

Transforming knowledge and curricula

The article **Transforming higher education: first comes knowledge, then curriculum**

published in **The Conversation** and **UCT IN THE NEWS** by my colleague at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Prof. Shadreck Chirikure starts out on a false premise.

If you want to learn about Africa, there's no need to go to Algeria, Mali, Zambia or anywhere else on the continent.

The reality is that: "It depends on what you're doing." Yes, much archival information/specimen/artefact material from/about Africa resides in the "expensive North". That is a tragic legacy of colonial occupation. However, for many African-based scholars, this 'information' is a treasure trove because modern Africa simply has neither the infrastructure nor the resources to provide this service. Given the precarious socio-political-educational-economic situation in Africa there is little hope that this 'information' could be accommodated safely, over the long term.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/22/islamic-extremist-pleads-guilty-at-icc-to-timbuktu-cultural-destruction> Libraries are being burnt. Artwork is being destroyed. Academics are being intimidated. In fact, in the same way researchers from the North need to explore Africa, local researchers need to undertake relatively short, strategic visits to safe-secure museums/herbaria in the North where they can interact/collaborate with colleagues there.

On the other hand, it's possible to learn and research much about Africa without leaving its shores. That's what 'field' research is all about.

Then Prof. Chirikure makes some assertions and cites some eminent African scholars. For example, he maintains the various "Fallists" have provided "impetus" for curriculum decolonialization. Yet, nowhere do he or Fallists argue for, let alone provide, coherent academically meaningful (i.e. job-career-getting) curricula. The most coherent Afrocentric curriculum I've discovered is that proposed by Prof. Mahmood Mamdani for UCT first year social sciences students in the 1990s. When it was rejected by a broad spectrum of interested and affected (and probably academically biased) colleagues, this precipitated the infamous Mamdani Affair. <http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/files/mamdani.pdf> It is beyond the scope of this reply to document the Affair in detail, but there is ample evidence <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02533959808458651?journalCode=rsdy20> that it was as much about legitimate academic disagreement as alleged "Bantu Education". My personal

assessment is that much of the source material on which Mamdani's curriculum was based was both questionable scientifically/historically and too advanced for first-year students (especially those disabled by the dysfunctional basic education system). I could elaborate on this.

Other than 70 year-old Mamdani, all of the scholars cited are dead or over 80. Their important colonial-oppression-focused publications have less relevance today in a post-Apartheid South Africa. Where are the authors and works that talk about post-colonial Africa run well by Africans?

Otherwise, the primary "impetus" of the Fallist movements is political at best and intimidatory and destructive at worst. Chumani Maxwele's expurgated letter published in the Sunday Independent (SI) on 21 August 2016 is quite explicit on this.

Why hasn't decolonisation happened?

Two reasons. First and foremost, as stated above, for most university-taught-disciplines, there is no coherent replacement decolonized curriculum that will produce graduates who will become the 'drivers' of the 'New' South Africa. Second, those promoting decolonization appear to be little more than inquisitors bent on stripping curricula of Eurocentric/colonial/Apartheid 'heresy'.

Knowledge

Then Prof. Chirikure shifts from curricula to "knowledge". He reiterates his complaint that it is disproportionately concentrated in, and controlled by, colleagues in the North and asserts that this is due to poor local funding for research and bias by those who control North-based publication vehicles (= journals).

With regard to the status of his discipline, archaeology, two South African departments (at the Universities of Witwatersrand and Cape Town) rank amongst the world's top 50 and examination of the published ratings of archaeologists by its National Research Foundation (NRF) list Prof. Chirikure and many colleagues (e.g. Huffman, Braun, Brink, Henshilwood, Lewis-Williams, Lombard, Parkington, Pickering, Sadr, Schepartz, Sealy, etc.) as world-class researchers. All are funded by the NRF et al. and have published in international journals. This is not consistent with his assertion that African-based researchers are not "best placed to produce knowledge about the continent" and are incapable of setting their own "agendas".

Back to knowledge. I agree with Prof. Chirikure that, when and wherever possible, that principles of disciplines should be taught using African-sourced examples. This is certainly the case at UCT in

Biological Sciences. I would go even further. Conservation Biology, a cross-disciplinary science which features strongly in its curriculum at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, was developed (and continues to develop) from concepts and analytical approaches that are uniquely African. Is the author serious in contending that this is not the case in his discipline? If so, perhaps he should link up with local colleagues to remedy the situation under the auspices of the South African Archaeological Society. <http://www.archaeologysa.co.za/> The recent creation and development of the Southern African Society for Systematic Biology is an excellent example of such a process. <http://www.sassb.co.za/> The SASSB sets its own academic/research agenda and successfully lobbied with government agencies to greatly enhance local investment in systematics research/education through the South African Biosystematics Initiative (SABI). <http://www.sassb.co.za/sabi.htm>

With regard to 'decolonization' of knowledge and curricula, instead of academic expurgation based on the geographical origin of ideas and their proponents, at SASSB conferences and strategic educational/research workshops, we insist on dialectical debate of conflicting paradigms to allow individual systematists to choose their own intellectual pathway.

In short, Prof. Chirikure has it half right. What Africa needs is knowledge catalysis not wholesale decolonization of its knowledge base and curricula.