

# INVESTING IN FORMAL EDUCATION: CAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE STUDIES ENHANCE GRADUATES' RESPONSE TO DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF AFRICAN COMMUNITIES?

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## **Isandulelo**

I-Africa isaqhubeka ibonakala njengezwekazi elingafinyeleli intuthuko jikelele. Imizamo lezinqumo ezehlukile sezike zathathwa ziqondiswe kuntuthuko yezwekazi lase-Africa kodwa lelizwekazi lisaqhubeka bhekane lobunzima. Imfundo isikeyabonakala sengathi izasheshe ilethe intuthuko e-Africa kodwa namhla lokhu asikatholi ushintsho ebesilulindele. Imbuzo isiyabuzwa ngamaqhinga okulwa lobunzima kulelizwekazi kudingidwa ukuthi lamaqhinga engabe ekulungele ukuqondana nesimo njengoba sinjalo. Eminye yale mibuzo iqodiswe kwezemfundo. Imbuzo ecwaningisisayo ngemfundo kwele-Africa ifuna ulwazi ngokuthi izifundiswa ziyazizwisisa izidingo zalabo abafuna intuthuko na? Imbono yezikhwicamfundo ingabe ifana laleyo eyabantu abafuna intuthuko na? Lelipheshana lifumana ukuthi ulwazi lwalabo abangafundile ngokwesilungu kufuneka lugoqelwe kulemfundo yaphesheya ukuze izifundiswa zikwazi indlela yokucabanga kwalabo abadinga usizo. Lokhu kubalulekile ngoba kuzokwenza ukuthi kungabi khona ukudonselana phakathi kwezifundiswa lezi eziphethe usizo nalabo abadinga lolusizo ngoba kuzobe sekukhona ukubona izinto ngesolinye. Lelipheshana liphetha ngokuthi izifundiswa zingathola amadla ekulweni lobunzima kuzwekazi-laseAfrica ngenkathi bezwisisa imbono lemicabango yalabo abafuna usizo

## **Introduction**

Apart from the violence of 'Eurocentred' political and economic colonial oppression, the indigenous people of Africa suffered epistemological violence and colonial domination in knowledge production that left them with almost no original thinking traditions to which they can

go back. Despite the political, economic, social and epistemological violence that accompanied colonial imposition in Africa and the South in general, the possibility for kinds of thinking that reflect the diversity of historical processes outside the purview of Western epistemology such as those that have been turned into subaltern, still remain. Apart from *domination*, the colonial encounter became a dynamic process that was also characterized by *resistance*, *negotiation*, *mimicry*, *hybridity* and *alienation*. The conceptual tools of *domination*, *resistance*, *mimicry*, *hybridity* and *alienation* as advanced by the post-colonial theoreticians provide us with a holistic picture of the colonial intercourse in Africa. A complete picture of colonial encounter that goes beyond *domination* and *hegemony* theories clearly reveal to us that present post-colonial Africa is characterized by a number of geo-specific worldviews that were not altered by colonial domination. By and large, the concept of indigenous knowledge systems in the context of Africa represents a patch-work of 'geo-specific' and 'body-specific' forms of knowledge that fall outside Western philosophy of what constitute knowledge. These conceptual tools together with those of *domination*, *resistance*, *negotiation*, *mimicry* and *alienation* are tackled in the course of this article.

## **Indigenous Knowledge: Relevance and importance in formal education**

### **Education for Africans?**

#### *A different education for Africans?*

It has already been acknowledged beyond any dispute that formal education<sup>1</sup> is a key aspect of development in general and addresses the vital component of capacity as a factor in addressing challenges of development. However, the question that is yet to be addressed is what form of formal education do Africans need in order to serve the continent efficiently and effectively? By and large, Africa need a different form of formal education in terms of substance compared to that offered by the Western world. This does not entail that current educational programs need to be replaced by an entirely new system but raising an awareness to students of formal education that there are other worldviews shared by many outside their 'Euro-centered' orientations, can make graduates

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'formal education' is used here in reference to structured systems and processes of developing knowledge, skills and character through modern institutions such as schools, colleges and universities.

execute their services in a contextually relevant manner.

Of course, the concept of indigenous knowledge in Africa is a problematic one. There are different views of what constitutes indigenous knowledge at different times and locations throughout the world. In Africa, conceptions of indigenous knowledge general fall into two broad categories. One category pushes for a 'nativist' approach to the concept of indigenous knowledge and the other, pushes for a 'civic' approach.<sup>2</sup> The former general conceives indigenous knowledge in dichotomous terms of the 'indigenous' as opposed to the 'foreign' and the later follows constitutional definitions of the indigenous. This article favors the 'natives' approach as opposed to the 'foreign' in its conceptualization of indigenous knowledge. Unlike the vague 'civic' conceptions of indigenous knowledge where democratic ideals qualify all knowledge including that which came with colonialism as the indigenous (and indigenous without the foreign), 'nativist' conceptions of what constitute indigenous knowledge bring to light those African bodies of knowledge that are geographically specific and have for a long period been suppression by imported colonial wisdom. These geographically specific bodies of knowledge, which are still silenced by the hegemonic formal education system reflects different kinds of epistemological orientations and ontology of knowledge that can be useful for graduates' response to Africa's developmental challenges. Any form of formal educational program in the post-colonial Africa that ignore indigenous knowledge studies as a way of making graduates understand the context which they are working in, risks producing a mismatch between education as a developmental intervention and the challenges that this intervention seeks to counter.

### *The academics and IKS*

Many scholars have expressed skepticism on the viability and relevance of the concept of indigenous knowledge systems especially in the way it is conceived in this article. A number of these skeptical scholars are of the view that the imposition of hegemonic Western modernity through colonial violence became so effective that the indigenous peoples of the South were left with no any other world view outside the purview of

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2 On 'nativist' and 'civic' conceptions of the indigenous and the native see SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Tracking the historical roots of post-apartheid citizenship problems: The Native Club, restless natives, panicking settlers and the politics of Nativism in South Africa' *ASC Working Paper 27* (2007).

Western epistemology. Gayatri Spivak even went to the extent of asking whether the subaltern could speak.<sup>3</sup> Jean and John Comaroff, two leading anthropologists studying South Africa have argued that the colonial encounter altered everything and everybody in Africa.<sup>4</sup> Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawn wrote of the 'invention of traditions'.<sup>5</sup> The key issue that can be gleaned from these studies is their emphasis on how Europe successfully invaded and altered everything in Africa and other parts of non-European world.

Of course, colonial domination in knowledge production in the countries of the South in general took the form of an epistemological genocide to the thought systems of indigenous people but it is too simplistic a view that the colonial impact was homogenous and left no stone unturned in destroying indigenous knowledge of the colonised. The colonial impact on epistemologies of the colonized varied from place to place and time to time. As Quijano<sup>6</sup> puts it:

The forms and effects of cultural coloniality have been different as regards to times and cases. In Latin America, the cultural repression and colonization of the imaginary were accompanied by a massive and gigantic extermination of the natives, mainly their use as expendable labor force, in addition to the violence of the conquest and diseases brought by Europeans. The cultural repression and the massive genocide together turned the previous high cultures of America into illiterate, peasant subcultures condemned to orality; that is, deprived of their own patterns of formalized, objectivised, intellectual, and plastic or visual expression.

Quijano's position is that Latin America became the most extreme case of cultural colonization by Europe. He argues that Latin America cannot, for instance, be compared with Asia, the Middle East and Africa where:<sup>7</sup>

In Asia and in the Middle East high cultures could never be destroyed with such intensity and profundity. But they were nevertheless placed in subordinate relation not only in the European view but also in the eyes

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3 GC Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', P Williams and L Chrisman (eds), *Colonial discourses and post-colonial theory: A reader*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994), pp. 66-111.

4 J Comaroff and J Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and consciousness in South Africa, Vol 1*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991).

5 E Hobsbawn and T Ranger, (eds), *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

6 A Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, (2), March 2007, pp. 169-170.

7 A Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, (2), March 2007, p. 170.

of their own bearers.

In Africa, cultural destruction was certainly much more intense than in Asia, but less than in America. Nor did the Europeans there succeed in complete destruction of the patterns of expression, in particular of objectification and of visual formalization.

What the Europeans did was to deprive Africans of legitimacy and recognition in the global cultural order dominated by European patterns.

The above analysis of varying impacts of colonial domination to cultures, patterns of thought and knowledge of the colonized throughout the South suggest that Asia, the Middle East and Africa are regions with high possibilities of diverse ways of thinking that reflects historical processes not completely altered by Western knowledge and imaginations of the world.

### *The long term influence of Colonialism*

The colonial encounter was indeed, a dynamic process that could not have entirely wiped off the colonized patterns of thought and symbols. The colonized was not a passive actor in the whole colonial process but developed ways and means of resisting colonial domination. Apart from *resistance* to colonial *domination*, the colonial encounter was also characterized by *mimicry*, *hybridity*, *negotiation* and *alienation*. Post-colonial theoreticians such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak developed the conceptual tools of *mimicry*, *hybridity*, *negotiation* and *alienation* in order to produce a holistic picture of the colonial encounter which goes beyond a simplistic approach of the *hegemony* theory.<sup>8</sup> These conceptual tools capture the complexities in the colonial encounter left out by *hegemony* theory's simplistic categorization of the colonial encounter in terms of *domination* and *resistance*. Cooper notes that the binaries of colonizer/colonized and *domination/resistance* began as useful devices for opening up questions of power but ended up constraining more complex interpretations of how power was deployed, engaged, contested and appropriated during the colonial encounter.<sup>9</sup> In spite of the constraining features

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8 E Said, *Orientalism* (London, Routledge, 1978); H Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London, Routledge, 1994); G Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak', P Williams and L Chrisman (eds), *Colonial discourses and Post-Colonial Theory, A Reader* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 66-111.

9 F Cooper, 'Conflict and connection: Rethinking Colonial history', JD Le Suer (ed), *The decolonisation reader* (New York, Routledge, 2003), p. 24.

of the binary analyses of *domination/resistance* and colonizer/colonized, Homi Bhabha argues that *negotiation* became a process by which both the colonizer and the colonized articulated antagonistic and oppositional elements without the redemptive rationality of transcendence.<sup>10</sup> Apart from coercion, the colonial encounter saw the need for consensual approach whereby the colonised's version was at other times incorporated into the system of articulating knowledge. In other words, on-going negotiations brought together knowledge of the colonized and the colonizer and as such, it is wrong to assume that colonial domination in knowledge production wiped off once and for all indigenous knowledge systems of all African communities. As we can see that colonial domination did not altogether wipe off African ways of thinking, it means that graduates of formal education system that came with colonialism can only be effective practitioners

Within the frame work of undisputable dominative and hegemonic engagements between the colonizer and the colonized, it is important to acknowledge that "mimicry" became a restrictive element for the colonial discourse to completely articulate indigenous knowledge without somehow embracing it. According Bhabha, "mimicry" became a sign of double articulation, a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which appropriated the 'Other' as it visualized power. It was both a menace and resemblance with the menace part of "mimicry" being its double vision of disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse and also disrupting its authority. It reversed 'in part' the colonial appropriation by producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence—a gaze of 'others'. It became a colonial discourse that was uttered "inter dicta"—at the crossroads of what was known and permissible with that which, though known, was kept concealed, as well as being uttered between the lines and thus both against colonial rules and within them. In a nutshell, the concept of "mimicry" in understanding the colonial encounter undermines the generalized perception that the colonizer's hegemony overhauled indigenous knowledge and discourses without appropriating and embracing them. This means that apart from destroying indigenous knowledge, the colonial system somehow preserved them and as such, it exists.

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10 H Bhabha, *The location of culture*, pp. 12-17.

The nature of the colonial encounter can also be understood through the conceptual tool of “hybridity”. According to Bhabha, “hybridity” refers to strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and ‘original’ identity of authority).<sup>11</sup> The process of “hybridity” reversed the effects of colonialist disavowal and allowed the denied knowledge to enter the dominant discourse, estranging the very basis of its authority as well as its rules of recognition. “Hybridity”, therefore represented the limit of ‘the noisy command of colonialist authority’ and ‘the silent repression of the native traditions’ meaning that the end result of this was the crossover of ideas rather than complete domination and destruction of indigenous knowledge systems.

By bringing-in the conceptual tools of “mimicry”, “hybridity” and “negotiation” in defence of the existence of indigenous knowledge, the idea is not to dispute the relevance of hegemony versus resistance analyses but to demonstrate that at times the ability of the colonized to resist the colonizer revolved around terms constructed by the colonizer. This means that the very idea of trying to retrieve knowledge untainted by the colonial influence is quite difficult to imagine. Spivak points out that the lengthy historical and cultural effects of colonialism are irreversible and as such, returning to the source is impossible and the sovereignty of the lost ‘Self’ of the colonies cannot be restored.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the hegemonic impact of colonial domination in knowledge production in African countries over a lengthy period rendered retrieval of knowledge untainted by the colonial system futile but some residual continuities in indigenous knowledge competing with the domineering Western world view exist. The idea here is not to retrieve these indigenous knowledge as this is an almost impossible task but to conscientize development practitioners such as formal education graduates about the existence of knowledge ‘otherwise’ that inform the worldviews of communities whose systems of thought fall outside the Western philosophy of what constitute knowledge.

A number of scholars contend that the colonial encounter was characterized by both continuities and disjuncture. According to Marks, in all societies, new classes and productive forces grew out of the Old

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<sup>11</sup> H Bhabha, *The location of culture*, pp. 15-17.

<sup>12</sup> G Spivak, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ p. 66.

World order. In colonial societies, in which new classes were frequently fashioned by external agencies before old hierarchies had disappeared, there was often articulation of new as well as old ideologies.<sup>13</sup> According to Mamdani, the colonizers constituted themselves as citizens and appropriated liberal ideas of liberty and equality as well as other civil and political rights as their preserve while they pushed the colonized into rural sector where they lived under the traditional authority who served the colonial system's principles of indirect rule.<sup>14</sup> This emphasizes that the colonial encounter was characterized by both continuities and disjuncture because some traditional leaders were drafted into the colonial civil service and became officials of native administration while on the other hand indirect rule meant the continuity of indigenous knowledge of those who were not directly affected by colonial knowledge.

#### *"Subalternized" IKS as "truly African"?*

In a nutshell, indigenous knowledge or 'subalternized' knowledge that has for long not been considered legitimate by the dominant worldview of what constitutes knowledge is real in Africa. It is therefore imperative that all practitioners of development including the educated elite understand and share the developmental imaginations of their intended beneficiary-communities. Otherwise, for formal education as a developmental intervention to neglect the need to understand the worldviews of the indigenous communities, inevitably risks resistance to its imposition of services that do not build-on communal understanding of development.

It is imperative to point out that indigenous knowledge in Africa is not homogenous throughout the continent but exist in bodies of knowledge that are geographically-specific hence indigenous knowledge can feature under the conceptual frames of 'geo-politics' and 'body-politics' of knowledge production. The conceptual frame-works of 'body-politics' and 'geo-politics' of knowledge production are very useful in understanding how indigenous knowledge in Africa is silenced in the world dominated by Western knowledge. Western philosophy of knowledge currently dominating the African continent represents a

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13 S Marks, *The ambiguities of dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism and the dtate in twentieth century Natal* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) pp. 4-7.

14 M Mamdani, *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late Colonialism* (New York, Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 12-20.

body of knowledge of particular ethnic groups (i.e Europeans such as English, French etc) that are located in a specific part of the planet (i.e Europe) and gained a false pretence of universality.<sup>15</sup> This false pretence of universality became a useful politics that was used to relegate indigenous knowledge systems to the subaltern incapable of voice of a status of worldview. In the colonial mentality, it became necessary to elevate the geographically specific Western bodies of knowledge of ethnic groups such the English to the status of the universal and relegate geographically-specific African bodies of knowledge such those of the Zulus to the status of the subaltern because knowledge was central to 'the colonial matrix of power'.<sup>16</sup> The purpose of placing indigenous knowledge with the conceptual frames of 'body-politics' and 'geo-politics' of knowledge processes is to emphasize a point that knowledge is not exclusively the domain of the West but different African communities have different localized knowledge systems that development interventions can build on to counter challenges faced by those communities. Formal education as dominated by Western perspectives of what constitute development as well as useful knowledge can benefit the African continent better by attempting to understand the world of those that are meant to benefit.

### **Indigenous knowledge studies and political constraints**

Whilst indigenous knowledge studies at formal education level can be a plausible input of making graduates more relevant to Africa's development issues, there are political and ideological constraints to the incorporation of these studies into the mainstream curriculums. Many post-colonial Africa governments are faced with the difficult task of nation-building through forging common values out of diverse communities. In democratic African states such as South Africa, curriculum development is subordinated to the overriding aim of democratic transition and the inculcation of liberal democratic values as well as the promotion of democratic citizen that is fully de-racialised and de-tribalised.<sup>17</sup> The challenge to the incorporation of indigenous knowledge studies in formal education therefore lies with convincing policy-makers that this idea compliments rather than contradicts with

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15 WD Mignolo, 'De-linking', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2), pp. 449-514.

16 A Quijano, Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality, *Cultural Studies*, 21(2), March 2007.

17 Republic of South Africa, Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement for Grade 10-12*, (Pretoria, 2002).

the project of nation-building in the context of post-colonial Africa where intra-state wars are constantly mobilized along tribal and racial lines. Indeed, intolerance of differences within many newly formed African states is major variable to civil wars especially in cases where race, culture and ethnicity is used to exclude than include. The main challenges in convincing the political elite therefore is how do one bring the subject of indigenous knowledge into the education system without provoking tribalism and racism? Whose indigenous knowledge will be taught and whose will be ignored? What characters and values will be cultivated by the subject of indigenous knowledge? All these questions make the task of incorporating indigenous knowledge system studies into formal education a challenge in the light of political and ideological constraints.

### **Conclusion**

There are foreseeable challenges to the promotion indigenous knowledge studies in formal education, but graduates can understand better the contexts in which they work in from understanding the imaginations of development of the communities that do not necessarily share the world view of formal education. The continent of Africa represents a patch-work of different geographically-specific bodies of knowledge that cannot be ignored by different development practitioners in executing interventions that address the challenges of different communities. Development interventions that build on communal perspectives of development can be more effective than that coming as an imported wisdom from above. In this way, indigenous knowledge studies can be a useful variable in aligning services of formal education graduates to the needs and challenges of the communities they intend to serve.