific mood of the time, the humanities jealously emulated the Newtonian, Cartesian model of science so as to gain credence and accreditation as scientific disciplines; hence, some including economics, sociology and anthropology, distinguished themselves from the arts and preferred the descriptor social sciences. They sought to use a “scientific” approach intending to approach the study of social life in an objective, rational, and systematic manner.

The irony though is that it was precisely because of this claim to scientific status that European scholars – David Hume, Emmanuel Kant and Georg Hegel – made chronically inaccurate representations of and pronouncements on other regions of the world, especially Africa and the inhabitants of the continent. At the core of their representations and pronouncements was the rationality debate, which questioned whether Africans were able to reason. According to scholars such as Masolo, (1994) and Jimoh (2018), the concept of reason differentiates between civilised and the uncivilised beings and those who are logical and the mystical ones. At the root of this problem are ontological assumptions concerning our parity as human beings disguised as epistemological issues about what counts as knowledge (Mungwini 2020). The logic was to invisibilise Africans by calling into question their humanity, to dispel African situated knowledges, discount the role of Africa and the Africans in world civilisational history and to deny Africa as a source of ideas but affirm it as a place for gathering raw data.

Flowing from such rubbishing and condemnation of things African was the idea that Western values, systems, structures should be superimposed on Africans and African ones should be erased, marginalised and destroyed depending on the nationalistic impulses and proclivities of the respective colonisers or imperialist powers. The ruins of the destruction of indigenous knowledge systems and processes have been covered extensively by many scholars (Ramose 1999; Ntuli 1999).

In the colonies such as countries in Africa, the disciplines assisted colonial administrators to understand, penetrate and control peoples of the colonies. Epistemologically and paradigmatically, they spawned an academic pandemic characterised by a captive and mimetic mind in the university in Africa. Although anthropology has received the worst strictures, all these disciplines were complicit in colonisation as bourgeois disciplines (Mafeje 1976). Even Christianity gave moral and ethical foundation to land dispossession and the enslavement (Prior 1997). As such, colonisation manifested itself through land dispossession (which in South Africa was given theological backing by the Dutch Reformed Church), epistemicide and proselytization (Lephakga 2015). It is noteworthy that with the development of Western institutions of higher learning in continents such as Africa, education was moulded along the colonising models in structure, in culture and in substance. Hence even in Africa, although the conceptions precluded the reality of pre-Western African science, the humanities had pretensions to scientific disciplinarity – as well articulated by Ake (1972; 1973).

The main reason for this is that in Africa the ethically questionable ‘right of conquest’ had devastating consequences in a range of spheres including the epistemological, philosophical, social, economic, political and jurisprudential. This is because the history of conquest resulted in the conquest of history through negation, erasure, destruction and the annihilation of modes of life of Africans and their social institutions. This history matters because the contact between western imperialism and Africa did not augur well for the Africans from an inter-culturality viewpoint (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016). Despite the differential impact of French, Belgium and British rule, colonialism left an indelibly negative mark on Africa. In this respect, the Enlightenment delivered light to Europe, but fixed and framed the African continent as a region of complete savagery and intellectual darkness which represented a negative ‘Other’. In a nutshell, it negated the humanity of Africans as historical, social, political and philosophical beings despite the fact that science, philosophy, rationality and thought are human activities over which the West does not have an exclusive monopoly.

Western conceptions of reason considered only certain people, specifically Europeans, as rational, and thus dehumanised large segments of subaltern populations via excluding them from having the capacity to reason. In his 'Critique of Black Reason' (2017), Mbembe thus argues that colonial discourse was based on an ontology of 'absolute alterity', that allowed Europeans to position themselves at the apex of civilisation, democracy, and reason and with colonised peoples viewed as inferior, lacking, absent, and non-human – an ideology that was used retrospectively to justify their violent colonial adventures.

Given the diversity among the colonial powers, they left a wide range of legacies, all negative. The causal significance of legacies varies, in that they affect subsequent freedom of manoeuvre, to different extents and in different directions. At its strongest, legacy takes the form of "path determination", implying that colonial choices determined post-colonial ones, or at least conditioned them, such that departure from the colonial pattern was, and perhaps remains, difficult and costly (Austin 2010).

Lessons I learnt about the humanities and what students should be taught

Although social thought and reflections about a wide range of interactions are a distinguishing feature of all human beings, my encounter with the humanities in their disciplinary form took place when I registered for my undergraduate degree at the American University in Cairo in February 1984. My studies continued when I pursued my post-graduate degree in sociology at the University of Dar es Salaam in late 1988. Further studies familiarised me with the disciplines. After two neophytes aborted my lecturing stay at the then Vista University in Soweto (now University of Johannesburg), I joined the department of sociology at the University of the North (now University of Limpopo) for seven and a half years. In 2004, after submitting my doctoral thesis entitled *Prospects and problems of transforming universities in South Africa, with special reference to the right to be an African university*, I bade farewell to academia.

Given these experiences, I consider myself a student of the humanities and can point out that (1) it is accepted as a common cause that in terms of socio-historical and philosophical context, the humanities as disciplines were midwived by the 'Enlightenment' and extended to the colonies through colonial imposition; (2) the effects of such superimposition included the exclusion of African epistemology and philosophy; and (3) thus to retain their undeserved dominance and elevated status will perpetuate both epistemic injustice and cognitive dissonance in the universities in Africa. Towards a quest for decolonisation of the humanities as an instance of democratisation, students of the humanities should be taught that:

The history of the development of the humanities disciplines in the West was characterised by lack of cognisance of multivariate contexts. As such, the idea held by Western "iconic scholars" that Africa has no history and the view in Western philosophy that there is no such a thing as African philosophy are both a function of the inability of Western knowledge to engage and grapple with diversity and difference.

Central to diversity and difference is the appreciation that "all knowledge is local" (Okere, Njoku and Devisch 2005) and universal knowledge can only exist in contradiction (Mafeje 2000). This is because production and generation of knowledge is highly ethnocentric, tribal and nativistic as it derives from particular environments and its standards are not permanent.

Standards for higher education are historical, temporary, contextual and tentative (Jansen 1995; Lebakeng 2008) and the appeal to the maintenance of dubious "universal standards" is an impractical one as standards should rather be refined, recreated and improved. Standards are not universal, permanent, objective, neutral or invariant. As such, the notion of standards should be subjected to careful, specific and historically sensitive analysis.

Flowing from this, it is clear that Western knowledge is not universal and, therefore, cannot be (1) universalisable and (2) cannot possess the authority to authenticate or invalidate other knowledge forms despite some aspects of it, as with all knowledges, being transferrable.

Pedagogically, it is a myopic conception that inevitably led to the endorsement of a single authoritative rationality and authoritative epistemology, further, to claims of knowledge that are supposedly true beyond time and space and unconditioned by particularity.

The starting point of the tradition of the politics of knowledge in political studies (Neave 2006) and in the sociology of knowledge is that knowledge is situated and contextually bound. By this we should understand knowledge to derive value from its utility and not mere availability, thus dispensing with accusations of relativism. According to Apple (1993), knowledge selection, that is, who produces knowledge, what knowledge is produced and what knowledge is "left out" are central questions of inquiry within the politics of knowledge.

Thus, despite Western knowledge having pretensions of being nomothetic (using generalisation rather than specific properties in the same context) and privileging itself as the fiduciary custodian of all knowledge, it is increasingly becoming clear that knowledge is in essence highly idiographic, that is, it describes the study of a group, seen as an entity, with specific properties that set it apart from other groups.

The Western nomothetic approach reached the African shores as scientism (the promotion of science as the best or only objective means by which society should determine normative and epistemological values). Methodologically, this can result in the exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation.

The imposition of Western science, and therefore, of the "northbound gaze" manifested in what a sociology wit refers to as epistemicide – the destruction of knowledges of other peoples – has the material consequence of depriving the world of other intellectual and philosophical resources as it leads to homogenisation rather than nurturing polycentrism. It fails to "let a thousand flowers bloom".

This problem of not letting a thousand flowers bloom was heightened in the denial of the existence of African philosophy. However, it is noteworthy that the definition of philosophy is not a matter of 'objective science' pure and simple. It is, on the contrary, a question of power relations as well (Ramose, 2004).

Science is as social and as subject to perversion as all other forms of knowledge in society. This being the case, there is no absolute way of separating science from the pervading ideologies of the day (Mafeje 1978).

While it is indisputable that European epistemology constitutes a pyramid of knowledge, it is equally true that indigenous African epistemology also independently and rightfully constitutes another and a different pyramid of knowledge (Ramose 1998). In this respect, the concept of knowledge democracy acknowledges this point and affirms the importance of multiple knowledge systems.

In terms of the relevance of this for African renaissance, it is noteworthy that economic models, such as scientific paradigms, predispose the actors towards certain patterns of behaviour and practices. Over time these become accepted as normal practices which everybody is expected to observe and follow. This is how theoretical orthodoxies are established (Mafeje 1998).

Western monological, non-reflexive and non-inclusive representations of Africa is a colonial experience that bequeathed a culture of epistemological silencing of African indigenous epistemology with its monochromatic logic of Western epistemology. It systematically devalued African indigenous knowledge systems by presenting African intellectual enterprises as illogical and sometimes primitive (Jimoh 2018).

A Western orientation and emphasis on the individual and de-emphasis of community and culture resulted in ideological dissonance and cognitive paralysis. Despite post-independence attempts to reverse this, vestiges of post-coloniality in contemporary education remain and perpetuate a myth of inferiority regarding indigenous knowledge and methods (Adebisi 2016).

Claiming sovereignty of African scholarship

Flowing from these lessons, we need to problematise the concept of 'university' since it appears to be anchored in a single ontology and informed by one epistemological version. There is a need to have universities in Africa as sites of multiple versions of how we know things. Towards this, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the way epistemicide works in current academic contexts (Bennett 2015) as it broadly continues to perpetuate Western organisational structures and institutional cultures under present determinate conditions. It is precisely this insightful understanding that has led Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2019) to argue that the continued domination of Eurocentric epistemology in universities in Africa, at the expense of African indigenous knowledge systems, is unjust.

Given that where there is clearly no justice in the educational sphere and with a good cause demonstrated for the need for epistemic justice, the ethical resistance to that condition requires a combative ontology. Little wonder that African scholarship has been purposefully aiming at correcting and reversing the lack of a cultivation of authenticity and specificity which, according to Mafeje (1985), is what enables an intellectual community to make a lasting contribution to knowledge and to put itself on the universal map as a growth centre.

In order to claim sovereignty over African scholarship, the starting point for the emerging generation of African scholars is to acknowledge that there is a range of scholars across the continent and in the diaspora, some departed and some still with us, who should be urgently crafted into the bio-politics of our knowledge. Our institutions of higher learning should ensure that students are much more strongly encouraged to interrogate these and other such works. Collectively, they have liberated knowledge from the positivistic and Cartesian model of scientific knowing, yet many institutions still cling to traditional pedagogical styles by teaching Western orthodoxies in the humanities. For them, in varied representations, indigenous African knowledge has been suggested as a replacement for colonial education. Among them we should include Claude Ake (Nigeria), Paul Hountondji (Benin), Dan Wadada Nabudere (Uganda), Archie Mafeje and Mogobe Ramose (South Africa) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Peter Onyongo (Kenya). On the strength of their arguments and personal experience, Wa Thiong'o suggests that 'a sound educational policy is one which enables students to study the culture and environment of their own society first, then in relation to the culture and environment of other societies' (Wa Thiong'o 1981).

The importance of these African works, among many others, lies in the teaching that, as Ramose (1991) points out, the foundation of decolonisation is the recognition and indeed the acceptance of the principle that the consequences of colonial conquest need to be radically reversed. At the core of this should be the quest to reverse the epistemology of alterity and the need to resuscitate, harness and inscribe an African epistemology in the higher education system in Africa. This inevitably requires that the emerging African scholars should be conscientised to stop being intellectually xenophilic, especially in relation to its Europhilic strain (Lebakeng 2018). Failure to do this is to inadvertently internalise epistemicide and to take ownership of colonial ruins.

The task ahead is not mere epistemic posture, it is not indulgence in what Vest (2009) refers to as perverse and unnecessary dialogues. Essentially, it is a task aimed at repurposing, redefining, reimagining and redetermining these institutions, not only to reflect, but to serve Africa and humanity through an African philosophy and epistemology of education. This is important since the transformation of educational discourses in Africa requires philosophical frameworks that respect diversity, acknowledges lived experience and challenges the hegemony of Western forms of universal knowledge (Higgs 2011) and is hence subversive of the prevailing orthodoxies.

In addition to our starting point, our propensity to maintain academic standards and to embrace dubious universal knowledge has to stop, as this has stalled the process of decolonising the post-colonial university in Africa. If we maintain standards, rather than recreate, refine and improve them, we will fail “to reject social conventions” and this will hinder the possibility of social invention (Reinharz 1979). After all, decolonising the disciplines means interrogating the methods and approaches in the production of knowledge, dismantling the Western canon and contextualising it, retrieving the African archives and revisiting and using African icons in the democratisation project. In other words, decolonising the disciplines is an imperative for epistemic virtue and a moral claim and not a mere quest for parity. To seek parity is a sign of adoration of Western knowledge broadly and science in particular.

Lastly, there is a need to address the paucity of authentic interlocutors by seriously and deliberately nurturing a core cadre of African scholars steeped in African sensibilities. After all, nobody can rely on the “northbound gaze” (Ramose, 2000) and think and act outside historically determined circumstances and still hope to be a social signifier of any kind (Mafeje 2000). A new generation of African scholars must be rooted in African challenges, potentialities and prospects in order to derive meaning and relevance. This has prompted Mungwini (2017) to advocate for the dictum: Know Thyself. I submit that Western scholars, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (pardon my bias for sociology) spoke distinctly to the European context of their time, as Michel Foucault did for his and that it is precisely this authenticity that guaranteed the efficacy and endurance of their discourses. They knew the nuances of their environment and anchored their representations and intellectual pronouncements in such.

Conclusion

The quest to decolonise knowledge and education in Africa places an imperative on the African scholars to become not only committed seekers of knowledge and truth but also activist intellectuals in the service of humanity (Mungwini 2020), hence the need for being engaged scholars. They can hardly avoid the connotation of “destruction” of existing structures, cultures, methodologies and theories. African humanities professionals should stop providing an alibi for the reduced funding of their disciplines. One way is to ensure that these disciplines are freed from the burden of epistemological captivity resulting from colonisation. As long as universities in Africa continue to rely on the epistemological paradigms of the West, they will continue to be impervious to the African realities and sensibilities. I submit that it is the flirtation of the humanities with Western science that has tempered their potency and all too often rendered them irrelevant and meaningless. In the humanities, we spent a great deal of time being seduced by vain debates as to whether these disciplines are a science or an art.

There are still glaring shortcomings in inscribing the African epistemology and indigenous knowledge systems in education in Africa. First, there is a lack of a critical mass of intellectual cadre, as universities in Africa lack resources. Second, there is still intellectual over-reliance as sources of inspiration on the Western “icons”. These gaps have serious implications for the way forward, but cannot be impediments. We can only take pride in the growing number of publications that point to appreciation of the need to make the humanities relevant and grounded on the African continent.

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