Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The South African higher education transformation debate: culture, identity and 'African ways of knowing'

Kai Horsthemke*

School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Following the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994, there has been a strong drive towards democratising education at all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary. The present paper examines some of the key ideas in the debate around transformation in higher education in South Africa, namely the notions of an African essence, culture and identity, as well as African knowledge systems. It contends that neither the idea of the 'essence of Africa' nor an emphasis on 'African culture and identity' constitutes an appropriate theoretical framework for conceptualising change in higher educational thought and practice in South Africa, the major problems turning on issues around essentialism and cultural relativism. Similarly, the post-colonialist and anti-discrimination discourse underpinning 'African ways of knowing' is unfortunately riddled with problems, logical and epistemological. While the present contribution is sympathetic to the basic concerns articulated in the respective debates, especially around the significance of indigenous languages, it offers both conceptual clarification as well as a critical (re-)evaluation of the pertinent issues. Thus, 'African knowledge' is argued to be a misnomer that raises more problems than it can conceivably solve. What its proponents hope to achieve is arguably better achieved by an emphasis on restorative justice that locates the principle of reconciliation within a basic framework of human rights.

Keywords: African knowledge; culture; higher education; identity; transformation

Introduction

In 2003, an initial meeting took place between South African president Thabo Mbeki and vice-chancellors of institutions of higher education. The objective was to pave the way towards transformation, by identifying critical issues and challenges in higher education in South Africa. It was in this context that the relevance (and indeed the interrelatedness) of African culture, African identity and African knowledge systems was articulated. The foundation document, which Malegapuru Makgoba and Sipho Seepe (then acting vice-chancellors of the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Vista University, respectively) were commissioned to prepare was circulated for critical commentary, mainly among academics, before it was submitted to then-Minister of Education Kader Asmal.

> The discussion paper… covers areas such as identity, culture, language and globalisation, but keeps returning to its central theme: what is African knowledge? What is an African identity and what would an African university look like [?] (Seepe 2004, 8)

Seepe adds, somewhat puzzlingly: 'Answers are not given to these questions. *Nor should they*' (ibid; emphasis mine). Nevertheless, other universities soon followed suit. 'The transformation challenge must be implicit in what we teach, the kinds of knowledge we produce', according to the 2005 University of the Witwatersrand Forum discussion document. 'Informed by the global

*Email: Kai.Horsthemke@wits.ac.za

context, we intend to be distinctly African in our purpose, commitment, curriculum, research and in how we engage with all sectors of society' (University of the Witwatersrand 2005, 3, 4).

The present paper explores some of the focal areas in the discourse(s) of transformation in South African higher education, most significantly the ideas of an African essence, culture and identity, as well as African knowledge systems. A popular trend in this regard takes culture and identity to be the 'central determinants of which knowledge to get into the curriculum' (Ekong and Cloete 1997, 11; Ntuli 2004; Masehela 2004). Pitika ka Ntuli locates his treatment of the 'search for an African identity through higher education' within the context of, *inter alia*, 'an African Renaissance' and 'the development of Indigenous Knowledge Systems' (Ntuli 2004, 171, 172). Kgabo Masehela presents a similar conception of an African essence, in terms of knowledge and identity:

> We have to construct our own epistemological framework from which we can explore ideas and build our own knowledge. … Africans must create our own paradigm from which we can also dialogue meaningfully with Europeans. (Masehela 2004, 11)

This position is associated with an instrumentalist approach to education, educational institutions and knowledge (Ekong and Cloete 1997, 10; Makgoba 1997b, 142, 143), an approach that 'insists on problem-solving skills, applied research, local or African content and community service' (Ekong and Cloete 1997, 10). The present paper argues that neither the idea of an African essence, culture and identity, nor the notion of African ways of knowing constitutes an appropriate theoretical framework for conceptualising change in higher educational thought and practice in South Africa. The aims of transformation proponents are arguably better met by a different approach.

The essence of Africa, African culture and identity

Makgoba and Seepe's 'preliminary remarks' stipulate 'an African identity and vision' of higher education that is in opposition to, and a departure from, 'the current Colonial-Christian-Western identity and vision' (Makgoba and Seepe 2004, 13, 14):

> The responsibilities [connected with being an African university] are… served not only by adapting our scholarship to the social structure and the cultural environment Africa but by also producing knowledge that takes the African condition and the African identity as its central problem. The central issue for our universities today is an institutional transformation in higher education that will provide for the production of knowledge that recognises the African condition as historical and defines its key task as one of coming to grips with it critically. (Makgoba and Seepe 2004, 19)

> 'The process for translating the African identity and vision in education', according to the authors, 'is called Africanisation'. (Makgoba and Seepe 2004, 40)

In a recent book supported by the South African Department of Arts and Culture, *I am an African: Embrace your identity, escape victimisation*, Ngila Michael Muendane argues that physical colonialism may have ceased but that mental colonialism continues to this day (Muendane 2006, 53–63) – and nowhere more starkly than in academia. Africans need to go back to their roots, their own traditions, Muendane suggests, to find and embrace their own identity (Muendane 2006, 122–7, 144–5). Inherent in the discourse around educational transformation in South Africa's institutions of 'higher learning' is a conception of the 'essence of Africa', commonly rendered in terms of 'African culture and identity': 'The primary principle of [a] university in South Africa should be to capture and encapsulate the essence of Africa' (Makgoba 1997a, 181). The rejoinders are obvious: not 'the essence of *South* Africa'? And: what is this 'essence'? Earlier in his book *Mokoko* – part autobiography, part treatise on university transformation – Makgoba claims that:

Africans have a culture, a history, *a way of thinking and doing things that are different* but enriching. We communicate, interact, socialise and *conceptualise issues from a different perspective*, background and experience. We tend to look at the whole, we look for meaning and symbolism. We do not split or operate in a linear pattern of thinking. These could no longer be ignored within the transformation framework. (Makgoba 1997a, 100; emphasis added)

If what Makgoba describes is indeed uniquely and distinctly 'African', what – if anything – makes it worth capturing and encapsulating? Speaking about the University of the Witwatersrand in particular, Makgoba recommends that 'Wits should take a lead in capturing the essence of Africa and its indigenous people, to adapt and integrate Western culture into the African culture' (Makgoba 1997a, 187).

All this is fairly nebulous. What is the 'essence of Africa', 'Western culture', 'the African culture'? Furthermore, who or what is 'African'? The answer to this question might be seen to turn on three aspects: ethnic and racial identity, orientation/commitment, and geographic location and identity. The first is invoked by those who argue that being African means being black. Makgoba's is a thinly veiled example of this approach (Makgoba 1997a *passim*; Makgoba 2005). Then there are those who take 'Africanness' to emanate from one's personal, social and political orientation and commitments. Muendane for example suggests that 'anybody who wants to retain names such as Durban, Verwoerd, Hertzog cannot be said to empathise with Africans and cannot qualify to be called African' (Muendane 2006, 181). A similar position is adopted by Kwesi Kwaa Prah (director and founder of the Centre for the Advanced Study of African Society) who argues that 'although most Africans are black, not all black people are Africans. Most importantly, not all Africans are black' (Mda 2007, 9).

The third type of answer is given in terms of hailing from or 'being of' the continent called 'Africa'. In a public lecture he gave at the University of the Witwatersrand on 22 November 2006, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert (former opposition leader and founder member of the Institute for Democratic Alternatives for South Africa) stated:

Of course, there is no end to ridiculing the mystifications and philosophical whimsy that relates to the way the word 'African' is made exclusive and special. Personally, I could not be bothered whether I am included in or excluded from such efforts. I use it, as I have explained, in its simple geographic sense. I am from Africa, therefore African, because I was born, grew up and live in South Africa and have a South African identity document. (Slabbert 2006)

At some point, Makgoba appears to acknowledge that:

African identity and culture are not uniform; have never been; and do not pretend to be.… The Afrocentric population is widely distributed throughout the world… Even within Africa, the north, west, east and southern parts form identifiable clusters of their own. All of these are linked by shared values that are fundamental features of African identity and culture. These, for example, include hospitality, friendliness, the consensus and common framework seeking principle, ubuntu, and the emphasis on community rather than on the individual. These features typically underpin the variations of African culture and identity everywhere. (Makgoba 1997a, 198)

That may be so. But are these features really compatible with 'Afro*centrism*'? And fairly soon, Makgoba reverts to what might be called a 'fallacy of the collective singular', an unwarranted generalisation that fails to do justice to the richness and multitude of (South) African perspectives, cultures, identities and ways of thinking[1]:

A broader reflection of our *South African culture or identity* in much of our educational curricula is long overdue. … A full restructuring based upon a fresh, shared, innovative and common vision, informed by our South African roots, is essential. It is a vision that needs to take into account the primacy of Africa and what it embodies in *its identity and culture*. As a new nation under a democratic transitional constitution, we should address the issue of *national culture and identity* as a priority. … A common vision that is informed by our South African roots is essential. This vision must take into account the primacy of Africa and what it embodies in *its history, philosophy, identity*

and culture[, i.e.], mind-set or paradigm. (Makgoba 1997a, 200, 201, 206; emphasis and punctuation amendment mine)

Nokulunga Queeneth Mkabela (University of Zululand) commits the same fallacy when she describes researchers as having 'made real attempts to get inside the African culture' (Mkabela 2005, 178) and when she mentions 'the collective identity… [that is] the foundation of indigenous African culture' (Mkabela 2005, 185). She goes so far as to say that in 'indigenous African culture' 'there is no *I*[-]*thou* relationship' (ibid., 186). Puzzlingly, she later stresses 'the importance of all individuals' in Afrocentric research (ibid., 186) – 'puzzlingly', because her own approach (apart from discouraging critical interrogation) arguably militates against taking individuals seriously: 'The Afrocentric method… emphasises a shift from dominant research methodologies to ways that are responsive to *an African world-view which is collective*' (ibid., 187; emphasis added).

Contra Makgoba and Mkabela, even within South Africa, there is evidently no single 'history, philosophy, identity and culture, mind-set or paradigm' (Makgoba 1997a, 206). Moreover, if anything, postulating a radical difference between African and other cultures is likely to marginalise the former. Equally troubling is the emphasis on Afrocentrism and the Afrocentric method, as a supposed antidote to Eurocentrism.[2] I suggest that to reject Eurocentrism by embracing Afrocentrism is similar to responding to school-ground bullying with corporal punishment, or to murder with capital punishment. Motivational reasons do not amount to justification, in any of these cases. Moreover, targeting 'Eurocentrism' is akin to setting up a straw man for easy demolition. It is a wildly implausible orientation (see Horsthemke 2006, 456, 457).

Cultural identity and indigenous knowledge

Central to the idea of African essence is a particular idea of cultural identity associated with indigenous knowledge. 'Culture', writes Catherine Odora Hoppers, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) specialist and former University of Pretoria scholar, on the interface between cultural identity and indigenous knowledge,

> … is the template shaping values, behaviour and consciousness within a human society from generation to generation. 'Cultural rights' means the right to preserve and enjoy one's cultural identity and development. … Within this template, the notion of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) has been defined as the sum total of the knowledge and skills which people in a particular geographical area possess. (Odora Hoppers 2005, 2)

Quoting from the International Labor Organization document, 'Convention 169', Odora Hoppers describes 'indigenous knowledge' as:

> … that knowledge that is held and used by a people who identify themselves as indigenous of a place on a combination of cultural distinctiveness and prior territorial occupancy relative to a more recently arrived population with its own distinct and subsequently dominant culture (International Labor Organization 1989: Article 1). (Odora Hoppers 2005, 2)

Legal theorist Luvuyo Dondolo, similarly, identifies local knowledge with a particular culture and epistemology:

> Local Knowledge is a complex system of knowledge that is local and unique to a particular population within a specific geographical area. Local Knowledge… manifests itself in various aspects of social life. … [It] is socially constructed and resides in living memories, practices and expressions of the practicing communities. … In post-colonial and post-apartheid Africa, aspects of Local Knowledge have been recognized and revitalized. … Local Knowledge is characterised by its own epistemology and its own organisational structures for the creation of knowledge. *Ways of knowing vary with cultures, locations, historical periods and gender*. (Dondolo 2005, 116; emphasis mine)

How do we know that local knowledge is 'socially constructed' and 'is characterised by its own epistemology'? Is this itself a social construct? But then how can anyone assume a vantage point outside the epistemology of a particular 'culture, location, historical period and gender' – which is actually what Dondolo appears to be doing here?

Odora Hoppers refers to:

> … traditional knowledge [as] the totality of all knowledges and practices, whether explicit or implicit, used in the management of socio-economic, spiritual and ecological facets of life. In that sense, it can be contrasted with 'cosmopolitan knowledge' that is culturally anchored in Western cosmology, scientific discoveries, economic preferences and philosophies. (Odora Hoppers 2005, 2)

Just as Dondolo fails to defend the ideas of social construction (see also Lebakeng 2004, 116) and of 'local and unique' epistemology[3], Odora Hoppers seems to be unaware of the contradictions inherent in the idea of '*cosmopolitan* knowledge' being '*culturally anchored* in *Western* cosmology'. Referring to the epistemological consequences of colonialism, she states:

> Today, indigenous knowledge is marginalised, even denigrated… Over time, this systematic subjugation has given rise to cultural racism as a structural phenomenon in formal systems, while promoting a denial of identity, *epistemological disenfranchisement* and the strategic disempowerment of African people and communities. (Odora Hoppers 2005, 8; emphasis mine; see also Lebakeng 2004, 109, 111)

'This paradigm that is cruel, blind', Odora Hoppers asserts:

> … and has no place for *defeated knowledges* or alternative theories of knowledge needs to be exposed for what it has done, and continues to contribute to the violation of human rights. It is in such a process of exposition that the dangerous romance with the politics of knowledge transfer from the North to the South – a romance that does not permit contestations of the politics of knowledge itself nor a contemplation of competing knowledges, a romance that makes a mockery of the *epistemological disenfranchisement* that lies beneath the massive poverty of millions of Africa's rural population – must be rendered open to debate and interrogation. (Odora Hoppers 2005, 14; emphasis added)

Odora Hoppers contends that:

> … when textbooks and formal institutions designated to produce and *legitimize knowledge* become cognitive regimes that acknowledge only the victor, and *defeated knowledge*s are erased or condemned as unscientific, then we witness a system of complicity in withholding freedom from those who need it the most – those on the receiving end of *knowledge apartheid*. (Ibid., 17; emphasis mine)

There is a plethora of red herrings here. For one thing, to speak of 'epistemological disenfranchisement' and 'defeated knowledge', let alone of 'knowledge apartheid', is to commit a category mistake. If it is Odora Hoppers's intention to condemn occidental arrogance regarding other knowledge systems, then it is advisable to separate the moral and political from the epistemological project. The question, 'Whose knowledge counts?' can be understood both in terms of power relations and in epistemic and veritistic (or truth-promoting) terms. Concerning the former, Odora Hoppers may well be justified in her criticism of the 'cruel [colonialist] paradigm'. To dismiss any indigenous perspective or traditional practice out of hand, just because it does not match or concur with our own, is prejudice, pure and simple. Yet, it is considerably more problematic to attribute *as a matter-of-course*, as Odora Hoppers and others seem to want to do, the status of *knowledge* and *truth* to the *beliefs* and knowledge *claims* of indigenous people, members of small-scale communities, etc. This kind of move is problematic because it usually goes hand in hand with an implicit or explicit relativism about knowledge and truth. The idea of 'legitimisation' or 'validation' of knowledge involves a tautology (for an identical error, see Lansink 2004, 121), as will become obvious in the discussion later. Knowledge, *qua* knowledge, *cannot but* be legitimate, or valid. The suppression of knowledge (as opposed to mere belief or

superstition) has little to do with whether it is 'indigenous', 'African', etc. The pertinent consid-
erations here would be not epistemological but, rather, matters of social justice.

Odora Hoppers argues that:

> … the blind excursion of science and the imposition of science-centred approaches as the sole crite-
> ria for developing IKS pose more problems for indigenous knowledge. They ignore the fact that
> indigenous knowledge systems possess *a cultural logic of their own*. (Odora Hoppers 2005, 34; empha-
> sis mine)

Such as? one might ask. This is exactly what renders them logically and epistemologically
dubious. Before explaining this verdict, I need to examine the idea of indigenous knowledge
systems and, importantly, the concept of knowledge itself.

African ways of knowing

'African' ('indigenous' or 'local') knowledge is a relatively recent buzz phrase that, amongst other
things, constitutes part of a challenge to 'western' education. In recent years, it was elevated to
a focus area by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF 2005) and has been the
chief focal issue of conferences, countless articles, internet/weblog postings, and anthologies
such as those edited by Ladislaus M. Semali and Joe L. Kincheloe and by Odora Hoppers (1999
and 2002, respectively; see also Department of Science and Technology 2005). In earlier writing
I have engaged critically with a number of these pieces (see Horsthemke 2004a, b, c). In what
follows I therefore give only a brief survey of the pertinent ideas and problems.

According to Pitika ka Ntuli, the Executive Director of Organisational Culture, and former
Senior Fellow at the African Renaissance Institute, quoting from the Bill he and Odora
Hoppers had been instrumental in devising, African indigenous knowledge systems and other
IKS emphasise:

> … the essential interrelatedness and interdependence of all phenomena – biological, physical,
> psychological, social and cultural. Indigenous cosmology centres on the co-evolution of the spiritual,
> natural, and human worlds. Thus many indigenous people in Africa and South Africa still practice the
> ritual of burying their umbilical cords and immediately planting trees at the same spot in order to
> establish a relationship with the plant life. Family histories in the form of *izithakezelo/ izibongo/ dithoko*
> make reference to some animal totem to be conserved. IKS holds that there are sacred places that
> have to be avoided and must be conserved. There are places where people are not permitted to fell
> trees, hunt wild life or to collect wild fruits for commercial purposes. Natural phenomen[a] like
> rivers and mountains play a significant role in the psyche and constitution of our people. (IKS Bill;
> Ntuli 2004, 175)

Ntuli adds that a 'university system that eschews local knowledge limits its competitiveness
in a global world'.

Reporting on the international academic colloquium on indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)
held at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 29 February–3 March 2004, the Univer-
sity's Philip Nel states that the idea of African knowledge (systems):

> … is enthusiastically embraced and hailed as the fit opponent to the Western knowledge system
> with the promise to restore not only oppressed ways of knowing, but also pride in traditional knowl-
> edge. It consequently serves as a sign of rebirth of a suppressed indigenous identity. … The fact that
> the advocacy for IKS recognition has coincided with the process of democracy following the apart-
> heid era in South Africa has inevitably pushed it into the arena of post-apartheid rhetoric of roots
> and cultural identity. (Nel 2005, 2, 3, 4)

Nel continues:

> The African self (if such a generalization is permitted), trampled upon and dislodged from its inherent
> cultural confines, begged for relief in terms of new identity and direction. This attempt was initially

soothed by movements of pan-Africanism, emphasising African ways of thinking and doing as well as a restoration of African identity and pride. … But has the quest to reclaim the suppressed identity and knowledge led to new forms of stereotyping indigenous Africa in essentialist ways? Have all the mutations of Africanisms… not resulted in a fixed African cultural perspective and a stereotyping of African thought systems, including the indigenous or local knowledge of communities? … If the IK pursuit is merely to reclaim the suppressed identity, then it is threatened by the same forces that highlighted it as a space. (Ibid., 9)

'How', Nel asks:

… shall we then reclaim indigenous knowledge without subjecting ourselves to perceptions of cultural fixity? … It is difficult for IK pursuit to occupy the future space, for it is indefinite and unde-finable [sic], unknown, uncertain and in fluidity. … An IK pursuit that re-establishes ethnicity, black consciousness and pan-Africanism in essentialist ways is an agenda to reverse the 'beyond space' to fixity with disastrous consequences. It cannot be an instrument of ideology and social engineering along the lines of essentialist and fixed ideas of culture and identity. This does not imply that IK does not contribute to identity, but it should not fix it absolutely. (Ibid., 10)

Nel is on the right track here, in cautioning against the essentialism and divisiveness implied in some defenses of indigenous knowledge. Yet, he errs in claiming that, as knowledge, it is indefinable, uncertain, in constant flux. (Insofar as Nel is making a knowledge claim here, is this knowledge also 'indefinable, uncertain, in constant flux'?)

One encounters such essentialism and fixity in the Nigerian Professor of English and coor-dinator of African American and African Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Oyekan Owomoyela's argument:

An African alternative – African knowledge, or what I have chosen to call African philosophy – must be *originally and distinctively African*. It must be free of the sort of mystification that disposes Africans to applaud the usurpation of the African tongue by European languages, to abjectly pursue an African Christianity or an African Islam, as though there were no subjugated indigenous religions crying for rehabilitation, and to insist dogmatically on the *unity of reason which Western thought supposedly embodies*. It must reject all the imputations of the Manichean positions between the West and the remainder, and it must resolutely depathologize the notion of alterity. Such a knowledge already exists, but it has been suppressed by Western impostor-knowledges and continues to be disparaged by westernized African intellectuals. (Owomoyela 1996, 67; emphasis added)

Owomoyela suggests here, without providing additional argument, that knowledge (and philosophy) could be not only originally but also distinctively 'African', in something more than a merely geographical sense – which is doubtful, for reasons that will be elaborated on later. He also seems to invoke a notion of 'culture-dependent' reason here, not unlike Ghanaian philoso-pher Kwame Gyekye's (Gyekye 1997, 19, 236), which is dubious – for similar reasons.

The idea that knowledge (and philosophy) could be originally 'African', while not uncontro-versial, is certainly not implausible. On 7 June 2006, Martin Bernal, in a presentation at the University of the Witwatersrand entitled 'Africa in Europe/Egypt in Africa', outlined the central argument in his then-as-yet-unpublished *Black Athena 3*: although Greek is by most accounts an Indo-European language, 60% of Greek terminology is not Indo-European but of Afroasiatic origin.

Muendane, too, contends that Europeans attribute their enlightenment to Greece, but that Greek thinkers were either educated in Egypt or influenced substantially by Egyptian thought and practice (Muendane 2006, 128). Examining the relative merits of both traditions, Muendane asserts:

The Eurocentric tradition is based on individualism, materialism and task orientation. The African tradition is based on spirituality, collectivism and people orientation, in a word, UBUNTU. The logic of the Eurocentric paradigm suggests that, to get progress one has to use sanctions, competition and coercion. It is a paradigm that can produce only a win/lose situation. The logic of the African

> paradigm suggests the use of interpersonal values, cooperation and cohesion. It is a paradigm that can produce only a win/win situation. (Ibid., 179)

Muendane's claims are clearly contradicted not only by the established history and influence of the communitarian tradition in occidental thought and practice but also by events past and present on the African continent (such as the recent spate of persecutions of foreigners in South Africa, misleadingly referred to as 'xeno*phobia*'). Furthermore, if Bernal and Muendane's analysis is correct, then the latter's argument from 'mental colonisation' loses much of its intended strength. If all 'philosophy and political thinking… mathematics… astronomy, geometry, medicine', etc, has been 'learnt… in Africa from Africans' (ibid., 128) then how could it possibly issue in mental colonisation?[4] In other words, the Afro-genesis thesis would render the idea of 'African ways of knowing' even less plausible. For it is one thing to argue that *all* knowledge originated in Africa initially (this is a moot point): it is quite another to argue that there are distinctly and uniquely 'African' ways of knowing. In other words, one can acknowledge Africa's contribution to 'world' knowledge, without being committed to embracing the idea of African IKS.

The major problem with advocacy of 'African indigenous knowledge (systems)' (cf. Makgoba 1997b; Semali and Kincheloe 1999; Odora Hoppers 2002; Seepe 2004; Department of Science and Technology 2005) is that 'knowledge' is characteristically left undefined. Accounts or explanations of indigenous knowledge characteristically focus on 'indigenous' – as if this were the difficult or controversial term. In fact, the common assertion that knowledge is 'contested' seems to draw its strength entirely from this lack of definition and conceptual clarity. Once an account of different uses of the term 'knowledge' and circumspect definitions are furnished, much of the putative basis for 'contestation' will have been eroded.

A brief analysis of 'knowledge'

In everyday thought and practice, including ordinary language, one commonly distinguishes between three different senses of 'knowledge' and 'knowing': acquaintance- or familiarity-type knowledge (*knowing a person*, *a place*, etc), practical knowledge (*knowing how*) and propositional knowledge (*knowing that*). In education, the focus tends to be on practical as well as on propositional knowledge. The former is usually taken to be synonymous or at least strongly – if not inextricably – associated with 'skill'. It is definition of the latter, often also referred to as theoretical or factual knowledge, which requires considerably greater circumspection. The traditional understanding of propositional knowledge can be traced back to Socrates and Plato, whose dialogues *Meno* (99c–100a) and *Theaetetus* (200e–202d) contain the essence of this definition. Traditionally, 'knowledge' has been defined as comprising three individually necessary and jointly sufficient components: belief (or opinion; this is its subjective component), truth (its objective component) and appropriate or suitable justification (which serves a bridging function between the subjective and objective).

The proposed definition renders possible an analysis of 'African knowledge'. If the latter is taken to refer to 'knowledge' in a practical sense ('skill'), it makes a certain amount of sense. Indigenous Africans (like the San) may well have practical knowledge or skills that are unique and distinct. However, if taken to refer to 'knowledge' in a propositional/theoretical sense, the idea faces significant problems – such as relativism (about knowledge and about truth) and superstition.

If knowledge in the propositional/theoretical sense is labeled 'African', this seems to presuppose that it is uniquely and distinctly so (see, for example, Owomoyela 1996, 67; Higgs and Smith 2002, 98–111). In other words, that African knowledge and truth are essentially different from knowledge and truth elsewhere. An example of relativism about knowledge and truth is

Dondolo's assertion that 'ways of knowing vary with cultures, locations, historical periods and gender'. Insofar as this is a knowledge claim, it must also be particular to a culture, location, historical period and (in this case, Dondolo's) gender. If this is so, why should it convince those of a nonrelativist persuasion? Unless Dondolo wants to claim that this particular knowledge claim has universal purchase – which would, however, weaken his assertion in another way. It follows from this example that relativism about truth and about knowledge is inconsistent, if not incoherent.

If one ignores, for the sake of argument, these logical problems, there is an additional, epistemological problem. Acceptance of the idea of *African* ways of knowing (in the propositional/ theoretical sense) would render difficult, if not impossible, a distinction between knowledge and superstition, or other kinds of irrational belief. If knowledge and truth were perceived to be essentially 'local', socially and culturally determined, it would be difficult (if not impossible) to distinguish between true and false, and justified and unjustified beliefs. It would certainly be impossible to evaluate and pass judgment on the beliefs held by those outside one's society and culture, e.g., the views of Robert Mugabe, the Lord's Liberation Army in Uganda, or of Lagos Airport customs officials. Amongst other things, this would have serious implications for the possibility of intercultural understanding.

If what has been established above is cogent, it follows that the focus on African indigenous knowledge systems has at best limited plausibility and value in driving the transformation process in South African (higher) education. Insofar as 'knowledge' is indeed 'indigenous African', and distinctly and uniquely so, it refers either to 'indigenous African *practices* (or *skills*)' or to 'indigenous African *beliefs*'.[5]

Language and transformation

An additional, essentially plausible component in the discourse around educational transformation is the idea of mental decolonisation, with particular reference to the significance of language. This notion was first articulated by Kenyan author and activist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and later adapted and deepened by Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (Wa Thiong'o 1986; Wiredu 2007). The reasoning is as follows: Africa, and in particular education in Africa, is to be transformed through a process of decolonisation of the mind. During and after colonisation, Africans' own thinking and educational systems were eclipsed by the thinking and policies of the dominant minorities:

> Eventually, our own philosophy was written by foreigners using the conceptual framework of foreigners. Inevitably, there have been distortions. We Africans have been brought up on foreign literature and foreign thinking, so our own thinking is in terms of the conceptual framework brought from abroad. (Wiredu 2007)

Africans, according to Wiredu, need to be clear about their own traditional thought, which has to be recovered by removing several layers of foreign, imposed conceptualisation. They must try to think through their own language again, to formulate and test their own theorising in their own languages.

The emphasis on the importance of language and the idea of decolonisation of the mind are both appealing and plausible. Given that language is a system of symbolisation for ideas and, at a deeper level, used to conceptualise ideas which are then symbolised: if all learning is done in a foreign language, those symbols – and the very ideas they symbolise – are conceptualised in a foreign language.

> When you learn philosophy or you learn about the world in someone else's language, you become fixated on manners of conceptualisation that are not congruent with your own. The solution is to

> go back through your own language and examine your own ways of conceptualisation, and then to make the critical comparison with those of other people. (Wiredu 2007)

At the deeper conceptual levels, says Wiredu, colonisation has led to subservience in thinking. Having a foreign framework imposed on that conceptualisation results in intellectual subservience and an unconscious adherence to foreign concepts.

The importance of mother-tongue education can certainly not be over-emphasised. But does mental or intellectual decolonisation mean rejecting every foreign influence? In the 1970s, Wa Thiong'o, together with his colleagues, Taban lo Liyong and Henry Uwuor-Anyumba, moti-vated for the abolition of the department of English at the University of Nairobi, in favour of a department of African literature: 'To orientate ourselves toward placing Kenya at the center. All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation' (Wa Thiong'o 1986, 145). Closer both in time and space, referring to the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, Makgoba claims that for this university to assume the lead in terms of transformation and, indeed, mental decolonisation, 'this means discarding the English-speaking and liberal images' (Makgoba 1997a, 187). Apart from wanting to replace (Latin) mottos and hymns (see Makgoba 2003) – which arguably makes good sense – Makgoba appears to advocate discarding the English language as an instructional medium. Indeed, in a 1998 co-presentation at the University with Pretoria-based researcher Console Tleane, Makgoba and Tleane pleaded for a replacement of the colonial languages by four basic African language groups, Nguni, Sotho, Venda and Pondo (Makgoba and Tleane 1998).

It is unclear whether this is likely to enable (South) Africa to be internationally competitive (Makgoba 2003, 2) or to contribute to 'world knowledge'. There is also the concern that the invention of new terminology is an avoidably forced and artificial process that replaces one form of foreign intellectual framework with another. Given young and adolescent learners' well-known capacity for language acquisition, any talk of 'abolition' and 'replacement' is likely to promote mental decolonisation entailing a kind of educational impoverishment in other respects. To guard against this, I would emphasise in this regard the desirability of all learners acquiring a working competence in at least one indigenous African language, for reasons of both personal enrichment and intercultural communication and understanding.

Restorative justice, reconciliation and rights

A third element associated with African ways of knowing concerns traditional African jurispru-dence. This is based on restorative justice, as opposed to considerations either of desert (retribution) or utility (consequences). In the slipstream of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), set up after the first democratic election in South Africa, in order to bring to light and address the injustices and crimes committed under apartheid, there has in recent years been a call for a TRC for education. In a special graduation ceremony address at the University of South Africa, Charles Villa-Vicencio, former director of research at the TRC, noted the TRC's failure to hold an institutional hearing on education:

> Schools and tertiary institutions ought to have been invited, subpoenaed if necessary, to give account of discriminatory and racist behaviour, sometimes in reluctant obedience to the law, often with will-ing consent. The Bantu Education Act, described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as 'the most evil of all pieces of apartheid legislation', ought to have been exposed for all to see. (Villa-Vicencio 2003, 15)

Ivor Chipkin points out that the TRC offered a vision of South Africans other than black (victims) and white (perpetrators). It suggested another possibility of defining themselves, in terms of a common humanity[6]:

> Indeed, what the TRC generated was not the South African people, but humanity as a whole. Such a finding was latent in the structure of the commission. By casting the effects of apartheid in terms

Bohler-Muller, N. 2004. Fluid identities and the possibilities inherent in transformative thought. In *Towards an African identity of higher education,* ed. S. Seepe, 145–55. Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Chinweizu. 1998. *West African Magazine,* 7–27 September (quoted in Ntuli 2004).

Chipkin, I. 2006. Somewhere over the rainbow. *Sunday Times/Insight & Opinion,* November 26: 29.

Department of Science and Technology. 2005. Vision and goals for an indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) policy for South Africa. *Indilingua: African Journal of Indigenous Systems* 4, no. 1: 361–98.

Dondolo, L. 2005. Intangible heritage: The production of indigenous knowledge in various aspects of social life. *Indilingua: African Journal of Indigenous Systems* 4, no. 1: 110–26.

Ekong, D., and N. Cloete. 1997. Curriculum responses to a changing national and global environment in an African context. In *Knowledge, identity and curriculum transformation in Africa,* eds., N. Cloete, J. Muller, M.W. Makgoba, and D. Ekong, 3–13. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.

Gyekye, K. 1997. *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Higgs, P., and J. Smith. 2002. *Rethinking truth.* Lansdowne: Juta.

Horsthemke, K. 2004a. 'Indigenous knowledge', truth and reconciliation in South African higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 18, no. 3: 65–81.

Horsthemke, K. 2004b. Knowledge, education and the limits of Africanisation. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 4: 571–87.

Horsthemke, K. 2004c. 'Indigenous knowledge': Conceptions and misconceptions. *Journal of Education* 32: 31–48.

Horsthemke, K. 2006. The idea of the African university in the twenty first century: Some reflections on Afrocentrism and Afroscepticism. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 20, no. 4: 449–65.

International Labor Organization. 1989. *International Labor Organization Convention on indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries.* June (referred to as Convention 169). Geneva: ILO.

Kwaa Prah, K. 2004. Africanism and Africanisation: Do they mean the same thing? In *Towards an African identity of higher education,* ed. S. Seepe, 93–107. Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Kwaa Prah, K. 2007. Without unity, there is no future for Africa. *Mail & Guardian* June 29–July 5: 27.

L'Ange, G. 2006. Keep what is useful, let history record the rest. *Sunday Times/Insight & Opinion* 5 November: 34.

Lansink, A. 2004. The African university: Contestations in the production of knowledge and identity. In *Towards an African identity of higher education,* ed. S. Seepe, 121–44. Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Lebakeng, T. 2004. Towards a relevant higher education epistemology. In *Towards an African identity of higher education,* ed. S. Seepe, 109–19. Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Lillejord, S., and Q.N. Mkabela. 2004. Indigenous and popular narratives: The educational use of myths in a comparative perspective. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 18, no. 3: 257–68.

Maake, N. 2004. Conceptions of an African university. In *Towards an African identity of higher education,* ed. S. Seepe, 157–70. Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Makgoba, M.W. 1997a. *Mokoko: The Makgoba affair. A reflection on transformation.* Florida: Vivlia

Makgoba, M.W. 1997b. From diversity to engaging difference: A novel approach to identity, knowledge production and curricular transformation. In *Knowledge, identity and curriculum transformation in Africa,* eds., N. Cloete, J. Muller, M.W. Makgoba, and D. Ekong, 138–46. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.

Makgoba. M.W., and C. Tleane. 1998. Africanisation and education. Lunchtime presentation, School of Education/University of the Witwatersrand, September 23.

Makgoba, M.W. (Ed.). 1999. *African renaissance: The new struggle.* Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Makgoba, M.W. 2003. An African vision for mergers. *Beyond Matric/ Mail & Guardian* May 2–8: 1–2.

Makgoba, M.W., and S. Seepe. 2004. Knowledge and identity: An African vision of higher education transformation. In *Towards an African identity of higher education,* ed. S. Seepe, 13–57. Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Makgoba, M.W. 2005. Wrath of dethroned white males. *Comment & Analysis/Mail & Guardian* March 22–31: 23.

Masehela, K. 2004. Escaping Europe's clutches. *This Day/Opinion* September 30: 11.

Mda, Z. 2007. Creating a continental identity. *The Weekender/Weekend Review* May 26–27: 8, 9.

Mkabela, Q.N. 2005 (March). Using the Afrocentric method in researching indigenous African culture. *The Qualitative Report* 10, no. 1: 178–89.

Mkhwanazi, E.S.N. 2007. African philosophy: A call to be ethically responsive to the 'other'. Paper presented at the International Society for African Philosophy and Studies. Rhodes University/Grahamstown, 2–4 April.

Mthembu, T. 2004. Creating a niche in internationalization for (South) African higher education institutions. In *Towards an African identity of higher education,* ed. S. Seepe, 77–92. Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Muendane, N.M. 2006. *I am an African: Embrace your identity, escape victimization.* Pretoria: Soultalk Publishers.

National Research Foundation (NRF). 2005. Guide 2006: The NRF Focus Area Programme. http://www.nrf.ac.za/focusareas/iks/.

Nel, P.J. 2005. Indigenous knowledge systems: Contestation, rhetorics and space. *Indilingua: African Journal of Indigenous Systems* 4, no. 1: 2–14.

Ntuli, P.P. 2004. The African Renaissance, IKS & globalisation: The challenge for a truly African university. In *Towards an African identity of higher education,* ed. S. Seepe, 171–84. Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Odora Hoppers, C.A. 2005. *Culture, indigenous knowledge and development: The role of the university.* Johannesburg: Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD), Occasional Paper No. 5: 1–50.

Odora Hoppers, C. (Ed.). 2002. *Indigenous knowledge and the integration of knowledge systems: Towards a philosophy of articulation.* Claremont: New Africa Books.

Owomoyela, O. 1996. *The African experience: Discourses on Africa and the relativity of cultures.* Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press.

Seepe, S. (Ed.). 2004. *Towards an African identity of higher education.* Pretoria: Vista University and Skotaville Media.

Semali, L.M., and J.L. Kincheloe (Eds.). 1999. *What is indigenous knowledge? Voices from the academy.* London: Falmer Press.

Slabbert, F. van Zyl. 2006. *I, too, am an African – if not, why not?* Public lecture, University of the Witwatersrand, Wednesday, 22 November.

The Constitution of South Africa. 1996. *Act 108 of 1996.* Pretoria: Government Printer.

Tutu, D.M. 1999. *No future without forgiveness.* London: Rider.

University of the Witwatersrand. 2005. University Forum discussion document: The transformation debate at Wits. Johannesburg, 5 September.

Villa-Vicencio, C. 2003. No way around the past. *Sowetan* June 23: 15.

Wa Thiong'o, N. 1986. *Decolonising the mind.* Heinemann: London.

Wiredu, K. 2007. Social philosophy in postcolonial Africa: Some preliminaries. Plenary lecture presented at the International Society for African Philosophy and Studies. Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 3 April.