Western Ascendency and African Capitulation: Antagonism for 'True' Public Administration Epistemology

Mathebula Ntwanano Erasmus

Department of Public & Development Administration
School of Management Sciences
University of Venda, South Africa
Email: hongonyi@gmail.com

……………………………………………………………………

Abstract

Public administration scholars in Africa are disinclined to advocate for the conceptualisation and contextualisation of their discipline in a manner that reflects the veracities of their communities. This paper, through a desktop method and literature review, seeks to interrogate and point out the existence of African public administration and question its independence from Western epistemology. The paper argues that there is fear, particularly among African scholars, to displease their Western counterparts by preaching the sermon of public administration based on African knowledge, cultures, values, beliefs, norms, history and traditions. By so doing, Africa is being defined, characterised, dealt with and reduced into a phenomenon by those who have never set a foot on its soil. The paper concludes by giving 'academic advice' for the need to defend the rich knowledge of Africa and particularly in the administration of government affairs.

Introduction

The politics of the knowledge sector continues to gain momentum in social, academic and economic spectra (Unger, 2019). In most instances, the discourse is centred around the question of academics with or without the audacity to produce what constitutes 'true' knowledge. This, however, should not be as the focus should be more on the truthfulness of the knowledge as opposed to who the author is or where (s)he originates. Scholars and authors from less developed countries find it difficult to access the publishing industry as perpetuated by the history of colonisation. In South Africa for instance, a deep-seated discourse was initiated by campaigns such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. Debates and demands for the decolonisation of higher education in general and curricular in particular are premised upon the need to liberate and deliver African students from a knowledge system "rooted in colonial, apartheid and Western worldviews and epistemological traditions" (Heleta, 2016: 1) necessitated the campaigns. However, authors such as Van Jaarsveldt, de Vries and Kroukamp (2019) argue that decolonising higher education generally and the field of public administration specifically might result in a system unreflective of international standards. This is so as it is espoused by institutions such as the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration and the International Commission on Accreditation of Public Administration Education and Training Programs amongst others. It then becomes a value judgment as to whether 'standards' precedes and overrides the liberation of the 'African mind' from a system entrenched in colonialism. Heleta (2016) argues that powerful individuals and interest groups will resist with contempt the Africanisation, decolonisation, and an attempt to have public administration—both the scientific area of study and government practice—espoused by African values fully implemented in institutions of higher learning in the African continent. But at who's interest is such resistance? This paper argues that the notion that Western epistemology is hegemonic over African knowledge systems is 'miscued' particularly in the highly contextual study of public administration and its practice. In simple terms, there is a general feeling that knowledge produced in the West is superior. In light of this, this paper begins by 'setting the scene' before proceeding to conceptualise decolonisation of knowledge using public administration as a unit of analysis. It then moves on to discuss and outline the African public administration practice and epistemology and the African charter as a body of knowledge that can be firmly built on.

Setting the Scene

Some scholars firmly believe that Africa and its people are unable to produce knowledge (see Mathebula, 2018; Maserumule and Vil-Nkomo, 2014). Their beliefs are necessitated by the fact that research outputs and other forms of publications produced within the continent as a whole equal that of Netherlands alone (Fonn, Ayiro, Cotton, Habib, Mbithi, Mtenje, Nawangwe, Ogunbodede, Olayinka, Galloba-Mutebi, & Ezeh, 2018). However, this must by no means be interpreted as a knowledge gap or the inability to theorise as it is always said (Mathebula, 2018). Koma (2018: 97) attributes this mishap to the "failure to embody invaluable African values, cultures, traditions, history, images and perspectives". As a result, students in institutions of higher learning are confronted with identity crisis. Identity crisis is a psychological state whereby a person experiences confusion as opposed to self-awareness and "distinguishing oneself from others" (Dameshghi & Kalantarkousheh, 2016). Disturbingly, this identity crisis is most likely to occur at the age students are enrolled into institutions of higher learning (Dameshghi & Kalantarkousheh, 2016). This menace clearly calls for the Africanisation and decolonisation of curricula across universities in Africa. This of course is not an easy task. However, it must be borne in mind that even during the times of the 'great' philosopher Plato, societies 'wrestled' with designing curricula that reflect the philosophies and ideologies of their countries (Musitha & Mafukata, 2018). From this we learn that 'knowledge decolonisation' is a difficult but necessary exercise if true liberation of the African mind is to be preached. This reminds me of Maserumule and Vil-Nkomo (2014) as cited in Mathebula (2018) who call for institutions of higher learning to become African universities rather than universities in Africa. This unequivocally demands of universities to become visionaries in promoting and embracing knowledge of African realities, especially in the social science field of public administration. Wingfield (2017) indisputably supports this view by stating that universities are not "ivory towers". That is, institutions of higher learning are part of research, teaching and learning solutions for a nation. This is part of the Africanisation and decolonisation project.

According to Freire (1975), education for liberation is one which forms society in a certain way, where society structures itself in a certain direction, "establishes an educational system to fit the values which guides" them. Freire is of the view that the current structured 'westernised' education system cannot be used as a lever for liberation. It is in this line of thought that Mashabela (2017) argues that Africanisation

23

is about liberation. Liberation literally relates to an action of setting someone free from "imprisonment, slavery and oppression" (Wikipedia). The question therefore is: slavery and oppression from what? Africanisation as a project seeks to free Africans in all life aspects from Eurocentrism, especially the view that it is hegemonic. The argument must not be misconstrued to mean that there is something wrong with Eurocentrism. Africa 'must' therefore "avoid emulating Western development paradigms" (Segage, 2018). Koma (2018) argues that Eurocentrism "must not claim universal hegemony". In the South African higher education sector for instance, curricula remain mainly Eurocentric and characterised by "Western dominance and privilege" that continues to prejudice and patronise the views of Africans (Heleta, 2016).

According to Mashabela (2017: 1), Africanisation refers to "the comprehensive liberation of all Africa and all Africans, but more specifically the liberation of the poor, the Black, the women and specifically Black or African women". This has implications for public administration practice as it relates to the need to transform society through policy processes. Africanisation in public administration is vitally important as Mathebula (2014) argues that pieces of legislation and policies are unenforceable and easily ignored as they lack moral and cultural flavour. In the words of Koma (2018), there is a need for a "policy framework that essentially encapsulates African inspired values and aspirations".

Colonisation within the Auspices of Higher Education

Conceptualising colonisation is critically important to the present purposes of examining and positioning the state of public administration theory and practice and the discourse of higher education decolonisation. Colonisation in the context of this paper refers to the control of Africans and their territories by Europeans through the domination of the mind (Mosweunyane, 2013; Bulhan, 2015). This is what Mart (2011) refers to as "mental control". Colonisation further refers to the use of institutions of higher learning as instruments of the "colonial-imperial project" in a bid to influence the colonised (Muchie, n.d). According to Mart (2011), colonisation in the educational sector context relates to the use of education as a tool "to achieve social control over African people". From the foregoing, this paper underscores the importance of education as an instrument to "capture" every other aspect of human beings.

24

Colonisation is a project of removing the colonised groups from their indigenous systems and structures (Mart, 2011). Indigenous knowledge refers to the teaching of the citizenry locally developed forms of traditions and values of African societies (Kaya & Seleti, 2013). After all, "Africa must be African" (Muchie, n.d). Knowledge, learning and research must be informed by African orientations. Education plays a central role in the way in which nations' history, racial power hierarchies and racial groupings are structured and function (Weiner, 2016). However, the challenge with the current higher education system in general and public administration in particular is the fact that the system stands and continues to stand on the pillars of the "colonial social order, fosters neo-colonial dependency and promotes elitism" (Kanu, 2007). But of course, the goal for colonising education has always been to "expose Africans to a superior culture" (Mart, 2011). There is no doubt that the so-called "superior culture" has always been viewed as and continues to be that of the West. As a result, higher traditional African education is cracked and disrupted (Muchie, n.d). The end result was to ensure that post-colonial education perpetuates "cultural and intellectual servitude and the devaluation of traditional African cultures" (Kanu, 2007: 65).

The Decolonisation Project: Public Administration Perspective

This section of the paper aims to unpack the concept "decolonisation" with a view to comprehend its implication in the context of higher education. Inasmuch as it has been argued in the preceding section that colonisation is a process that includes two varying parties, decolonisation, particularly of the curriculum in institutions of higher learning, is a necessary project as the paper argues.
In the words of Muchie (n.d):

> When you say someone is an educated African, you mean that he is conscious of his people's problems, that he knows his culture well enough to be able to discriminate between its drawbacks and its advantages, that he can take the land his people have, the livestock his people keep, the wisdom that his elders teach, and the customs that his people follow…

This is how the African education system must be. This is decolonisation. This is the decolonisation and the Africa we wish for.

25

Decolonisation of the systems and institutions of higher learning is about the sentient realisation of the oppressed to outrightly reject the ideals, customs and norms of the Western coloniser (Saurome, 2018). It is time for Africans and scholars in charge of the education systems in different African universities understand and undertake to dismantle the knowledge chains imposed by pernicious regimes and the decolonisation project will emerge as a 'serious project'. The project requires that institutions of higher learning "decolonise, deracialise, *demasculanise*, de-gender" (Heleta, 2016) themselves as well as begin the discourse on engaging ontological and epistemological issues of "research, methodology, scholarship, teaching and learning as well as pedagogy" (*Ibid*). For instance, pedagogies such as that developed by Bloom (taxonomy) remains the world most acceptable and favoured way in African pedagogical arrangements without being questioned. This is so because, as Heleta (2016) argues, the Western worldview of knowing and knowledge is "the only way of knowing". It is equally interesting that the South African education system and policy-makers in particular have till date not attempted to develop and implement a pedagogical approach that responds to the needs of the local realities. In the words of Mart (2011: 192), "if we really wish to do good in Africa, we must teach her savage sons that white men are their superiors". These are the words of an ambitious coloniser. Therefore, decolonisation should aim to dismantle Eurocentric epistemic hegemonies and transform the education system to one located in the African context (Heleta, 2016). However, the words of Freire (1975) share a painful reality with all those advocating for Africanisation and the decolonisation of the curriculum in institutions of higher learning.

> The power which creates an educational system in its image will never allow education to be used against it…and therefore a radical transformation of the education system can never take place unless society itself is transformed (Freire 1975).

Transformation and education takes place simultaneously. By this, the author seeks to submit that education can be used as a tool to transform society while transformation itself requires society to be educated.

Decolonising the education system will go a long way in creating the workforce that seeks to ensure economic development and end poverty, which remains one of the major challenges of the African continent. To be precise, in the words of Musitha and Mafukata (2018), decolonising

26

education is the *sine qua non* for a public administration practitioner in particular and a social scientist in general if governance and administrative challenges confronting Africa are to be effectively addressed. By this, Africa would have a public administration practice that is not constituted by incumbents who recite Western epistemologies for the sake of curriculum fulfilment while service clients experience service delivery challenges. A proud African such as Ngungi Wationgo (1981) alludes that "Africans are in a relationship with itself" while others are in the universe. It is for this and other reasons that Mkandawire (2011) referred to Africa as running while other nations are simply walking. Mkandawire was giving a professorial address on the challenges inhibiting the true realisation of development in Africa which was centred around the fact that Africa is incapable of developing due to failures to reflect on its own challenges and authoritatively seek to address them.

The thrust of the argument in this paper, stems from a question posed by Van Jaarsveldt, de Vries and Kroukamp (2019):

> Are there reasonable arguments to support the demand for changes to the content of this discipline (i.e. public administration) and is there a need to adjust curricula to concede to the wishes of the protesting students for the decolonising of science?

In the view of this paper, the question is naïve, unfair and unfortunate. This is so because there is a need to realise that the decolonisation project has more to do with liberation from the Eurocentric hegemony and thereby instilling a sense of being and self particularly for Africans. Decolonisation has everything to do with 'renewal' of the African continent or an undertaking for the realisation of a "new Africa" (Segage, 2018). In the words of Mathebula (2018), this is a "transformative project" rather than merely theorising and producing knowledge outputs. For Van Jaarsveldt *et al* (2018), the call to decolonise the curricula of institutions of higher learning and that of public administration may result in misalignment with international standards and agencies such as the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), the International Commission on Accreditation of Public Administration Education and Training Programs (ICAPA) and the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA). Is this not the perpetuation of colonisation of the public administration discipline? A close look at all these institutions, one can hurriedly grasp the agenda. Whose interests

are these institutions serving? Is it in line with the agenda to decolonise the African mind, one which is independent from Western epistemology? Why are those international standards so important that they supersede the transformative agenda of a continent which has been under the screws of colonialism (intellectual) from time immemorial? African intellectuals are duty-bound, as argued before, to theorise using their real-life experiences rather than over-relying on theories and methodologies that have nothing to do with responding to African governance challenges. Brunsson and Jacobson (2000) in Van Jaarsveldt *et al* (2018: 19) view standards as "rules about what those who adopt them should do, even if this only involves saying something or designating something in a particular way". The conceptualisation underscores why there is no need to cry foul about the public administration curricula being "at odds with current trends in many curricula" globally (Van Jaarsveldt *et al* 2018). This is so as public administration in the African context is not duty-bound to adopt the way things are done internationally, unless there is a valid and a binding reason to do so, which has since not been pointed out. Moreover, African harsh realities differ substantially from those of Europe as a continent and developing countries and therefore the two are incomparable. The paper argues that the practice and exercise of public administration in the West and in Africa are structurally and institutionally dissimilar. It is therefore worthwhile that the paper briefly reflects on the African practice of administration. This is with a view to bringing to the forefront the significant differences and the existence of the practice in Africa and that of the West.

African Public Administration Practice

For many years, or even time immemorial, public administration practice in the African context has been a matter of contention in terms of its existence or the lack thereof. Of course, public administration needs to be defined as both theory and practice if one is to understand the existent relationship between the two. Public administration theory is a scientific social science field of study while practice is the activities of government officials. Marume (2016) in his *Meaning of Administration*, simply defined public administration as a field of administration existing within a political system for the accomplishment of goals and objectives formulated by politicians. Of course this article seeks not only to look for the reconfiguration of the definition but also to conceptualise it to an African public service environment. This is a civil service rooted in African public service and administration structures and the inherent

governance models. This article unapologetically rejects the notion that pre-colonised Africa did not possess governance systems, something that Basheka (2015) refers to as "indigenous Africa's governance architecture" despite the fact that European powers relied on it to build and maintain their "colonial state administration" (Kisangani, nd). Hence, famous beliefs that Africa had no administration 'worthy of the name needs to be rejected' (Basheka, 2015: 466). Ubuntu as an African philosophy seeking to guide the conduct of individuals and administrators is a perfect example (Mathebula, 2014).

The Ubuntu philosophy is the basis for African culture and systems as it advocates for interconnectedness, common humanity, and the responsibility of individuals to each other (Oppenheim, 2012; Rampke, 2016). Mathebula (2014: 938) holds that Ubuntu is a term translated to mean "human kindness". When Plato spoke of a fair and just society and state (Motloba, Makwakwa & Machete, 2019), was this not a conscious call for human kindness for both the governor and the governed? Ubuntu denotes a moral meaning for citizens to create a functional community (Oppenheim, 2012). A community refers to "fellowship" or a group of people coming together to fulfil a common purpose (Mathebula, 2015: 187). When establishing a common purpose, governance and administrative structures need to exist and be functional. This is more of a compelling demand for ethical and moral governance, something that is currently lacking in African (South Africa included) public service (Mathebula & Munzhedzi, 2017). Mathebula (2014) however blames the lack of moral and ethical conduct by public officials on the lack of "cultural-moral" flavour in governance structures. The African Charter on Public Administration also serves as an agenda within and with which governance structures in the African context ought to be designed, implemented and controlled.

Public Administration Epistemology: An African Charter

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2005 online) defines epistemology as the study of knowledge and justified belief. In its definition, the following questions are posed: what are the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge? What are its sources, structures and limits? At the core, epistemology has everything to do with the creation and dissemination of knowledge in particular areas of inquiry (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005). Narrowly defined, knowledge pertains to awareness, understanding, or information obtained through experience or study, and that it is in the mind and possessed by people

generally (Cambridge Dictionary, online). Undoubtedly, Africans have sets of tools through which knowledge is accumulated such as daily experiences. Is this not African epistemology? This is despite the fact that a plethora of African knowledge and theories are unwritten as opposed to Western knowledge and its sources.

Accounts of public administration practice as recorded by Kisangani (nd) where African societies before colonisation included certain functions such as tax collections, supervising ceremonies, adhering to the rule of law which was presided over by emperors, kings, chiefs and military commanders. This is supported by Basheka (2015: 480) who firmly believes that African public administration and governance systems existed pre-colonisation before it was disoriented with a 'Western-based' ideologies. Most importantly, in pre-colonial Africa, "moral elders" were responsible for teaching ethical and moral conduct in communities (Basheka, 2015: 475). This is what Mathebula (2014) and Zitha and Mathebula (2015) argue is at the heart of resolving public service challenges as opposed to contemporary rule of law alone.

This article argues for the existence of African public administration using the African Charter to substantiate the point. The Charter, which was adopted at the 16th Ordinary Session of the Heads of State and Government of the African Union (AU), provides mainly for the values and principles of public service and administration for the member-states of the AU. According to Latib (2010: 2), cited in Busieka (2018: 51), the African Charter seeks to define "the principles and general rules governing African public services with the express objective of building state capability". This therefore calls for an adoption of the Charter since it serves as a policy framework for African public administration and a "source of inspiration for development" (Busieka, 2018: 51). This underscores the realisation of a dire need to base pieces of legislation and policies underpinned by African values if developmental challenges are to be effectively dealt with. In the words of Busieka (2018), the implementation of the African Charter will "go a long way" in dealing with governance deficits and ensuring state capability confronting African states.

Conclusion

If students who are recipients of higher education and its perceived benefits in institutions of learning consciously realise the importance of "decolonised knowledge" and epistemology, scholars are morally and duty-bound to respond to the call. Not only is decolonisation of the

curricular important, a public administration and governance systems and structures based upon African values accentuates the underlying developmental challenges facing Africa and the alternative solutions thereof. It was not the aim of this paper to discredit public administration curricula based on Western epistemology but to rebut the assumption that African public administration is a myth. It was therefore through literature argued that there is a need for renewal of the traditional systems that have always existed to be inculcated within the main public administration curricula of African universities in order to befit African realities and the eminent challenges. In his concluding remarks, Basheka (2015: 481), held that "we need to learn from the way African societies governed their affairs and what lessons can be picked up from such systems, especially the best practices that united people to a common purpose, which are lacking in contemporary administrative systems". As argued in the paper, this decolonisation and Africanisation project places a duty on African scholars to advocate for 'true public administration' for Africa and Africans.

References

Basheka, B.C. 2015. Indigenous Africa's governance architecture: a need for African public administration theory? *Journal of Public Administration*, 50 (3): 466-484.

Busieka, M. 2018. The African Charter: an enabler for good governance. *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 10 (1): 44-59.

Dameshghi, S. & Kalantarkousheh, S.M. 2016. The relationship between identity crisis and responsibility of adolescents in Nazarabad. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 3 (2): 97-107.

Fonn, S., Ayiro, L.P., Cotton, P., Habib, A., Mbithi, P.M.F., Mtenje, A., Nawangwe, B., Ogunbodede, E.O., Olayinka, I., Galloba-Mutebi, F. & Ezeh, A. 2018. Repositioning Africa in global knowledge production*, Lancet*, 392: 1163-1166.

Freire, P. 1975. Education for liberation. http://acervo.paulofreire.org:80 80/jspui/bitstream/7891/1139/3/FPF_OPF_01_0001.pdf. (26 August 2019).

Heleta, S. 2016. Decolonisation of higher education: dismantling epistemic violence and eurocentrism in South Africa. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1 (1): 1-8.

Kanu, Y. 2007. Tradition and educational reconstruction in Africa in postcolonial and global times: the case for Sierra Leone. *African Studies Quarterly*, 10 (3): 65-84.

Kisangani, E.F. not dated. Development of African administration: pre-colonial times and since. https://www.eolss.net/sample-chapters/C14/E1-34-02-02.pdf. (22 July 2019).

Koma, S.B. 2018. The African renaissance and the impetus for transforming higher education. *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 10 (2): 97-108.

Mart, C.G. 2011. British colonial education policy in Africa. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 2 (9): 190-194.

Marume, S.B.M. 2016. Meaning of public administration. *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, 4 (6): 15-20.

Mashabela, J.K. 2017. Africanisation as an agent of theological education in Africa. *HTS Teoloiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 73 (3): 1-9.

Mathebula, N. 2014. Public sector financial management, morality, culture and law. *Journal of Public Administration*, 49 (3): 936-945.

Mathebula, N. 2015. Community participation in the South African local government dispensation: a public administration scholastic misnomer. *International Public Administration Review*, 13 (3-4): 185-199.

Mathebula, N.E & Munzhedzi, P.H. 2017. Trias politica for ethical leadership and good governance: praxis of checks and balances in the South African context. *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*, 14 (2): 7-17.

Mathebula, N.E. 2018. Pondering over the Public Administration discipline: a move towards African epistemology. *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*, 15 (2): 17-25.

Mkandawire, T. 2011. Running while others walk: knowledge and the challenge of Africa's development. *Africa Development*, xxxvi (2): 1-36.

Mosweunyane, D. 2013. The African educational evolution: from traditional training to formal education. *Higher Education Studies*, 3 (4): 50-59.

Motloba, P.D., Makwakwa, N.L. & Machete, L.M. 2019. Overview of the moral theories of justice: part one. *SADJ*, 74 (3): 150-152.

Muchie, M. n.d. Combining and constructing a research, knowledge and training African area.

Musitha, M.E. & Mafukata, M.A. 2018. Crisis of decolonising education: curriculum implementation in Limpopo Province of South Africa. *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review*, 6 (1): 1-8.

Ngungi, W.T.O. 1981. Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature. East African Educational Publishers: Nairobi.

Oppenheim, C.E. 2012. Nelson Mandela and the power of Ubuntu. *Religions*, 3: 369-388.

Rampke, B. 2016. Interconnectedness, healing and harmony: the application of Ubuntu in peace research and in Namibian-German

postcolonial disputes emerging from the return of human remains. Master's Degree Programme in Peace, Mediation and Conflict Research, University of Tampere.

Saurombe, N. 2018. Decolonising higher education curricula in South Africa: factoring in archives through public programming initiatives. *Archival Science*, 18 (2): 119-141.

Segage, M. 2018. African's development trajectory in a globalised world: Africanism or globalism modernity. *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 10 (2): 35-48.

Unger, R.M. 2019. The knowledge economy. https://www.oecd.org/naec/THE-KNOWLEDGE-ECONOMY.pdf. (28 February 2020).

Van Jaarsveldt, L.C., de Vries, M.S. & Kroukamp, H.J. 2019. South African students call to decolonize science: implications for international standards, curriculum development and Public Administration education. *Teaching Public Administration*, 37 (1): 12-30.

Weiner, M.F. 2016. Colonized curriculum: racializing discourses of Africa and Africans in Dutch primary school history textbooks. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 2 (4): 450-465.

Wingfield, B. 2017. What "decolonised education" should and shouldn't mean. https://theconversation.com/what-decolonised-education-should-and-shouldnt-mean-72597. (05 March 2019).

Zitha, H.E. & Mathebula, N.E. 2015. Ethical conduct of procurement officials and implications on service delivery: a case study of Limpopo Provincial Treasury. *Public & Municipal Finance*, 4 (3): 16-24.