The Africa Governance Papers

Volume 1 | Issue 2 | October 2022

EDITORIAL

Reflections on epistemological pluralism: Not either/or but either/and

Welcome to the second issue of *The Africa Governance Papers*.

This issue reflects something of the journal's multi- and interdisciplinary ambitions, with articles employing a range of research methodologies and looking at very different topics in Lesotho, Zimbabwe and South Africa, as well as broader-ranging issues in West Africa and the continent.

Moliehi Ramonate's article draws some useful conclusions for reforming Lesotho's politicised and underfunded civilian police oversight structures. Nnaemeka Ohamadike develops a set of indicators based on the Ibrahim Index of African Governance as the basis of a quantitative analysis of levels of political accountability across the continent and concludes that regional and continental bodies need to support and strengthen anti-graft programmes at the national level. An in-depth legal analysis of certain recent abuses of constitutionality in the form of "lawfare" in South Africa is the subject of Helen Acton's article, which recommends several strategies to curb this wasteful and ultimately unjust practice. In Zimbabwe, Malvern Marewo and Senzo Ncube do an on-the-ground investigation of the sense of belonging of the residents of a fast-track land reform resettlement project and conclude that this is relatively fragile as compared to their sense of connection with their areas of origin, where their sense of ties to community is more deeply supported by clan and totem identities.

Regarding totem identities, Nene-Lomotey Kuditchar's article contributes a critical discussion of the abstract framing of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets in Africa and argues through a series of case studies of the totemic practices of some local communities in West Africa that African indigenous knowledge and practices offer a deep-rooted and practical approach to supporting efforts to achieve environmental sustainability.

Ross Harvey's detailed review of Professor David Benatar's study of the negative repercussions of critical race theory bleeding into the University of

Cape Town's leadership and governance structures concludes that the author's detailed account offers well-grounded reasons for concern about academic freedom and freedom of speech at one of Africa's leading universities. Terence Corrigan's insightful review of Petar Stankov's recent study of populism in other parts of the world raises some highly relevant questions that suggest new lines of research on the phenomenon in Africa. And finally, in their comment piece, Kendra Connock *et al* offer a detailed argument for a better understanding of the problems and potential of Africa's marine ("blue") economy and outline several practical approaches that African delegates could and should adopt to highlight the issue at COP 27 this month in Egypt.

To my mind, even this limited selection of research topics shows that the challenges facing African governance currently – and indeed, in the foreseeable future – require a wide range of research insight and, consequently, of epistemologies and their associated methodologies for governance to be effective. The idea of epistemological pluralism is a major feature of thinking about research in the African context, and rightly so. Yet it might be said that the implications of this are frequently misunderstood or misdirected. I can think of two important areas where this is the case: firstly, in a tendency to "binarise" Africa's relationship with the rest of the world, and secondly, and partly as a consequence, to think that European or Western thought is still fundamentally centred on and indeed fixated on "mechanistic" or positivist approaches to research. It might be argued that these issues should have little to do with a healthy, independent approach to African research. Yet this would be a mistake. It is true enough that African identities and approaches to knowledge were largely dismissed or marginalised during the colonial and imperial eras, but this does not mean that our thinking in the modern world of which we are a part can be isolated from developments elsewhere.

To take up the first point, the binary approach to Africa's relationship with the rest of the world, and particularly with the approach to knowledge of thinkers from countries that are still regarded as former colonial powers, has historically depended on the idea that there are distinctive or unique epistemologies associated with different "races" or (broadly speaking) continental cultural groups. This idea was, it might be observed, a major feature of Western thinking about Africa during the imperial era and it continued to be a major theme of postcolonial thinking in Africa, albeit with a difference emphasis. For many thinkers in the immediate decades after independence – among them Placide Tempels, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Innocent C. Onyewuenyi, Christopher Anyanwu, Anselm Kole Jimoh and Amaechi Udefi – the emphasis was on the idea

that there are distinctly African ways of knowing the world (Nwosimiri, 2019, p. 36). Senghor's concept of negritude, for example, asserted African ways of being and knowing in the face of continuing racism even as the European empires came to an end (Nwosimiri, 2019, p. 38).

The destructive influence of Europe's imperial ideologies peaked during the period from the partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884 to the end of World War II (Pomper, 2005, p. 3). That destructive influence was based on two major assumptions: that superior technological capabilities entitled certain nations to rule far-flung polities around the world without the consent of their people (Pomper, 2005, p. 2) and that European domination entitled those powers and their representatives to ignore indigenous thought and experience, an approach that amounted to "epistemological blindness" (Ahenakew, 2014, p. 150). Given this, the impulse to distinguish African approaches to knowledge as uniquely meaningful was a natural political imperative for newly free African nations.

That basic standpoint has since developed into a worldwide academic counter-paradigm under the rubric of decolonising academia as attested by academic contributions from as far afield as Canada, New Zealand and South Africa (Ahenakew, 2014; Teffo, 2011; Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). What decolonisation means varies, depending on the viewpoint of its different exponents. Yet ultimately, despite its hegemonic claims, this approach is not universally accepted within the African academy.

Ovett Kodilinye Nwosimiri, for instance, in a remarkable recent PhD dissertation, argues, firstly, that the approach depends on totalising the issue of supposedly specific continental epistemologies in an ethnophilosophical way as involving fundamentally different and opposed kinds of rationality. He argues that this ignores the possibility that rationality is not binary but many-sided (Nwosimiri, 2019, p. 41) and suggests that it ultimately restricts African thinking (Nwosimiri, 2019, p. 45). The US-based Nigerian philosopher Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò has recently argued, in similar vein, that "decolonising" African academe will seriously harm scholarship in and of Africa by coding modernity as a "white" phenomenon in which Africans cannot participate and to which they cannot contribute. Although intended as "radical", he continues, the idea of decolonisation recapitulates, rather than challenges, the colonialist trope that Africans are the objects, and not agents of history (Táíwò, 2022).

A rather typical example of the excesses and temptations of totalisation may be found in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. In this book, Said rightly notes that "[t]he difficulty with theories of essentialism and exclusiveness, or with barriers and sides, is that they give rise to polarizations that absolve and

forgive ignorance and demagogy more than they enable knowledge" (Said, 1994, p. 32). And yet he goes on to claim that there exists a "fundamental ontological distinction between the West and the rest of the world" about which there is "no disagreement" (Said, 1994, p. 108). Further, that since the European Renaissance, all exchanges between Europe and the colonised world have been mediated through an us-and-them relationship determined by the colonisers and their descendants, perceived in a simplistic and undifferentiated way. This, Said claims, is a fact "quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident" (Said, 1994, p. xxv). Yet as Kenan Malik points out, this "transhistorical" – one might adjust this, perhaps, as "ahistorical" – claim "collapses the subtleties of two millennia of history" and "subsequently reads history backwards, conceiving of the past in terms specific to the present" (Malik, 2000, p. 159).

Clearly these issues have direct consequences for the question, or quest, for an adequate understanding of a truly pluralist epistemology. It is somewhat ironic that for many, the idea of pluralism is taken to connote not accumulation and complementarity but division and essentialist preference.

Preparing for this editorial, for example, I was interested to note that the second edition of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Methods* includes Vidich and Lyman's magisterial overview of the history of (Western and mainly American) ethnography. In this article the authors recognise that the discipline centred fundamentally on the study of "the other" for centuries. Yet they go on to argue, in effect, that this orientation came full circle in the 20th century with the discovery of the category of "civil otherhood" – that is, that "the other" represented a category of human being that was not so far away from the centres of metropolitan power after all (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 33). This long reflexive journey, in turn, was ultimately the source of the development of "highly refined and diverse" methods that address a "vastly expanded subject matter" concerning the "varieties of experience in modern life" today (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 42). These include, one presumes, the paradigms and their associated research methods of interpretivism and constructivism, which are contributing to increased knowledge of the formerly colonised worlds, among other things – though indeed, not exclusively.

Their article serves as a model of thorough, painstaking and honest research in its broad area from which many a student might learn volumes, even if it is (as it has every right to be) fundamentally Americentric in orientation. Yet only five years later, it was quietly elided from the third edition of the handbook published in 2005. In the interim, the editors had become convinced of a new idea, along with proponents of the "radical" version of decolonisation mentioned earlier, that

"qualitative research, in many if not all of its forms (observation, participation, interviewing, ethnography), serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, and for truth". They extend the idea by approvingly citing Linda Tuhiwai Smith's claim that to the colonised, "all scientific research" is inextricably linked to European imperialism, adding that "the dirty word" "research" is "one of colonialism's most sordid legacies" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1). Their elision of the Vidich and Lyman article doesn't receive any direct comment, but it might be that it was excluded because of its frank recognition of the centrality of the concept of "the other", which has itself become, for some, a "dirty phrase". Rather that, perhaps, than accept the reality of "uncomfortable knowledge" (Rayner, 2012). Ultimately, they also seem to think that the swift development of a range of qualitative research methods in the social sciences in recent decades represents a victory of sorts over quantitative," imperialist" research methodologies and that the latter have somehow been rendered redundant.

All of which gets me to my second point, namely a persistent tendency on the part of researchers who identify as anti- or decolonialist in orientation to identify "Western" thought with (European) Enlightenment-inspired (Ahenakew, 2014, p. 148) oppressive reductionism, often most associated with the "positivist-empirical approach"(Gran, 1986; Jegede, 1995; Moyo, 2020). The origins of writers who take this view are by no means restricted to Africa:

> Anti-oppressive methodologies offer a counter-approach to positivist approaches, which consistently reproduce the epistemic privilege of the scientific paradigm. It is no small task given that positivism has a lengthy history beginning in the Enlightenment era, a period marked by the celebration of science and a perception that through scientific reasoning man could understand, control, and shape the natural, social, political, and economic world. From this perspective emerged a belief in a universal truth applicable to all people and cultures (Kovach, 2015, p. 47).

Positivism may have been the "Western" dominant scientific philosophy during the 19th century (Tarascio, 1975, p. 49) and it may have survived into the 20th century in the form of logical empiricism, which was based on the idea that all theoretical statements about the world must be subject to verification in terms of the researcher's empirical (and ultimately sensory) experience (Choi, 2018). But positivism of this type had already come under sustained questioning from pragmatist thinkers in the early 20th century, and not much later from other philosophers of science, such as Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper. Increasingly, it was recognised that science could not provide a reductive Theory of Everything, and that at best what was achievable was a "wide variety of overlapping ways of understanding" (Davies, 2006, p. 1).

The "Western" approach to knowledge, then, is by no means as unitary as implied by its reductive anti-reductionist critics. In the assertions of some forms of decolonial theory one detects a totalism that is curiously at odds with the associated claims to epistemological pluralism.

A far better and far more interesting account of the underlying issue as interpreted and reread from a postcolonial perspective can be found in Ganeri's compelling analysis of the wealth of insight to be gained from the Sanskritic philosophical tradition of the epistemological stance. Indian philosophical schools, he argues, "supported a plurality of … epistemic cultures, which did not exist in isolation from one another but were in constant mutual dialogue and often very vociferous conflict" (Ganeri, 2019, p. 1). Yet disagreements of this sort implied a shared commitment to the existence of shared data that all might agree would ground claims to knowledge, even if they did not agree what that data was. The basis of this approach, he shows, was the idea of the epistemological stance, "which is not a proposition but a practical attitude, a strategy or policy which guides inquiry: it is an approach to the problem of producing knowledge, not a thesis about the sources of justification" (Ganeri, 2019, p. 6). There is a depth of sophistication to this from which all epistemological pluralists might draw inspiration.

In similar vein, I might point to Jìmí O. Adésínà's seminal study of the implications of the logic embedded in the Yorùbá language and certain of its discursive narratives. These, Adésínà argues, embody the view that: t'ibi, t'ire, l'adá ilé ayé, construed as "the world was created in the cohering of contradictory forces" (Adésínà, 2002, pp. 105–106). An epistemology oriented in what he describes as "ti 'bi-t'ire logic" is not merely methodological but ontological in orientation and has, in his view, the prospect of a new paradigm in sociology "in which the coexistence of opposites and the open-ended outcome of social interaction or contending social forces provide an analytical framework devoid of teleological discourse" (Adésínà, 2002, p. 106). Such insights, Adésínà argues, do not offer merely local insights that encourage "teaching sociology in the vernacular" but "rich, ideographic, local narratives" that can contribute to a genuinely global sociology (Adésínà, 2002, p. 91).

As both these examples of postcolonial scholarship show, there are clearly major challenges for this ambitious scale of postcolonial scholarship. These are clear, especially for scholars not rooted by upbringing or heritage in such traditions, and who do not know Sanskrit or speak Yorùbá or indeed many other languages that embody detailed traditions and understandings. Non-indigenous scholars

wishing to learn from such approaches would clearly face issues of culture and translation, for example. (Adésínà does indeed point out issues connected with the nuances of translation.) Yet the depth of possibilities even from these brief accounts is clear. Scholarship of this order does not reveal "new worlds"; it reveals world conceptions that were and are already there – or rather, here. Nor does such an approach need postmodernist relativism. As Adésínà remarks, "scholarly dialogue becomes impossible when we reject (as postmodernists do) any basis for intellectual adjudication" (Adésínà, 2002, p. 95).

Surely the lesson to be drawn from centuries of domination and resistance, of epistemological blindness and indigenous exclusion, is that epistemological pluralism, if it is to mean anything, must be genuinely inclusive. Modern societies, however we arrived at them, are fundamentally diverse and pluralist in nature (Bevir, 2012, p. 1). In such a context, quantitative as well as the qualitative research paradigms are needed. Effective governance requires surveys and statistics, just as cancer treatments and large-scale social policy interventions require random-controlled trials. Understanding the marginalised and inner-city poverty can benefit from ethnographies of lived experience and participatory research. Somewhat tongue in cheek, but not entirely, might it not be suggested that the stance of epistemological pluralism should not adopt a binary, exclusionary either/or approach, but rather an adventurous either/and?

So I'm pleased to say that this issue of TAGP features articles that address themes relating to governance in several African countries that make use of a range of epistemological approaches and research methodologies. It's an approach which, as an interdisciplinary journal, we hope to see further developed in the coming issues. I'd particularly like to thank the peer reviewers for this edition, who took the time to offer detailed comments on the articles that added a lot to them and from which, I have been assured, the contributors themselves gained much.

The journal is gathering steam. We are now hosted on Ebsco, the worldwide academic database, giving contributors exposure to a huge academic audience. Our thanks go to Fikile Dhlame and Rogit Gayalkar at Ebsco for their sustained and professional interest in TAGP. I'd like to note that we are also well into our second year with accreditation to be applied for after the third year. Articles published before then can be granted retrospective accreditation once we have satisfied the publishing requirements.

Richard Jurgens, Editor

References

Adésínà, J. O. (2002). Sociology and Yorùbá Studies: Epistemic intervention or doing sociology in the "vernacular"? *African Sociological Studies*, 6(1), 91–114.

Ahenakew, C. (2014). Indigenous epistemological pluralism: Connecting different traditions of knowledge production. *Canadian Journal of Native Education V*, 37(1), 148–164.

Bevir, M. (2012). A history of modern pluralism. In M. Bevir (Ed.), *Modern Pluralism: Anglo-American Debates Since 1880*. Cambridge University Press.

Choi, N. (2018). Berlin, analytic philosophy, and the revival of political philosophy. In J. L. Cherniss & S. B. Smith (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*. Cambridge University Press.

Davies, E. B. (2006). Epistemological pluralism. King's College, London.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2005). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Ganeri, J. (2019). Epistemic pluralism: From systems to stances. Journal of the American Philosophical Association, 5(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2018.34

Gran, G. (1986). Beyond African famines: Whose knowledge matters? *Alternatives*, XI, 275–296.

Jegede, O. J. (1995). Collateral Learning and the Eco-Cultural Paradigm in Science and Mathematics Education in Africa. *Studies in Science Education*, 25(1), 97–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057269508560051

Kovach, M. (2015). Emerging from the margins: Indigenous methodologies (S. Strega & L. Brown (Eds) *Research as Resistance – Revisiting critical, indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches*, pp. 43–64). Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

Malik, K. (2000). Universalism and difference in discourses of race. *Review of International Studie*s, 26, 155–177.

Moyo, L. (2020). Decolonial Research Methodologies: Resistance and Liberatory Approaches. In *The Decolonial Turn in Media Studies in Africa and the Global South* (pp. 187–225). Palgrave Macmillan.

Nwosimiri, O. K. (2019). Epistemology in African Philosophy: A Critique of African Concepts of Knowledge [PhD]. University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Pomper, P. (2005). The history and theory of empires. *History and Theory*, 44(4), 1–27.

Rayner, S. (2012). Uncomfortable knowledge: The social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses. *Economy and Society*, 41(1), 107–125.

Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism* (1st ed.). Vintage Books.

Táíwò, O. (2022). *Against Decolonization: Taking African Agency Seriously*. Hurst.

Tarascio, V. J. (1975). Intellectual history and the social sciences: The problem of methodological pluralism. *Social Science Quarterly*, 56(1), 37–54.

Teffo, L. (2011). Epistemic pluralism for knowledge transformation. International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity, 6(1), 24–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/18186874.2011.592388

Vidich, A. J., & Lyman, S. M. (2000). Qualitative methods – Their history in sociology and anthropology. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., pp. 23–46). SAGE.