

African Renaissance, coloniality and the quest for a polycentric global epistemology.

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Abstract

The idea of an African renaissance as a quest for the rebirth and regeneration of Africa provides an opportunity to think differently and otherwise about Africa particularly within the context of what seems to be unrelenting challenges facing the continent. This work locates the need for an African renaissance within the broader emancipatory vision in which colonial vestiges give way to African reawakening and self-redemption. In this work we conceive the 'return to the past' as a return to initiative and select the critical reappropriation and reaffirmation of the indigenous forms of knowing as our focus of analysis. In the spirit of inter-philosophical dialogue, the work examines how reappropriation as an aspect of the African renaissance can help us move towards the realisation of a polycentric global epistemology- a world in which many epistemic traditions can coexist. Relying on arguments in philosophy of liberation, the work is an attempt to theorise on modernity and the politics of knowledge in postcolonial Africa and to examine how Africa can contribute towards the growth of a truly global knowledge landscape.

Introduction

In his essay entitled *Formulating modern thought in African languages: some theoretical reflections*, Wiredu (1996, p. 104) concluded the discussion with the following statement: "conceptually speaking, the maxim of the moment should be 'African, know thyself'." We wish to adopt this maxim to serve both as a rallying call for Africans in the academy concerned about knowledge generation and also as a guiding framework for the philosophical argument to be pursued in this essay. While Wiredu's focus was on the need to develop greater awareness on the conceptual framework of our African languages in order to see how they can transform into instruments for the transmission of 'modern' and 'advanced knowledge', his call for the 'African, to know thyself' remains as crucial as ever given the ongoing quest by Africa to reposition herself within the global community of nations. The question of an African renaissance is a subject that so much has been said already from academic, political and journalistic perspectives but it continues to seize us partly because of its ideological significance to postcolonial Africa and also because it still lies ahead in the sense that it is an ideal yet to be realised. While an African renaissance remains to be realised, the seeds of its origination were sown in what Ngugi wa Thiongo (2012, p. 1520) calls 'the African idea', that sort of consciousness which helped organise Africans across the continent in their fight for independence, that is, Pan-Africanism. African renaissance as a quest for the rebirth and regeneration of Africa is in a way an effort at

remembering and re-membering Africa. '(Re)membering'¹ Africa, involves a process that attempts to reverse or undo the dismembering Africa suffered, from slave trade, the partition of Africa, through to colonisation and the subsequent subordination of its peoples for years. The processes of (re)membering Africa can assume various modes and forms which in their diversity constitute the essence of African renaissance. African renaissance as a vision attempts to realise the ultimate (re)membering in the sense of an economic, political, cultural, psychological and epistemic rehabilitation of the being of the African. We emphasise the being of the African because we are aware of coloniality, a condition that continues to define the African existentially and epistemically. Revitalising and reawakening the African past is one way of restoring that memory which was disrupted by colonialism.

In this work we limit ourselves to examining how the African renaissance, as a return to initiative, can help move us closer to the realisation of a polycentric global knowledge landscape through the critical reappropriation of indigenous knowledges. Memory of the past, restoration of its intellectual heritage as defined and dictated by the context and needs of the present, is crucial in the process of '(re)membering Africa'- that attempt to render Africa alive once again in order to transform it into a significant player in global imaginations. There is need for Africa to liberate memory by reconstructing history and realise epistemic justice. As Mignolo (2012) argued, memories are the foundation of political visions and decisions, they are a way of being in the world, of building, maintaining, transmitting and consolidating identity that imperial histories taught colonised peoples to despise (para. 8). Without memory there is no African renaissance. In general terms, to remember from Latin *rememorari*, meaning to recall to mind (Online etymology dictionary), is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present. This work examines the African renaissance project within the context of reclaiming African epistemic historicity by arguing for the need to make indigenous knowledges part of the continuous and living memory of its peoples and in the process re-inscribing Africa and its forms of knowing into the ongoing global conversations on knowledge. This is not an attempt to return to the past, but to re-inscribe the past in the present towards the future (Mignolo, 2011, p. 49). We are convinced that the assumption about 'the psychic unity of mankind'- a nineteenth century label that is quaint but still in use- which claims that all human groups are truly human in their thinking apparatuses, and therefore broadly similarly in their ability to invent and innovate, (Blaut, 1993, p.12) has credence although it was denied by those who championed the view that there is only one centre for knowledge generation, creativity and innovation. An important rejoinder to those who deny African historicity and initiative is the simple reminder that not so long ago, that is before Western imperialism and colonisation of other continents, the world order was polycentric boasting of different centres of knowledge each suited to the needs of their respective communities. In this work we argue that an African renaissance, as that project which seeks to reconnect

¹ I make use of the term (re)membering to combine the concepts of remembering and re-membering borrowed from the work of Ngugi wa Thiongo's 'Re-membering Africa' in which he describes an effort to reclaim and make good that which was dismembered through the processes of slavery and colonisation.

the African knowing subject to the epistemological traditions inherent in Africa, remains important for postcolonial Africa. It holds the promise not only for African epistemic liberation but also for addressing existential challenges facing postcolonial Africa in general.

African renaissance

Historically, calls for the regeneration and rebirth of Africa are not new because the restoration of Africa and African humanity are issues that have always defined African politics and the ideological visions of most of its leaders. As correctly noted by Zeleza (2009, p. 155), every so often in our history African leaders and thinkers rediscover and reaffirm the future, a future depicted in terms of renewed hope such as African reawakening, rebirth, renewal, reconstruction, revival, and renaissance among others. What drives this yearning for rebirth is the realisation that Africa is not what it ought to be in the first place. Centuries of slavery and colonial subjugation and the subsequent political independence have created a strong desire in the sub-consciousness of Africans that the conditions that Africa was forcibly plunged into by Europe should change. Africa must find itself once again. There is no doubt that the overriding hope is for a new beginning, for Africa's modern cruel history to pause and change course (Zeleza, p.155). However, the idea of an African renaissance is one that continues to elicit so many opinions and the views expressed can be generally classified into three categories: (i) Those out-rightly dismissive of the idea who are identified as Afro-pessimists who are quick to point out, of course with plenty of empirical examples, that Africans have demonstrated to the whole world how difficult it is for them to govern themselves and manage their economies since independence for anybody to believe that there can be any bright future for the continent. (ii) Another equally sceptical group is one that sees no real benefit in entertaining the idea of renaissance simply because it not only serves to derail progress by shifting people's attention from dealing with real issues of the here and now by dreaming of a glorious past that Africa cannot return to and for which they even express profound doubt it ever existed. (iii) And then there is the optimistic group who in their analysis of history, politics and the contemporary world order, see reason in believing that Africa can come together and make its own mark in the unfolding project of human civilisations by reconnecting with itself once again. This last group of theorists is driven by an eclectic patchwork of philosophies such as dewesternisation, demarginalisation, Africanisation, and decolonial thinking. The main argument of this last group is that there is still, in existence, conditions that warrant a new coming together of Africa in order to realise true liberation and to become a significant player on the world platform. In fact, a renaissance is still a possibility because the conditions that made Pan-Africanism possible in the 18th and 19th centuries have not disappeared completely but they have simply assumed new and disguised forms (More, 2000, p. 76) and they still need to be struggled against. The same problems that prompted the rise of Pan-Africanism and its cry for freedom still persist under new banners of neo-colonialism and globalisation and with the same logic of coloniality. Poverty, inequality, sexism, discrimination, and other dehumanising experiences that were the reason for the rallying call for independence are still part of what defines Africa and these can be blamed on both poor leadership in Africa and globally on the colonial matrix of power. These problems require a new galvanising vision and dream capable of replicating the passion and solidarity that united Africa against

colonialism in yesteryears. This is the gap African renaissance can fill. Africa can only realise and reawaken its potential when enough energy is directed at confronting issues of governance internally as well as addressing effects of the colonial matrix of power at the global level.

The colonial matrix of power, a focus of those who advocate decolonial thinking in all its diverse forms, is described by Mignolo (2011, p.142) as “that complex conceptual structure that guided actions in the domain of economy (exploitation of labour and appropriation of land and natural resources), authority (government, military forces), gender/sexuality, and knowledge/subjectivity.” It involves four interrelated domains namely control of the economy, of authority, of gender and sexuality, and of knowledge and subjectivity (Mignolo, 2011, p. 8). Decolonial thinking seeks to deal with this problem created by modernity which constitutes its darker side called coloniality. Coloniality is described as a condition that outlasts decolonisation and refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism and are maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). As modern subjects, Maldonado-Torres (2007) argues, we breathe coloniality all the time. It is within this context of the persistence of coloniality both as a condition of African existence and as an extension of colonial power beyond decolonisation that the significance of a true African renaissance can be understood.

Broadly conceived the African renaissance can be seen as an attempt by Africa to come to terms with itself and its own past within the context of a colonial modernity that has always sought to cast Africa as the opposite other of modernity. As Ki-Zerbo (1991, p. 3) in the general introduction to the *UNESCO History of Africa* argues, “unless one chooses to live in a state of unconsciousness and alienation, one cannot live without memory, or with a memory that belongs to someone else.” It is true that Africa is still in crisis and is struggling to emerge from the shadow of colonialism and for that reason an African renaissance remains a viable option in terms of thinking of its future. Much focus should therefore be on how this dream and vision can be transformed into reality to constitute an effective organising philosophy capable of translating passion into action. As correctly pointed out by Lissouba (as cited in Legum, 2000, p. 67) “the idea of Africa in charge of its own destiny- on an equal footing with the rest of the world and making its contribution to the reconstruction of a world civilisation- can only be based on great passion. Passion is what provides the energy needed for an idea to take shape.” Legum (2000) reminds us of how “the Encyclopaedists who shaped the French revolution, dreamt of the ‘equality of man’ and their natural born rights at a time when feudal Europe was ruled by despotic kings and selfish aristocratic class” (p.67). Today what they dreamt of is what the modern generation regards as the defining character and nature of western society but at the point of their dream many should have dismissed those views as wild or unrealisable. The same should be true about African renaissance and it is precisely for this reason that Africa should be allowed to dream on. Not every idea that has transformed societies historically is built on facts and truth. In his discussion on memory in history, Mazrui (2000) touches on a

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fundamental aspect of how memories are created or invented in history, including nationalistic memories. For Mazrui (2000, p. 89), it is true that “European imperialism in Africa played havoc with African memory - initiating new forms of amnesia, nostalgia and false memories” out of which a false but positive memory responsible for the birth of Pan-Africanism was created. Mazrui (2000, p. 97) submits: “Pan-Africanism was born out of the false memory of a pre-colonial united Africa, divided by imperialism. This Pan-African false memory is positive. Within it there may lie the seeds of Africa’s economic and political salvation.” Reinvigorating this Pan-African spirit directed at economic freedom can trigger a true renaissance for Africa. In the same way identities are known to flourish despite their roots in myths and falsehoods (Appiah, 1992, p. 187), we see no reason why rallying calls for an African renaissance cannot also feed from the so-called faulty ideology of *romantic gloriana*- a memory of Africa that glorifies African achievements before the arrival of the colonisers. Utopian dreams can be the cause of positive action. Legum (2000) reminds us that only those who are unfamiliar with political history scoff at romanticism because those who don’t dare to dream have no glimpse of what the future holds. It is probably true that Africa feels strongly about what it can bring to the table and that history will absolve it one day that the momentum about a renaissance which others have dismissed as utopian continues to grip different generations of Africa. If the current world order has been in place since 1500, then probably by this measure of time, Africa should not be judged harshly for remaining hopeful about a renaissance given that the last country to attain independence from colonial rule on the continent has only experienced about twenty years of that freedom. Therefore, collectively, it is because of time and the continued existence of a world order that glorifies capitalism and thrives on coloniality, which by themselves are very strong forces, that Africa has not achieved much in getting to where it ought to have been in the first place. This is not in any way to ignore the facts on the ground about Africa’s own predatory elite and political dictatorships that have become arguably worse than oppressors of yesteryear. There is no doubt that since attaining independence and with proper and committed leadership, Africa could have made significant strides in the restoration of human dignity and in countermanding coloniality.

The myth of emptiness

In this work we maintain that the African renaissance initiative urges us to take seriously the continued effects of the historic “myth of emptiness” (Blaut, 1993, p. 15) upon which colonisation and subordination of Africans and other indigenous peoples across the world was premised. According to Blaut (1993) the “myth of emptiness” served as the pretext for the whole colonial project. From the proposition of emptiness a series of claims were made: (i) A non-European region is empty or nearly empty of people (hence settlement by Europeans does not displace any native peoples). (ii) The region is empty of settled population: the inhabitants are mobile, nomadic, wanderers (hence European settlement violates no political sovereignty, since wanderers make no claim to territory). (iii) The cultures of this region do not possess an understanding of private property- that is, the region is empty of property rights and claims (hence colonial occupiers can freely give land to settlers since no-one owns it). And finally, and more importantly, is an emptiness of intellectual creativity commonly referred to as the absence of rationality (Blaut, 1993, p.

15). These excuses which constituted the basis of title to territory and subsequent alienation of others from their land and resources remain thorny issues in postcolonial states where questions have been raised on whether Africa can achieve a renaissance without first dealing with the adverse effects of the “myth of emptiness” such as inequality through such things like land redistribution for instance. In other words, debate still rages on whether a true African renaissance can be achieved without redressing colonial imbalances particularly those relating to land and access to resources by the majority of indigenous peoples in Africa. It is for this reason that the land reform program of Zimbabwe has continued to polarise opinion particularly between those who theorise about politics and the economy from the modern liberal capitalist perspective and those who advocate a re-reading of these two through decolonial perspectives- those whose analysis proceed from a vision of life and society based on the cessation of coloniality. Mignolo (2011, p. 52) defines decoloniality as long term processes involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power that should ultimately create conditions for a new humanity to emerge. While acknowledging the controversial modus operandi and all forms of human rights abuses connected to the land reform program in Zimbabwe, it could be argued that the program in the way it unfolded with its militaristic undertones, was a true re-enactment of colonial conquest and its logic of usurpation: ‘to the victor belong the spoils’. It was through the same logic and mentality that Africa was parcelled out to various settler powers as spoils for their conquest of the continent. For postcolonial Africa, the ‘myth of emptiness’ and ‘the centre-periphery model’, are two theories whose ramifications are serious and long-lasting. Much energy has been expended on historical reconstruction largely in response to the theory of emptiness and also as a way of correcting the perceived distortions on the story of human civilisations.

In the domain of knowledge the myth of emptiness was further buttressed by the scriptocentric fallacy, a position that sees writing as the norm and equates absence of writing with illiteracy or ignorance. According to Miller (1990, p. 68) the term illiteracy imposes a negative judgment and prevents one from thinking, in positive or at least neutral terms of orality that is, concerning those non-literate verbal arts and forms of expression that sustained cultures for centuries before modern forms of writing came along. Kadiatu (1998, p. 19) also observed that “the diagnosis of illiteracy upon another society points directly towards a ‘scriptocentric’ worldview which marks a state of ‘orality’ as a state of nature.” The ascription of illiteracy was often politically motivated as it located those communities designated as such as occupying a blank and negative space outside history. It was appropriate and politically expedient for the anthropologist as a colonial agent to postulate the absence of ‘text’ in traditional Africa. In this way the absence of text became indicative of the absence of self-consciousness or even of self-knowledge which the ethnographer is then able to create and to donate to the subjects of her analysis (Kadiatu, 1998, p. 18). This was indeed part of the larger conspiracy to exclude Africans and other indigenous peoples from the human group and confine them to the sub-human category or what Grosfoguel (2012) calls the zone of non-being. Only those people in the zone of being have their humanity socially recognised.

In his *Of Grammatology* Derrida (1967) seems to have dealt a blow to the scriptocentric argument when he put forward an argument to address the problem of binaries of speech versus written, presence versus absence, written versus oral. Derrida redefined and broadened the concept of writing in a way undermining the supposed distinction between literate and oral cultures. Derrida's definition of writing goes beyond writing as ordinarily understood and in its restricted graphematic sense to include speech. Derrida argues that it is impossible to conceive of spoken language without structure, without system, conventions, parts of speech, grammar, tenses, codes, systems of relationships and difference (see Christopher Norris, "Derrida and Orality Revisited" "n.d"). As argued by Norris, for Derrida writing is therefore in some sense prior to speech, not in the historical, chronological or diachronic sense, but prior in the sense that spoken language presupposes the possibility of writing. In other words the potential of writing, along with many of its structural characteristics, is built into the very nature of spoken language from the outset. Derrida gave the concept of writing a far broader and more general sense to the point where writing - as *archi-écriture* or a kind of proto-writing-becomes pretty much co-existent with every culture (see Christopher Norris). Equally significant is Ngugi wa Thiongo (2013)'s analysis of the relation between the tongue and the pen in which he stresses the primacy of the spoken word by asserting "the pen imitates the tongue. The pen is clerk to the tongue. It draws pictures of the spoken. The pen speaks the already spoken (p. 159)." For Ngugi wa Thiongo (2013), if we are to develop knowledge, philosophy and all the other arts in Africa and through African languages then we have to listen to the African tongues and what they are saying. Our intention here is not to enter into the debate on orality and writing but to illustrate that within philosophy there are arguments that have been put forward that in essence debunk the myth of emptiness premised on the assumed absence of written discourse. Commenting on the status of indigenous knowledges in contemporary society, Hountondji makes the following important observation. According to Hountondji (2002a, p. 24), "indigenous knowledge has not entirely disappeared from collective memory. It has not lost any parcel of its age-old efficiency either." An African renaissance in the area of knowledge is therefore possible if dialogue and mutual synthesis can take place between the indigenous and Western traditions of knowing under some form of transcontinental epistemic dialogue. The attempt to discredit the indigenous and champion the western forms of knowledge serves only to perpetuate the 'myth of emptiness' as originally conceived by its Eurocentric protagonists. In order to answer to this recurrent yearning for an African renaissance- that desperate and determined battle to reclaim African humanity and historicity- the war must be waged on many fronts including of course knowledge generation.

'African know thyself'

The injunction which serves as our subheading, while borrowed from Wiredu, is apparently a derivation from the famous saying 'know thyself' attributed to Socrates, although those like George James who have engaged in projects of African historical reconstruction have openly contested that ascription. For George James (1954, p. 4) "know thyself" was a common inscription on Egyptian mystery temples addressed to Neophytes and for that reason he disagrees with the popular attribution. However, it is not our intention to rekindle

debate on this controversial issue except to highlight the philosophical context of the subheading here selected. The injunction 'African know thyself' is for us crucial for two reasons. First, it defines in a fundamental way the immediacy or urgency of an African renaissance as that programme whose realisation affords Africans an opportunity to reconnect with their memory or intellectual history and henceforth provide the impetus needed to achieve historical reconstruction. Second, and equally important, the phrase is a call to Africans in various spheres of the academy to revitalise African modes of knowledge production on the continent. It is a call for epistemic re-awakening so fundamental to modern Africa if it is to escape the thralls of coloniality. Of course the second is related to the first in that it is what ought to drive and inform the renaissance. In one of his articles, Taiwo (1993) discusses the problem of the stunted development of modes of knowledge production in Africa and identifies colonialism, and particularly its systems of exclusion, as one of the problems. It is in those aspects of African history excluded by modernity, that is, in those aspects located on the other side of modernity, that most of Africa's own history can be found. Dussel (2009, p. 514) argues that European modernity has impacted cultures throughout the world through colonialism. As it extracted resources and information it also discarded or actively destroyed that which it could not absorb. On the other side of modernity are those cultural aspects and traditions that were discarded, devalued and judged useless by colonial modernity. But the ultimate exclusion of all was the exclusion of Africans and other indigenous peoples of the world from the membership of humanity as defined by modernity and its Enlightenment reason. As poignantly noted by Maldonado-Torres (2007), from that famous statement which serves as the ultimate crowning of being in modernity, that is, Descartes' 'cogito ergo sum', the 'I think therefore I am', a number of conclusions on the nature of the Other located on the underside of modernity can be drawn. Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 252) submitted, "the 'I think, therefore I am' presupposes two unacknowledged dimensions. Beneath the 'I think' we can read 'others do not think', and behind the 'I am' it is possible to locate the philosophical justification for the idea that 'others are not' or do not have being. In this way we are led to uncover the complexity of the Cartesian formulation. From 'I think, therefore I am' we are led to the more complex and both philosophically and historically accurate expression: 'I think (others do not think, or do not think properly), therefore I am (others are-not, lack being, should not exist or are dispensable)." It was by virtue of this exclusion that the being of the African, including their knowledge and technologies that had sustained life for centuries was denied and discarded as obsolete.

Whereas the march towards modernity in Europe made imperative the preservation of monuments, knowledges, and identities that came before, the same principle was not applied to African monuments, knowledges, identities and other human achievements in the period preceding the colonial encounter (Taiwo, 1993, p. 898). Why was this so? The answer for us lies in the African's denied ontology. We agree with Taiwo (1993)'s submission that "if Africans had been considered human in the first place, it would have been unnecessary to exclude them from the march of history and from the gains that humanity made up till the time of the colonial encounter, especially those regarding respect for persons and human rights (p. 898)." Herein lies Africa's problem, their exclusion from the

category of human beings, a move that served as the pretext for conquest and subordination. However, what many have asked is “how could the same European modernity and Enlightenment that promoted ‘precious ideals like the dignity of persons’ also be so intimately and inextricably implicated in slavery and the colonial project?” (Eze, 1997, p. 12). It is the existence of this duplicity which highlights what we may rightfully call, in the words of Mignolo (2011) ‘the darker side of Western modernity’. The roll out of modernity and the whole Enlightenment project and its successes were driven by slavery, the subordination and derogation of the colonised Other. Rather than being merely conceived as a return to the past and a hankering for what will never be, in the mode expressed by Afro-pessimists, we conceive the call for an African renaissance as in and of itself a call to re-engage with modernity from the African standpoint - from the position of so-called peripheral peoples and their epistemologies. In this sense our African renaissance can be conceived in the same mould as Dussel (2009)’s vision of trans-modernity. Dussel (2009, p. 514), defines trans-modernity as a task whose point of departure is that which has been discarded and devalued by modernity and a project that involves the development of the potential of those cultures and philosophies that have been ignored, upon the basis of their resources, in dialogue with European and North American modernity. The African renaissance therefore, becomes for us, a project that seeks to foreground African modernity going forward in African modes of knowing and experiences. It becomes a project coterminous with the restitution of positive memories and a sense of being for the Africans. It involves, in epistemic terms, reconnecting the African knowing subject to the epistemological traditions inherent in Africa in order to make possible an African articulation of knowledge. It is for this reason that we proceed to argue for the critical reappropriation of indigenous knowledges as integral to African modernity.

In his article entitled ‘Ancestors and Archaeology in Africa’ Schmidt (2010) makes a fundamental point concerning how in Africa those living today should relate to the historical past. For us indigenous knowledge and its place in Africa today can be analogised to the relationship between the living and their ancestors. In the same way present generations are biologically connected or indebted to the ancestors, modern knowledge in Africa today remains vacuous without a similar indebtedness or connection to indigenous knowledge as the DNA from which it takes its form and identity. Highlighting the importance of our past (herein referred to as ancestors) Schmidt (2010, p. 62) declares, “we are dependent upon the ancestors and that ancestors are active agents in our lives and other lives. They are us; they passed on their DNA, our characters, and our deep-time cultural history; they are forever our teachers.... We can either incorporate the ancestors or we can continue to erase the spiritual world from archaeology (in this case indigenous knowledge), proclaiming that science has all the answers and that the future has no past.” In epistemic terms, there is no question that if we as Africans discard that which is from our past, our intellectual history, we have discarded the DNA that makes our knowledge African going forward and hence we have lost who we are and cannot therefore know ourselves. Kaphagawani and Malherbe (2002, p. 220) rightfully so, argued “although epistemology as the study of knowledge is universal, the ways of acquiring knowledge vary according to the socio-cultural contexts within which knowledge claims are formulated and articulated. It is from such

considerations that one can sensibly talk of an African articulation and formulation of knowledge, and hence of an African epistemology.” In contemporary Africa, as a result of reasons related to our colonial past, the DNA that affords African knowledge its identity is slowly being lost. This is the reason why the critical reappropriation of Africa’s knowledge traditions is important for the African renaissance project. For the ‘African to know thyself’ there is need to strengthen efforts that reconnect Africans to their indigenous knowledge traditions and transform that knowledge to constitute part of the modern knowledge complex. There is no way one can leave an African imprint on modern knowledge without taking seriously knowledge traditions and modes of articulation inherited from the past which, as Hountondji (2002a) correctly noted, are still available but remain relegated to the private realm as informal knowledge outside the official knowledge sector.

Renaissance and polycentricism

Before 1500 the world order was polycentric and non-capitalist. After 1500 the world order entered into a process in which polycentrism began to be displaced by an emerging monocentric civilisation (Mignolo, 2011, p. 28).

This monocentric civilisation is western civilisation which is coterminous with modernity. The historical allusion above is important in that it gives us a sense of what the world order was like before the planetary whirlwind of change that installed the West as the only centre around which everything should revolve. The call for an African renaissance, if understood within this framework, is a desire for the restoration of parity between the recognition of civilisations across the world as was historically the case. To dream of such a world is indeed understandable for Africa because it appears to be the only world in which true humanity can be realised. African renaissance in this case is an attempt to restore African agency and also a “reaffirmation of the thesis that the African experience can be and should be the primary source from which to draw concepts to understand and interpret its politics, history, and philosophy” (Ramose, 2000, p. 53). In the domain on knowledge, this historical picture only reminds Africa of the need to re-assume its position as a centre for the construction, generation and distribution of knowledge. As we reflect on issues of knowledge, we derive solace from the fact that despite centuries of marginalisation and neglect indigenous knowledge still exists although it does so as the informal sector as opposed to the formal sector of knowledge. It exists in the margins and shadow of the modern scientific knowledge which is western. Hountondji (2002a) succinctly captured the prevailing knowledge situation in most of Africa in the following submission:

What we witness today is a situation where indigenous knowledge is marginalized. In the best cases, it goes its own way, side by side with the new knowledge system, in a relationship of mute juxtaposition and mutual ignorance, exclusive of all dialogue and exchange (p. 24).

The question that naturally follows is how can this problem of ‘mute juxtaposition’ ‘mutual ignorance’ and ‘lack of dialogue or exchange’ between knowledge traditions extant today in Africa be resolved? Our answer lies in the critical reappropriation of indigenous knowledges

and their integration into the modern forms of knowledge. Reappropriation of the indigenous knowledge entails engaging in a systematic process of sifting from the past those practical, theoretical and normative frameworks, and ideas, that can provide solutions to challenges of the present. As Hountondji argued, reappropriation does not seek to replace or do away with Western forms of knowing nor is it some kind of imprisonment into the particular, but it is simply an attempt to utilize our African ancestral heritage and the creativity, adaptability, and ability to innovate what made our ancestors what they were (Hountondji, 2002b, p. 507). The intellectual heritage from the past has to be subjected to the necessary processes of critical assessment, testing and updating so that the knowledge is capable of answering to our present needs and requirements.

For Hountondji (2002a, p. 37), “we must find ways to reformulate traditional knowledge in terms of imported knowledge and, vice versa, we must integrate the traditional into the modern in a way that allows the development of new forms of rationality, enlarged and more comprehensive than the forms prevailing.” But in order for that reappropriation to commence there is need to change our attitude towards the African past in several respects. This is where the question of African languages and their place in generating knowledge becomes important. We shall not delve deeper into the question of language in this work as it is an issue that so many scholars on the politics of language have seriously dealt with although it may be important to acknowledge that because of the language policy in Africa which continues to favour colonial languages, attaining intellectual self-determination will forever remain difficult. This is the point that Brock-Utne (2001) argues forcefully in her work with the telling title - ‘Education for all- in whose language?’ in which she surveys and highlights the pitfalls of most language policies in education across postcolonial Africa. For Brock-Utne (2001, p. 120) even the concept ‘education for all’ a much sought after ideal in postcolonial Africa becomes a completely empty concept if the linguistic environment of the basic learners is not taken into account. The reality is that without restoring African languages to their rightful place in the academy there is no attaining ‘education for all’ and without ‘education for all’ there is, by extension, no African renaissance. There is no doubt that foreign languages constitute barriers to the attainment of knowledge in Africa and if Africa has to transform itself from a consumer to a generator of knowledge then strengthening its indigenous languages is not an option. In order to confront the effects of the ‘myth of emptiness’, and revitalise knowledge generation in Africa, indigenous languages must drive the policy of ‘education for all in Africa’. Of course this will never be easy because the question of language is always about power. As Brock-Utne (2001, p. 118) correctly points out the choice of a language of instruction in Africa is a choice that may redistribute power not only at the global level but also locally between the elites and the masses. Educating people through their own language makes knowledge accessible and translates in reality to ‘power to the people’ a feat that a good number of those in power in Africa cannot tolerate. It is equally imperative that due to the challenge of marketing books produced in these indigenous languages and the subsequent effect on the bottom line, African governments cannot rely on private publishers in this regard but they should take a conscious decision themselves to provide funding for such programmes in the same way they allocate budgetary support to other sectors for national development.

In much of postcolonial Africa governments could do well to take a leaf from early Christian initiatives under the so-called civilising mission in Africa. By translating the Christian Bible into various language vernaculars spoken by the indigenous peoples themselves, the missionaries were able to render the foreign Christian religion part of the African life. To this day it is not uncommon to hear African elders claim unequivocally that ‘in our tradition we are Christians and we live by the teachings of our Bible’. “Contrary to the possible intentions of some Western missionaries, the use of African languages in the evangelisation of Africa transferred the initiative to African converts, who could take possession of the Christian tradition in ways never envisaged by the original messengers” (Brand, 2011, p. 180). In other words, the point that we seek to underscore is that it was because of the close attention paid to the linguistic context by astute missionaries of yesteryear that many Africans are able to claim ownership of Christianity today. If this gesture was to be extended to other fields such as science then it is possible to envisage a future in which Africans can come to ‘own’ modern scientific knowledge once the linguistic barriers are broken. Revitalising African languages will undoubtedly champion the return of the knowing subject in the process laying the foundation for a true African renaissance. There is no doubt that an African renaissance ought to accord primacy to the African experience while at the same time opening up alternative modes of comprehending reality consistent with the diversity that characterises humanity. This, if extended to all cultures, will ultimately lead to the emergence and subsequent growth of a polycentric global epistemology.

Polycentrism rejects the coloniser’s model of the world where the world has a ‘permanent centre and a permanent periphery, an inside and an outside, where the inside leads and innovates while the outside lags and imitates’ (Blaut, 1993, p. 14). Mignolo (2011) reminds us that traditionally the world was polycentric until other centres of knowledge were displaced by a monocentric civilisation developed by the West for the rest. But since some of those traditions were merely displaced but not completely destroyed their rebirth or revival is still a possibility. According to Mignolo (2011, p. 29) “Western civilisation emerged not just as another civilisation in the planetary concert, but as the civilisation destined to lead and save the rest of the world from the Devil, from barbarism and primitivism, from underdevelopment, from despotism, and to turn unhappiness into happiness for all and forever.” There is no doubt that modernity or western civilisation has transformed lives in a manner previously unthinkable to humanity but questions remain on whether it has delivered ‘happiness for all and forever’. Is contemporary society not blaming the current crises of global warming, poverty, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the global economic crisis, and terrorism on it? Few would disagree. An African renaissance promises to open up horizons of knowledge and knowing kept hostage by modernity and in the process contribute to the creation of a polycentric global knowledge landscape consisting of ‘a polylogue of a variety of mutual epistemological others’ (Maffie, 2009, p. 60). Polycentrism imagines a future in which many knowledges can coexist without presuming that there is a single and best way for all humans to live or know nature (Maffie, p. 63). It is through the rebirth and subsequent reinstallation of Africa as a producer of knowledge alongside other centres across the world that will help transform the world into a truly global knowledge landscape. Within the African renaissance project lies the potential for epistemic liberation, a condition that has potential to open up horizons for dialogue across cultures free of any

hegemonic tendencies. The imaginary coming together of all humanity in celebration of its achievements has always been and remains an important aspect of the African renaissance dream.

Conclusion

Although the idea of an African renaissance raises mixed feelings not only in Africa but also outside, the reality that Africa is still in crisis despite sitting on some of the richest resources in the world, renders the thought of such a rebirth not only appropriate but urgent. In this work we selected epistemic liberation as one mode of achieving a renaissance for Africa. To 'know thyself' the African has to reconnect with the memory that makes constructing an African epistemic history and identity possible. In the domain of knowledge this entails preserving, strengthening and passing on the DNA inherent in indigenous African knowledge and forms of knowing as part of the modern scientific knowledge that pervades our society. The African renaissance is for us a sum of all those different attempts aimed at (re)membering Africa culminating with the possible installation of a polycentric world in which many knowledge traditions can coexist and contribute in reshaping our common destiny.

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