

**DOMINANT EPISTEMOLOGY, AFRICAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES,
CULTURE AND THE DISCOURSE ON THE DECOLONISATION OF
KNOWLEDGE WITHIN THE (AFRICAN) UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract:

Knowledge is preserved in the language of its producers and developers, and as a carrier of culture, language is significant because it controls the way people (individually and collectively) perceive themselves in relation to others in the world. Language is also primarily responsible for initiating and sustaining creativity. Unfortunately, for European cultural hegemony language also became a mechanism for launching strategies of domination and alienation of the African personality and traditional knowledge. Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) and Prah (2009) have observed that as part of the plan the processes of subjugation and domination did not only have to do with the colonised having to inherit alien syntax or lexicology, but also the ways in which they ultimately perceive self and the world, and how to relate with Europeans in their assumed superior status. Therefore, this article interrogates the socio-politics of the dominant epistemology and how it has impacted African indigenous languages and culture. It supports the case for the discourse regarding the decolonisation of knowledge within the (South) African university. The article argues for the retrieval and re-positioning of African indigenous languages and culture as part of the decolonisation project because the interface between indigenous knowledge and other knowledge systems is critical in generating new insights.

Key words: *European cultural imperialism, epistemology, African indigenous languages, culture, traditional knowledge, subjugation and domination, decolonialisation*

1. Introduction

Calls for decolonising education first emerged on the African continent in the context of decolonising struggles against colonial rule during the 1950s and 1960s. It is based on a negation of modern colonial education whose organising principle centred on shaping the colonised into colonial subjects, in the process, stripping them of humanity and full potential (Fatar 2018).

As Freire (1993; 53) asserts “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings

pursue in the world, with the world and with each other. Language and culture play a significant role in the production of new knowledge. In this regard “language is defined as that aspect in life that “bears the record of history, traditions, beliefs and knowledge of any people. It is in language that people learn, relate to each other as social animals in a material world of production, reproduction, distribution and exchange” (Prah 1998: 2). Language is not only a medium of communication but also a carrier of culture. Therefore, language is important because it often guides way people think and reason, perceive themselves in relation to other individuals in the world. It

is also a means through which people invent and create material tools that sustain their existence and produce knowledge.

As part of epistemic binarism, colonialism decimated African cultural heritage and language and ensured that the colonised are without any means that is critical in defining themselves in power related situations, more especially against the domination of European knowledge (Osha 2005: 5). In support, Fanon (1963: 169) points out that, to succeed in its mission, through some ‘perverted logic’ colonialism ‘distorted, disfigured and destroyed African cultural heritage and practices. In explaining this Jansen (2017: 155) points out that “power consciously *select* what is worth teaching and knowing, and in the process, assign value to what goes in and what is left out of curriculum. The choice is [obviously] political.”

In the context of the post-colonial African space of knowledge production and learning the de-centering and marginalization of African cultural heritage and practices is maintained through epistemology that prioritises and promotes Eurocentric images, perspectives and ideas. Consequently, it is normal for African political leaders to continuously search for solutions for African problems from Eurocentric dominating epistemologies. In this regard, the main aim of this article is to interrogate the socio-politics of the dominant epistemology and its impact on African indigenous languages and culture, support the case for the discourse on the decolonisation of knowledge within the (South) African university. The authors argue that the decolonisation project should focus on the development and reclamation of African indigenous languages and culture

because the interface between indigenous knowledge and other knowledge systems is critical in in generating new insights.

2. European cultural imperialism, epistemology and the marginalization of African indigenous languages and culture

Biko (1978:240) and Ngara (1985: 39) assert that to advance its mission of displacing the African personality and means of creativity, the coloniser reduced the African scholar to a perpetual student who was taught by a perpetual teacher. These students were not only given a Western education but were also taught in Western European languages. Subsequently, African education was equated with the acquisition of a European language. The result of this action was that literacy was associated with the mastery of English, French or Portuguese, and more significantly it was linked to a Westernised type of schooling and epistemology. The implementation of such strategies resulted in Western cultural imperialists achieving their objective of nullifying African indigenous education.

Mugambi (1992: 2) points out “Africans experienced a dichotomy between what they learned at school, and the socialized life they lived at home,” meaning whatever was taught at school radically contrasted with what they were taught at home and in society through various indigenous practices and institutions. Since language is not only a medium of communication, but also a carrier of culture, the implications of the psychological effect of the dichotomy that Mugambi (1992) refers to here and also affirmed by Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) and Prah (2009) is that the process did not only have to do with inheriting alien syntax or

lexicology, but also the ways in which the colonised would perceive themselves and the world and how to relate to others, especially Europeans in their assumed superior status.

As a further strategy to suppress and marginalise indigenous languages all different colonies were compelled to adopt the languages of colonisers as official languages. Therefore, indigenous languages were only used 'at home' and in other informal situations that were separate from the colonialist realm. In this way "the colonial child was made to see the world and where he [or she] stands in it as seen and defined or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition" (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986: 17). As Fanon (1967: 38) aptly points out "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language." This was part of a strategy aimed at ensuring that the psycho-social terrain of domination and subjugation was sustained.

In South Africa and Africa at large the fundamental aim of colonialism was to prevent indigenous Africans from identifying with their own cultures, norms, values and languages. In so doing, they would be denied their own frame of reference and be coerced into identifying and accepting a Westernised way of life. This process was systematically orchestrated by the apartheid regime in South Africa. Africans would then also immerse themselves into westernised ideologies and ways of thinking completing losing their African identities. Consequently, African culture and heritage was viewed as insignificant (Ani 1994). Notwithstanding, it should be noted that knowledge of African culture is at the heart of forming an African identity that is synonymous with its customs,

beliefs and traditions. Mudimbe (1988:2) boldly asserts that through the implementation of apartheid policies and practices Africans lost their true identities. He explains that this was systematically achieved through implementing inculcating westernised ideologies in the minds of African people, denying them access to land and providing them with a westernised education. Therefore, indigenous African communities were forcibly immersed into a culture that was not their own and they lost their sense of self-worth and identity (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1993: 182).

Today, the marginalization of African languages is still rife in South Africa. Moodie (2006: 6) qualifies the statement using the example of educated and professional black, who believe that English is more important than the other officially recognised languages in South Africa. They have adopted the view that "... the value of African languages has diminished as many young educated black people view English as the language of aspiration, while the government and parents steer children towards science and maths-orientated professions". Moodie's example demonstrates that apartheid was aimed at ensuring that African people became entrenched in western ideologies and the belief that their cultural heritage, knowledge and identities are inferior and not on the same level as their western counterparts. Noteworthy, is that the Soweto Uprisings in 1976 ushered in a new era regarding culture and language. The main objection for the uprisings was the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, which was not the mother tongue, nor first, second or even third additional language of black learners.

Freire (1993: 29) contends that communities such as those who embrace English as the only language that can be used for learning and expressing cultural creativity is premised in the notion that those who have been colonised have become “adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires.” The risk is being able to be oneself. Through languages, foreign to Africa, concepts and thoughts, which were in direct conflict to traditional values of African culture were enforced on African communities. Ultimately, African communities became physically affecting communities psychologically and referentially. The following quote serves as an example: “... Islam [as, one emerging foreign cultural hegemony] ... made Arabic the language of millions of non-Arabs, thus spreading culture in a most powerful manner” Asante, 1980:7). In this case hearing God in a foreign language automatically makes one experience the divinity in foreign form resulting in alienating the colonized from their indigenous cultural heritage and identity.

Therefore, the aim of European cultural imperialism was to collectively destroy the collective memory bank of the colonized past achievements and their experience over time, all of which form the fundamentals of their identity in relation to other people in the world. In this regard, language was used as to sustain cultural imperialism and before the Soweto uprisings it was successfully used as means to undermine the cultural identities and languages of African people.

3. A case for the decolonization of knowledge within the (South) African university

Without any doubt and as demonstrated by Biko (1978) and Ngara (1985) language is key in any nation’s self-expression, identity, cultural creativity and socio-economic development. Coupled with culture language is a means through which people design and create things (material, intellectual and spiritual) in time and space. In support Makgoba et al. (1999: xi) argues that it is through language that people invent and reinvent science and technology, education, political systems and economic developments.

The advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) presents an opportunity for Africa to relocate itself in the socio-economic economy. Academics, professionals and language experts should seize the prospect of advocating the development of indigenous languages. This could be achieved by developing and implementing policies as well as procedures advocating prioritizing African indigenous languages. These languages should be integrated into educational institutions and become mediums of instruction in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics programmes. In this way African indigenous languages could flourish and become more developed than is currently the situation in South Africa.

In explaining the importance of prioritizing African languages and culture as part of the decolonisation project Prah (2009:91) argues that:

... there exist two parallel histories of knowledge and knowledge production. The first of these is what is generally

described in the literature as endogenous knowledge – knowledge that is built into African thought and practice and in steadily modified forms passed down to successive generations. ... The other history of knowledge is one which has been acquired through the Western encounter and which is also produced to narrower sections of the African population and which goes into creation of the modern elite in African societies.

What is obvious from Prah's submission is that over the years there has never been an attempt to merge the two histories of knowledge, namely, the European and the African cultural heritages and practices that are obviously embedded in their languages. Any form of knowledge is enshrined in the language of the producers and its developers. African languages are core to Africa's processes of invention and reinvention. To this effect, Sibuyi (1999: 8) aptly argues that 'to sideline a body of indigenous knowledge systems or scientific knowledge which is encapsulated in these languages will do a

great disservice to the African renaissance project and its intended objectives."

4. Conclusion

The article has highlighted how European cultural imperialism has used language to achieve its objectives of subjugation and domination of the African personality and language. It is through the intentional recovery of indigenous languages that Africa with all its people will be able to effectively respond to the challenges and opportunities of the modern world. Indigenous knowledge systems are intractably connected to the indigenous languages, culture, innovation and creativity. Therefore, this article endeavours to demonstrate that language as a carrier of culture is a means through which people generate knowledge and design the means that will sustain them in time and space. It also contributes substantially towards developing socio-cultural and economic development strategies that will enable Africans to compete with other communities in the world that has now become a competitive global village.

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