Africa and Knowledge: New Stories, Global Relevance

Over the last 20 years there has been growing concern with the global politics of knowledge. This is not just a matter of worrying over inequities of literacy or educational access, though those are important enough. And it is not a matter of the World Bank re-branding itself a “knowledge institution”, as if the predators of Wall Street had melted into air. The issue is much more profound. The debate concerns the nature of knowledge itself, the processes of knowledge formation, and the politics embedded in dominant forms of knowledge.

This territory is being explored in a vigorous literature on the global dynamics of knowledge, a literature with multiple forms and regional bases. Active strands include research on alternative intellectual traditions, new approaches to global history, postcolonial sociology, indigenous knowledge and technology, Southern theory, Islamic and Chinese sciences, the psychology of liberation, decolonial thought, the decolonisation of methodology, and more (Bhambra 2014; Rosa 2014).

Postcolonial Africa, the terrain of this admirable book, has been one of the key sites of these debates. In the era of anti-colonial struggles, half a century ago, the concept of an African philosophy became highly influential as a counter to the colonisers’ abusive attitudes to Africans and their cultures. Many intellectuals and post-independence politicians adopted the idea of Afrocentric perspectives and indigenous knowledge, and these ideas have ramified through contentious discussions of religion, politics, gender, illness and healing, environment and development. When indigenous knowledge ideas entered official health policy, in the context of the South African HIV/AIDS crisis, the result was a fiercely polarised debate and, arguably, many deaths.

But these debates also resulted in important intellectual advances. Perhaps the
most striking is the work of the Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji, made famous by his critique of the idea of “African philosophy”. In his later work, Hountondji (1997) led a pioneering exploration of the interplay of indigenous and colonising knowledges, analysed the division of labour in the world economy of knowledge, and diagnosed the “extroversion” of mainstream intellectual practice in the South–its active subordination to theory and methodology from the global North (Connell 2011). *Africa-Centred Knowledges* represents the next generation of enquiry into these issues.

The book is an impressive combination of 12 studies, involving 23 authors, on a wide range of intellectual and practical problems. Part I, “Epistemology–Struggles Over Meaning-Making”, is more concerned with theories and frameworks. It includes chapters on the broad picture of North/South knowledge politics; indigenous knowledge debates; contestation over the concept of gender in development contexts; concepts of time, and the treatment of time by three African novelists; classification practices, illustrated by a specific novel; and the political knowledge constructed in Kenyan popular music.

Part II, “Policy and Practice–Applying the Knowledge”, is more concerned with specific social situations or techniques. It includes chapters on knowledge in Namibian fisheries; issues in creating computer applications for development contexts; health and housing in a poor area of Cape Town; the gender doctrines of charismatic male pastors in Ghana; layers of knowledge in postgraduate students’ writing; and local concepts supporting academic success in a context of poverty in Zimbabwe.

I’ll give a little more detail on three contributions that were particularly illuminating for me. Mbugua Wa Mungai’s chapter on the politics of Kenyan popular music is titled “‘This is a robbers’ system’”. That translates the chorus of a KiSwahili rap song that offers a fierce critique of Kenya’s ruling powers and authorities, and the deeper malaise of society. Wa Mungai locates this in a tradition of political and social
critique via popular music, facing authoritarian power and neoliberal structural adjustment. The character, and limits, of this informal knowledge of the state are examined in subtle detail via the lyrics and the performers, showing their emergence from urban poverty and a disillusioned, misogynist youth culture.

The chapter on fisheries, by Barbara Paterson, Marieke Norton, Astrid Jarre and Lesley Green, examines the tension between the practice-based knowledge of Namibian fishers, and the population biologists whose understanding of fish stocks has been integrated into “management” practices. But there is not only tension: Paterson et al. also show the overlap between these knowledges, the uncertainties of the scientific measurement efforts (not to mention the disasters of fisheries management in other parts of the world), and the multiple needs that shape both fishers’ and managers’ strategies. This chapter is particularly clear about the institutional forces at work. What from a distance looks like a clash of epistemes, close-up is much more interactive.

A different kind of interaction is traced in “Men of God and Gendered Knowledge” by Akosua Adomako Ampofo and Michael P.K. Okyerefo. This tells a fascinating story about both gender and religion, under the impact of colonialism and then in postcolonial popular culture. An Africanisation of Christianity did occur, but in recent years the spectacular rise of Charismatic churches has shifted the ground towards a new kind of globalisation, making extensive use of mass media, and finding a base among the poor with a distinctly non-traditional prosperity gospel. The core of this chapter is a reading of the gender discourse of three leading Charismatic pastors, their doctrines about women, sexuality and marriage that weave together big-man conceptions of admired masculinity, highly selective readings of the Bible, and contemporary social dilemmas. It’s neither indigenous knowledge nor “Western” knowledge, but a new formation that now has impressive reach, with troubling implications for gender equality.

The book contains a rich assembly of ideas and observations, even in its
presentation. The cover reproduces a stunning photo of an older fisherman working on a hand-made fish trap. The picture was taken in a coastal community in KwaZulu-Natal that was at the time under threat of removal and loss of land, and poignantly reflects the threatening interplay of power and knowledge. One can imagine visual dimensions of many issues in the book.

The book covers such a range of places, issues and approaches that it might have fallen apart. The editors, Brenda Cooper and Robert Morrell, weave it together in an introductory essay. They start with the polarisation between the rock of immovable Afrocentrism and the hard place of Eurocentrism. Their idea of “Africa-centred knowledges” offers a way past this polarity, acknowledging Africa as multiple, global and dynamic. I’m not sure I agree with their characterisation of such knowledge as located in “an intermediate space”. The studies in the book don’t suggest a defined space so much as deeply entangled knowledge practices, out of which new formations of knowledge are emerging. Cooper and Morrell go on to discuss this terrain under the rubrics of collaboration, embodiment, gatekeeping, and global power.

The book is rich in descriptions of knowledge practices, and the cast list of players is sometimes surprising. The book also illustrates the difficulty of contesting the extroversion of knowledge practices. Knowledge workers in the global South are trained to collect data and conduct analyses via prestigious theoretical frameworks imported from the metropole. This does happen in some chapters of *Africa-Centred Knowledges*, invoking the usual suspects (Latour, Butler, Foucault, Bourdieu, etc.). The truth is, we do not have a widely-accepted protocol for knowledge production outside the Eurocentric knowledge economy. There is a risk, then, that Southern perspectives will function as no more than an add-on.

That is a situation the editors of *Africa-Centred Knowledges* are hoping to get beyond, and the book shows multiple ways of doing so. I was impressed by the range of emergent knowledges that are documented here. They range from the interactive
knowledge emerging around fisheries, to attempts at a new logic of software development, to the implicit political and gender knowledge in music and preaching, to what Linda Cooper and Lucia Thesen, in their chapter on postgraduate writing, call the “trace archive” recording the knowledge that is suppressed in a Northern-centric academic labour process. Though the book is most obviously of interest to scholars and practitioners in Africa, on these issues especially it offers resources and ideas that will be valuable far more widely.

References


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