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Transforming Epistemologies in the Postcolonial African University? The Challenge of the Politics of Knowledge

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Abstract

The process of knowledge production, dissemination and consumption has captured much scholarly attention from a political viewpoint in recent times. Discourses on development, empowerment, transformation and democracy have revolved around knowledge and power and more precisely on the politics of knowledge. Institutions of higher learning, especially universities, globally, as nerve centres of knowledge production and distribution, have not been spared from the challenges of the politics of knowledge. In this conceptual paper, we theorise the dynamics of the challenges and opportunities of the politics of knowledge in the context of the postcolonial African university's endeavour to transform epistemologies in higher education in the 21st century Africa. Our case is premised on three claims, namely that 1) the production and mediation of knowledge is a genuinely political process (Weiler, 2011b) 2) universities can be considered among the most political institutions in society (Ordorika, 1999) and 3) recontextualisation and transformation of university epistemologies (Weiler, 2011a) is a prerequisite for an authentic postcolonial African university.

Keywords: *decolonisation, transformation, higher education, Africanisation, knowledge, power*

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Introduction

Social transformation sits at the extreme end of conceptions of social change with universities frequently deemed as key institutions in the processes of social change and development (Brennan, King, & Lebeau, 2004). Universities have been allocated the explicit role of the production of highly skilled manpower and research output to sustain the professed economic needs. Their business has been basically to produce, through research, relevant knowledge, and to disseminate the same knowledge, through teaching. Hence, the centrality of the knowledge enterprise in universities worldwide. In the contemporary world, the notion of knowledge has gone through a process of transformation with an enduring influence on our understanding of the creation, distribution and employment of knowledge. Such a conception is crucial for the formulation of a theory of knowledge that explains the intimate link between knowledge and power. In this paper, we submit to three claims. Firstly, that the production and mediation of knowledge is a genuinely political process (Weiler, 2011b). Secondly, that universities can be considered among the most political institutions in society (Ordorika, 1999) and lastly, that the recontextualisation and transformation of university epistemologies (Weiler, 2011a) is a prerequisite for an *authentic* postcolonial African university and a way “to reinvent the African university”(Juma, 2005) by producing knowledge and creating institutions that can translate that knowledge effectively in African communities(Wilson-Tagoe, 2007). However, we submit to the proposition that

Few development strategies mention curricular reform as a necessary area of improvement for increased competitiveness within the globalizing economy. Research on existing curricula and their suitability for serving Africa's needs may shed light on new and useful directions that curricula could take... that African universities have not made large efforts to reform their curricula in response to rapidly expanding scientific knowledge and changing economic opportunities”(Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2006, p. 31).

Hence we engage with the notion of the politics of knowledge in the process (es) of transforming epistemologies in postcolonial African universities.

The notion of transformation is a fundamental constituent of the postcolonial theory whose anticolonial framework is a theorisation of issues, concerns and social practices emerging from colonial relations and their aftermath (Dei, 2014). We engage transformation to interrogate the power constructions entrenched in knowledge production, distribution and consumption based on the understanding that there are some knowledges that are marginalised by the more powerful and dominant ones. The current status quo in the African university in terms of what is researched, taught and used as valuable knowledges is marked by a sharp binary between those in control of the discourse and those who resist it. Hence, this debate quizzes the interplay between those who control knowledge production on the one hand, and those who resist the control of epistemologies in the African university, on the other. This debate submits to the view that to institute authentic epistemologies in the 21st century postcolonial African university, there is a need for establishing a sincere synthesis of all existing knowledges, in which faculty accommodates various, shared and joint dimensions of knowledge. However, we admit that to generalise about a continent as large and diverse as Africa is is an oversimplification although we consent that there are common epistemological strands and challenges that universities on the continent share.

We provide a critical exposé for a movement towards a reorganised and reconstituted space, where epistemologies acknowledge the diversity of both the local and the exotic human ideas. This paper calls for a paradigmatic shift by rebuffering universal, fundamental definitions of epistemologies in the African university that impart decontextualized, essentialised realities. We locate an African university in the complexity of lived experiences of the Africans by foregrounding the transformation of knowledge research, production and dissemination. The discourse is grounded in Ashis Nandy's assertion that universities should “...begin to act as sources of skepticism toward the victorious systems of knowledge, and as the means of recovering and transmitting knowledge that has been cornered, marginalized or even defeated.”(Nandy, 2000a, p. 118). In the context of this debate, we question: Do Africans have their unique way of apprehending external object or reality? Conversely, is it defensible to African epistemology separate from and superior to the epistemology of the West currently dominating African universities?

In our attempt to fulfil the above assertions, this paper asks the following topical questions:

- What is the relationship between knowledge and politics?
- Whose knowledge matters in the university in the postcolonial university in Africa?
- What alternatives are available for the 21st century African university to research, produce and distribute genuinely *African* knowledges relevant for contemporary times?

The paper starts by conceptualising the notions of transformation and epistemology before debating the dynamics of the relationship between knowledge, power and politics. This will then draw us to enter

into the politics of knowledge in the African university. We wind the debate by exploring the different alternatives for the transformation of epistemologies in the university in Africa and the challenges therein.

Epistemology as the nature of knowledge

Epistemology, in the context of the theory of knowledge, is a universal phenomenon. It inquires into the possibility, nature, origin, scope, validity, and limits of human knowledge. Knowledge materialises from a complex process that relates to social, situational, cultural and institutional dynamics. In their daily lives, people classify, cipher, process and assign meaning to their experiences thereby defining their everyday forms of knowledge. Existing conceptual frameworks, actions and events inform the process of its creation, distribution and consumption which in turn is influenced by the experiences, resources and the arrangement of social interaction, skills, orientations and interests. In this conception, knowledge is arranged in time and spatial zones and hence it is located within the realm of diverse levels of relevance. One's ability to solve some practical problems one encounters in one's everyday life informs and validates one's personal knowledge until a point where one comes across a problem that cannot be easily solved by what one already knows. At this point, new knowledge is created to encounter the emerging challenge. Knowledge thus becomes the tool with which individuals negotiate the complexities of everyday life (Barnett, 2009). The question then is can knowledge be imposed or impressed on a person or people? Conversely, are there some knowledge hierarchies where the dominant knowledges can impose their presence on the supposed weaker knowledges?

In Lockett (2010)'s conception of 'paradigm shift', knowledge is relative, depending on the "paradigm" that controls the knowledge field at any given time. Some paradigms are so dominant to a point where they are unthinkingly acknowledged as true, until a "scientific revolution" creates a new paradigm of new knowledge. This draws us to the question whose knowledge matters (Weiler, 2011b) given the "contesting discourses in higher education curriculum restructuring" (Ensor, 2004, p. 339). We argue from the classical epistemological approach where "the creation of knowledge is a process of qualitative refinement and quantitative accumulation. Its goal is to disclose the ultimate foundation—the 'meta' point of view from where we can see the ontological order and the objective truth—and to provide a neutral and universal language to explain natural phenomena (Omotoso, 2010). Hence, we argue that any form of knowledge makes effective meaning on condition that it is located only within its own cultural context. We thus pursue Geri Augusto's assertion that "...no field of knowledge has *all* the answers, that knowledge creation is not just content but also a set of social and cultural practices, and that the university in Africa should not lose sight of the contributions it might make to knowledge" (Augusto, 2007, p. 199).

What is transformation?

The notion of transformation has gained currency in the twenty-first century, though on many occasions, it is often misused and misinterpreted. In institutions, private and public, leaders and their organizations are obliged to answer to the call to transform to which they should talk the language and take action in search of the transformation mandate. Frequently their responses, are reactive, active and mere growth changes that lack sustainability and systemacity. But do they know what transformation is? What defines transformation and what characterises it?

Transformation occurs when leaders create a vision for transformation and a system to continually question and challenge beliefs, assumptions, patterns, habits and paradigms with an aim of continually developing and applying theory, through the lens of the system of profound knowledge. Transformation happens when people managing a system focus on creating a new future that has never existed before, and based on continual learning and a new mindset, take different actions than they would have taken in the past (Daszko & Sheinberg, 2014 n.p.).

From the above, we note that as a process, transformation is an ongoing activity of challenging the status quo by adopting novel ways of creating a different future from that which is currently in existence. In this sense, transformation implies a basic change of character and little or no resemblance with the past configuration or structure. At the heart of any transformative agenda is the dimension of challenging assumptions since these assumptions and standards steer policies, procedures and systems and structures. This implies that there will be a profound change in structure that creates something new through a system of persistent questioning, challenging, exploration, discovery, evaluation, testing, and creation of new theory and practices. The notion of transformation is based on the assumptions that the current situation is piecemeal, controlling, blemished, or worse off—destructive. In the transformative journey, there is no fixed or foreseen destination since the route has not been used before thereby

justifying the unpredictable and uncertain character of transformation. It implies a creation of and an attempt to realize a dream that is profoundly different from what existed before. Hence, it a conscious decision to functionally adjust and make a difference in a granted reality. It implies the presence and application of precaution to astutely craft a process and realise a result absolutely different and having apparently noticeable attributes and characteristics that would clearly define what has developed, from what it was before. We can as well interrogate the notion of Africanisation as transformation in the context of Thabo Mbeki's conceptualisation. For him Africanisation is

...the re-orientation of persons, institutions, structures, products, processes and ideas towards a fresh, creative and constructive imaging of Africa and African contexts which take past, present and future African reality and African potential seriously, consciously and deliberately (Mbeki cited in Maluleke, 2005 n.p.).

From the above we probe the notion of transformation in the context of epistemologies in African universities. We argue that at the heart of epistemologies in African universities, is the politics of knowledge hence our conceptualisation of the politics of knowledge in the next section.

The concept of *politics of knowledge*

To talk about a politics of knowledge, and consider the resemblance of politics and knowledge sincerely, we presume that there is an element of the *hierarchy* of authority, with authority in matters of knowledge originating from some action that is "supreme." Knowledge is produced inside political structures and when created and disseminated, it charts the lines and patterns of power existing in society (Wills, 2014). Simultaneously, knowledge can be created in confrontation with what is socially dominant, in an endeavor to transform those power structures. Such knowledge, nonetheless, is fashioned around and through power structures, and ascertains precise political contacts between the knower, the known, and the knowledge itself. While Weiler holds that "...the linkage between knowledge and power is both very intimate and very consequential, and that arriving at a better understanding of this linkage is crucial to any attempt to formulate a political theory of knowledge and its production (Weiler, 2011a, p. 209), this relationship is, to a large extent, inconsistent and often contradictory. However, taking after Karl Marx and Karl Mannheim through to Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, the close synergetic relationship between knowledge and power has continued to pervade contemporary times. In this section we enter the debate by considering Weiler's delineation of four facets of the knowledge-power dynamic, namely:

- the paramount importance of *hierarchies* in the existing knowledge order,
- the relationship of *reciprocal legitimation* between knowledge and power,
- the *transnational division of labour* in the contemporary knowledge order, and
- the political economy of the *commercialization of knowledge* (see Weiler, 2011b, p. 2).

Hierarchies imply a classic expression of power in which there are tenets of the dominant and the subordinate, the prestigious and the insignificant and the greater and the lesser value in a given situation. They are a reflection of the structural nature of power and authority thereby endorsing the substance of politics. In the epistemological sphere, hierarchies pervade themselves in form of the differential endowment of status across knowledge domains. For example the empirical sciences and the natural sciences are often given an edge over the humanities in a variety of situations in academia, social life, industry and commerce. Conversely, in terms of institutional understanding of the production of knowledge, exclusive think tanks from specialized knowledge domains in the faculty sit at the apex of the hierarchical pyramid thereby showing again the existence of clear and more or less recognized hierarchies. Hence, it's the game of some disciplines in the knowledge economy wielding dominant power over others.

Both knowledge and power should be capable of claiming trustworthiness and be recognized as having credibility (Weiler, 2011b). Like political power, knowledge and power legitimate each other, that is, they exist in a space of "reciprocal legitimation" where knowledge legitimates power and, conversely, knowledge is legitimated by power (Weiler, 2011a, p. 210). As Ashis Nandy adds,

As more and more areas of life are "scientised" and taken out of the reach of participatory politics to be handed over to experts, the universities as the final depository of expertise have become a major global political actor of our times. In addition to their other tasks, they legitimize the "expertisation" of public affairs and the reign of the professionals.' (Nandy, 2000b, p. 116)

This can be exemplified by the extent to which many policy decisions are informed by theory and practice produced in institutions of higher learning while the political institutions confirm or disapprove some epistemological research in universities.

The politics of knowledge can also be traced in the mould of “the transnational knowledge system and the international division of labour” (Weiler, 2011a, p. 2011). Transcending the local and national interests, the global knowledge systems assign key intellectual tasks for institutions of higher learning especially universities in terms of knowledge research, production and dissemination. There are small but powerful institutions like the World Bank, and the European Union, domiciled in the First World, who have allocated themselves privileged roles of not only dictating whose knowledge matters, but more importantly, what knowledge is worthwhile and to whom. This demonstrates a unique division of labour, in which the on-going global knowledge system is an expression of the close symbiotic relationship between the hierarchies of economic control and political power and knowledge production and distribution.

In addition to the above scenario of the politics of knowledge, Weiler includes the place of the commercialization of knowledge in the modern world. Knowledge production in the contemporary world is regarded ubiquitously in economic and commercial terms. As such, there are some knowledge domains that are rated as having greater commercial efficacy than others and their utility is usually a product of the dictates of the consumers of such knowledge. For examples there are notable cases of university faculties forming research synergies with industry while cases of industry-based research centres are not uncommon in most universities in the developing world. Universities have often given skewed favour to such centres in a bid to lure investment from such firms. This comes much to the disadvantage of those knowledge producers especially in the humanities.

The above facets of the politics of knowledge depict scenarios of the power relations that predominate epistemologies in universities in general. We grant that the production of knowledge and its negotiation of knowledge is indisputably political process that demands a systematic and critical inquiry and one in which knowledge and power are in reciprocal legitimation. However, we present a counter-argument that proposes a reversal of the above relationships between knowledge and power especially by arguing for transformation of epistemologies in the context of the postcolonial African universities. In the next section we zero in on the African university by discussing the above in terms of the place of the politics of knowledge in contemporary postcolonial African universities.

Contemporary epistemologies in postcolonial African universities

We submit to the contention that universities make a unique contribution to development via knowledge by transmitting knowledge to individuals who enter the labour market and contribute to society in different ways (Cloete, Bialek, Pillay, Bunting, & Maassen, 2011, p. 26). However, the university’s role and the conceptions of the place of knowledge in development will vary from one university to another and one country to another. On this view, Cloete et al. have delineated for notions. Firstly, the university places *an ancillary* role in producing educated civil servants and professionals (Cloete et al., 2011). In this sense, the teaching that goes on in such universities is simply based on the transmission of orthodox knowledge with no emphasis on scientific research for the enhancement of development policies. Secondly, in cases where universities are regarded as *self-governing* institutions, the universities are left to themselves with little or no public investment only to turn to think-tanks from the North by entering into joint research projects. In this perspective, the output from the university contributes to the strengthening of national identity with the creation of an elite bureaucratic community with high scientific knowledge. In their independent nature, such universities’ knowledge systems are not steered by the local, cultural and geographical interests of the university. In the third view, the university is taken as *an instrument* for development agendas through direct involvement in local communities by expertise exchange and capacity building not through the production of new scientific knowledge. Lastly, university is regarded as an *engine* of development and “... is the only institution in society that can provide an adequate foundation for the complexities of the emerging knowledge economy when it comes to producing the relevant skills and competencies of employees in all major sectors, as well as to the production of use-oriented knowledge” (Cloete et al., 2011, p. 19). Given the overall characterization of the value of knowledge in the development matters, we question the contextualisation of such conceptions in contemporary African universities. How does this help to explain the current politics of knowledge and the consequent demand for transformed epistemologies of the same?

The knowledge system has centres and peripheries in the production and distribution of knowledge. Africa, as a continent, finds itself on the very edge of the knowledge periphery (Altbach, 1987) and appears to be increasingly isolated from the centre (Teferra & Altbach, 2004, pp. 38-40). Contemporary epistemologies in African universities suffer from eurocentrism characterised by a biased and skewed mainstream scholarship rooted in western scientism that coerces faculty and students to “adhere to the paradigms that do not reflect their knowledge or experience of the world” (Lowy, 1995, p. 728). What constitutes knowledge in the African university are privileged western philosophical perspectives based

on euro-American culture and history which stipulate the dominant theoretical structures for social science knowledge and research with little sensitivity to African "...contextual specificities that enhances a university's ability to make unique contributions to the global corpus of knowledge"(Habib, 2014 n.p.).

Dominant actors establish their hegemony through the selection of traditions in order to consolidate a dominant identity (Ordorika, 1999, p. 19). African universities in many countries are frequently linked by their participation in an international system of knowledge distribution. As such, for these universities, the evaluation of scholarly work of faculty and students, their research proposals, manuscripts, and publications that verifies the key incentives of their intellectual life are all controlled from Europe and America as the centre, while university academic ranking is dependent on the epistemological preconditions set by the former colonial handlers. This is despite the fact that "It is a stark contradiction that African academics are expected to publish their work in an academic context that does not even provide them with access to the journals, databases, and other publications that are vital in keeping abreast of international developments in science and scholarship" (Teferra, 2002). In addition, we find it interesting that, " Research commissioned by organizations and funding agencies in the global North and West tends to tie African researchers to the agendas set by those organizations and agencies, making them instruments and accomplices of their own marginalization" (Cardoso, 2005, p. 64). On this view we argue that current epistemologies persist to sink in a crisis in the modern knowledge system. We then question when the African university epistemologies will be crafted by African scholars with a clear African outlook come into existence? We argue below that there is need for epistemological transformation in the universities in Africa as an anticolonial framework to liberate the social practices of unequal power relations emanating from colonialism and its aftermath.

Towards transformed epistemologies

To argue for transformed epistemologies in the 21st century, from the above, is to speak an anti-colonial discourse by probing the power constructions embedded in ideas, cultures and histories of knowledge production and use in the university. As an "epistemology of the colonized" (Dei, 2002, p. 6), the status quo of the politics of knowledge currently existing in the universities in Africa requires institutions of higher learning to cease to peddle and reproduce, until eternity, the skewed epistemological inequalities between the west and Africa. The paradigmatic hegemony of knowledge norms, with origins in Western societies and their scientific institutions cannot go unchallenged. We support the view that universities in Africa need to liberate knowledge production from narrow class, technical, and instrumentalist dominance by a few foreign experts by moving through to a broader theatre of recognition of other producers of knowledge, which matters in their lives and has validity in their cultural contexts and "...challenge the citadel of Eurocentric paradigms and western 'scientific' epistemologies of knowledge" (Nabudere, 2003, p. 2). The question that interests us most is: how are the links across knowledge landscapes discussed above be conceived and pursued. Conversely, how can new avenues be opened up for transformation plans to reconfigure categories and knowledge practices?

We acknowledge the need for the African university to engage in the "triple agenda of deconstruction, reconstruction and regeneration" to be undertaken at the same time" (Odora-Hoppers, 2002, p. 236) in which an African- centred epistemology would embrace African identity in its outlook by critically considering knowledges from local communities and the inclusion of sages and knowledgeable practitioners therein. By so doing, we argue that a shared knowledge platform of exotic and local knowledges would do away with the "...hierarchical relations or one-way knowledge flows from 'source' to 'user,... from conventional disciplinary gatekeeper to societal audiences (Augusto, 2007, p. 202). Africa should and must do much more to develop its universities as institutions that generate and utilise knowledge and information by decolonising the epistemic and pedagogic realities in higher education. In addition, the 21st century epistemologies in the African university could take the form of a genuine synthesis of all existing endogenous and exogenous knowledges, as a paradigm shift into a newly reconstructed and reconstituted space in which no cultural or social group's knowledge wields more power than others. This could be one way of demonopolising the nature of knowledge and its sources.

The integrative perspective of 21st century African university epistemologies will embrace, among other programs, "inviting academics from abroad for visits with various academic purposes or hosting foreign academics when presenting at academic conferences" (Botha, 2010). We view this as one way of making the African university more global, without diminishing the African imperatives. This view, underlined by the Africanisation of epistemological issues, can be described as

... a process of exposition that the dangerous romance with the politics of knowledge transfer from the North to the South – a romance that does not permit contestations of the politics of knowledge itself nor a contemplation of competing knowledges, a romance that makes a

mockery of the epistemological disenfranchisement that lies beneath the massive poverty of millions of Africa's rural population – must be rendered open to debate and interrogation (Odora-Hoppers, 2005, p. 14).

We however, acknowledge the existence of the ambivalence that manifests itself between the protagonists of the globalisation school and those who foreground the Africanisation of epistemologies in the university. There is a need to strike an honest balance between the African and the non-African in the curriculum. This will discourage unequal partnerships in the knowledge economy by eradicating the possibility of ambushing parties. Such an approach will safeguard an amalgamated epistemology, whose interests are the African consumers of knowledge production and research in the university. It will ensure that Africa and the African come first, before looking to the exportation of the same to the global arena. We confront African scholars and academics on the continent and in the diaspora to admit the complexities of Africanising epistemologies in the university, by distinguishing the key issues germane to the specific context in which the curriculum is to be Africanised (Botha, 2007, p. 214). It is by so doing that the fear to Africanise the academy in the interest of supporting exogenous standards can be removed or at least minimised.

Concluding remarks

The conception of the nature, source and validation of knowledge in contemporary times and the subsequent call for its transformation has made an immense contribution to an understanding of its production, distribution and consumption. In this paper, we interrogated the discourse of the transformation of epistemologies in the postcolonial university by locating the same in the politics of knowledge debate. We noted that political forces, through hierarchies in knowledge order, the reciprocal legitimation of knowledge and power, the transnational division of labour in current knowledge and the commercialisation of knowledge dominate the politics of knowledge dynamics in the African university. We observed how the uneven Eurocentric paradigms and their accompanying scientific epistemologies continue to manifest themselves in African universities much to the disadvantage of the local and the relevant. A clarion call for the Africanisation of knowledge systems in the university by endogenising the academy was made. We dispelled the exaltation of exotic knowledge production techniques and its use by arguing for a knowledge economy in African universities grounded in local and regional traditions and knowledge cultures. However, in line with the moving times of globalization, we acknowledge that epistemologies in the 21st century African universities could transcend the indigenous by synthesizing itself with some pristine elements of knowledge systems to from around the globe although local relevance and priorities take higher preference.

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