

Chapter 8

Conclusion: Towards a Mainstreaming of Indigenous Knowledge in Africa's Education



Indigenous knowledge centered education is critical and holds the ability to set the stage for Africa's advancement in all fields and sectors. The fundamental disconnect between curriculum and reality that is characteristic of Africa's contemporary education is not without a background. Precolonial African societies were known to have designed learning to reflect the lived experiences and aspirations of learners. Education addressed the needs of the population and was generally understood by all. The social, political, and economic independence of the various African nations that existed before colonial intrusion was of paramount importance, and as such, there was no question of yielding the shaping of young minds to the whims of external parties.

Colonial rule brought to much of sub-Saharan Africa, a repudiation of the region's own indigenous knowledge across sectors. Education would then shift from an independent and growth centered enterprise with adequate and well-trained personnel, to one where untrained or ill-trained personnel were hired to depend on external forces for directions and strategy.

For several reasons in a post-independence Africa, those in charge of designing education structure continue to advance the colonially bequeathed foundations of education across the region. Former South African President Thabo Mbeki, referring to the need for Africa's indigenous knowledge to be given prime attention across sectors stated that

It is necessary that the peoples of Africa gain the conviction that they are not and must not be wards of benevolent guardians, but instruments of their own sustained upliftment. Critical to this is the knowledge by these peoples that they have a unique and valuable contribution to make to the advancement of human civilization, that...Africa has a strategic place in the global community (Mbeki 2010).

This study set out to analyze the absence of indigenous knowledge in Africa's academic curricular, and its impact on the development of the continent. The central thesis of the study is founded on the observation that the difficulty of designing viable development strategies in Africa derives from the fact that the region's modern

development thinking is not the direct descendant of, or an adaptation of the principles of the indigenous communities over which the new nation states have imposed their rule. This statement directs attention to the sociological implications of education, the relationship between a society's level of socioeconomic advancement on the one hand, and the quality of education on the other. The key questions raised at the start of the study revolve around the nature of indigenous African knowledge and its implications for the role of education in the region's development. Specifically, the study raised the question, "in what way are the principles and philosophies of indigenous African knowledge either in harmony or in conflict with those of the region's modern scientific ones as promoted by the educational system? In other words, in what way will the understanding of the region's indigenous knowledge systems enable us improve upon its paradigms and models of development?"

The study is founded on the contention that there is no such thing as neutral, objective, or bias-free knowledge, but that every form of knowledge is packaged with underlying intentions and upheld by power. Knowledge is dependent for its creation and sustenance upon certain attributes such as culture, context, custom, and history. There is no universal knowledge upon which all mankind can lay claim to or identify with. The study explores the construction of knowledge, and raises questions on why some variant of knowledge are acceptable and why others are not. It deals with the social construction of knowledge, with the "crucial factor being that some forms of knowledge have more power and legitimacy than others" (McLaren 2009, 63).

Education in Africa in terms of curriculum and learning is still largely defined by the colonially imposed boundaries as to what constitutes "proper education." This situation is exemplified in the curriculum of education across levels, where indigenous knowledge is largely considered a subordinate knowledge system to Western science—if at all it is given any recognition. Often dismissed as lacking in legitimacy, such terminology as "non-quantitative, out of date, and amethodological" are often used to describe the concept of indigenous knowledge, while arguments are presented, stating that it is bereft of scientific rigor and objectivity.

This study has tried to present an argument in favor of the mainstreaming of indigenous knowledge in Africa's curriculum.

The World Bank's admits that "educational research has shown that teaching supported with prior knowledge increases students' ability to grasp materials taught to them (...) and they are more apt to retain information" (World Bank 2000). The document further advises educators to utilize indigenous knowledge as the basis to "build on and teach new concepts" a process known as constructivist learning." In sub-Saharan Africa, education and research have mostly taken the form of an outside-in approach whereby the agenda of what is to be researched is set by the donors or development partners. This is also the case with curriculum of teaching and learning. Very few efforts, transformative in approach and content, has been put into modifying the curricula of teaching and learning across the continent of Africa, in order to make for independent, environmentally generated and sensitive teaching, learning, and research.

Research that will lead to advancement in Africa will have to be founded on appropriate education. Classroom content must integrate “particular curriculum content and design, instructional strategies and techniques, and forms of evaluation” (Trifonas 2003, p. 23). In Africa, research agenda, curriculum, and “given” conceptual frameworks should be continuously reexamined by researchers, teachers and students, with the aim of eschewing all manifestations of neo-colonial underpinnings and emphasizing indigenous ideas and addressing Africa’s peculiar realities and challenges (Ezeanya 2011).

In the search for knowledge within any particular community, people’s history, culture and worldview ought to form the baseline for further studies and analysis (Sarpong 2002). Africa is rich in indigenous knowledge across fields and sectors, however, there is a detachment of research from the people’s lived experiences. African researchers struggle for relevance and to have the masses appreciate their research output, but this has proven difficult over the years as a result of the disconnect that exists between research and reality. According to Mkabela, “it is the examination of the African reality from the perspective of the African; one that places the African experience at the core, recognizes the African voice and reaffirms the centrality of cultural experience as the place to begin to create a dynamic multicultural approach to research” (Mkabela 2005). It is very important, therefore, for African researchers to reacquaint themselves with Africa’s knowledge systems and research.

There is need for African researchers to merge the Western acquired knowledge, skills, methodologies, and tools of research with the African reality (Nsamenang 1995). In essence, Western solutions and research strategies for discovering new knowledge are not made to measure for all. The West does not hold the key to research methodology and approaches for understanding the rest of the world. In Africa, the lack of emphasis on this truth has brought about distortions in efforts towards advancing the continent and its people. According to UNESCO, “new insights reveal that development interventions have failed to induce people to participate because of the absence of instruments and mechanisms that enable them to use their own knowledge. Greater efforts therefore should be undertaken to strengthen the capacity of local people to develop their own knowledge base and to develop methodologies to promote activities at the interface of scientific disciplines and indigenous knowledge” (UNESCO 2000) African researchers are reluctant to tackle challenges facing the continent unless they are to be funded or to enter into some sort of partnership with Western institutions. These are hindrances to authentic research works in Africa and the production of authentic knowledge out of the continent.

For research on indigenous knowledge to be effective and far-reaching, researchers would definitely have to exude humbleness, endurance, determination, sensitivity, creativity, open-mindedness, and critical thinking. These attributes are needed to overcome challenges that a curriculum or research agenda which seeks to inculcate indigenous knowledge must be ready to contend with. Further challenges that must be overcome by researchers seeking to work with indigenous knowledge include;

- (i) The unwillingness of indigenous knowledge custodians to part with it. As knowledge is synonymous with economic, social and even political power in every society, individuals tend to want to play a zero sum game, wanting to protect their territory and means of livelihood and family sustenance by any means possible, some holders of indigenous knowledge could insist on concealing the knowledge they have in order to maintain the status quo.
- (ii) Related to the above is that some indigenous people are hesitant to divulge knowledge due the fact that they are uncertain of its usage in the hands of the uninitiated. This fear has been legally founded, especially in the activities of Western based pharmaceutical companies which dubiously procure indigenous knowledge from local communities only to patent it and benefit exclusively from it to the detriment of the values and the economic advantage of the actual owners.
- (iii) Indigenous knowledge, it must be recognized more often than not, functions optimally within its environment of origin, having been tried and tested over centuries within that particular locale. In working with indigenous knowledge caution must be exercised in the wholesale transplant of knowledge to another location. This goes on to show that indigenous knowledge requires a lot of academic emphasis and not its dismissal as noted from this study, as unscientific in nature.
- (iv) Just like in every other field of human endeavor where there are variations in learning, indigenous knowledge holders also vary in their expertise, and care should be taken not to consider everybody who calls himself a traditional bonesetter as having all the necessary knowledge in that field. There are quacks in every profession, and indigenous knowledge is not exempt. The same level of depth, versatility, professionalism, and aptitude used in identifying genuine practitioners in just about any other field can be applied to the field of indigenous knowledge.
- (v) Oftentimes, it is difficult to separate indigenous knowledge as a distinct body of knowledge, different from its originating culture. Essentially, indigenous knowledge is embedded in culture and this entails rituals, legends, folklore, proverbs, etc. This lends it very easily to misinterpretations and mal judgments from outsiders, especially westerners who tend to dissect that body of knowledge from the lenses of their own limited interpretations.
- (vi) The question of intellectual property rights regime for the use of indigenous knowledge has also been an issue among scholars, researchers and holders of indigenous knowledge. New legal alternatives are to be considered to protect indigenous pharmacology, in order to stem the tide of 'illegal' patenting and economic exploitation by the West. This work recommends a *sui generis* approach that provides for the nature of indigenous intellectual property to be defined in accordance with the cultural values of the indigenous communities. Unlike the IPR regime that provides a shelf life for inventions, the *sui generis* provision should recognize the timeless nature of sub-Saharan Africa's indigenous pharmacology and should be devoid of the provisions for originality and material form, which the global IPR regime upholds.

Empowering indigenous knowledge as part of the education curriculum will demystify knowledge to Africans who have been conditioned since colonial times to not identify their culture and learning with science, technology, the humanities, and arts. The effect will be that education will become “easy” and accessible to many and can be readily applied to real-life situations. The outcome will be unprecedented innovation and creativity and accelerated scientific and technological advancements across Africa.

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