

Making Room for Alternative African Epistemologies in Ethiopian Higher Education

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Abstract: Higher education institutions in Ethiopia are expanding in diversity of fields they offer to students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The opening and internationalization of new programs mostly responds to the demands of market forces on the one hand and the prospect of employability in the national and global market on the other as perceived by incoming students. Accordingly, curricula are mostly shaped by the interests of national and global market forces. While this is necessary to a certain extent, the need to make sure that graduates have a well-balanced regional and international outlook that goes beyond too immediate priorities of market forces should be well kept in mind by higher education program developers and curriculum designers. One issue often raised by Ethiopian scholars and others in relation to the narrow outlook of most Ethiopian higher education graduates is the fact that they are mostly unaware of (or alien to) the lives, aspirations, struggles, dreams, and achievements of people in adjacent African countries and the African diaspora. This paper is an introduction of some of the alternative and moderately influential intellectual perspectives developed by African and African-American scholars that can help balance the one-sided world outlook of Ethiopian students which is primarily shaped by the perspectives of DWEMS (“Dead White European Males”) in different fields.

Keywords: African Epistemologies, African Diaspora, African-American Scholarship, Ethiopia, Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

It will be very appropriate for the matter at hand if we begin by wondering what the response of faculty members in different academic programs of Ethiopian higher education institutions would be if they ask themselves these two questions: “How many African theorists do I know in my field/area of study?” and “How often do I ask myself whether there is African or African-American theoretician/inventor in the courses of the field I teach?” It is possible to expect that the answers would be “not many” or “none” for the first question and “rarely” for the second one. This is not without a reason. Modern higher education institutions worldwide have been predominantly shaped by European scientific and cultural achievements which began to take a shape during the Enlightenment and Renaissance eras of the 17th and 18th centuries. For the past three centuries, the natural and the social science fields, as well as the humanities in Western modern education have been mostly dominated by what have recently come to be referred to as the “DWEMS” or “Dead White European Males.” The attempt to integrate and mainstream the epistemological perspectives of contemporary popular culture, non-white and indigenous societies, non-European knowledge authorities, and women is only a recent development. Critical theory research and revisionist history that try to remove the exclusive focus on “canonical” cultural texts of the West and official history have played a big role in this process.

In Ethiopian higher education programs, the integration of these alternative epistemological traditions is perhaps the least practiced compared to other developing African and non-African countries although it may often be discussed. Students continue to refer to European and American textbooks in virtually every courses they take in higher education institutions. Occasional changes in the curriculum reflect mainly new developments in the fields that arise out of research outputs and globalizing trends led by Western nations. Local needs and research outputs do not significantly impact the curriculum or the general academic culture of higher education institutions. It is possible to say that a relatively impactful research is done only at policy level; and, that is limited primarily to statistical analyses and performance indicator evaluations aimed at responding to the specific queries of international donor organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). The absence of local research think tanks and network of professionals who can constitute a ‘national knowledge regime’ has led some analysts to question the justifiability of the intervention of international organizations through knowledge aid (Molla, 2014). In its place is suggested a shift in the mode of assistance to research capacity building at the higher education level (p. 231).

I propose the inclusion of some African and African-American academic, cultural, political, and scientific discourses as an alternative to encourage students and local scholars to trust their own views and perspectives. The post-colonial academic discourses of many African countries and the counter-hegemonic intellectual outputs of the African-American diaspora are areas to seriously consider if the goal is to provide Ethiopian students and scholars alternative outlooks that can lead them to view themselves as potential knowledge authorities.

It is important that they begin to clearly see that not all aspects of their society are intelligible based on Western theoretical frameworks, and not all issues and problems they need to address in their society are framed as academic agenda in Western textbooks.

Why Africans and African Americans?

My conviction regarding the need for curricular integration emanated from my observations during my graduate studies in the U.S. (2006-2015) which began by a personally surprising discovery to me that although slavery is abolished, racism was still alive in the U.S. affecting many of the discourses in the education field. For example, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of President George H. W. Bush was stirring debates among educators who support it on the one hand and who see it as posing threats to the values of democratic and inclusive education by its indirect endorsement of school choice which led to the “segregation” of people of color and poor children into low-budget urban schools (Ravitch, 2010). In literacy and curriculum fields, the need for the inclusion of the peculiarities of the African-American sub-culture (linguistic, social, historical, oral) was strongly suggested by educators who believed that the predominantly white academic culture was putting many of those children who come from a non-white household tradition to be considered as failures simply because their modes of literacy and way of socialization were different than the formal, “standardized” academic expectations (Heath, 1983). These and many other counter-hegemonic discourses, which were primarily informed by studies and perspectives from the critical paradigm, were effectively forcing me to formulate critical questions of mine: “What if Ethiopian school children are ‘failing’ in masses in an education system that they are not supposed to pass in the first place?” “How authentic is their learning?” “How much of what Ethiopian college students learn is becoming part of their ‘soul’—strong enough to inculcate critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving dispositions which are all the results of genuine scholarship?” “To what extent can the way Africans and African American intellectuals resisted the social crisis and identity disorientations be examples for Ethiopians to deal with their own issues?” These questions led me to inquire about some important aspects of the supposed interlinkage between the social purpose of education and national identity, which I am not going to discuss in this paper. However, such direction for an inquisitive mindset is what seems to be desperately lacking in the Ethiopian higher education academic culture today.

In addition to the above, I also observed that Ethiopian students in the U.S. (Ethio-Americans or international students) happen to have, ironically, the lowest sense of awareness and enthusiasm towards topics like pan-Africanism and Ethiopianism despite the fact that Ethiopia has been the major inspiration for such Afro-centric discourses in the 19th and 20th centuries. With the current government emphasis on neoliberalism, globalization, fast-paced economic growth, ethnic federalism, and aggressive expansion of the industrial and business sector, the room for Ethiopianism and movements of African solidarity has seriously narrowed in Ethiopian political or academic discourse within the past three or four decades. Especially in academics, the emphasis on business and STEM fields has pushed the humanities and the social science fields, especially history and philosophy, into the shadow,

preventing a higher order contemplation on foundational issues such as preservation of identity, social cohesion, indigenous knowledge system, and alternative/Ethiopian academic philosophy. This has nowadays only left many Ethiopian students unable to actively participate in, let alone lead, global Afro-centric discourses. Ethiopians have indeed a lot to learn from the intelligent, big-hearted, genuinely warm, and gifted African and African-American scholars whom they are utterly ignorant about, and this can begin from making some room for alternative African and African-American epistemologies in the current higher education programs.

The Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is thus to show that valuable bodies of knowledge exist among Africans and African Americans that are influential and potentially very relevant to Ethiopia, yet are not fully included in mainstream Western academics. As it is impossible to cover the vast body of knowledge, I will only attempt to show the above point by presenting four selected scholars and their contributions to their respective academic fields, three African-Americans and one African, as well as one indigenous philosophy of the Zulu people of South Africa. The fields these works draw from and can build upon include: philosophy, politics, literature, gender studies, history, anthropology, biology, and teacher education.

My examination of the works of each of the four scholars was led by the following three questions:

- What was the driving inquiry of the scholar that caused the epistemic turn in his/her area of study?
- How is the inquiry rooted in the scholar's African (non-mainstream) identity?
- How would Ethiopian higher education students benefit if we exposed them to such works?

The responses to each of the above questions are summarized for each scholar under the following sub-sections.

1. Dr. Cornell West's works in Politics and Philosophy

Dr. Cornell West (1953-present) is an American philosopher, political activist, social critic, author, rapper/artist, and radio co-host. West is the first African-American to graduate with a PhD in Philosophy from Princeton University in 1980 and is a recipient of more than twenty honorary degrees. He is mostly known for his two books *Race Matters* (1994) and *Democracy Matters* (2005), and he refers to himself as "a non-Marxist socialist" whose intellectual contributions draw heavily from Christianity, socialism, black Church, neo-pragmatism and transcendentalism. West has participated in the Civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s demanding black rights. Only as a high school student, he was involved in demonstrations advocating for the inclusion of black studies courses in the curricula. West has held several prestigious positions in major Western universities including Yale, Harvard,

and University of Paris, and is currently the director of the African Studies program at Princeton.

West's intellectual position came out of his inquiry into the contemporary condition of Black Americans who are predominantly seen as "problem people" and not as "fellow Americans" by "white America." The liberal versus conservative debate that call for removing structural impediments for black mobility on the one hand and the revival of Protestant work ethics among black community to make them more responsible for their lives on the other, according to West, obscure the more important underlying danger—black nihilism. West contends nihilism poses the greatest danger but is not adequately dealt with in the political discourse. He believes nihilism in Black America stemmed out of feeling of worthlessness caused, not only by economic deprivation and political powerlessness, but also by psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair (West, 2001). West questions the predominant tendency to understand the human individual as an "economic man"—a being exclusively motivated by self-interest and drives for self-preservation. This hypothesis, which is central in the field of political and economic thoughts, does not always explain the needs of degraded and oppressed people according to West because their needs also involve a deeper quest for identity and meaning to their existence. In most of his works, West intelligently criticizes and exposes the racist, patriarchal, and capitalist political and economic hegemony which he believes is primarily driven by lust for money, power, and status, thereby ignoring human values such as love and truth that are essential for the common good. West calls for a shift from fundamentalist market value to traditional familial and communal meaning systems that can enrich the cultural lives of black people helping them to effectively deal with nihilistic effects of their oppression.

How much is nihilism a threat to Ethiopian youth today? Maybe not to the extent that African Americans endured due to their prolonged suffering under slavery; but, it certainly is a growing threat under the loosening social fabric and the hostile political system that is more militaristic than humanistic. Through its unfavorable view towards the country's history and traditional values, and with its devotion to promote exclusively profit-minded system of weighing any tangible and non-tangible cultural asset of the Ethiopian nations and nationalities, the current government has turned governance from a practice of leadership to a multi-dimensional system of alienation where vertical political allegiance takes precedence over horizontal, communal solidarity. Like West argued, resisting oppressive political ideologies by culturally enriching the human soul would be a perfect antidote to the political and public discourse culture that is getting increasingly dry and nationally un-healing. The works of Dr. Cornell West are by no means the only ones that can inspire discourse in this area. But they exemplify the valuable ideas and perspectives produced by African and African-American scholars that are largely ignored in the mainstream academics, but could be productively entertained in Ethiopian higher education, specifically in the fields of politics and philosophy.

Alice Walker's Contribution in the Fields of Literature and Gender Studies

Alice Walker (1968-present) is an American novelist, poet, and activist. Walker was originally from a poor household that earned much less than what was needed to live a modest life; yet, her mother's strong commitment to get Walker an education enabled her to survive her childhood and teenage challenges by using writing as a coping mechanism. Walker privately wrote poems and short stories that helped channel her deepest thoughts and feelings about family, relationships, spirituality, gender, history, black culture, and her own life experiences. She later studied literature in college and wrote about black history on magazines. She particularly wrote about the lives of black women in America, and participated in the Civil Rights movement protests. Although Walker produced many widely accepted books and literary products, she is best known for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982)—which tells a story of a young girl who suffered and survived racial and sexual abuse at the hands of men. She became the first African-American to receive the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Although Walker endorses some controversial practices such as intimate relationship among women as empowering, she has contributed a great deal to the understanding of the role of women in creating a buffer for increasingly loosening social cohesion among the black community. In one of her books, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), Walker advocates for a position she named "womanism"—a variety of feminism which, Walker believes, best represents what it means to be a whole, rounded, mature woman that loves other women, is concerned about the fathers, sons, and boys, and cares to fight what oppresses the whole black society (p. 81). Walker draws on the works of many pioneering black women of literature and political activism including Zora Neal Hurston, Rebecca Jackson, and Coretta King—the wife of Dr. Martine Luther King. In her various literary products, she narrates the lives of exemplary black women from the times of slavery up to the present and insightfully sheds light on the changing values of the black community as it entered the present consumerist era. Walker calls black women to be more spiritually-evolved and less materialist in order to be able to fight the oppressing forces that operate through racism, drug culture, black-on-black violence, and general mediocrity in life. She advocates for black history workshops—teaching black women about their history, in order to remind them how emotionally resourceful they were in surviving the dehumanizing condition of slavery through their "creativity, endurance, and loveliness of spirit" which she believes black mothers effectively utilized to resist the potentially damaging negative emotion that developed due to oppression (Walker, 1983, p. 28).

Walker argues that collecting the works of pioneering black women of literature should be used to educate present day black women, black folklore, and black family history, so that they can be equipped with a vision to fight for social justice and change. Walker believes it is only to the extent that women engage in such struggle that they can liberate themselves; however, she advocates for non-violent struggle and calls for the practice of love, compassion, and forgiveness by black women who she believes are capable of creating a better image of humanity since they were not part of the forces that perpetuate oppression at any point in history. According to Walker, one way to make the creative spirit of the black

mothers and grandmothers continue is to share their works of art to the next generation. Their spark of creativity and wisdom, Walker believes, is found, for example, in their children's artistic inclinations and talents (writing, music, sculpting, painting, etc.). Therefore, to make this continue through generations, Walker believed that, as a higher education teacher, she should collect and share black women's literary products, which is what she did at Wellesley—a private women's liberal-arts college in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

Walker discusses the vitality of storytelling, music, arts and crafts etc. from mothers to children as important routes of transmission of enduring spirituality. For example, she admired her mothers' own story she used to tell her, including the way she told it, and some of her creative habits such as adorning with flowers “whatever shabby house we were forced to live in” (p. 241). She stated that her mother planted gardens with more than fifty different varieties of plants, a habit/occupation she beautifully described as “ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of beauty” (p. 241). She said occupation such as this was a work many black women practiced for a long time. Walker also recounted in detail her struggles with suicidal thoughts when she was young, and emphasized the importance of sisterly love (she got from friends when she expected them the least), art (for her poem) for conquering the sense of void and nothingness and celebrating life.

Much like Dr. West, Walker emphasizes genuine affection and warmth among blacks and between blacks and whites as more important than other forms of help such as financial aid and companionship in political revolt. They both call for the continuity of the once-strong bond of brotherhood and sisterhood among black people and bond of black kinship characterized by mutual caring and trust. In short, Walker argues for the urgent need to keep the wholeness of the “soul” of the black family through spirituality, culture, and art which she believes was well-maintained until materialism hit the black society in the 1970's.

Walker's “womanism,” which can be considered as a particular school of thought like feminism, has a lot to say to the women's right efforts in Ethiopia's gender movement. In Ethiopia, the most commonly known strategies to ensure girls' and women's wellbeing are often reactive—meaning, they are targeted on compensating for the disadvantages women go through as they are shortchanged by men and the patriarchal economic and political system. Such strategies include affirmative actions in education, microfinancing and vocational training, legal actions against girls' and women's harassment, and so on. While these activities are extremely important, they are not capable of bringing social change in the longer term because the root of male violence, which can be personal, symbolic, or institutional, cannot be *culturally* dealt with by these mechanisms. Walker's perspective reminds us that for societies like the black-American population where women are victims of racism and sexism, growing to be a “womanist” and working for long-term cultural change through the familial (mother-son and father-daughter) and cultural (art, music, spirituality, storytelling) is essential. Social change for people like Walker is all about creating rich, creative, tender, and beautiful souls who can stand against the dehumanizing effects of consumerism, racism, materialism, and sexism. It is impossible to wage long-term fight against gender-based oppression in Ethiopia simply by focusing on structural and legal

amendments without considering the cultural and political dynamics that are depriving men of their tenderness and far-sightedness. It is extremely important to think of new educational approaches in higher education gender programs to equip both men and women to work methodically against these dynamics using their cultural and spiritual resources, which, unfortunately, are presently used only to encourage conformity to the status quo rather than to promote advocacy for social change.

Cheikh Anta Diop's Works on Afrocentrism

Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986) was a Senegalese historian, anthropologist, physicist, and politician who studied the origin of human race and pre-colonial African culture using his encyclopedic knowledge gained from vast disciplines. Diop, who is pioneer to the Afrocentrism idea, is probably unparalleled by African scholars in his academic achievement. He has five doctoral degrees, and has studied chemistry, nuclear physics, philosophy, history, anthropology, linguistics, Egyptology, and economics, all of which he applied to study the history of Africa. In recognition to his immense scholarly contribution to the study of African culture, the former University of Dakar in Senegal was named "Cheikh Anta Diop University" after him.

One of the most notable works of Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* (1974), contains a comparative history of evolution of social organizations in Africa and elsewhere. Diop contends that there is racial and cultural commonality across the people of Africa which is more important than the ethnic and cultural differences that are magnified out of proportion by the mainstream social science and race studies. He argued that Nubians, Somalians, Egyptians, and Ethiopians are all racially interrelated. Diop also established the first radio-carbon laboratory in Senegal and did corpse testing to prove that ancient Egyptians were blacks—a radical departure from the position held by mainstream Western Academicians on the subject until recent decades. Diop worked hard for the recognition and proper understanding of pre-colonial black civilizations which were considered as non-existent by Western historians. He also advocated for African renaissance, pan African movement, African federation, and African independence, thereby becoming the path-finder for later Afro-centrists. Although Diop's works were widely influential in African studies fields, UNESCO has refused to acknowledge his findings.

Diop gives a great deal of information on pre-colonial African societies which can add to our positive understanding of Ethiopia's racial and cultural make-up. The question then becomes whether higher education programs in Ethiopia should disregard ground-breaking works like those of Diop's simply because they are not well-approved by Western international organizations like UNESCO. Should discussions on cross-national communication and cultural solidarity among Africans be muted simply because they are not the agenda of Western or International Organizations or their satellite political organizations in Africa? African academicians in general and Ethiopian academicians must give a reasonable action-filled answer for this question.

Innovative Work of American Biologist—Rick Kittles

Dr. Rick Kittles (1976 – present) is American Biologist specializing in human genetics. He taught biology in high schools in the 1980s and in the 1990s he was a research assistant in federal African Burial Ground Project—a project in which Howard University researchers unearthed the bodies of 408 African Americans from an eighteenth-century graveyard. Kittles participated by gathering DNA samples and comparing them with samples from a DNA database to determine which part of African the individuals buried in the graveyard had come from. Kittles developed his work to a genetic tracing mechanism which allowed several African Americans to discover their ancestral identity—a privilege they were not capable of maintaining due to their apparent displacement from their African homelands during the slave trade (Kittles & Royal, 2003). Dr. Kittles has also immensely contributed to the understanding of prostate cancer—a more common phenomena among African American males to which they are genetically vulnerable.

Dr. Kittles' work is the result of investigating issues that are unique and troubling to his own community. Tracing ancestral identity cannot be a concerning agenda for white people, and may not therefore be at the foreground of issues of research in mainstream life sciences. Yet, the importance of framing and investigating the problems of one's own society that may not be regarded so by other communities did not escape the mind of researchers like Dr. Kittles, whose work can help Ethiopian students understand the need to develop an eye for setting out to tackle unique challenges of their own community, and not just be led by the basic research agenda of the discipline or imported research questions and fads that are less urgent than problems at hand.

Ubuntu-gogy—Zulu Peoples' Idea towards Teaching

The fifth perspective to be discussed in this paper is not the work of an individual, but a collective value system upheld by Zulu people in South Africa and across many other African societies. *Ubuntu* is an explicit world-view of Zulu people and it literally means “humanity.” From this came the term *Ubuntu-gogy*, which is defined as the art and science of teaching and learning undergirded by humanity towards others (Bangura, 2005). It holds the premise “I am because we are” and that “individual is an individual because of other individuals in society” (Otunga, 2005, cited in Nafukho 2006, p. 409). *Ubuntu-gogy* is proposed as an anti-dote for twenty-first century social and educational crises by some African scholars. This is because unlike the mainstream “pedagogy” that views the relationship between teachers and students as impersonal and strictly professional, *Ubuntu-gogy* holds the idea that teachers should be prepared to become moral authorities (much like community elders) that are change agents in their society.

Given the authoritarian, fragmented, and non-personalized atmosphere Ethiopian schools are often criticized for (Abebe, 2008; Asfaw & Hagos, 2008; Poluha, 2010; Save the Children,

MoE & MoWA, 2008), it could be appropriate to introduce preservice teachers with such Afro-centric understanding of humanism and humane teacher-student relationship. This can be a great complement to would-be-teachers' training and education on humanistic psychology, which is rooted in an optimist and trusting view of the human nature, and humanistic approaches of curriculum development that have their background in the 19th-20th Century movements of liberal education (Eliot, 1898; Harris, 1886).

CONCLUSION

The selected presentations in this paper are not remotely representative of the vastness of the Afro-centric and African-American scholarship. However, for those in the Ethiopian higher education system who seem to be growing less attentive through time towards epistemologies alternative to the Euro-centric world-view, they could be good indicators of the presence of potentially relevant body of knowledge outside of the mainstream knowledge system. It is notable that these bodies of knowledge are generated from political, social, economic, and moral concerns that could be similar in nature to ours. They can also fill the gap created by the non-Ethiopian origin of some aspects of the mainstream academics by encouraging students to think flexibly and authentically once they are aware of the presence of alternative viewpoints. Most importantly, the inclusion of such perspectives in Ethiopian higher education programs can keep Ethiopian higher education graduates in touch with the intellectual discourses among Africans and the African Diaspora (including Ethio-Americans), which is an important but neglected aspect of the effort to internationalize Ethiopian higher education.

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