Re-building Knowledge in African countries

Felwine Sarr

Full professor of economics, writer
Duke University

felwine@gmail.com

The epistemological questions of what type of knowledge, how are they produced, and for which purposes, are fundamentals for Africans in their struggle for political, cultural and economic emancipation. In order to imagine and construct different futures, it is necessary to interrogate the enunciation of knowledge paradigms. In the context of the necessities of production of new forms in all the domains of social and political life in African countries, the issue of knowledge production is crucial. Not only because the African continent has challenges to face in terms of education, health, well-being... in this era of economies based on innovation and knowledge. But more fundamentally, because knowledge production sustains and reproduces a political, an economical and a social order

In the recent history of the African continent, the ethnologic knowledge produced on African societies would play a critical role in their domination by Europeans during the colonial period. In the contemporary era, knowledge allows a control (or a regulation) of the understanding of the world; in that sense, it's a space of power that can be an instrument of coloniality.

To think critically about the challenges that are actually facing African countries, it is necessary to interrogate the geopolitics of knowledge in the context of African countries. In the first section, I will do a genealogy of what Mudimbe named the colonial library, and emphasize the role of this colonial library in contemporary African positionality. In a second section, I will particularly emphasize the necessity for Africans to engage in an epistemic shift by widening the

vision of what knowledge is and by reactivating resources of knowing embodied in their cultures; but more specifically by producing new knowledges that will be useful for the future of African societies and for the world in general. In a third section, I will outline the main paths to building an African ecology of knowledges.

Geopolitics of knowledge in African countries

Epistemic violence and colonial library

The corpus of knowledge about Africa is largely marked by colonial ethnology and anthropology. Valentin Mudimbe named this corpus the colonial library. Since the fifteenth century, the African landscape was structured by discourses whose objective was to physically dominate the lands, to reform the minds of native inhabitants, and to integrate local economic histories into the Western perspective. (Mudimbe, 1988, p. 2) These various forms of knowledge, principally motivated by the objective of governmentality and whose goal was the justification and the establishment of the colonial enterprise, viewed non-Western countries through the prism of cultural superiority and racial prejudice. Unfortunately, these forms of knowledge continue to largely influence the perception of the African reality, and have become an element of the perpetuation of domination or dependency.

In fact, maintaining an economic asymmetry between the colonies and the Metropole implied that the latter exerted an absolute political control over the colonies. And yet, this control would have been impossible without largely shared beliefs in the cultural dominance of the colonizers. It was of vital importance for the colonizers to establish this sense of superiority, to not simply conquer the lands and the resources of the colonies, but also their hearts and their minds. As a result, the economic and political injustice that is inherent in colonization adds, according to Rajeev Bhargava, one more layer of "epistemic injustice", which he defines as a form of cultural injustice that occurs, as happened in India and in African countries, when concepts and categories through which a people understand itself, as well as its universe, are replaced by the concepts and categories of the colonizers.

So, the system of meaning and categories allowing for the individual and collective orientation of dominated peoples have been replaced by the meaning and categories of the colonialist, and this has been done by a denigration of the values of the local communities, as well as their production of knowledge. This process of interiorizing the cultural and epistemic frameworks belonging to colonized peoples is first deployed within the discourse of colonizers, and then becomes crystallized within theoretical works (ethnologist and anthropologist) carried out by the colonizers.

Africanizing the social sciences and humanities

For Valentin Mudimbe, Kwasi Wiredu, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for Africans to deeply recover their sovereignty and their fecundity, it's urgent to address the question of the liberation of African discourse (philosophical and scientific) in order to establish African social sciences. For these thinkers, it is important to become the subject of one's own scientific discourse and to determine its practice according to one's own norms and criteria.

For Mudimbe and Wiredu there is a necessity of performing a radical transformation of the social and human sciences as they are currently taught in African universities. This reconstruction project requires re-working the social sciences starting with the epistemological interrogation concerning the objects, methods, and status of knowledge produced by the human sciences and social sciences as they are applied to African realities. Deconstructing the colonial-ethnological reasoning starts with a radical critique of the produced discourses, their theoretical frameworks and their ideological underpinnings.

For Mudimbe and Wiredu, in order to finally escape from a scientific alienation that is constantly lying in wait, African researchers must take on the responsibility of a thinking by establishing a scientific discourse, that would be the expression of material life within

their own socio-political contexts. This activity of thinking must root itself within the present, placing a careful attention to its own specific archaeological environment and the real trends in Africa's various societies and their full voice and concrete expressions. It is a question of integrating the true complexity of African social formations, and no longer considering them as carbon copies of Western history, but as having their own cultural and historical specificity.

The initiators of African social sciences (Kagame, Lufuwalbo, Mulago, Mbiti) have been criticized for having simply taken Western categories, concepts, schema and systems in order to cast African "entities" into them. These criticisms, according to Mudimbe, are poorly expressed or ill-founded and too easily elide a major question, that of how to determine the difference in meaning to be made with respect to the West and what it really costs to acknowledge this difference:

> To really escape from the West supposes being able to appreciate exactly what it costs to be detached from it; it presupposes to know up to which point the West, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it supposes to know what allows us to think in opposition to the West, what is still Western; and to measure in what our recourse against it is still perhaps a ruse that it opposes us and at the end of which it is waiting for us, unmoved and elsewhere. (Mudimbe, 1982, pp. 12-13)

The order of the Western discourse, an area defined according to an economic structure and a cultural archaeology, only takes into account other cultures or other systems, by reference to itself and, according to Mudimbe, in the specificity of an experience which would be irreducible to it.

The limit of syncretistic approaches according to Mudimbe consists in the fact that the Africanization of sciences is only thought under the modalities of application (economics, law, sociology). It is fortunate that African researchers (C. A. Diop, Obenga) who want to remake the history of Africa from scratch show in a concrete way how to reconceptualize the organization of disciplines inherited from the West, through skillful and subtle techniques to de-structure the control of doctrines and social appropriations of scientific discourse.

One of the ways of Africanization of the human and social sciences would be the recourse to the hermeneutical resources of African languages as tools for decolonizing thought and reorganizing the categorization and classification of knowledge. Kenyan philosopher Odera Oruka argues for a philosophical reading of the resources from African vernacular languages. His hermeneutic approach, by exploring the oral resources (myths and proverbs) of Kenyan languages, allows him to highlight the philosophical sagacity of this corpus. The "Wisemen-woman" (sages) studied by Odera Oruka are philosophers because they are capable of reflexivity and critical distance from their corpus.

Valentin Mudimbe, in The Scent of the Father, Mudimbe asks the question of what order of discourse for African social and human sciences. How to circumvent or overcome the essential paradox that marked the liberation of the Negro discourse which had to be based on the work of Africanist anthropologists in order to build itself (Negritude). Mudimbe asks the question how do we articulate an authentic African thought that would faithfully account for the order and norms of African discourse?

Mudimbe believes that by undertaking a radical linguistic revolution, the replacement of European languages by African languages, a different order of discourse would emerge. Changing the linguistic instrument of knowledge and scientific production could produce an epistemological shift, and open up a much-needed pathway toward a new adventure in Africa. In the same way that, by transplanting into their language the methods, techniques, and uses of knowledge received from Egypt, the Greeks triggered a reorganization of knowledge and life whose essential order is still in development.[1] In any case, a new universe would emerge. And in this perspective, the establishment of truly African social

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1   "It is certain that just as the promoters of Greek thought by transplanting in their language, techniques, methods and uses of the knowledge received from Egypt have triggered a reorganization of knowledge and life, the essential order of which is still current and still in progress… Similarly, a change in the linguistic instrument of knowledge and scientific production would certainly provoke an epistemological rupture and pave the way for a new adventure for Africa."

sciences and humanities would be effective, that is, knowledge practices that would be in harmony both with the gradients of African cultures and with the postulations of our modernity.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o also estimates that rediscovering the vitality of African languages would not only allow for the decolonization of minds and imaginaries, but also would reveal the internal and signifying universes, inscribed within an order of the world that intimately shapes meaning for Africans. Languages open up galaxies, universes, and worlds one must explore.

African languages could be considered as privileged entry points into taking care of and managing the cultures in question as well as their contents in terms of thought and forms of knowledge. The work of Alexis Kagamé, Émile Benveniste and Ludwig Wittgenstein[2] has provided some evidence for the link between thought and syntactic and grammatical structure of languages.

This vision of Kagame and Benveniste is somehow nuanced and mitigated by recent development in linguistic philosophy by Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Kwasi Wiredu. The latter is interested in the philosophical resources of the Akan language while avoiding an ethnophilosophical approach. For Wiredu, language is not meant to reveal the collective thoughts of Akan culture, as postulated by ethnophilosophers (Kagame, Tempels, etc.); it is a hermeneutical resource that allows for new critical explorations in African contemporary philosophy.

In a similar vein, Souleymane Bachir Diagne questions the stakes that the diversity of languages constitutes for cognition. Does each language lock us into an irreducible system of thought? Can we simply and purely identify linguistic representations and cognitive representations, as cognitive grammars seem to do? In his work on global cognitive anthropology, he asks himself the following question: Does language determine the logical categories we use as well as the fundamental notions we have of being, of time, etc.?

According to Souleymane Bachir Diagne, it is no longer a question of criticizing ethnophilosophy in the name of philosophy, but of seriously taking up again what has been sought in the discipline and which has gone astray in the impasse of an ethnic philosophy. SBD invites us with Catherine Fuchs to go beyond the linguistic relativism of Sapir and Whorf, Kagame, and Benveniste. Language inclines to think. It inclines, without necessity, as Leibniz says.

Humanities from an African perspective, the epistemic shift

The epistemic shift, I am calling for, is not just a better application of Western social sciences (the so-called humanities) to African realities or a better inculturation of the latter. This is the main argument of Mudimbe. My point is that we must acknowledge the diversity of approaches to reality depending on civilizations and eras, a plurality of ways of knowing, as well as a gnoseological and epistemological relativity.

> I propose to rethink the plurality of journeys of human thinking, starting from the idea of equality in principle of the different traditions of thought or discursive practices, while acknowledging their incommensurability. This leads us to consider these different traditions of thought, from their horizons, and the configurations of the thinkable which they propose, as unique journeys of the mind which have developed concurrently, shaped by the cultures from which they originate. This does not mean that there is no circulation of ideas and thought across regions and eras.

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2   Émile Benveniste, « Catégories de pensée et catégories de langue » (1958), in Problèmes de linguistique générale, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, pp. 63-64. Ludwig Wittgenstein : « les limites de mon langage sont les limites de mon monde », Tractatus logico-philosophicus, section 5.61, tr. G.-G. Granger, Paris, Gallimard, 1993. Alexis Kagame is a Rwandan philosopher who has shown how much of Aristotle's ontology is derived from Greek grammar.

Thinking about these questions in an African context calls for an epistemic shift. Incorporating the complexity of African social structures, and embracing them in their cultural and historical distinctiveness in knowledge production, requires a change of position within the fields of constituted knowledge and a reinvention: an act of thinking which pays particular attention to the current trends in the societies being examined.

This project of restructuring requires us to completely reconsider the social sciences, and necessitates an epistemological questioning of the objects, methods and status of the knowledge produced by the humanities and social sciences, as applied to African realities. The major obstacle of such an approach remains the difficulty of determining an epistemological field for the task; in other words, the specific objects to be studied, but also the methods needed to do so.

A recurring critique of the Western view of knowledge is that it overestimates the prerogatives of the subject by basing itself on the illusion that the latter, by its own means (reason and/or the senses) can produce thought that covers the complexity of reality. The pitfall of European methodology consists in selecting a single criterion to explain reality.

The fruitfulness of the methodological approach based on the principle of the excluded third party[3] has to be reconsidered. This approach distinguishes the subject from the object to interpret reality. Making objects into momentary entities, and cutting reality into little portions which we later attempt to piece back together. This residual positivism in Western epistemological traditions is based on an atomism which dates back two thousand years. This approach was useful for the development of physics and other natural sciences; but it proves much less fruitful when dealing with the humanities and social sciences because the objects of study are multilayered and the subject is not separate from the object. In the same way as in quantum physics, the position of the observer modifies the object being observed.

The idea is being able to go beyond the dichotomy between the subject and the object by ascribing to the subject qualities of an object, and vice-versa—to the object capacities of a subject (i.e. to produce knowledge and the ability to change the point of view of the observer). A knowledge production from a bifocal point of view, by combining an adequate critical distance and an understanding from the inside.

But more fundamentally, it is a question of acquiring more in-depth knowledge of African societies and cultures, which are also based on their own gnoseological criteria. To achieve this, it is necessary to adopt other modes of understanding reality, besides scientific knowledge as it is currently constituted. The exploration of the relatively unfamiliar territories of African onto-mythologies and epistemogonies allows a more open-minded approach to various types of knowledge, that have helped and safeguarded African societies in their long history. These constitute ways of knowing which have demonstrated their long-term operational attributes in different areas of human activity: therapeutic and environmental knowledge, technical know-how, social, historical, psychological, economic and agronomical knowledge. These knowledges ensured the survival, growth and sustainability of African societies. In order to mobilize these knowledges, it is necessary to explore multiple African cultural expressions and linguistic resources.

We should also engage in a debate around a theory of knowledge limited by the boundaries of the Western vision of knowledge by questioning the exclusivity of the logocentric episteme and the enframing of modes of comprehensibility by the single mode of written thought. It's about reconsidering the question of knowledge at its very roots.

The objective is to rethink the conditions that make knowledge possible. "What can I know?" is the question asked by Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason. "How is knowledge possible?" These questions defined physics and metaphysics in the 18th century.

Questions that we might ask ourselves instead could be these ones: What do the non-discursive ways of thinking teach us about reality? This examination of knowledge will be developed by considering the objects of the epistemological quest as well as its ways of perceiving reality. Since the time of Aristotle, to explain is to determine causes or to

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3   This view is questioned by Issiaka-Prosper Lalèyê but also within the Western episteme by proponents of quantum physics and thinkers such as Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, who promoted transdisciplinarity and the principle of the *included third*.

identify the primary cause. "Linear causality" thinking has a limit, and this is the primary cause. Complex and dialogic thinking (promoted by E. Morin) has made it possible to see this mode of interpreting reality in relative terms, by revealing its limitations.

Building an African ecology of knowledge

Re-building knowledge in Africa could be pursued by setting up an ecology of knowledge, borrowing from Margarita Bowen and Boaventoura de Sousa Santos, where disciplines, approaches and methodologies are considered not just on their own but within an ecosystem where they can interact and produce new knowledges. While accepting that knowledge is derived from experience, the notion of an ecology of knowledge looks to a much broader concept of experience, in consonant with a more dynamic ecosystemic concept of the world. Margarita Bowen, the Australian historian of science who coined the term ecology of knowledge in 1985, emphasizes that all ideas or actions that are issued from observation are themselves incorporated and part of the global ecosystem. This evidence suggests a radical break from the established and positivist model of exact scientific method, in which the scientist is regarded as being detached, intellectually at least, from the objects of observation, and so able to collect reliable data (objective facts) by sense-perception analysis to ensure accuracy. David Lowenthal (1961) argues that perception is not a matter of sense alone, "sensing, thinking, feeling and believing are simultaneous and interdependent processes".

Questions that we might ask ourselves could be the following: Can we enlarge the notion of perception? Can we envisage an epistemology of the senses? Can we consider arts, dance, theater, and bodies as sites of knowledge?

The idea is to recognize an epistemological pluralism that acknowledges the particularity of science and its efficiency in some domains, while contesting its pretension to having the monopoly of truth and its aim to disqualifying other forms of knowledge. My point is to contest the contention of science to being the only legitimate and true knowledge one the one hand, and also the postmodern relativism according to which all knowledges are equal on the other hand. The idea is not to attribute the same ability (capacity) to all types of knowledges, but to allow a pragmatic discussion between alternative criteria of validity. A discussion that does not immediately disqualify knowledge that are outside of the scientific canon. Rebuilding knowledge in Africa is being able to rely on all type of knowledges produced by African societies through times, and re-activate those that still operate in various domains of life.

This mean ending with a monoculture of knowing by allowing a constellation of various knowledges that interact and that are complementary, and also knowledges that can be translated one into another, by avoiding the fragmentation and the non-communicability of various types of knowledge. Also, going beyond the idea that knowledges are situated and exclusively depend on the conditions of their production. Knowledge is at the same time situated and trans-situated.

Human intelligence lies in our ability to go beyond the various possibilities of thinking, to understand them and generate dialogue between them.

An ecology of knowledge will not be systematic research for the ultimate truth, but rather an attempt to present several possibilities in order to produce something intelligible and useful from the encounters of a plurality of ways of knowing, knowledge production and discursive practices. The ultimate objective of this epistemological shift is the construction of a library that encompasses all the libraries (libraries of the logos and the non-logos epistemologies, differing pre-colonial, colonial, postcolonial, decolonial archives, thoughts and knowledge) that are disseminated in societies. This library will enable the production of new knowledges and new ways of knowing, as well as an integral recognition of ignorance. Ignorance embodies what is ignored (not considered as knowledge), but also what we don't yet know. It is, therefore, a space of creativity and innovation. The ambition

of such an ecology of knowledge could be in synchrony and diachrony, to study the life of ideas (their present and their future); historical variations in response to fundamental human questions, expressed in the collective thinking of large groups of individuals.

Therefore, reflecting on social transformations, and knowledge and cultural production of a linguistic era, necessitates an understanding of the global environment that produces meanings. This is justified by the fact that philosophical statements, legal or scholarly conjectures, or literary processes or recurrent tropes, only really become meaningful when connected to each other in the interactive topography of social discourse as a whole.

In that perspective, an African ecology of knowledge could become a multidisciplinary enterprise that explores both literature, as well as canonical knowledges, the arts, the practical solutions and collective beliefs, the material production, and theoretical knowledges in their refined and simplistic versions, literate or not.

Such a meaning cannot be perceived by sectoral studies, practicing a 'division of labor' in some continuous Fordist regime of disciplines. This African ecology of knowledge must go beyond the analysis of determined discursive fields and genres—philosophical, religious, scientific, literary, political. Leading such an undertaking in the context of African countries raises the question of the sources and in particular the question of the oral sources, carriers more than any other of the collective memory and the knowledge production of African societies.

It should just be remembered that African societies have experienced writing systems that have played differing roles in archiving and conserving their cultural heritage. Some writing systems were reserved for an elite, and others were more widespread. For us, it is a matter of moving away from the scriptural paradigm, which sees writing as the exclusive means of transmitting the collective memory and the cognitive and cultural heritage of a people. Many human groups did not need writing to transmit their cultural capital.

There is no human group without a language, and without a codified means of perpetuating its collective memory, therefore, without means of exchanging texts at a distance. West African societies have produced a cultural and cognitive heritage that has enabled them to ensure their long-term survival. In order to promote this heritage, it is necessary to explore their art of language, which includes oral traditions, cosmogonies, myths, of diverse cultural expressions. It's about questioning these cultures through the processes they have mainly used to transmit their knowledge and their collective memory.

In the African context, in addition to exploring written and oral sources, artifacts and objects can also play a significant role in an archeology of knowledges. They can help in the rewriting of history; they also encompass knowledge and indicate alternative epistemological universes.

Every society (culture or civilization) transmits a heritage and perpetuates a cultural matrix that conveys its identity through time, transforming it as the world evolves.

The question is how to characterize this transformation?

The task will be to study in the context of African countries the elements of this cultural matrix: its various components, beyond the analysis of the constitution of intellectual traditions, but also, to look at the processes of meaningful metamorphoses within a culture. This raises the question of how civilizations are transformed (by internal movement or by adoption and integration of external influences). In order to study the history of the transformation of cultural matrices, it will be necessary to use transcultural studies. If we open the methodological scope and shift the geography of our intellect, an ecology of knowledge can be a field for studying major questions of our time through using more plural archives.

Conclusion

To face the challenges that the African continent is dealing with, it is urgent to improve and better appropriate modern scientific knowledge and their technical applications. This creative assimilation is a trend that is already observed in many African countries, in which new technologies are used to provide solutions in education, health… But furthermore, it's a question of widening the ranges of knowledges on which social organizations are based, by incorporating, in the repertoire of useful tools, the knowledge produced by African societies and embodied in their cultural matrix and their DNA. An additional task that is assigned to African researchers is to produce the knowledges that will be needed by African societies in the coming decades, in order to better respond to their needs and answer their challenges.

Reopening the future for African countries is a task that takes place firstly in the realms of thought and imaginaries. To give birth to an imagined community, it is necessary to reconstruct the narrative around Africa and produce the needed knowledge for the type of societies that Africans want to create. It's about leaving the various teleological injunctions (progress, development or modernity) to allow for unplanned futures that carry the aspirations of African populations.

The African continent is experiencing a cultural transformation. The continent can become a Laboratory to reinvent its economic, political and social life. It has all the tools for this reinvention. A challenge of giving institutional forms to this re-invention is the rebuilding of knowledges and imaginaries. African continent's reason is plural. Africa is reassessing its own appraisal of its social, political, and cultural spheres. The open-air laboratory that Africa constitutes has its foundries working at full speed, feeding them with fuel gleaned from all fields.

Rebuilding knowledge in Africa could open up to an infinite universe…

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