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An Epistemological Critique of the African University Education System

Ephraim Taurai Gwaravanda

Abstract

This chapter is a theoretical exposition of the African university education system that is characterized by domination of the Eurocentric epistemological paradigm owing to factors such as colonialism, imperialism, and globalization. I argue that such domination contradicts knowledge democracy and it ought to be challenged. Secondly, I argue that African universities should make the African epistemological paradigm central in their education system. Thirdly, I argue that South-South cooperation should be adopted by African universities to challenge Eurocentric domination since a collective effort, rather than individual attempts, is likely to dislodge foreign epistemological domination.

Keywords: African university, epistemology, Eurocentric hegemony, African knowledge systems, knowledge democracy

1. Introduction

Global debates on the understanding of education systems have demonstrated that the Western conception of knowledge as justified true belief is problematic especially when applied to non-Western categories of knowledge. The domination of the Western conception of knowledge has historically and systematically marginalized, silenced stereotyped, dislocated, and decentered alternative conceptions of knowledge in systems of education. The use of the term “African epistemology” has resulted in debates on whether the adjective “African” is necessary especially in the areas of decolonization, Africanization, and transformation of education. The central claim in this chapter is that Western epistemology which dominates African universities is heavily individualistic, yet knowledge is understood as communalistic in the African setting. This scenario requires rethinking so that African universities reflect an African epistemology in their production of knowledge. This is important because knowledge production is central in the university system.

I intend to answer the question of the relevance of African epistemology in African universities by justifying its uniqueness through showing the elements of relationality, dependence, and interdependence. While a lot of literature has been written to justify the use of African epistemology in African universities, this chapter shows the significance of an African relational epistemology within African universities. The research gap I wish to fill is one which provides the relevance of an African relational epistemology to the African university system. I intend to go beyond the

debates on Africanization, decolonization, and transformation of the African university by concentrating on epistemological matters that affect African universities.

The work is divided into four sections. The first section examines the notion of “African university” in the context of epistemology to argue that the notion is logically incoherent. The second section is a critique of Western epistemology that shows that knowledge cannot be transcultural when it is practiced within cultural settings. The third section explores the relevance of African relational epistemology within the African university. The fourth section shows the importance of dialog and links with other epistemic perspectives in the global south with the aim of dislodging Western epistemological hegemony within universities of the south.

2. The African university in the epistemological context

Before focusing on the meaning of the term “African university,” it is important to define the concept of a university. Ryle gives an analogy of a university visitor who is shown key physical structures of a university such as administration blocks, lecture rooms, and libraries. The visitor, having seen key parts of the university, still insists on asking where the university is. The visitor fails to connect the university to its parts so as to realize that real university is a system of how the parts are organized into a functional organic whole. While the visitor assumes seeing the university in the literal sense, the seeing that allows one to understand is in the sense of grasping the connectedness of parts. Beyond Ryle’s analogy, I argue that a university is beyond a mere organization of physical structures but it also involves the thinking system that forms the intellectual foundation of the university. This intellectual foundation is the epistemological paradigm. The question I examine in this chapter is whether a foreign epistemological paradigm can be authentic or genuine enough to solve the problems of the host continent [1].

From Ryle’s analogy, two issues can be drawn. Firstly, a university is a system that is coordinated for an intellectual purpose as evidenced by research and learning. While this systematic arrangement involves physical buildings, these buildings are simply parts of a whole, and one will commit the fallacy of division if one identifies the university with its parts. The second aspect raised by Ryle, which is critical for this research, is that the coordination of the parts of a university must be understood. The understanding involves going deeper than appearance to give a detailed analysis of the essential components of what makes a university. This level brings up the question of epistemic spaces, the intellectual freedom, and the purpose of a university to the community in which it is found. Although Ryle himself may not have raised these issues, they arise when attempting to fully understand what a university entails. The key function of the university is to search for truth. This function is facilitated by a love of learning and respect for knowledge. The love for learning gives a sense of wonder that propels the desire to seek new knowledge. The respect for knowledge involves examination of key theories, concepts, and categories without any bias [1]. The question of searching for truth is important for this research since the key assumption is that some knowledge systems have been sidelined by an epistemological paradigm whose understanding of truth is one-sided, narrow, and undemocratic. In addition, a university should allow “the will to search and seek without limitation, to allow reason to develop unrestrictedly, to have an open mind, to leave nothing unquestioned, to maintain truth unconditionally” [1]. Ogwuanyi’s view shows that university should be reflective and even be self-reflective in the sense of questioning and evaluating its own steps and practices. Having looked at the broad understanding of a university, it is now important to explore the question of African university.

The African university education system is currently dominated by Western epistemology where the analytic model of knowledge is being used. The model relies on the definition of knowledge as justified true belief. This definition of knowledge is not only foreign to the African university but it also has implications that are inconsistent with the African ways of knowing. The Western definition of knowledge excludes social epistemology that is fundamental in the African knowledge paradigm. African knowledge systems validate knowledge through the community. The African university education find itself in the paradox of mimicry and are currently dualized along Eurocentric thought (which is the dominant one) and weak Africanized curricula which blends both Eurocentric thinking and African indigenous knowledge system. However, it has to be pointed out that African knowledge systems contribute an insignificant part in the weak Africanized curriculum.

The African university education is currently dominated by Eurocentric epistemology. Eurocentric epistemology creates contradictions, uncertainties, and dilemmas. Eurocentric epistemology assumes a “universalistic, neutral, objective point of view” [2]. Following such epistemological underpinnings, African universities have used universality, objectivity, and neutrality to define and influence content of the curriculum without the problematization of these concepts. “Universality” hides the subject and claims knowledge applicability “always and everywhere” to borrow the Kantian phrase. Critics of Eurocentric thinking have argued that “universality” is a myth [2–4]. The aspect of location should therefore be included in knowledge claims without assuming Kantian universality. “What I am claiming is that all knowledges are epistemically located in the dominant or the subaltern side of the power relations and that this is related to the geo- and body-politics of knowledge” [2]. Neutrality in the sense of observer independence is when the “ego-politics of knowledge” of Western philosophy has always privileged the myth of a non-situated “ego.” Ethnic/racial/gender/sexual epistemic location and the subject that speaks are always decoupled. Objectivity entails that “in Western philosophy and sciences the subject that speaks is always hidden, concealed, erased from the analysis” [2]. By delinking ethnic/racial/gender/sexual epistemic location from the subject that speaks, Western philosophy of science defends universal categories that are seen as applicable always and everywhere. These universals are also understood to be impersonal and beyond emotions. Against Western universalism, I argue that if concepts, universal as they may be thought to be, are formulated within a cultural setting, then the concepts cannot be transcultural [2]. Knowledge is always from a particular location [4–6], and there is no need to marginalize other locations. “Nobody escapes the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the ‘modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system’” [2]. These claims are reinforced by the view that our “knowledges are always situated” [7].

The Cartesian “cogito, ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) is the foundation of modern Western sciences. It is the basis of the idea of “objectivity” as seen in natural sciences. While Western science borrows heavily from the Cartesian approach, scientists and academics from African universities have endorsed this without criticism. By producing a dualism between mind and body and between mind and nature, Descartes was able to claim non-situated, universal view of knowledge. The universal view of knowledge allows Western epistemology to disregard all other forms of knowledge. The neutral view is called the “point zero” [8] perspective of Eurocentric philosophies. By “point zero,” Castro-Gomez refers to a form of neutrality, and it has been argued that in research and teaching, including African universities, neutrality is a virtue. The point zero is beyond both subjectivity and relativity, and it is understood as beyond a particular perspective or locality.

Critics of universalism see the point zero approach as beyond human capacities and an approach applicable to some kind of deity [2]. The ideals of objectivity and universality are not immune from criticism, and the next section examines the flaws of these ideals.

3. Critique of Western epistemology

Objectivity may be defined as neutrality or observer independence. This entails that epistemological claims must be free from subjective or cultural bias. Truth claims should be free from observer bias and not depend on the fact that a particular person is conducting investigation. Every person, including the epistemologist, looks at the world from a particular perspective, shaped by personal and cultural facts [9]. Critics of objectivity argue that hidden cultural assumptions distort our investigation of truth. Hidden cultural assumptions that distort the conclusions of science can be made visible by beginning from a marginal perspective. Instead of occupying a “view from nowhere,” thought begins from somewhere. Once that is understood, the task is which somewhere should we examine the world. Philosophy should challenge its own picture of itself by criticizing both the project and assumed goal of Western philosophical reflection [10]. Philosophical investigations are subject to historical and cultural particularities. Philosophy is written and explored within cultural contexts. The timeless nature of reality, justice, and truth is ought to be challenged. The assumption that reason is a transcendent, noncultural standard ought to be rejected. Reason is actually justified not as timeless truth but as a local ideal. Reason is used by philosophy to show particular versions of truth. It is easy to write about the “other” or voice from the margin. What appears about embracing the other is largely rhetoric. A standpoint theorist sees possibility, promise, and hope as emanating from the margins [11]. A conceptual scheme is a way of seeing the world. Incommensurable conceptual schemes [12] are schemes that are so fundamentally different from each other that they cannot be compared or ranked or united into a single scheme. Different cultural traditions provide incompatible ways of separating valid truth claims from invalid ones. These ways are internal to cultures, and there is no transcultural way of sorting out the contradictory truth claims. The West should recognize the failures of its own traditions and open up to new traditions especially the ones that promise to overcome our failures by providing clear and careful standards of justification.

Eurocentric thinking is internally limited by its own narrowness and perspective. “Eurocentrism is unable to deal with the assumptions and complexities of colonialism and it is unable to reject the use of Eurocentric theory or its categories” [13]. So eurocentrism is a self-limiting approach which African universities have no justification in following. It is a form of provincialism that has to be evaluated using the lenses of pluriversality.

Eurocentric epistemology is a kind of provincialism whose narrowness contradicts the spirit of genuine knowledge. If knowledge should be open-ended and tentative, then why should gatekeeping be done using the myths of universality, objectivity, and neutrality? The idea of the universal is that of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all particulars, the deepening and coexistence of all particulars [14]. Pluriversality respects both multiplicity and diversity. It picks the best elements from each culture and tradition. This means that it is the sum total of the best elements from each culture and it takes the dimension of multiple thinking without disregard on any of the cultures. This kind of thinking brings in the idea of pluri-cultural perspectives that engage in honest dialog for the enrichment of knowledge in particular and humanity in general [4]. Le Grange writes, “for too

long what has been taught and learned in African universities has been dominated by Western science disciplines and more importantly by a representationalist perspective of science or knowledge” [15]. What is taken as genuine knowledge in African universities is a perspective that requires revisiting and reconceptualization. In Le Grange’s view, Western science “is not only local but located” or situated. The locality is hidden in abstract universalism. Abstract universalism is used to dismiss other knowledge systems as non-knowledge. The narrowness and fallacies of Western science should allow indigenous knowledge to stamp authenticity in the African university.

The use of Eurocentric epistemology in African universities disrespects the epistemic concerns of students. Arguably, “many spaces within the university do not recognize the knowledge and cultural capital that first-generation students bring with them to the university as valid forms of knowledge and as valid forms of cultural capital” [16]. This gives a mismatch between the learners’ epistemological background and university learning. As a result, graduates from a contradictory learning process fail to attain relevance in their own communities because there is unequal participation in the learning process. “Higher education must be made relevant to the material, historical and social realities of the communities in which universities operate” [17]. Such unequal participation is called “hermeneutical injustice” [18]. In instances of hermeneutical injustice, the power imbalance is such that certain people’s positions, and the knowledge they bring from those positions, suffer from a deficit of credibility. For instance, if a student of law brings into the learning process the indigenous court system, that knowledge is likely to be dismissed as “unsystematic and unscientific.” Experiences of learners are therefore dismissed when the Eurocentric way of thinking is given domination in African universities. Although hermeneutical injustice was academically defined almost a decade ago, this form of injustice is as old as racism and colonialism. “In South African higher education, this is a hermeneutical injustice with its roots in a colonial past, where other knowledge systems and ways of being were systematically disregarded and perceived negatively” [16]. Education should be liberating instead of enslaving. This means that all processes linked to education such as research, teaching, and learning must free the mind. Freeing the mind entails thinking in diverse positions that involve criticism and evaluation without any blinkers, whether imposed on acquired [19].

Three issues can be drawn from the observation that education ought to be mentally liberative. Firstly, it is a contradiction in terms to talk of education that fails to liberate the mind. Secondly, education should liberate rather than enslave the mind. Colonial epistemology fails to achieve mental liberation in the African university, and it therefore fails to promote intellectual independence and growth. Thirdly, the skills from education are the practical aspects that are relevant for society. If education lacks the practical dimension, then it fails to serve its key purpose.

Universities should be critical about the curriculum by an examination of its theoretical and practical aspects. Theory must feed the practical, and the practical must allow further examination of theory. In other words, ideas must be tested in terms of usefulness to the community. As a result, a curriculum that relates to the community is more appropriate than a borrowed curriculum that tends to be inconsistent with community knowledge systems and experience [20]. To cross the boundaries of one’s culture without realizing that the other person may have a radically different approach to reality today is no longer admissible [21]. A university should therefore use the standards of openness and dialog to assess knowledge claims without dismissing them on the basis of prejudice. If still consciously done, disrespect of knowledge from other cultures would be “philosophically naive, politically outrageous and religiously sinful” [21]. The philosophical naivety

observed is a result of lack of facts, while there is rashness predicated on prejudice. Given the context of colonialism, meaning has to undergo contestation, negotiation, and dialog. In the politics of knowledge, it is irresponsible to dismiss knowledge claims without their contribution taking into account. This thinking opens up for the content of African epistemology as shown in the next section.

4. African relational epistemology

In what sense is epistemology both African and relational? African relational epistemology, in this chapter, refers to a theory of knowledge that is both communalistic and informed by African culture. The combination of being communal and a basis on African culture is important because being communal in itself does not qualify knowledge as African since there is Western communitarian thought on the one hand and the existence of multiple non-African but global southern perspectives as found in Latin America and Asia on the other. African culture, in the context of epistemology, supplies the categories and concepts used to validate knowledge claims. African epistemology stands in a special relation to ontology because it starts by recognizing the being of the other. In the context of epistemology, the other is seen as a subject, capable of rational thought and capable of producing knowledge. The other is also important in the validation and evaluation of knowledge claims. African epistemology is relational in the sense that it is both dependent and interdependent. Dependency signifies the reliance on other people for the acquisition of knowledge. Interdependence is a mutual exercise that facilitates the exchange of knowledge between two or more people within the community.

African epistemology demands one to answer the question “what is African about epistemology?” African epistemology refers to a critical analysis of sources, nature, extent, and justification of knowledge using the African conceptual scheme. In the African sense, knowledge is not abstract, but it is related to the world. Knowledge is related to space and time in the sense that it is shaped by these categories. Beyond worldly connections, African epistemology rises above analytic atomistic epistemology through its stress on otherness. Knowledge is acquired through others, and it is validated through others. It recognizes and respects different perspectives. The African knowledge system recognizes the role of the community in the acquisition and preservation of knowledge. The cultural conceptual scheme becomes very important in the sense that it provides a platform for the description, analysis, validation, and evaluation of knowledge. The hierarchy of knowledge starts with the community at the top, followed by groups, and lastly the individual.

According to the Sotho proverb *Motho ke motho ka botho*, one’s humanity is seen through others. In the context of knowledge, the proverb entails that knowledge is passed as such through others. The test of the community distinguishes between propositional knowledge and opinion. Without the community of other human beings, the criterion of knowledge cannot be established. In the context of knowledge, the proverb boils down to the fact that knowledge is acquired, validated, and evaluated through others. In this context, the transition is from the Cartesian “I” to the African “We.” A quick objection that is often leveled against communalistic knowledge is that this view of knowledge eclipses the individual within the community. However, communalistic thought does not necessarily eclipse the individual for two reasons. First, thinking is done by the individual, and when thoughts are judged as significant by others, they qualify as knowledge, and secondly, individual points of view are acknowledged in the assessment of knowledge. The proverb

calls for respectful and polite attitude toward other human beings. To care for one another therefore implies caring for knowledge concerns as well. Without epistemic care, the interdependence between human beings and knowledge would be undermined [22]. The recognition of others in knowledge production becomes important. There is dialog with other epistemic communities in the global south as shown in the section that follows.

5. South-south cooperation in epistemological issues

There is no need for African universities to continue to be replicas of Oxford and Cambridge. Knowledge that is generated from African universities should be linked to African experiences so that it is able to solve African problems. Syllabi that are designed to meet the needs of colonialism should not find its way in the postcolonial era [23]. The situation calls for an epistemological transformation of universities. Transformation of the world's epistemological diversity into an empowering and emancipatory mechanism against hegemonic globalization speaks to another kind of bottom-up cosmopolitanism vested in the dialog of humankind, applauding cordiality, solidarity, and living in contradiction of rationality of profit-oriented avarice and egoism [24]. The recognition of epistemic diversity is important for universities in the global south because it helps in dislodging the domination of the north. On the contemporary global arena, the upsurge of knowledge and information is admitted to be one of the key forces of change relative to higher education in Africa, yet modern science, as epistemologies from the north, lack the "capacity to capture the inexhaustible diversity of the world" [24], rendering it a perpetuation of a Western knowledge hegemony and the annihilation of African thinking even in the inquiries about Africa affairs [25]. The situation calls for a reinvention of social emancipation that transcends the critical theory produced in the north and the social and political praxis to which it has subscribed by "opening" of the canon of knowledge, to the ongoing debates and initiatives on diversity and recognition [24]. The opening up of the canon of knowledge facilitates a horizontal progression of knowledge in a manner that accommodates other forms of knowledge through dialog and respect for other epistemic perspectives. Hence there is a need for critical discourses on epistemologies in universities in Africa as part of the south that challenges the "hegemony, universality and violence" [26] ushered in by Eurocentric philosophies just as we might never know where the cures for tomorrow will come from or the new construal of our planet's ecology as whole systems rather than reductionist parts or new ways to conceive of reconciliation or to define the human [27].

The call for a struggle of "alternative" knowledges which need to vigorously challenge the conception of other knowledges as "merely" local or indigenous is an acknowledgment that they are the products of socially systematized practices consisting of the deployment of diverse types of material and intellectual resources attached to specific situations and contexts [24]. The subjection of epistemologies in universities to critique and change over the last three or so decades demanding a criteria of what counts as knowledge and its validation has become, for some, the last crisis of epistemology that occurs through a twin problem of naturalization and historicization. Naturalization of epistemology entails reducing knowledge to the demands of natural sciences such as physics and chemistry where observation and experimentation are key. This is reductionism since it strips knowledge of its normative dimensions. Historicization of knowledge means making the history of knowledge a priority, yet genuine knowledge should address both the present and the future in terms of knowledge validation [28]. The naturalization of knowledge takes the direction of natural sciences where epistemology is reduced to observation

sciences so that it departs from its normative concerns. Historicization of knowledge reduces epistemology to the history of ideas, and this is also problematic in the sense that the present and the future are left out.

From a radical design, an epistemology must be rooted in the experiences of the global south by critically thinking of contemporary epistemology as a normative project evocative of modern science which can be characterized as epistemological pragmatism. This will not only rescue epistemology from a confinement to, and centeredness on, scientific knowledge alone but to inclusively embrace all forms of knowledge. Santos' case is rooted in the discourse of "decolonising Western universalisms via decolonial pluriversalism" [2] in which the "universal" within the Western philosophical tradition is challenged by proposing an entry of another, more decolonial way of thinking universality [2]. There is no liberation without rationality; but there is no critical rationality without accepting the interpellation of the excluded, or this would inadvertently be only the rationality of domination. Santos makes a case for epistemological and theoretical tasks that can create new possibilities of progressive social transformation aimed at putting an end to the monumental Eurocentric theoretical justification of the unequal relations between the global north and the global south [24]. The proposal for an epistemology of the south is therefore a direct challenge to the neoliberal project which manifests in three major trends in higher education, namely, privatization, commercialization, and corporatization of knowledge as reflected by the unrelenting growth of capitalist and corporate influence [29, 30] especially in the university. "In the neoliberal model higher education is ideally integrated into the system of production and accumulation in which knowledge is reduced to its economic functions and contributes to the realization of individual economic utilities" [31].

An epistemology of the south would fittingly be a horizontal rather than vertical array of knowledge forms and sources of hierarchy in which African universities that do not feature on the top 500 of world rankings are rendered poor quality, second-rate, or failures as this is a clear reflection of global inequalities, with the burden of such characterizations weighing in disproportionately on universities in the global south. Besides, setting a "gold standard" [24], by placing knowledge systems on a ranking scale only to selectively discriminate those originating from disadvantaged communities especially in African universities, is to undermine the sources that engender them and a confirmed way of legitimating knowledge hierarchies. One way for African universities to attempt to improve their knowledge status on a global scale is to focus on granting the humanities and social sciences their rightful place in order to confront Africa's development challenges head-on. We argue that to be drawn to the empirical science-oriented platform for which African universities have no resources and general inclination needed to support research in this field is to play the zero-sum game.

I challenge African university leaders to valorize Africanity, and the fruit of their creative imagination (the knowledges they produce) should adopt different forms and manifest themselves differently according to context and necessity [32]. By arguing for an epistemology of the south, I observe Santos' case as a "decolonial epistemic perspective" that will assist with "... unveiling epistemic silences, conspiracies, and epistemic violence hidden within Euro-American epistemology and to affirm the epistemic rights of the African people that enable them to transcend global imperial designs" [33].

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the very idea of "African university" is logically incoherent because of excessive reliance on foreign epistemology that negates

the idea of being African. The core of any university is the advancement of knowledge. Advancement of knowledge is based on a clear epistemological paradigm. The use of Eurocentric models of knowledge in the African university defeats the very idea of “African university.” The African university has a history of colonialism that continues to threaten its very existence as evidenced by the domination of colonial epistemology. Eurocentric epistemology has used the ideals of universality, objectivity, and neutrality to hide the locality and situatedness of knowledge. On the basis of these “characteristics” of knowledge, Eurocentric epistemology has set standards of knowledge that African universities have followed for decades without sufficient criticism and evaluation. The use of colonial epistemologies in African universities has no rational justification that is immune to objections, but it is based on a history of fallacious reasoning that Eurocentric epistemology defended as “arguments.” The use of colonial epistemologies in African universities disrespects both the students and the communities in which these universities are found. Epistemology from the south is used to dislodge the Eurocentric narrowness in order to pave way for alternative thinking and pluriversality within the African university. African universities should therefore cooperate with other universities within the global south so as to dislodge the tendency by Western epistemology to dominate African universities in the context of epistemology. The relational African epistemology can be used to open up dialog and respect for other epistemological perspectives.

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