



Decolonisation, knowledge construction, and legitimation at African universities in the 21st century: Relevance of François Lyotard

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Abstract

The Fallist movement in South Africa, among other points, called into question the relevance of maintaining aspects of colonial heritage, especially as they relate to knowledge construction at South African higher education institutions. The issues of transformation and knowledge decolonisation also came into the limelight with some students calling for the decolonisation/Africanisation of science as a system of knowledge, hence #ScienceMustFall. These issues can be placed in the wider context of the argument that African centres of learning are founded on colonial epistemologies and forms of education. It is notably a reality that impedes the project of proper transformation and decolonisation at African centres of learning. Utilising desktop methods, this article engages the debate on knowledge decolonisation at African universities in the 21st century. Based on François Lyotard's postmodern views, the article theorises a possible philosophical grounding for knowledge decolonisation. It argues for openness to subjectivity in the enterprise of knowledge construction, and for the integration and mainstreaming of African knowledge systems at African universities.

Keywords: decolonisation, knowledge construction, knowledge legitimation, indigenous knowledge systems, education transformation

Introduction

Today just as in the past, doesn't everything happen as if most of the countries in Africa were irremediably extrovert, the quest for knowledge being organised mainly so as to be able to claim some sort of extracontinental legitimacy? (Ambrose Kom, 2000, para. 1)

Political change in Africa since the era of colonialism has precipitated discussions centring on the themes of decolonisation and postcolonialism. Thinkers like Fanon, Nkrumah, Mamdani, Appiah, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Serequeberhan, among others, have debated several

subjects concerning postcolonial African states including neocolonialism, race, nationalism and nation-building, justice, and decolonisation. These debates and discussions have been aimed at generating theories, and informing policy and praxis towards addressing those elements of colonialism that affect the existence and life of Africans in the postcolonial era. Notably, although some progress has been made in certain postcolonial African states as regards achieving proper decolonisation (which recognises African Indigenous knowledge systems and epistemologies), some African countries are still bogged down in the quagmire of the legacy of colonisation.

In post-apartheid South Africa, some alienating circumstances consequent on colonialism and its legacies are still present and remain problematics that need to be discussed and addressed. The events surrounding the Fallist movement in South Africa revealed the reality of the various forms of alienation experienced by African students at higher education institutions (Schutte, 2019). The Fallist movement did not only call for the physical removal of the reminders of colonial subjugation, but they also called into question the relevance of continually maintaining and perpetuating some aspects of colonial heritage, especially as they relate to knowledge construction at South African higher education institutions. Notably, in 2016 a video that went viral on the internet shows some University of Cape Town (UCT) students arguing a case for the decolonisation/Africanisation of science as a system of knowledge (van Jaarsveldt, et al., 2018). Their argument can be summarised thus, that colonialism/neocolonialism is experienced in the reality that forms of knowledge based on African worldviews are disregarded at South African schools. According to the students, science is, however, given due prominence as an exalted system of knowledge, thus presenting a good case of knowledge imperialism and the perpetuation of colonial heritage at South African schools. Consequently, the students proposed that #ScienceMustFall or that science needs to be “scratched off,” especially in Africa (Henderson, 2016). This call generated lots of debate, with some arguing that it is illogical and ridiculous to call for the dethronement of science which globally, is seen as a body of knowledge deemed to be pervasive, objective, and of great utility.

The above events and demands of UCT students can be placed in the wider argument that African centres of learning are founded on colonial epistemologies and constantly find themselves trying to measure up to and meet the standards of extracontinental (Western modernity) knowledge legitimation (Gwaravanda, 2020; Heleta, 2016; Horsthemke, 2020; Schutte, 2019). They are also inserted into the general local and global debate about what is taught at universities and the relevance of existing curricula to students’ milieu (Sayed et al., 2017). It is argued that maintaining and perpetuating content and curricula based on extra-continental epistemologies (Western modernity and its colonising knowledge systems) hampers any effort by these centres of learning to achieve proper transformation and decolonisation in the form of producing knowledge that is both based on African epistemologies and relevant to the African people. Kom (2000) affirmed this and further, was of the view that “this broadly explains the marginalisation in which any African initiative in the field of knowledge would remain stuck” (para. 11). Considering this problematic, the current study builds on extant literature on these issues and contributes to the debate on

knowledge decolonisation at African universities in the 21st century. Specifically, based on François Lyotard's views on the postmodern condition, the essay primarily theorises on the philosophical basis for knowledge decolonisation and legitimation at African higher education institutions.

Theoretical perspectives: Whose knowledge is it anyway?

Formal education as it exists in African universities is arguably a consequence of colonialism and the history of the Enlightenment construction of knowledge (Bolt & Bezemer, 2009; Horsthemke, 2020).¹ In this, it is taken for granted that knowledge systems, as exemplified in the division of the university space into faculties representing diverse areas of knowledge, is legitimate and the way knowledge should be categorised. What needs to be interrogated is, "How did these divisions come to be?" and, perhaps, the deeper questions should be "Whose knowledge is it anyway?" and "How did we come to have a body of knowledge at African universities taken to be the acceptable body of knowledge?"

This essay, in answering these questions, takes as its point of departure the acknowledgement that knowledge construction as it exists in African universities currently, is a brainchild of the European and Western educational systems (Gwaravanda, 2020; Heleta, 2016; Horsthemke, 2020). This argument is not new and can be garnered from the views of many scholars including Emmanuel Wallerstein (1996, 1999) who have explored knowledge construction at world universities. A narrative that is nuanced needs to be presented here, which will serve as a conceptual framework to understand knowledge construction and divisions existing at universities globally. Secondly, as sequel to the views expressed by Emmanuel Wallerstein, there is a further exploration of a theoretical basis that could ground transformation and knowledge decolonisation at African universities in the 21st century.

Emmanuel Wallerstein: The divorce of the two cultures

In *Social Sciences in the Twenty-First Century*, Wallerstein (1999) traced the history of the construction of knowledge and the emergence of the social sciences. He noted that social science is "not a bounded, autonomous arena of social action" but "a segment of a larger reality, the structures of knowledge of the modern world" (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 42). Hence, to understand and make projections about the social sciences as an area of knowledge in the 21st century, Wallerstein addressed issues within three time frames: "the historical construction, the present challenges, and the plausible future alternatives" (1999, p. 42). And within each time framework, he focused on three aspects: "the structures of knowledge as a whole; the evolution of the university system; and the particular character of the social sciences" (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 42).

1 It is acknowledged that this assertion is debatable considering some evidence to the contrary. On this, Walters et al. (2021, p. 1) have argued that the "present-day education outcomes in Africa cannot be independently attributed to colonial or pre-colonial ethnic institutions; instead, it is the complementarity or contention between colonial and precolonial institutions that result in education outcomes in Africa today."

The historical construction of the social sciences as a body of knowledge is noted to have occurred against the background of a tense framework. This tense framework is the 18th to 19th century epistemological divide between science and philosophy. The epistemological divide resulted in the restructuring of university faculties, establishing science and philosophy as disparate areas of knowledge. Left on its own, social science differentiated itself from the other two cultures by assuming a middle stance and, “having developed no epistemological stance of its own, social science was torn apart by the struggle between the two colossi that were the natural sciences and the humanities, neither of which tolerated a neutral stance” (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 43). But the lease of life for social science came with the late 19th century attacks on the claim of the natural sciences to be a superior form of knowledge because it was able to know the “truth” and the “static” determinate laws that govern the universe. According to Wallerstein (1999, p. 44) “since the late nineteenth century . . . a large group of natural scientists have been challenging the premises of Newtonian science; they see the future as intrinsically indeterminate.” Notably, the attack on Newtonian science for the first time in the then known history of human thought enabled serious consideration of the argument that the social world is inherently uncertain. Against this backdrop, Wallerstein argued:

We shall enter the twenty-first century with considerable uncertainty about the validity of the disciplinary boundaries within social science, and a real questioning for the first time in two centuries about the legitimacy of the epistemological divide between the “two cultures,” and hence the de facto threefold partitioning of knowledge into the three super categories of the natural sciences, the humanities, and the “in-between” social sciences. (1999, p. 45)

Wallerstein further noted that there is one major problem with the issue of divorce between philosophy and science. This resulted in the distinction between the “true” and the “good” with empirical science asserting that it has no “tools to discern what was good; only what was true” (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 45). As a result of this, Wallerstein was of the view that we are not sure “how far we will go in the next twenty-five to fifty years in the project of ‘overcoming the two cultures’” (1999, p. 45) and that “the relative lack of contact between the two movements is not only an organizational problem; it also reflects an intellectual difference” (1999, p. 47). For him,

It is here that social scientists may perhaps be called upon to play a special role’ since they are professionally concerned with and attuned to the problem of establishing normative frameworks, and they have been studying such processes throughout their institutional history. (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 47)

Having situated the emergence of the social sciences in the context of the cultural wars that influenced the construction of knowledge in history, Wallerstein (1999) then focused on how that played out in the universities and how the disciplines created from the two cultures’ distinctions recreated themselves in the universities. On this, he noted:

There are two major forces at play that are undermining the capacity of the existing disciplines to reproduce themselves. The first is the practice of the most active scholars. The second lies in the needs of the controllers of financial resources: university administrators, national governments, interstate agencies, public and private foundations. (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 48)

Considering the above factors, and having explored them focusing on how they affect the construction of knowledge and the social sciences at universities, Wallerstein asked, what is the way forward towards a reconsideration of the university as the “virtually singular locus of the production and reproduction of knowledge” (1999, pp. 48–49)? For the author, this question remains open and it also mirrors the continuing epistemological debate on the divorce between the two cultures. Another interesting question that centres on this debate is how to understand the role that the social sciences will play in the 21st century in light of the possibility of an epistemologically reunified faculty of knowledge. For Wallerstein (1999, p. 49) the role will be a central role “since the reunification . . . involves the acceptance by both the natural sciences and the humanities of some of the long-standing premises of the social sciences, especially the social-rootedness of all knowledge.” He however noted that this would be dependent on what happens in the world system as social reality because, given that social science attempts to talk about what is going on, “it constitutes an interpretation of social reality that at once reflects this social reality and affects it, that is at once a tool of the powerful and a tool of the oppressed” (Wallerstein, 1999, p. 49).

François Lyotard: Knowledge and the postmodern condition

From Wallerstein’s description of the story of the two culture wars, science’s hegemonic claim of knowing the truth of reality is apparent. The claim also presupposes that science has the “appropriate” methods to reach such truth about reality. But the question should be: “What reality?” And again, “Is there only one truth to reality?” Answering these questions credibly is important for theorising on the issues of knowledge and knowledge construction and legitimation as they concern the project of decolonising African knowledge. Perhaps, to help us engage in this debate further and to present a base for the project of decolonising African knowledge systems against the backdrop of imperialist forms of knowledge inherited from colonialism, it is pertinent to look at François Lyotard’s thesis on the postmodern condition.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard (1984) engaged in debate on the conceptualisation of knowledge in the context of a post-industrial society faced with new inventions in communication technology and the new media. For Lyotard, the problematic was “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” (1984, p. xxiii). A central question that emerged from the discourse concerns the issue of knowledge legitimation and, specifically, how so-called scientific knowledge can be legitimated. Lyotard (1984) firstly noted that the area of knowledge in computerised societies was evolving from being an end in itself to a product to be packaged for distribution. This has necessitated the reality that in these computerised societies, to be valuable, knowledge construction and legitimation must toe the line of being able to be formatted into packs of information

adaptable to modern communication systems. This development has brought with it the struggle among developed nations to control this process because knowledge is power and the 21st century understanding of power and who controls it is based on who controls computerised information. Consequently, for Lyotard, the conceptualisation of knowledge in postmodern computerised societies was undergirded by the interlocking forces of power, authority, and government. In this, Lyotard presented a clear link between knowledge and power systems in postmodern societies.

An important aspect of Lyotard's thesis that concerns this essay is the description of the nexus between science, knowledge legitimation, and politics. The issue of science's claim of superiority as a form of knowledge was made analogous to a political claim of authority. Notably, the process of legitimation of science as a body of knowledge was presented as being parallel to political power legitimation—both, for Lyotard, demand an authority figure to determine acceptability and due consideration. This was problematic for Lyotard because the question remained as to who is authorising the authority figure itself. Furthermore, Lyotard wanted us to understand that science is not synonymous with knowledge. The distinction between the two is seen in the fact that while science comprises denotative statements and positivists methodology (observe, repeat, verify), knowledge itself is not limited but comprises uncertainty and flexibility in the process of identifying relationships across subject matters towards presenting some form of good assertions. Hence, narratives become the measure of knowledge competence, in which a narrator is legitimated by the fact of just being the narrator. Furthermore, in postmodern societies, two forms of knowledge exist and they include narrative and scientific. For Lyotard (1984) none of these forms of knowledge can be adjudged to be right, true, or better because of incommensurability—the criteria to measure their aptitude are different. But it is the case that narrative knowledge has been looked down on by the proponents of scientific knowledge based on an apparent inability of narrative knowledge to consider knowledge legitimation as a priority. This is however ironic considering that “scientific knowledge must resort to narratives in order to legitimate itself, as arguments and proofs are merely dialectics” (Lyotard, 1984 as cited in Miemis, 2012, p. 8; see also Woodward, 2020).

Consequently, Lyotard proposed that the task of knowledge legitimation and validation should be with the people/humanity. This is so because “knowledge is valuable insofar as it serves to meet the goals of the collective” [also] “in the post-industrial society the grand narrative is dead” (Lyotard 1984, as cited in Miemis, 2012, pp. 9–10). Science, seen as grand narrative, is also dead since it is the case that “a process of delegitimation was inherent in terms of positive science, as its version of ‘knowledge’ was legitimated by itself ‘by citing its own statements in a second-level discourse,’ and is therefore not true knowledge at all” (Lyotard, 1984 as cited in Miemis, 2012, p. 10). The death of grand narratives in the postmodern world necessitates the rise of other contesting forms of knowledge (little narratives). This supports Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (1984, p. xxiii). In this, knowledge construction should concern itself with change, adapting to change, and generating new ideas not based on scientific/positivist rigid

approaches but approaches that help in meeting the goals of the collective within a context (Lyotard, 1984; Miemis, 2012; Woodward, 2020).

Decolonisation, knowledge construction, and legitimation in African universities in the 21st century

Why should “science fall”? The issue of knowledge imperialism

The above description by Wallerstein allows us to begin to understand that the divisions and categorisations of faculties at universities stem from the conflict between the two cultures. In this, it is easy to understand that knowledge as we have it today, even in African universities, stems from this conflict between the two cultures. African universities seem to have swallowed the end product of the knowledge wars during the Enlightenment era, hook, line, and sinker. The Western trapping of education is notably taken for granted as the real and central form of education, and knowledge construction at African universities has been viewed from the perspective of the disparity between the two cultures. This was established during the colonial era when so-called formal education was introduced to Africa. Suffice to say, the current African university as it stands is a product of the globalising Western education system brought about by the missionaries (Freedman, 2013; Meier zu Selhausen, 2019). Universities in Africa are structured in such a way as to align with the Enlightenment/Western education system and construction of knowledge characterised by the dispute of the two cultures and the subject/object dichotomy (Saayman, 1991). Notably, Hegel has stated that Africa does not have movement or development to show since it is not regarded as a historical part of the world, hence colonialism should be regarded as basically an era of enlightenment (as cited in Mosweunyane, 2013; Wilks, 1971). The enlightenment event has thus informed the construction of knowledge in the schools that the African continent inherited as a legacy from the West through colonialism.

In the Gulbenkian commission’s report entitled, *Open the Social Sciences*, Wallerstein (1996) also looked at the historical issue of the divorce between the two cultures that resulted in the emergence of social science. As a way of improving social science, the report asked that social science be restructured and opened to focus on more areas, and to serve as a unit of reconciliation between the humanities and the natural sciences. Reflecting on this call, Burawoy (2007, p. 137) noted that the Gulbenkian commission’s report

disavowed anachronistic disciplinary divisions, western universalism and methodological positivism, and instead proposed the unification of all scientific knowledge under what it called “pluralistic universalism.” It exposed its own scholasticism, however, in failing to address for whom and for what is scientific knowledge produced.

Against the backdrop of this assertion, we can begin to understand the call for the dethronement of science.

The emergence of science and the claims of science are central to Wallerstein's thesis on the conflict between the two knowledge cultures. The interesting aspect emerging from that discourse is how the natural sciences have claimed superiority in the project of construction of knowledge. The natural sciences claim to have the tool of determining the truth of the universe, which the humanities and social sciences do not have. Science's claim of hegemony as the true form of knowledge is central to the argument of the existence of knowledge imperialism and the subsequent call for its dethronement. This is crucial to understanding the view that knowledge systems inherited from the colonialist are synonymous to imperialist forms of power. The nexus between knowledge and power comes to the fore—here knowledge and power are intertwined and drive home the argument that forms of knowledge existing in African universities are reminiscent of, and perpetuate, colonial and neocolonial forms of knowledge construction. Science, as that body of knowledge, is seen as part of the colonial power system. Here, there is no disparity between the coloniser and the inherited Western tools of knowledge construction. Hence, since science is the brainchild of the Enlightenment era and enlightenment being a Western historical event, people feel that subscribing to the notion of science's superiority is tantamount to subscribing to and upholding colonial power and knowledge structures.

Against the above backdrop, we can understand the call, #ScienceMustFall, by the UCT student activists in South Africa. It is argued that the claim of science as the “know it all” form of knowledge is analogous to the view that Western knowledge systems currently obtainable at African universities are, and should be seen as, the best form of knowledge. It is understood that the claims of science represent knowledge imperialism that can no longer be allowed to be perpetuated at African universities. Moreover, in this, science is understood as a colonial form of knowledge and its exalted position is seen as imperialistic; hence, science needs to be dethroned. This call is perhaps informed and exacerbated by the perception that African Indigenous knowledge systems are looked down on by some scholars as not being legitimate forms of knowledge (Murove, 2018; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). Synonymous with science's positivist claim that knowledge construction needs to be empirical and verifiable (Juma'h, 2006; Turner, 2001), the argument by some anti-African knowledge system thinkers is that African Indigenous knowledge systems are sometimes made up of superstitions, are not empirical, and their methods of verification and legitimation not rigorous enough and hence, cannot be regarded as a credible form of knowledge (Horsthemke, 2004, 2017).

The case for African knowledge systems: The relevance of François Lyotard

A central question on the issue of knowledge construction and legitimation arises: “Whose knowledge is it anyway?” This question is related to François Lyotard's questions: “How do you prove the proof?” or, more generally, “Who decides the conditions of truth?” (1984, p. 29). The question also links to the question: “If science and colonial knowledge systems should claim hegemony of legitimation, who is legitimising the system itself?”

To answer these questions, it is clear from foregoing descriptions that knowledge systems as existing in African universities are inherited from colonial structures. Mamdani (2011, para.

7) affirmed that “the organization of knowledge production in the contemporary African university is everywhere based on a disciplinary mode developed in Western universities over the 19th and 20th centuries.” There are thus forms of neocolonialism existing in the African university system specifically on the issue of knowledge construction, which apparently must work towards external (extracontinental) legitimation in the name of globalisation and knowledge consensus. African universities have adopted the systems of education and knowledge construction that emerged from the Enlightenment cultural wars. Science emerged from that dispute claiming to be the only body of knowledge with an objective (consensus) methodology, a claim that presents the issue of knowledge imperialism. In this, it is seen that as science claims hegemony of being the true form of knowledge, Western and European forms of education have claimed superiority to other knowledge systems. This knowledge imperialist stance is at the crux of the matter and it is then not surprising that the UCT students presented rhetoric that might be termed disparaging to science as a body of knowledge. The call that #ScienceMustFall is arguably an expression of deep-seated revolt against perceived imperialist tendencies of colonial and neocolonial knowledge systems at African universities, which have alienated the African student from being relevant to the African milieu. The desire among the students perhaps, is to posit African knowledge systems as being on equal footing with knowledge systems from elsewhere in the global arena of knowledge construction.

Lyotard’s (1984) argument on the postmodern condition provides a basis for negotiating African knowledge systems. This article argues that, if we agree with Lyotard on the concept of little narratives, we have a basis on which African Indigenous epistemology can have a footing on the global enterprise of knowledge construction. In Lyotard’s view, the method of legitimation used by the sciences becomes obsolete in a postmodern society; instead, what is obtained is *paralogy* as a new canon for knowledge legitimation. In this, against Habermas’s (1987) understanding that conversational questions should lead to consensus, Lyotard was of the contrary view that they should rather lead to paralogy—a process in which the creation of meaning is ongoing (as cited in Shawver, 1998). This is important because it allows knowledge systems like Indigenous African knowledge systems to not force themselves to fit into the parameters of knowledge legitimation as obtained in the so-called unified global knowledge system supposedly grounded on Habermas’s consensus. Paralogy, as proposed by Lyotard, posits a process of ongoing creation of meaning in which there is no claim of any knowledge system to have the hegemony of truth or understanding. For Lyotard, consensus (exemplified by science and enlightenment rhetoric) was just another stage in the conversation and not the end. The conversation is still open and is a dialogical process that requires allowing the views of all stakeholders in the conversation towards the awakening of minds to new ideas and other forms of knowledge (Shawver, 1998).

Arguably, African knowledge systems could find a foundation on Lyotard’s proposal of narratives. Notably, for Lyotard, no form of knowledge can be taken to be right, true, or better because of incommensurability—the difference in criteria to measure their aptitude. Based on this, it can be argued that the suppression of certain African knowledge systems as not able to make the standard of the global knowledge system becomes redundant. This

scenario was represented in Lyotard's assertion that narratives as a form of knowledge are looked down on by proponents of scientific knowledge based on apparent inability of narrative knowledge to consider legitimation as a priority. This is flawed considering that there is no way of positing knowledge legitimation that must be one-size-fits-all. Incommensurability is a real issue.

Knowledge imperialism based on the understanding that there is such a thing as global knowledge system legitimation is not sustainable. Such a conception could be regarded as a grand narrative—a narrative based on the idea of consensus, which tends to negate any other form of knowledge system tending to be outside the stated consensus. For Lyotard (1984), grand narrative was dead and little narrative was of utmost importance. This view perhaps grounds the exultation and positioning of African knowledge systems at African universities. The effort to make certain knowledge systems outside the known global knowledge system (grand narrative) fit in, may result in the alienation of the people from whom such systems originate. This is unfortunate because it is the case that knowledge can only be valuable insofar as it can help people to meet certain goals in their society (Miemis, 2012). Consequently, there is a need that African universities, in their effort to fit into the standards of global university knowledge construction/legitimation rhetoric, should not forget to focus on Indigenous African knowledge systems. These Indigenous knowledge systems in their various forms should constitute the basis for true decolonised curricula at African universities.

Decolonising knowledge in African universities in the 21st century: Some considerations

It will seem that, like every other area of human life in which Africans participate, the continent has subscribed to the notion of *conversational consensus* in the arena of knowledge construction and legitimation.² Ironically, in doing this, the continent has inadvertently been relegated to being consumers not producers of the so-called consensus knowledge (Sawyerr, 1999). Mamdani (2011, para. 31) affirmed this and further asserted that

The assumption that there is a single model derived from the dominant Western experience reduces research to no more than a demonstration that societies around the world either conform to that model or deviate from it. The tendency is to dehistoricise and decontextualise discordant experiences, whether Western or non-Western. The effect is to devalue original research or intellectual production in Africa. The global market tends to relegate Africa to providing raw material (“data”) to outside academics who process it and then re-export their theories back to Africa.

Furthermore, Sawyerr (1999, p. 3) noted that “it takes a considerable leap of imagination to locate much of sub-Saharan Africa within the global village.” This also relates to the issue of the place of Africa in so-called global knowledge construction; it would seem that Africa and

2 It would seem the African continent has agreed with Habermas's (1987) understanding that conversation questions should lead to consensus, which is close ended. It is noted that Lyotard argued against this and proposed the concept of paralogy, which indicates that the process of creation of meaning is ongoing.

African universities have been relegated to the periphery of global knowledge construction. African universities have hence failed to be relevant to the communities around them. Mamdani (1993, p. 11) decried the reality that, “the new post-interdependence African university was triumphantly universalistic and uncompromisingly foreign . . . made no concession to local culture . . . stood as custodians of standard in outpost of civilization.” This reality has arguably produced students who are continually alienated and dissatisfied with the status quo of maintaining colonial knowledge systems at African universities—hence the call to decolonise African universities exemplified in #ScienceMustFall.

Knowledge imperialism and the notion of global knowledge legitimation (as a grand narrative) cannot be continually sustained in the present era. The call to decolonise knowledge at African universities is a valid one. African universities need to go beyond the era of trying to fit into global standards and consensus, forgetting their context in that process. This is not to argue that construction of knowledge and the effort to decolonise knowledge at African universities should take the stance of “throwing away the baby with the bathwater.” Rather, the argument is that, sometimes, trying to fit into the methodology and paradigm used in global knowledge legitimation in the name of consensus may lead to a situation in which the effort to create knowledge relevant to African contexts becomes redundant. As Lyotard saw it, incommensurability is and will always remain the problem. Notably, on this issue, Ashcroft (2000, p. 2) cautioned against accepting “the binary between Europe and Africa. . . . Forms of knowledge generated in the two continents may be different from each other, but they are not incommensurable and they include radical differences of assumption and experience *within* them.” This argument is valid and, in fact, grounds the need to engage the question of possible integration of the different assumptions and experiences of African knowledge systems with those found in other contexts, including Europe. However, the position that the forms of knowledge are different and include radical differences of assumption and experience undergirds the argument that it may be problematic to try to legitimise African knowledge systems using extracontinental standards. It must be argued that there is no way we can credibly divorce forms of knowledge from their origins—knowledge systems are as such identity based and socially constructed (Vindevoghel, 2016). Hence, despite the belief that knowledge is one, and that science is universal, it is the case that the notion of science itself originated from a context (Lloyd, 2000; Wallerstein, 1999). And, as Mamdani (2011, para. 30) validly asked:

If the Enlightenment is said to be an exclusively European phenomenon, then the story of the Enlightenment is one that excludes Africa as it does most of the world. Can it then be the foundation on which we can build university education in Africa?

Knowledge decolonisation in deference of Indigenous knowledge systems is necessary in light of the need to make African universities relevant to the African contexts. The call for knowledge decolonisation (as underscored by the science must fall movement) should not be seen as a call to reduce the quality of education but, rather, a call for relevance. On this, Mamdani (1993) rightly argued that quality and relevance are not mutually exclusive—which is to say that African universities can be made to be relevant to the African context while

maintaining quality of education at these African centres of learning. Knowledge construction at African universities then needs to be dynamic, representing the thoughts of various African indigenous people, and not perpetuating knowledge colonisation through the exultation of extracontinental knowledge systems. To be practical, decolonising knowledge at African universities could take the form of a drastic transformation of methods and pedagogy, and engaging in proper curriculum content reform, taking into consideration African forms of knowledge and worldviews. It should consider a curriculum which, according to Lebeloane (2017, pp. 7–8), addresses and demystifies

The ideologies of class, gender, ethnicity, ethnocide, inequality and race that dominate colonialism to young students in schools. The western view of interpreting and implementing economics, education, law and science will be addressed by interpreting and implemented from an African perspective.

Also, the African worldview of the oneness of creation, for example, could be considered as a point of departure towards reconstructing knowledge that would be useful to understanding African cultures and issues affecting African communities. Lebeloane (2017, p. 8) agreed that “Botho/Ubuntu will be retained and sustained. That includes the retention and advancement of culture, dignity and language. The people will not lose their being which includes their norms and values.” It is here that social sciences can become relevant to the African situation as Mamdani (1993) proposed. This area of study should focus on producing knowledge based on various African Indigenous knowledge systems.

The task of decolonisation of knowledge at African universities in the 21st century would further demand putting in the conditions, and creating autonomous frameworks, for the validation and appropriation of local bodies of knowledge (Kom, 2000). A shift from the Euro- and Western-centric focus of research at African universities to a focus on Afrocentric research is germane to the project of decolonisation of knowledge and African knowledge legitimation. On this, it is important to reiterate Kom’s views on the issue of knowledge and legitimation as they concern research. Kom (2000, para. 9) noted that “It remains nonetheless true that applied research of the Afrocentric type could have set out marker pegs for an African modernity of the sort that can be seen in a good number of Asian countries.” This is an important view considering that a focus on Afrocentric applied research would have encouraged the production of knowledge based on African knowledge systems, as proposed by Mamdani (1993). As alluded to in that assertion, this has helped Asian countries’ progress in establishing Indigenous knowledge systems seen, for example, in the success of Chinese medicine. This could be replicated in the African context if African researchers took the step of not trying so hard to fit into extracontinental standards, and/or engaging in research that seeks extracontinental legitimation.

As already posited, decolonising knowledge at African universities does not have to entail throwing the baby out with the bathwater or creating a knowledge system isolated from the rest of the world. Kom (2000, p. 1) agreed that “the autonomy that is being claimed has nothing to do with a type of intellectual nationalism, confinement or entrenchment in a suicidal isolation.” The challenge one would guess is on the possibility of finding room for

decolonising knowledge at African universities founded on colonial epistemologies and pedagogies. Ashcroft (2000) echoed this challenge in the assertion:

The most intransigent problem to face post-colonial states today is . . . the challenge of re-constructing inherited institutions and practices in a way that adheres to the demands of local knowledges, makes use of the benefits of local practices, and maintains an integrity of self-representation. (para. 1)

Ashcroft (2000) found the solution in two strategies: appropriation and interpolation. In appropriation, the suggestion is that knowledge systems and methods (even extracontinental) could be adapted to local use. In this, dominant technologies of knowledge are adopted and used in ways appropriate to local conditions and aspirations. An example of this is found in the use of literary writing; “Literature, the repository of Universal values, the revelation of the deepest aspects of the human condition, should be required to have some relevance to local societies” (Ashcroft, 2000, para. 2). For example, authors like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o have appropriated and maintained the known forms of literature writing but have proposed the use of local languages, which is the vehicle of cultural dissemination. Furthermore, appropriation leads to interpolation. Through appropriation of extracontinental knowledge systems and methods, postcolonial African societies “are able . . . to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse, to interpolate their own cultural realities, or use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers” (Ashcroft, 2000, para. 22). Summarily, the proposal to decolonise knowledge and to establish legitimate knowledge at African universities is valid, however, it is important also to consider that in the face of growing globalism, Africa cannot isolate itself from the rest of the world in trying to realise this vision. Hence, Ashcroft (2000) further proposed that truly decolonised legitimate African knowledge should be envisaged as knowledge that considers local needs and purposes as important but need not relegate the skills of knowing.

Conclusion

The words of Ambrose Kom, in the epigraph on the issue of African knowledge legitimation, summarise the main issue being tackled in this article. Kom (2000) further asked:

Can legitimation, even scientific, be built up outside the social framework that inspires the research? More fundamentally: are we condemned to stagnate on the periphery, always determining ourselves in relation to other people, unable to picture ourselves in an independent way? (para. 2)

This article tries to answer these questions, placing them in the light of recent developments in South Africa’s higher education sector, which saw students calling for the dethronement of science as a body of knowledge. This article placed the issue in the context of the call to decolonise knowledge in African universities and, indeed, the call to dethrone all forms of colonial imperialism in Africa’s varied arena.

Grounding the argument on the postmodern view in which there is scepticism for grand narratives, and the call to allow little narratives, the article posited that it is time to give space to African knowledge systems. Drawing from Lyotard, it is argued that there should be some openness to a kind of subjectivity in the whole enterprise of studying phenomena and construction of knowledge. On this, Wallerstein rightly asked:

How is it possible to perceive any more general reality than someone's irreproducible photographic snapshot of some momentary part of it . . . how can we measure the impact of the perceiver on the perception. (1999, p. 47)

These questions, if looked at properly, will open one's eyes to the reality that ultimately, there is always subjectivity in the observation of phenomena and the construction of knowledge that results from such observation. Considering this, it is important to assert that understanding phenomena cannot be said to be as according to one area of knowledge, as the natural sciences have claimed. On this, Kom (2000) noted:

Of course, science's calling is the universal. But we now know how closely the universal is linked to ethnocentrism and how much those who have sold us the values of the universal at a very high price have most often set up their own values, not to say their own fantasies, as a universal system. (para. 3)

This echoes Lyotard on the issue of the claim of science in the knowledge production and legitimation discourse. That discourse validates the assertion that there should be space created to allow the interpretation of phenomena from other perspectives, which also means being open to insights from other areas of knowledge.

Consequently, in response to Kom (2000), it must be said that African research does not have to stick to the pathways mapped out by colonial or neocolonial experts, and satisfying extracontinental knowledge needs. African knowledge production cannot be allowed to stagnate on the periphery but should be positioned at the centre and be able to picture itself in an independent way. It cannot be that African universities should keep maintaining the status quo of knowledge production and legitimation as inherited from colonial education systems prevalent at African universities. There should be a move to a focus on observation and description of phenomena as they relate to African contexts. In so doing, debates and academic voices at African universities will no longer be muted around the major problems that face the African society as decried by Blade Nzimande, former South African Minister of Higher Education (Pillay, 2011). Hence, the case for decolonising knowledge and striving for knowledge systems and research with an Afrocentric focus is valid. The views posited by thinkers like Mamdani, Kom, Ashcroft, among others, provide insights on how to realise these at African universities.

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