



# Educational Development and Knowledge Flow: Local and Global Forces in Human Development in Africa

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Both local and global forces impact on educational and human development. This disrupts Africa's capacity to own, generate, and share knowledge. A disorganizing hybridism between African, Eastern and Western heritages exacerbates the difficulty. A social Darwinian perspective disparages but exploits Africinity. Furthermore, no extant theory captures the complex braids of Africinity, which tend to be reduced to evolutionary templates, therein trivializing them and misleading interventions. We offer the concepts of a learning posture and a diversity paradigm as discovery constructs to bring Africa's hidden knowledge out of the traditional closet; into synergy with new technologies and into application for competency building for local knowledge generation and development.

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## Introduction

The orienting values of this paper are learning posture (Agar, 1986) and diversity paradigm (Nsamenang, 2004a), which we offer as discovery constructs for re-conceptualizing theory, methods, and practice in Africa's education and human development arenas. It is about how experts may bring themselves into perceiving and enacting their role as first and always a learner (Ngaujah, 2003). Popper's (1959) view that 'every scientific statement must remain tentative for ever' reinforces this principle. This is not the posture of the science and development work manifest in interventions in Africa today.

## Conceptual Issues and Theoretic Moorings

'A theorist's view of development is closely tied to his or her view of human nature, a view intimately tied to his or her conception of how the universe



works' (Nsamenang, 1992). Indeed, an African theory of the universe 'constitutes a very different *psychological frame of reference* from that which informs contemporary Western developmental psychology' (Serpell, 1994, author's italics). Indigenous African precepts are not merely fixations at the level of the European agrarian systems of any evolutionary period. For instance, Africa's educational thought and praxes, albeit largely dismissed by national governments and sidelined by social Darwinism, cannot be anything else but African. Indigenous African education is a 'formal' education system in its own right, which is labelled 'informal' or 'nonformal' only by those obsessive derogationists, whose measuring rod is Eurocentric education.

Contemporary Africa is heir to a triple heritage (Mazrui, 1986): a restive intermingling, like strands in a braid, of Eastern and Western legacies, superimposed on a deeply resilient Africanity. This complexity has been little contemplated or theorized about. No existing theory fittingly explains it and no antecedent evolutionary template exactly corresponds to its triple-strand braid. Thus, Africa's often posited primitivism is a misperception rather than an evolutionary reality. In this sense, reductionism and wrongful niching of Africa in evolutionary history simplifies and misdirects interventions, thereby exacerbating misunderstanding.

Given the outcry against the continuing application of a single cultural frame (Saraswathi, 1998) to human diversity; this paper does not, *per se*, advocate turning away from Western education or other alien contrivances. Nor does it subscribe to wholesale replacement of Africa's systems with the foreign, which is the net outcome of most interventions on the Continent. Africa's systems possess their own coherence and purposeful consistency, which deserve attention and discovery rather than replacement with a so-called superior system. No people entirely dislodged from their ancestral roots can ever make progress with development; the failed development in Africa is due, in my thinking, to the inexplicable coercion of Africa into a Darwinian box. Given Africa's chequered history at the hands of European nations, this may be classical Freudian intellectualization of its difficulties. In this light, my advocacy of more agrarian-relevant education systems for Africa does not constitute a Pol Potian argument. It is noteworthy that the interventionist skin grafts onto Africa's festering sores have failed to take or are shrivelling off rapidly, due to a refusal to attend to the above-cited source of incompatibility.

### **Innovative theorizing to outgrow myopia and capture ethnotheories**

It is the author's belief that innovative insights from novel models are required. There is a need to outgrow the 'best practices' formats wherein donors or development agencies and interventionists insidiously condemn and out-phase Africa's ethnotheories and *modus vivendi* from, say, school curricula,



missionary, or development agendas. How can Africa be blamed for failure when the history of developmentalism and formal education fails to identify any African precept that has genuinely entered educational planning and development thinking, even with participatory interventions? And yet the application of extraverted remedies continues, without any evidence that an Africentric approach has been given a fair trial. Instead, African precepts and knowledge systems have been unconscionably excluded from policy and remedy, even by the African political class and educational elite, perhaps to accord them an elusive 'modernity.' If interventionists are to convince Africans of the value of new grids through which to look at the world, they must first understand how Africans conceive their world; only then can they figure out how to move Africans into their new world theories.

The emancipatory and progressive stance of scientific positivism and the modernizing posture of developmentalism, for all their full advantages, thus far have stigmatized the Continent not simply as devoid of any achievement but much worse as incapable of any progress without *receiving civilization*. Admittedly, we cannot lose sight of the many positive contributions Eurocentric civilization made and continue to make to Africa, yet we highlight the negative because it is these consequences that mar Africa's realities today. For example, compared with the West, education in Africa does not match expectations with promises. The gulf between promises and actual achievements has grown wider. Africans watch in dismay the non-fulfillment of the chimerical dreams that colonialists and their African successors promoted in enthusiastic rhetoric (Ayandele, 1982). International advocacy continues to reinforce this rhetoric with minimal, if any, feedback from a glaring disjunction between Africa's predominantly agrarian values and the core imperatives of formal education.

### **Statement of the Problem: Education Sector Analysis**

For Africa, institutional education is an intervention, par excellence, because Africa's indigenous educational traditions predate the advent of institutional education. As Fafunwa (1974) pertinently clarifies, to understand the history of education in Africa, adequate knowledge of the indigenous educational systems that existed before the arrival of Islamic and Christian education is required. Antiquated indigenous education has survived till today and continues to be useful, showing no signs of disappearing from the educational landscape. Indigenous African education differs from the Western model; it has its own organizational coherence that is usefully oriented toward purposes different than those of the Eurocentric model. A closer study of its principles may challenge some long-held assumptions about teaching and learning and



enrich the school system with novel approaches to the generation, ownership and sharing of knowledge. For example, the egalitarian spirit of the African peer culture may inspire the self-generated learning and cooperation that schools attempt in vain to motivate (Nsamenang, 2004b).

The Western instructional mode of knowledge and skills acquisition and utilization diverges from Africa's largely participatory education. Regrettably, universal primary education remains an elusive goal throughout Africa, and in most countries its implementation has led to declining returns in an economic sense, for example, educated Africans in agrarian economies lose their farming skills through education. Africa is even worse off in higher education, because less than 5% of students have access to it, compared with a world average of 16% (Prakash, 2003). All tiers of education are unaffordable to the majority of Africans; the average annual cost of Africa's per capita university education in 1996 was over 400% of the per capita income, compared with 26% in the United States of America. As actual costs strain budgetary provisions, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is being experimented with in an effort to expand access. An African Virtual University (AVU) has thus been established, but the core requirements of the ICT revolution — connectivity, capacity, content — are not easily affordable. Worse yet, ICT will not only hype Africa's cultural alienation by proselytizing mainly foreign values but the diversion of funds necessary for its purchase will impact detrimentally on Africa.

An acid test for education as a social institution is its ability to breach the barriers that separate a school and its beneficiary society. Is the school able to promote 'economic progress, the transmission of culture from one generation to the next, and the cultivation of children's intellectual and moral development' (Serpell, 1993) in partnership with its community? To analyse this one must first gauge the fit or mismatch between what educational institutions do and what society expects of them (Vessuri, 1998). However, a common criterion applied to educational relevance in much of Africa appears to be a perceived 'modernity' index put forward by governments and advocacy rather than the local community.

The twin forces of localization and globalization are central to educational relevance. While localization presses for sensitivities to local identities and realities, globalization sees the introduction of new opportunities and images that evoke global desires. It is thus essential to understand educational relevance in terms of its priming impact on the individual, the local community and the nation-state when confronting global trends. Globalization and the imperatives of the knowledge economy demand not simply literate citizens but, more importantly, well-informed citizens with relevant knowledge of and skills for the global village in general and their own country and local community in particular, and how they can make a contribution to



both. Thus, localization and globalization compels global thought, but situated intervention. The education of the Third Millennium therefore should firmly niche the child in his or her own culture while simultaneously providing competencies for the imperatives of the global village; a delicate balancing act, indeed.

As currently dispensed, institutional education does not really open up Africa to itself. It purports to be offering *universal knowledge* to bring Africa out of backwardness, but diffuses mainly disparate chunks of Western knowledges and skill repertoires. It is slim on local wisdom and situated intelligences. It even gives the impression of the African home as an uncivilized setting to escape or replace. By undermining African patterns of knowledge construction and human differentiation, formal education instead gives primacy to the technical acquisition of information. It pays minimal attention to the ethnotheories with which Africans make sense of the world and the experiences that shape their personalities (Lahlou, 1996). This deprives Africans of their cultural and social capital, transgresses an Africentric theory of the universe and stunts Africa's generative capacity to develop knowledge and a coherent picture of how the universe works. By not meshing effectively with stark African realities, present systems of education somehow decontextualize their African learners.

Undoubtedly, education in Africa produces experts, but most are alienated from and somehow ignorant of their cultural roots and agrarian livelihoods by education curricula that are deficient in local content and traditional skills learning. Accordingly, its graduates find it difficult, if not impossible, to generate and share knowledge and competencies about their cultures. In a certain sense, their education has converted them into 'ignorant' experts of their own circumstances. Thus, the disjuncture between educational provisions, existential realities and lived experiences exacerbate Africa's sorry state and highlight its lack of awareness of its own circumstances and the conditions that sustain the status quo. Herein is the hub of Africa's incapacity and failure.

As national governments grapple with slim budgets, education churns out masses of marginally literate school leavers and graduates, increasing numbers barely able to scratch a living; their education apparently more suitable for foreign than national labor markets. An expanding cohort of the unemployed disturbingly increases the dependency index.

The Western systems that ordain the gold standards for the contemporary world order worsen Africa's condition. They assert a superiority over, and forcibly deny equity to, even recognition of, Africa's systems of knowledge, thereby depriving Africans of any niche in knowledge generation, ownership and application. Hence, Africa's desperate fate in being 'one group,' the focus of this paper, 'whose distinctive culture is little appreciated' (Ellis, 1978). We are referring here to a 'debased Black condition' (Liebenow, 1986), which has



wrought a chronic African identity crisis and an acute learned helplessness from self-denigration and disregard of African cultures.

## **Human Development as Socialization of Knowledge and Generative Capacity**

Human offspring are not born with the knowledge and skills with which to face life; they learn or grow into them as they develop. An African worldview visualizes the human being as a biotic system, which education transforms rapidly into a cultural agent. Newborn babies are prepared by genetic endowment and primed by sociocultural inheritance to learn, share and develop.

Literally, the child is born into a state of *posited* knowledge that partly impairs and partly enhances experience of the realities she or he will encounter daily in life. The instructed strategies by which contemporary African children are acquiring or generating schooled knowledge largely differ from those of their participatory traditions and family routines.

### **Garden metaphors and incremental attainment of knowledge and personhood**

African developmental ideas and educational values derive partly from the perception of the unborn as ‘buds of hope and expectation’ (Zimba, 2002). Africans may not articulate it but we can infer awareness of genetic inheritance from their visualization of newborns as ‘full of potentialities of human nature’ and ‘entirely geared toward the future’ (Erny, 1973). Thus, an important assumption in African garden metaphors of human development, which is a central principle in developmental science, is self-motivated learning, which improves with proper cultivation and socialization (Nsamenang, 2005).

Garden metaphors connote a gradual unfolding of human abilities and serial attainment of levels of maturity throughout ontogeny. For example, just as a seed germinates and in time grows into a fruit-bearing plant, the newborn baby systematically matures into futuristic adulthood. Accordingly, the knowledge base and personhood of the child is seen in its ‘becoming’ (Erny, 1968); in the sense of a ‘project-in-progress’ or a plant that slowly but surely matures into fruit-bearing.

Education enhances children’s inherent ability to extract livelihood lessons from their ecocultures. Piaget’s (1952) theory of knowledge is based on the interactional-extractive role of learning. It explicates how children develop as they generate or acquire the knowledge that shapes their thoughts in their interaction with the environment. While Rogoff (2003) posits children’s development *as participants in cultural communities*, for Dei (1996) it is socialization of knowledge. However, most children are not raised;



socialization is a generative process by which children actively learn or teach themselves.

A good amount of children's knowledge entails making sense of the world and making progress with self-understanding and relative status. The generative force of socialization eases children's identity formation and approximates education to processes of living, learning, teaching and maturing. We can infer from this that the practice of early training in sharing, self-care and performance of chores indicates keen awareness of the innate ability in children to affiliate and become self-regulated and competent. The normally developing African child is expected to complete his or her basic training in the social, intellectual, moral and practical domains by the end of adolescence (Cameroun, 1981) and to graduate into higher-order interactional networks.

### **Collaborative Networks and Partnerships in Knowledge Flow and Capacity Development**

Collaborative networks and partnerships are characterized by power potentials. If power is the right to define reality and impose it on other people's definition of reality (Howe, 1998), then Africa has no power. Over the centuries, various interest groups and powerful individuals superimposed their realities on Africa. Imperial nations, for example, enlisted academic disciplines to illuminate modernist ideologies that would consolidate their stranglehold on Africa. The negations and unsolicited impositions qualified Africa as 'the wretched of the earth' (Fanon, 1967).

Nevertheless, African peasants have always maintained a certain formidable power that guards their indigenous institutions and knowledge systems, thereby maintaining some level of self-reliance (Larson, 1998). This measurable but uncharted power is based upon their capacity to resist what they do not have a voice in by means of silent withdrawal (this measurable but uncharted power is based upon the capacity to resist what they do not have a voice in; they tend to withdraw silently from what they are not fully part of). In this section, we endeavor to understand Africa's wretchedness and difficulty with knowledge flows in terms of historical blind spots that sustain misunderstanding, distortion and nonacknowledgement of Africa's capacity and achievements, and the ambiguous role of expertise.

#### **Historical blind spots and the misunderstanding of Africa**

Historically, Eurocentrism, racism and modernist agendas coalesced to form deep-seated blind spots that have since sustained misunderstanding of Africa and its peoples. The misunderstanding began with the earliest European explorers into and through Africa. They, like colonial experts, itinerant



researchers and tourists have imputed nothing but absurdity and perversion into African cultures and lifestyles (Davidson, 1969), therein stripping Africans of any inkling that they possessed power by dint of their knowledge. These blind spots have contributed to a negative image that has, amazingly, been actively transmitted across centuries to deny Africa a respectable place in today's collaborative networks and partnerships. Decades of African studies have not altered the image. The fallout has been the continuing misperception of Africa's un-Western social thought and knowledge systems and Africans' lack of awareness of themselves and their world.

Richards (1985) finds no difficulty in discerning the blind spots and incipient cultural evolutionism in the experts, including some Africa-born specialists, who work in and with Africa. Many are aware they hold these negative feelings or modernist orientations toward Africa and Africans, but it is not so easy to relinquish them and many give up the battle. An important but unexamined element of the misunderstanding or misperception of African affairs comes from Africa's diaspora, even those more recent sojourners. Once most Africans arrive in the West they begin to misperceive and misinterpret Africa from the conceptual systems of Europe and North America, thereby reinforcing the condemnation of Africa. As such, there has been little or no productive or useful rapport or discourse between the Continent and its diaspora.

### **Distortion and non-acknowledgement of Africa's capacity and achievements**

Analyses of African affairs are replete with modernist commitments. They tend to be unidirectional and blameful. While they maintain a conspiracy of silence over how advocacy portrays interventions as 'neutral' and international agencies corrupt African states, they typically misconstrue and highlight the debased African condition as self-inflicted. For instance, the colonial expert did not and the Westerner does not expect backward Africans to work out any relevant solution to their problems nor possess any lessons for modernity and progress. Such negativism amounts to non-acknowledgement of Africa's worth, including African humanity, or at least, the regard of Africans as not so worthy of keen attention. Imagine what it feels like to be a member of a collaborative network in which one is perceived to have failed 'to develop from the primitive to the civilized;' a desperate beggar imprisoned by evolution and incapable of any achievement (Masefield, 1972).

External forces thrive in Africa, ostensibly to redeem the Continent, but in reality to rationalize the continuing rape of its tremendous human and material resources, which develop everywhere but Africa. The world order, particularly the United Nations system and the Breton Woods Institutions, has perpetually cornered Africa into despondent ineptitude with frequently shifting 'conditions'. Does the world care about how such conditions exclude reflection





and incorporation of local points of view and national realities, without which empowerment or development is impossible? Does this not represent strange perversion of the 'truth' when it comes to African affairs? Why is Africa so rich, yet its people are so desperate for foreign aid?

The noncontrol of development policy and destiny by African governments aggravates the desperation, as the conditions have pressured them into conceding to international advocacy (Buchert, 1998). Regrettably, perhaps in mistrust of national experts, many African governments prefer foreigners in frontline policy issues, reverting to their own citizens to complete predetermined protocols. Accordingly, Africa is under pressure to understand and adapt to the world as defined by Western civilization. Lack of a critical mass of experts further stunts Africa's diagnostic capacity, a bad situation worsened by brain drain; a sure slow death for a Continent that imports 'unsuitable' consultants at exorbitant cost. In addition, the negligible number of native-born African scholars and international civil servants cannot raise a perceptible Africentric voice in global affairs. The outcome is a continent in acute distress seeking to rid itself of infectious diseases, debts, underdevelopment, and the extraversion of its mentalities and knowledge systems (Tingbe-Azalou, 1994).

Africa's path into global knowledge waves was truncated when imperialists condemned African versions of knowledge and colonial scientists and experts recorded innovations, even inventions, by African farmers but refused to acknowledge and promote them as achievements. It may sound illogical, perhaps obnoxious, to imagine that scientific agriculture and development cooperation could instead inflict more harm than good in 'backward' Africa. Who would have imagined that 'invention and ecological adaptation in African agriculture are at their most vigorous where external agencies have interfered least?' (Richards, 1985).

In fact, some crucial innovations in farming practices in Africa were local discoveries (Glanville, 1933). In spite of such evidence, that local practices contain many clues that universities and researchers might follow up with benefit, some African research institutes and universities virtually theorize farming decisions by 'dead reckoning' — scientists draw conclusions from principles or armchair theorization of what is considered 'civilized'— oblivious of 'the majority of African farmers who continue to rely on their own systems of knowledge and research procedures—systems and procedures of which scientists in the 'formal' sectors are often quite unaware.'

### **The ambiguous role of expertise in Africa**

A double hoax characterizes the benefactor–beneficiary or expert–recipient relationship in Africa. While some experts mistrust and dismiss African recipients of interventions, those same recipients or beneficiaries are often at pains to come to terms with benefactors or experts who trample their dignity



and humanity by failing to interact freely or spontaneously with them. Recipients sometimes notice the ‘difficulty’ benefactors and experts have ‘in understanding African ways of thinking and acting’ (Creekmore, 1986). This human factor compels the need to clarify not only what expertise is but also what to make of donor motives.

Is expertise a procedural issue, a matter of possessing universal knowledge or that of having relevant knowledge about a specific place or given condition? To what extent can an expert, native-born or alien, genuinely and objectively ground policy and intervention principles on, say, the life circumstances of African children? To what extent are experts truly adaptive persons? Is the central concern of the expert the ethic of interventions or sensitivity to the emics of, say, backward Africa? Scott (1998) holds that experts lack the knowledge that can come only from practical experience. Do benefactors possess such knowledge and sensitivity?

While Richards laments the ignorance of some foreign experts he observed in Africa, Ford (1971) forthrightly testifies how their efforts in the trypanosomiasis control program ‘were feebly scratching at the surface of events we hardly knew, and if we achieved anything at all, it was often to exacerbate the ills of the societies we imagined ourselves to be helping.’ In the long run, the colonial trypanosomiasis researchers ‘left ... a legacy of ideas that had little relevance to the biological processes with which they had unwittingly interfered.’

The strand of African expertise was obviously broken when its educators abandoned their variegated mother tongues to unwittingly adopt ‘neutral’ imperial languages for school instruction, therein permanently stunting indigenous language development and their speakers’ proficiency to articulate and expose indigenous perspectives. The proficiency levels of most school-children and teachers, even scholars, in the adopted languages have remained below levels required for the effective mastery of the educational and cultural content needed to build up an internationally competitive body of knowledge. In addition, the capacity of the neglected mother tongues to replace foreign languages of instruction for the formal teaching of knowledge and competencies has declined considerably. Sadly, Africa’s schools, the social institutions officially chartered to organize learning (Easton *et al.*, 2000) have been responsible both for the decline of indigenous languages, and for Africa’s inability to renew and strengthen its own culture, hence Africa’s inability to link to global knowledge waves and universal cultural heritage as a whole.

### **Is There Any Way Forward?**

To make progress in and with Africa, it is essential to understand core lessons gleaned from the current state of the field.



### **Lessons from the field**

Four important lessons, among many others, are discernible. First, present-day formal education stunts the generative capacity of indigenous education; it produces copycat graduates with an avid taste for received knowledge and foreign assistance. Second, not only expatriates misunderstand Africa and its peoples; Africa's governing class and educated elite, alienated from their cultural roots and peasants by education and lifestyle, also undermine and misperceive Africa and Africans. Third, while acknowledging the difficulty of drawing clearly applicable lessons from development history, the World Bank still insists on Africa using 'pre-existing and accepted global standards to guide and support the credibility of their reforms' (World Bank, 2000), an index of lack of credibility in Africa and intolerance to its efforts outside 'the box'.

Finally, Eurocentric political and social history in Africa reveals an obsession to depict and treat Africa as an aberration of human civilization, hence Africa's status as the outlier of the world system that must be coerced into the box. Perhaps, the 'conditionalities' of the UN system and international advocacy are meant to tame the 'African beast.'

### **A learning posture**

In principle, adopting a learning posture permits us to conceptualize the 'reality' that exists outside 'the box'. As such, it can facilitate the exploration of phenomena as they exist in given contexts. The flexibility of this posture can allow Africans, for example, to work by themselves from their current competencies and conditions, without the constraints of professional restrictions, to gain in self-awareness and to discover by themselves how to benefit from the new pedagogies and technologies.

### **A diversity paradigm: tolerating differentness, promoting inclusion**

A diversity paradigm seeks to improve the circumstances of people in their differentness instead of insisting on homogenizing or measuring them on standards alien to their circumstances. It is an inclusive frame for discovering Africa's tacit knowledge and figuring out how, for example, peculiarly African ideas, practices and issues (Serpell, 1992) can drive and imbue educational curricula with 21st century values and visions?

In comparison with the Eurocentric model that frames today's discourse, a diversity paradigm gives more attention, or as much attention, to the milieu in which children are developing. As such, it can empower Africa's schoolchildren and scholars into knowledge generators, creative producers and competent competitors in the global village. In this way, it allows the raising of children's



knowledge and repertoires of intelligence and creativity that 'exist already in their culture because their culture requires it' (Ogbu, 1994). This enhances understanding-of-self-in-context; understanding that is minimally evident in African children, but that constitutes the foreknowledge to appropriately niche self and culture solidly and meaningfully in the global context.

## Concluding Statement

The British Prime Minister's initiative for Africa (2005), like others before it, proselyte Western models to which Africans should conform. Its focus is 'almost exclusively ... on issues that are more germane to Western social reality than to the harsh realities of life in African communities.' As such, it loses 'sight of the soil out of which the existing [African] society has grown and the human values it has produced' (Westermann, 2001). The initiative cannot help Africa develop on its own terms and its net impact will push Africa into a still more precarious status within the conceptual systems and consumer values of Europe and its diaspora. Africa will neither control nor understand itself through such an initiative. As long as development thinking and action in Africa remains fixated on Eurocentrism, development will continue to elude Africa. True African development will be Africentric. While such a perspective is not yet in sight, those who can conceive of it and bring it to birth have little resources to do so and may be unnoticed by national and international power blocks.

In conclusion, one would like to see the international community give a healthier respect to the people of Africa, in order to rethink intervention desires, goals and needs as perceived by Africans rather than by Western needs, ambitions and apprehensions. Can Europe and its satellite institutions rid themselves of 'the box' in order to tolerate differentness and promote inclusion?

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