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Book Review

Africanising the Curriculum: Indigenous Perspectives and Theories by Vuyisile Msila and Mishack T. Gumbo (Editors)

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Elephants and the Grass

Wapiganapo tembo nyasi huumia. (Swahili)

When elephants fight, the grass (reeds) gets hurt.⁵

I fully appreciate the need for a frank debate about “Africanising the curriculum” in our present internationalised context. Knowledges that crisscross the globe originating from one source of world, are re-presented and packaged as emanating from the superpowers of the rich and famous, paraded as evidence of legitimating motivations for ascendancy to the throne of privilege. The host sources of knowledge remain obliterated. This has been the history of conquest for centuries, where victors triumphantly exhibit their spoils of war: the vanquished are exhibited as spectacles of amusement and derision; their goods and property ceremoniously displayed as the new property of the conqueror. So too are the knowledge systems, stolen from one context, exposed in pageantries of arrogance and humiliation. This is a matter of power and privilege intersecting to mark the territory of new heroes and villains. The aftermath of conquest is usually characterised by the victor supposedly generously distributing the booties of conquest, which have included even the donation of whole geographic territories to loyal allies, the bestowment even of people into enslaved bondage, and the ripping asunder of family units as persons were degraded to the status of property and sold in the marketplace. Border crossings are usually about exploitation, and the powerless and conquered are silenced into subjugation. Their voices are relegated to whispers in the wind until new whirling spirits are activated to challenge the injustice. And hell has no greater fury than the rising of those who for centuries have been downtrodden, abused, and made to feel alienated. Their lashing out against the oppressors bears centuries of being muzzled. And the new war is waged. The target of *bella nova* is to claim back the stolen goods, to accentuate the need for redefinitions of the self, to campaign for a resurrection of the lost world.

Vanquished and victor stare each other in the face. And a complex recognition emerges in the present battlefields of the new century. Neither victor nor vanquished can fully disentangle the centuries of inbreeding of people, knowledges, habits, rituals, and routines. Procedures of cultural heritage are

⁵ https://www.google.co.za/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF8#q=when+two+elephants+fight+it+is+the+grass+that+gets+trampled&*>

blurred around the edges as even the vanquished cannot recognise their heritage genetic origins. Every I bears a seed of the others buried deep into the psyche. The project of humanity has taken over to intersect, blur, erase, shape, evolve, and prevent a romanticised hearkening of the era gone by.

We are all witnesses in the modern world of being a part of the fuller island of humanity.

But the elephants will continue to fight. Each marking dominantly their need to claim the right to be king of the tribe. Or maybe their fight is simply about rekindling their lost sense of erasure.

The pattern of African colonialism is not the only story of conquest as the citizens of the Western world increasingly found the need to seek new territories. Colonial expansion had its logic of finding new economic strategies to assert ascendancy across the globe. The Europeans, indeed with the backing of powerful weaponry and technologies in the last century, expanded their marketplace of harvest and plundered territories across the globe: into the Americas, into the Asian and Australasian worlds; even attempts at usurping the East with its own cultures of advanced technological products and patterns of governance and political systems. Each time the rationale of discovery of new territories was reported back to the controlling central Empire, and the marvel of the conquistadores were elevated to heroic stature. Little was said on the devastation of the colonising influence on the local indigenous community; little was said of the exploration of the diseases of the Empire that biologically wiped out whole nations of servile colonies. No mention was usually made of the empires of the worlds conquered. Little official recognition was afforded to the knowledge systems of the local, which were often misunderstood or even belittled (Diamond, 2005).

Migration into the “new world” was coupled under colonial expansion with a disguised mandate of bringing civilisation to the heathens. And migration continues to this day, especially as displaced humanity seeks out new territories as a consequence of natural disasters, economic disasters, and resultant political warfare. Migration of people and ideas has usually been about the path to find new spaces for meaningful habitation. Unlike traditional 19th century colonialism, migration patterns today are not simply about the movement of the North to the South, or the West to the East. Twenty-first century superhighways are being created in all directions facilitated by the rampant exchange of ideas and knowledges through powerful new technologies of communication and dialogue. For example, a remote West Samoan in a small island in the Pacific has, in theory, the potential to connect in real time, to the exploits of a national American election many geographic miles away from the cultural context in which she resides. The blurriness of borders itself escapes nationalistic boundaries and the voyeurs have potential to escape and create new worlds without even leaving their geographic and cultural homes. We are fluid, mobile beings, refusing to be streamlined into historical bondages of past identities and practices. Our menus are infused by the projects of others. We are diverse, multiple, and continually contested beings as new internal and external dialogues about who we are and who we want to be, consciously invade our being. Any attempt to box us is resisted and we too, bear the hallmarks of both victor and vanquished as we mark new territories, new selections for the kinds of knowledges, systems, and rituals of education and entertainment we choose. We can move backwards in time, but we cannot escape to live in the time from which we originated. Our new time is fashioned in the goals of the future, making selective choices about the curriculum of our lives.

So what has this to do with the Africanising of the curriculum and the search for indigenous perspectives and theories, the subject of this book?

This book generates many pertinent questions about the theoretical and practical rationales that could underpin the nature of rebirthing the African identity after a history of Westernised colonial expansion. It openly proclaims that this is not a project of romanticisation of the former precolonial Africa, which bore all the hallmarks of internal diversities of religions, ethnicities, and patriarchy. Moreover, the book claims to move beyond a self-pity project and a celebration of victimhood. Its authors engage the

agenda of how Africans themselves are also complicit in the agenda of their own marginalisation, and how “indigenous epistemicide” (Odora Hoppers’ 2002 coinage) is perpetrated by those who have left the continent diasporically, methodologically, and epistemologically. The book offers a series of explorations of how knowledge exchanges across the colonisers and colonised characterise the subjugated African ways of knowing. It even claims that rampant patriarchy is not an indigenous manifestation, and that it is colonialism that brought oppression to African womanhood. Some authors make a case that Westernised feminisms fail to understand African womanisms in a bid to continue (arrogantly) to give mandate to the West to speak on behalf of “the voiceless South.” The book constitutes subtle and overt provocations about how Africa will and can redefine an African worldview, an African perspective. The book chooses to elaborate on how the Africans have become alienated from their own cultures and identities, and how the separation between their everyday lived experiences and the learnt worlds of schooling constitute the project of formal modern schooling. The book is a call for an epistemic turn to decolonise the curriculum through a resurrection of former marginalised cultural habits, rituals, routines, and knowledges that have been erased over time. The book acknowledges that the urban African citizens have even been co-denigrators of their own historical roots, with little respect or valuing of their largely rural existences. The urbanised have capitulated to the view that to be educated is to disconnect with an African cultural past. The book provides a foundational reading platform of the range of debates of what constitutes an indigenous knowledge system and the competing theoretical worldviews of their limitations and potential.

However, for me, the book offers a repeated agenda of aiming to resurrect a past. It does not sufficiently trouble the intersected identities of what an internationalised world contends of present day society. Am I too, going to be accused of being a colonised self? The debates are largely located with a critique of the “globalisation” worldview, with its technological and neoliberal hegemonisations. Rightfully so, the book (and its many authors) challenge the way in which the selections of curriculum that currently dominate the schooling and higher education terrain, are subtle infusions of capitulation to the dominant forces of Western hierarchies. However, often the authors do not problematise the complexities of creating a new intersected, interconnected global citizenry, an agenda which celebrates internationality not as a competition between fighting elephants, but about finding the spaces for dialogue and exchange.

The book does not deal with realities that our global context is littered with patterns of oppression not only between the non-African and the African continent, but also within the internal systems of Americas, or between the European continental belligerent partners. The consequences of worldwide migratory patterns reveal a humanity in search of new spatialities to express their sense of self, and their hopes for their future. And this has led paradoxically to a greater rising up of boundaries and walls of dissent, resentment, and doubt as new cultures intersect to compete for the same pool of physical or financial resources. For example, the borders of Venezuela and Columbia are increasingly being policed as pregnant mothers attempt to cross South American borders where they are more likely to receive better quality health care. The reaction is defensive and territorial, and new patterns of xenophobia emerge across previously harmonious neighbours. The rise of xenophobia is a fundamentalism that characterises not only the religiously Islamic countries warring around rights to economic passageways, but also the triumphant arrogance of conservatism that celebrates homophobia, racism, and religious bigotry in the north American territories of the United States. Present day European elections are premised on the notable increase in the voice of the conservative right who wish to guard and defend monoculturalism and nationalistic patriotism. The Indian subcontinent is marred with new forms of separations between religious factions (Hindus and Muslims), as well as increased anti-African sentiment against foreign immigrants.

Whilst ostensibly the war is against the importation of foreign cultures, such as drug peddling and child trafficking, these agendas are usually constructed around the competition for economic survival tactics in an increasingly technologised and automated economic system that relies more on machines than

human labour. South Africa too, has had repeated agendas of xenophobic attacks perpetrated by those who argue that national identity and resources are being eroded to support foreigners. The world, not just Africa, is a complex amalgam of competing forces, never neutral of abusive power and corruption. The global citizen is a hybrid not of one solid cultural heritage and is likely to be connected to an evolving identity, no doubt shaped by forces of a relatively new 24-hour accessibility to “world news.” We live in a Coca-Cola cultural complexity, and our football teams are no longer confined to our localised heroes. But, is this global village something that is accessible only to those with the financial resources to share its hegemonic force, that is, those who can afford access to modern technological communication systems such as televisions and computers? Is this globalising culture capable of being curtailed, especially by the older generation who are less confident of ways to negotiate to become part of the technological networks? How does age and class intersect to produce hegemonic control?

I find that the highly reflective chapter that raises for me, the most pertinent questions about these complexities is the one by Chikoko (2016) who interprets how the African international project is unfolding within the realms of higher education. He reports on an institutional project that attempts to explore, not just the officialised curriculum, the declared or espoused curriculum of advocates of the design of higher education, but also the lived experiences of international students within an African university. Rather than generate heat, the chapter elaborates the insight that the internationalisation of the curriculum in higher education is far from available to those who cross borders into the South African higher education system. He suggests that whilst recognising the need to develop emic homegrown culture specific identities is a laudable goal, this cannot be disconnected from the expectation that we live in an etic world aiming to develop perspectives that span a generic universalist goal. He suggests that there is need to generate a baseline of an asset-based agenda, recognising the self-worth of local contextual specificities, but that this cannot remain fixated on narcissistic glorification. We must embrace the responsibility to affect the rest of the global world in which we live through the process of interconnected dialogues, exchanges, and opening of hearts, minds, and voices to the lived experiences and perspectives of others. We cannot be claiming for an individualistic agenda disconnected from the world of competing ideas and forces. Ubuntu, an African philosophy, by definition requires a dialectical interchange between multiple partners who do not necessarily agree, but who help shape each other.

For me the list of questions generated out of the project described in this chapter, points to the very turbulences that this book generated personally. I list them here for emphasis of continued questioning that remains unanswered by the book:

- Who is African?
- What makes scholarship African?
- What does it take to engage in African scholarship?
- Where do our different understandings of African scholarship come from?
- Can we come to a common understanding of African scholarship? Should we?
(Chikoko, 2016, p. 79)

Unlike Chikoko above, the book seems to suggest that singular answers to these contested issues are possible, and can be contained in a solution that will be found. This is despite the professed theoretical claim towards nonessentialism and preferred plurality, yielding a paradigmatic paradox. I think that this is an illusion that cannot be crafted in a sanitised solution. The book in general, proffers a view that a holistic, stable, socially just curriculum will be possible if one attends to an affirmation of the self and a reconnecting with a (rural) African past. I am not suggesting that the resources of these Africanisms should not be a project per se. What I am suggesting is that it is naïve to hope for a world that will not be forever contested with hierarchies and marginalisations. There will always be, in the curriculum selections made, inclusions and exclusions, and this could be overtly manifested or

oftentimes, lie below the surface of the officialised curriculum. References to the hidden and null curriculum are examined in this anthology. Some authors acknowledge that despite the legalised removal of former colonial systems of governance and administration, the education curriculum of many African schooling and higher education systems, still bear the hallmarks of colonial hidden heritages. But the book does not acknowledge sufficiently, the many contradictions even within Africa itself. For example, African identities and worldviews often are hushed even in those contexts that profess to be “anticolonial.” The “success” of African countries for emulating and performing in comparative international assessment testing is an example of this continued infiltration of colonial perspectives in the education and schooling system. The masters’ voice still defines the hallmarks of quality.

Therefore I need to ask: Why do I, after reading this anthology, feel silenced and celebrated at the same time? I see in the book the choice to contest the powerful hegemonic controls that are imposed on me from outside my worldview. I see the agenda to redefine my selfhood. And my self is celebrated. But the choices of the perspectives and theories make no mention of my own heritage within the African continent. I believe I am African, with roots that are drawn from many historical continental geographic and religious perspectives. But the book does not engage sufficiently the notion that the African continent is patterned with a mosaic of differing intersecting cultural systems of which I am a part. I do not feel that I am invited to be considered as African too. Instead, I leave the reading of the book feeling that the world of being African is already predetermined to belong to only certain groups or kinds of individuals, outside of my existence. I notice this in the choices of the bibliographic preferences which explore colonialism largely in relation to a largely a geographical heritage of preferred continental African authors. I recognise this as a deliberate attempt to celebrate that scholarship in, for, from, and about Africa is the hidden curriculum project of the book. But I see no references to the contested views of Orientalism and its examination of the politics of marginality as part of the decolonial project, even on the African continent. I see no mention of the struggles of many individuals of different racial groups for the dismantling of the intersected oppression of colonialism and apartheid, which fragmented rather than cohered different cultural and religious orientations. I see a silence about matters of sexual orientation and African identities. I see a flirtation with brief accounts from international black American scholars in the USA, and from the African continent outside South Africa. I note the two white African scholars included in the anthology. But does this assemblage of authors reflect the fullness of the Africans of the continent?

Perhaps the choice of English as its preferred medium to lead the academic debate is a means to generate an inclusivity of voices and audiences. But how is this choice not part of the colonised agenda? These are the kinds of contradictions and complexities that the book does not overtly tackle, presumably because this is already a settled agreement that our dialogues can be mediated through the borrowing of the masters’ language? English is my only home language. And therefore, I should feel included in this debate. But am I the targeted audience, or a participant in this gaze mediated via the choice of the language of its research? Or am I the one to be converted by the languaged argument? And yet, why then, do I feel silenced?

I think that the book, whilst presenting practical operational ways of infusing into the curriculum space a view about how African identities can be celebrated, still compartmentalises Africanness into certain ethnic and racialised agendas.

I note, for example Higgs’ (2016) chapter, which pushes the boundaries to explore for a greater wisdom utilising Mazrui’s (2004) characteristics of wisdom. Higgs reports that wisdom requires tolerance, an optimising of the economic well-being of all, the campaign for social justice in broader rather than narrow ascendancies, the questioning of how curriculum choices tend to benefit particular preferred sets of individuals, the need for broader campaign for true equality, a respect for a sustainable environmental context and lastly, the need for interfaith dialogue. This more comprehensive

philosophical view of wisdom and the project of what scholarship should be directed towards, is glossed over by many of the authors, who choose instead to remember the oppression, without adequately suggesting a more dialogical openness based on respect and trust of multiple perspectives around identities of the past, the present, and the future.

To quote Ramose (2004) in this chapter: “Wisdom is openness to unfolding praxis, which also cherishes the logic of co-operation, rather than conquest and competition” (as cited in Higgs, 2016, p. 12). A non-cooperative agenda results in “reductionism, absolutism and dogmatism” which Ramose saw as “an injury to the complexity of life as a holistic phenomenon” (2004, as cited in Higgs, 2016, p. 12).

I would have liked the book to open up the spaces for this expansionist, complex, and intersected world. Instead, I feel like the grass, trampled and trodden. I am cast as simply a spectator rather than invited to contribute. Nyerere (then President of Tanzania) in the 1970s, commented in a New York United Nations speech, that during the Cold War, the contesting belligerence between the two superpowers of Russia and the United States, it was the poor third-world countries throughout the globe, and especially in the African continent, that were the ones who were the real victims. Whilst the elephants fought, the grass was trampled.

Whilst the elephants of colonised and coloniser fight, it further marginalises those who inhabit the contextual spatiality of the complex interconnected world we live in. The grass suffers most. Curriculum must consciously affirm the possibility that all citizens of the world are able to share in dialogue and respect of the interchange of competing and contested worldviews. This is not a naïve hope of a return to romanticised essentialist past, but a hope that must be infused with criticality (Bozalek, Liebowitz, Carolissen, & Boler, 2014): an agenda of multiple strategies that campaigns towards the forever contested nature of knowledges and knowledge systems, whilst moving towards greater degrees of freedom and assertion.

Elephants cannot dance, without scaring the chickens.

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