Integrating African indigenous knowledge systems: Towards a bi-system curriculum in the academia

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Abstract

A major challenge facing indigenous knowledge systems in general, and African indigenous knowledge systems in particular, is the identification and codification of those elements that can be said to properly constitute the systems, and the establishment of modalities for their interaction with universal, or modern, knowledge systems. It is not just enough to assert the existence or significance of indigenous knowledge, but rather essential to demonstrate these empirically and methodically, more so in the face of contestations of their validity. Within the context of the paper being proposed here, it is only when such codification or identification is accomplished that indigenous knowledge systems can be integrated with modern knowledge systems and the associated educational curricular. Such integration within academic curricular is a necessary step towards creating bigger facilities, including institutes or institutions to advance indigenous knowledge systems.

However, a related challenge is the continued rejection by many Africans of indigenous sources of knowledge and wisdom. Many African institutions cite 'obsoleteness' and 'the need to move forward' to obstruct the integration of indigenous knowledge systems within their curricular. At faculty levels, such obstructions sometimes take the form of resistance to interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation, especially where such involves partnering with indigenous knowledge systems. For example (and this is not wholly hypothetical), a student in a Department of English attempting to defend a thesis proposal on the use of Yoruba proverbs

or other oral philosophical corpora such as the *Ifa* (divination) corpus in the resolution of conflicts or disputes in African literature might get asked: 'why Yoruba proverbs? – this is a department of English!' Yet, the application of Hegelian or Marxian formulations (originally in German), or of Aristotelian or Socratic principles (originally Greek), attracts no such sanction.

Programmes such as language nesting, bilingual education and inclusive curriculum have been established in a number of indigenous knowledge initiative centres in Africa in the attempt to build indigenous knowledge capacities. This paper is concerned with language as a veritable source of indigenous knowledge but also as a medium for the integration of indigenous knowledge and universal knowledge systems within academic curricular. It is well established that official policies do shape popular attitudes. The paper attempts to harvest indigenous knowledge policies and experiences within language and philosophy based departments in selected Nigerian universities, and proposes a bilingual curricular with an objective to create a subject place for indigenous knowledge systems within the academy.

Rationale for insistence on the integration of indigenous knowledge

The need for the integration of indigenous knowledge is affirmed from both functional factors, i.e. the sheer utilitarian value for African citizens and potentially for the whole world, and from psychological or affective (feel good) factors, which also reverberate on functionality. Both factors speak to the need to secure "a subject place for Africa" (Asante 2007), or to "secure the base" (wa Thiong'O 2016), or an attempt, albeit considered by some ambiguous, to "demarcate and bolster an African identity and sphere of life and action" (Crossman and Nevesch 2002, p. 98). The definition of indigenous knowledge proffered by UNESCO hints at the twin objective object noted above: one aspect of this is to ensure the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in "global science and policy processes," while the other is to foster engagement with scientists internationally, with the ultimate aim of furthering understandings of indigenous

conditions, with respect to, for example, "climate change impacts, adaptation and mitigation."[1]

However, many definitions of indigenous, or endogenous, knowledge,[2] fail, just like the UNESCO one above, to factor in the demand of decoloniality and the benefits to be derived therefrom.

This paper is interested in the enactment or enablement of policies that would lead to the systematic integration of the indigenous knowledge in the Nigerian university curriculum. As with most parts of Africa, the curriculum is largely, if not wholly westernised, or driven by western theories, values and methodologies, leading to the loss of information or knowledge that is of value to immediate local communities, and potentially of value to the whole world in areas such as medicine, agriculture, the sciences in general, as well as language, art, philosophy, jurisprudence, indeed, the humanities in general. There are also affective issues in terms of loss of sense of identity and pride. These are gaps, which policies that enable the integration of indigenous knowledge can attempt to resolve.

In the following sections, I look at this twin pattern of imposition of western knowledge systems and silencing of indigenous knowledge systems, especially within the curriculum in higher institutions, that is to say, the ways in which indigenous knowledge has been submerged in the Nigerian academy. I also consider what I call a "bi-system curriculum" that can help to systematically integrate indigenous knowledge systems with the curriculum. As a background to the research, I would like to understand the trajectory of indigenous knowledge in representative institutions; whether such a policy exists at all, at what levels, who were the initiators and what was their vision; what has been the progress, the nature of the knowledge

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[1] https://en.unesco.org/links

[2] As I elaborate later, it is possible to use the term "indigenous knowledge" and the transformed term "endogenous knowledge" (Crossman & Neveschi, 2002) interchangeably, for reasons that I will elaborate on shortly.

and its potential to attain international reckoning and impact the universal store of knowledge in these areas.

Definitional issues

The projection or promotion of indigenous knowledge must begin with its definition. However, definitions of indigenous knowledge are often inherently contrastive, and ultimately belittling relative to the definitions of what constitutes western or "universal" knowledge. Thus, in contrast to western scientific knowledge, the definitions of local knowledge have revolved around principles such as nature, culture, rurality, environmentalism, orality. These features parallel the definition by UNESCO, which I partially cited above, that "local and indigenous knowledge refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings" (UNESCO LINKS). The definitions have often derived from ILO and UN concepts of indigeneity itself.

The rejection of the term "indigenous" by Crossman & Nevisch above would seem predicated on its implication of an original or autochthonous holding; that is, the indigenous appears to belong to original inhabitants, whereas endogenous refers to "development determined by innate resources" and emphasizes "dynamic growth process" (p. 99). A major and valid criticism many definitions of indigenous knowledge as sampled above is therefore the continued negative naming and terminological inferiorisation of African knowledge, via notions of localization and non-scientificity, and other inherently contrastive emphases, such as "nature" and "spirituality," that are based on a negative comparison with western knowledge. "Africanisation of knowledge is basically a call to place the African worldview at the centre of analysis and recognition that there are different pyramids for the construction of knowledge none of which should be regarded as inferior."

Role of language

The route to the muting of African Indigenous knowledge has been by muting the associated language. The aspect of language is important and should be emphasised. I take it as axiomatic that language is the gateway to indigenous knowledge, or to any knowledge for that matter. Colonialism and neocolonialism work to foster an attitude of rejection of indigenous languages and simultaneously, an immersion in the colonial language, knowledge and history. The attitude of embracing colonial knowledge systems accords well with the Frantz Fanon's dictum on the obsession of the colonised with the canons of the oppressor at the expense of his own learning and culture, which they whimsically abandon; and more to the linguistic perspective, wa Thiong'O's dictum that the colonization of the "mental universe" of colonized people's was facilitated by "the domination [of their] languages".

The absence of indigenous linguistic agency in the education sector, as in the case in most African countries, deprives the countries of the knowledge that come with their indigenous languages. I also find the non-extremist view of linguistic relativism to be relevant at this point, that is, the principle that languages reflect different habits of cognition and different experiential values.

In the following tables, I compare a number of concepts relating to the domain of education, as conveyed through three words in English, for example, "curriculum", "education" and "teacher" and the equivalent words in German, *Lehrplan*, *Bildung*, and *Lehrer*. I also, for the purpose of cross-referencing, compare the word for "teacher" in Dutch, *onderwijzer*.

TABLE 1: ILLUSTRATION OF HOW LANGUAGE DRIVES INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Term/ Concept	Definitions/Origins (from *Wikipedia)*		
	REPRESENTATIONS DRIVEN BY LANGUAGE		
	ENGLISH	GERMAN	Back Translation from German
	"CURRICULUM"	**"LEHRPLAN"**	
Curriculum	In education, a **curriculum** (/kəˈrɪkjʊləm/; plural **curricula** /kəˈrɪkjʊlə/ or **curriculums**) is broadly defined as the totality of **student experiences that occur in the educational process.** The term often refers specifically to **a planned sequence of instruction**, or to a view of the **student's experiences** in terms of the educator's or school's instructional goals.	Der **Lehrplan** fasst Lerninhalte und Lernziele nach Schultypen und Schuljahr systematisch zusammen. Ein Curriculum umfasst darüber hinaus das ganze Konzept der Lehr- und Erziehungsmethoden sowie die Zielsetzungen einer Bildungseinrichtung.	The **curriculum** systematically **summarizes learning content and learning objectives according to school type and school year**. A curriculum also encompasses the **entire concept of teaching and educational methods** as well as the **objectives of an educational institution.**
	The word "**curriculum**" began as a **Latin** word which means **"a race" or "the course of a race" (which in turn derives from the verb *currere* meaning "to run/to proceed"). The word is "from a Modern Latin transferred use of classical Latin curriculum "a running, course, career" (also "a fast chariot, racing car")**, from currere "to run" (from PIE root *kers- "to run")." The first known use in an educational context is in the *Professio Regia*, **a work by University of Paris professor Petrus Ramus published posthumously in 1576. The term subsequently appears in University of Leiden records in 1582**. The word's origins appear closely linked to the Calvinist desire to bring greater order to education.	Dem **Lehrplan** ging der Bildungskanon voraus, mit dem der zu vermittelnde Wissensbestand einer Kultur festgelegt wurde. Die erste große europäische Schulreformbewegung **der Neuzeit ging von den Ideen Jean-Jacques Rousseaus aus, der das Studium der Realien, der Natur und der Lebensumwelten als Lernprogramm ins Spiel brachte.** Bei der Eigentlichen Kanonkontroverse, an dem sich kontroverse Erziehungsprogramme festmachten, ging es um die Stellung des Latein und der alten Sprachen. Bei der neuhumanistischen Bildungsreform von **Wilhelm von Humboldt umfasste der Kanon des Lernens (Süvernscher Lehrplan von 1810/16 für die preußischen Gymnasien**) Latein, Griechisch, Deutsch, Hebräisch, Mathematik, Realien, Religion, Schönschreiben sowie Gesang und Sport.	The **curriculum** was preceded by the educational canon, with which the knowledge to be conveyed in a culture was determined. The first major **European school reform movement** of the modern age **started from the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who brought the study of realities, nature and living environments into play as a learning program**. The actual canon controversy, to which controversial educational programs were attached, concerned the position of Latin and the ancient languages. **In Wilhelm von Humboldt's neo-humanist educational reform, the canon of learning (Süvern's curriculum from 1810/16 for the Prussian grammar schools**) comprised Latin, Greek, German, Hebrew, mathematics, realism, religion, calligraphy as well as singing and sports.

The illustration shows different representations of the same concepts through the agency of language. The words used in the different languages signal different strategies of naming and of knowing, as far as those words are concerned. In one language, the term "curriculum" appears semantically unmotivated in relation to the experience it describes, such that the knowledge of the word is operated by means of a meaning transfer and is apprehended (metaphorically) – from the "course of race" to the running of an educational course; on the other hand, the term in the other language, *Lehrplan*, directly apprehends the experience, its agents and the concrete associated practices – "the plan used by a teacher" presumably in a classroom.

What the various illustrations above demonstrate, in summary, is how knowledge is represented in language and how language in turn drives the pursuit and representation of knowledge, hence the absence of linguistic agency deprives communities of indigenous knowledge. Assuming a colonised Germany or Netherlands having to access knowledge only through English, the specific knowledge demonstrated above, which are otherwise derivable through the impetus of indigenous linguistic agency, simply vanishes.

Another important issue demonstrated here therefore is the fallacy of "universal knowledge" or a collective "western knowledge." Again, the knowledges represented in each column in the above tables are primarily local, drawn from the local environment, history and experience. While there are universal principles of knowledge governing lexical output, or derivable from the so called local output, the power asymmetry between different regions of the world has led to the appropriation and imposition of so called universalism by the west (see also Hountondji 2002; Kaya 2014).

Problems of and efforts at integrating AIKS in the curriculum

The problem with the integration of regard to African Indigenous Knowledge Systems as noted earlier is the immersion of the education system and education policy in the colonial system. Some of the related problems include the following:

- Continued appropriation or suppression of indigenous African holdings through power asymmetry and the principles of globalisation

- Absence of linguistic agency

- Receding communal memory

- Absence of policy and institutional frameworks or clear guidelines for the integration of indigenous knowledge systems

  - Neo-colonial agency – residual army of colonial education

  - "M Juxtaposition"

Modes of "integration" of indigenous knowledge

Institutionalizing indigenous knowledge systems for development in Africa should start with an understanding of knowledge development goals, which include the establishment of local knowledge competencies and partnering with global knowledge concerns (see Cummings et al, 2019), and by establishing it as a common goal that is necessary for the development of the continent. It is assumed that the academia has a vanguard role to play as belonging to the educated elite that is supposed to galvanise development. The task of the indigenous academy, Fatnowna and Pickett (2002) note, is to "engage in the continuing process of making knowledge explicit, accessible and organised, within systems of shared understanding and applications in practice" (p. 209). Within the context of this paper, the task is to make indigenous knowledge available and synthesise it with other available knowledges.

Different modes of the attempt to achieve consciousness of indigenous knowledge and integrate same within the community in Africa have been identified, including use of educational materials with socio-cultural relevance and creation of IKS centres. However, within Africa, efforts to place indigenous languages systematically on the appropriate pedestal for integration with the existing colonial system have been stultified due to the entrenchment of colonial system and immersion of operators of the African system in western worldviews and methodologies. Many African institutions typically reject indigenous sources of knowledge and wisdom, citing 'obsoleteness' and 'the need to move forward' to obstruct the integration of indigenous knowledge systems within their curricular.

A Bi-system approach

By bi-system approach, I mean a system of immersion that integrates indigenous knowledge systems with foreign or international knowledge systems, with the goal of securing a knowledge space for the indigenous system within the curriculum, thereby enriching the overall curriculum and the corresponding systems of knowledge. The corresponding activation of interest in the indigenous knowledge ultimately leads to a quantum leap in the development of indigenous knowledge systems, and to transformations in the respective areas of knowledge.

The bi-system approach anticipates an egalitarian amalgam of knowledge sources and knowledge goals as against the hierarchic transmission of just the colonial knowledge system in an indigenous language. It accommodates the two dueling systems, indigenous or non-indigenous. A model of accommodation is necessary to avoid extreme hostility to indigenous knowledge innovations and the absence of indigenous manpower.

For example, within the Nigerian education system, not only is there no concrete policy of promoting or integrating indigenous knowledge, there is rather, in the related document, the National Education Policy, explicit statements tying the entire sector to globalist trends. The policy document has it that:

> Nigeria like most other countries of the world is undergoing rapid social, economic and political reforms. The *impetus for these changes is fuelled by* the nation's commitment to such *international goals* of development such as the Education for All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and our own home-grown *National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategies (NEEDS)* I and II that recognizes education as a means of empowering the people for the attainment of the nation's developmental plans and targets. (Nigeria National Education Policy 2014)

Not only is the country's educational objective subordinated to general international goals (which are couched at least as a primary concern above), but also that, as shown below, the tokenist addition of "our home-grown NEEDS" does not include a concern for indigenous knowledge production. Rather it is couched as:

(i)   an aggregate tool of empowerment for the poor, and the socially marginalized groups;

(ii)   an effective means of developing the full capacities and potentials of human resources, as well (sic)

(iii)   the development of competent workforce through the acquisition of practical skills relevant to the world of work as a veritable means of developing sound intelligent learning societies, fit and relevant to the 21st century

Indeed, nowhere in the entire document does the term "indigenous knowledge" occur. It is not surprising that the battle cry of indigenous knowledge production is not heard very much within this vast terrain.

How then do we integrate indigenous knowledge within the bi-system approach? The first enemy of indigenous knowledge integration therefore is the absence of an enabling policy. The first port of call in the attempt to integrate the production of indigenous knowledge is to enact policies to create an awareness of this need. Integrating indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems within the curriculum necessarily involves a triple process of policy intervention, attitudinal change and methodical innovations. Colonially minded academics need to be aware or be made aware of the necessity for change, which requires both training and a certain degree of persuasive push, through policies that authorize the process. Further to policy enactment is the will to implement. Experience with the Nigerian language policy, which has always been embedded in the education policy shows that implementation is a problem. The policy of using indigenous language at certain levels of education in the country is often ambiguous, but even where it is clear, it is either not implemented at all or it is implemented haphazardly or half-heartedly. Policies must therefore be accompanied by appropriate implementation strategies that would include a systemic monitoring of the process. Inclusion, juxtaposition and synthesis (IJS) are the hallmarks of this system.

Conclusion

The task of integrating indigenous knowledge content in the curriculum in African institutions is clearly an enormous one. Colonial education is deeply rooted and ingrained in the collective consciousness which includes the leadership and authorities at various levels of engagement. From the ruling authorities to the university administrators to the lecturers and even the students, it is colonial education down the line. Colonial education in Africa therefore has an "army" that is populous, committed, well trained, well equipped and well connected. By

contrast, those who have enlisted in the "army" of indigenous knowledge and indigenous languages are a distinct minority. Since academics must however constitute a core part of the building block of indigenous knowledge integration, the task requires their commitment; decolonising the academic mind is therefore an important first step in the effort to integrate indigenous knowledge systems in the curricular of African institutions.

References (to be supplied)