

## **AFRICANISATION OF PSYCHOLOGY: IDENTITIES AND CONTINENTS**

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**Abstract.** The psychologies of North America and Europe have long dominated African academies. The relevance of this knowledge for people of African origin, has been challenged in arguments for the Africanisation of the discipline. A common argument is that an understanding of African epistemologies is necessary for the development of psychological knowledge appropriate to the continent. Inherent in this position, but usually unrecognised, is a challenge to the external validity of knowledge claims developed outside the conditions which construct mentality in Africa. Also evident is a tendency to totalise African experience and mentality. Despite some debate, the idea of Africanisation in psychology has not been systematically developed. The current paper attempts to take the discussion forward. Following a discussion of ways in which the Africanisation of the discipline has been considered, I suggest that it is necessary to distinguish between the Africanisation of psychological knowledge, and the appropriate application of modern psychological theory and research in African contexts. The former suggests a challenge to the professional psychologies of Europe and the United States, and in some versions, it may imply the adoption of the traditional ethnopsychologies of Africa. The latter position leaves these claims largely intact while developing eco-culturally sensitive interventions. This contribution argues that an African psychology should draw on both local and external knowledge systems. But in wishing to call itself a psychology it needs to be guided by the conventions for psychological activity which exist in the various corners of the discipline.

### **BACKGROUND.**

During the apartheid era, the psychological profession was rightly castigated for its apolitical silence, and for not bringing its intellectual resources to bear on the psychology of oppression in South Africa (Nicholas, 1993). At the present time, the profession faces a further challenge (at the level of knowledge production and training), as calls for the Africanisation of the South African academy increase (Moulder, **Sunday Independent**, May 19, 1996). In the case of the humanities, Africanisation is concerned (among other matters), with examining the fit of assumptions about persons which inform the psychological theories of the northern modern world, against those held to be common in sub-Saharan Africa (and that it includes those south of the Limpopo!).

The idea of just what is "African" about these views and how important they might be for psychological work in South Africa, is a central concern of this contribution. Appiah's

assertion that it is helpful to see Africanisation as an identity project which may be deployed strategically for certain aims, will be offered as a contrast to the essentialist manner in which the construct is (Appiah, 1993). I argue that the essentialist form leads to rather sterile outcomes, which are potentially hinder the Africanisation of psychology.

The Africanisation of psychology is not a new issue, but it has a current urgency. It has long been the subject of extensive discussion among African American psychologists (e.g. Nobles, 1980). It has also appeared in scattered critiques of the Eurocentrism and racism which have accompanied the deployment of mainstream psychology on the African continent over a similar period (e.g. Bulhan, 1981 & 1993; Dawes, 1985 & 1986; Liddell & Kvalsvig, 1990; Nell, 1990; Foster, Nicholas & Dawes, 1993; Nicholas, 1993; Howitt & Owusu Bempah, 1994).

It is of note that debates on the Africanisation of psychology tend not to mark the uneasy state of the discipline in the late 20th century. The debates between (modernist) Smith (1994) and (post-modernist) Gergen (1994) exemplify the broad terms of this situation. Modernists claim that the central aim of the psychology as a science is to establish a universally applicable and ideologically neutral set of scientific propositions. In South African debates during the 1980s, this position was represented by Biesheuvel (1987). Modernists assert that while mental contents and some processes may vary across cultures, the regulating systems of mind are identical for all members of the human community (Shweder, 1991). Thus the central project of cross-cultural psychology in Africa was to use cultural difference as an independent variable in the search for psychological universals. Cultural particularities in mental functioning were first read as deficit, and later as differences in eco-cultural niche experience (Jahoda, 1982; Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1990; Gauvain, 1995).

The modernist project, nested as it is within neo-positivist essentialist psychology, cannot entertain the possibility that the search for universals is a flawed, as this would mean the death of the enterprise. Because it has been developed in the northern hemisphere, this body of knowledge has attracted the pejorative "Euro" label in the Africanisation debate. However the critics have not challenged the validity of the modernist project itself.

An alternative psychology, associated with post-modernism and with emerging discussions concerning the possibility of a "cultural psychology" (Shweder, 1991), has not received attention from those engaged in the Africanisation / Eurocentrism discussions. Several cultural psychologists argue that psychology has constructed an ethnopsychology of the modern unitary western subject (Danziger, 1990; Sampson, 1990; Shweder, 1991; Ingleby, 1995). In contrast to cross-cultural psychology, cultural psychology maintains that the subject in mainstream psychology cannot be seen as universal, as it is only one of a range of possible subjectivities which exist around the world. As Shweder (1991:87) puts it: "... statements about regularities observed in the lab, or anywhere else ... [are not] about inherent properties of a central processing mechanism ... but ... descriptions of local response patterns contingent on context, resources, instructional sets, authority relations, framing devices, and modes of construal"). Thus cross national similarities in findings, may be reflecting similarities in these social parameters, as much as they might reflect psychological essence. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, the decision to take this stance or one of the more traditional positions in the discipline, will influence one's response to Africanisation.

## **PROJECTS AND WHITE WRITING.**

Given the overdetermination of “race” in South Africa, I am aware of how delicately the white English South African identity, into which I am cast by my location in political history of the South Africa (and into which I inevitably cast myself), shapes both my contribution to this debate, as well as potential responses. These facts should not, I believe, render this voice illegitimate. While I cannot and do not wish to speak on behalf of anyone, or expropriate black South African experience, I believe that as an academic in this country at this time, it is necessary to engage with the issue of the Africanisation and its implications for psychology.

This task is important, because if left unexamined, the notion of Africanisation can be constructed in as overdetermined and essentialised a manner as “race” or culture (Dawes, 1985). Such practice, manufactures a false consciousness of a timeless unitary identity, that ignores differences of class and modernisation that characterise Africa today. It creates a rhetoric which binds the subjectivities of those inhabiting the African continent seamlessly together, denying that this is a constructive and historically informed exercise. Such a view contrasts strongly with “A Foucauldian view of subjectivity [which] is of a self torn in different directions by competing discourses” (Burman, Levett, Kottler & Parker, 1997:4). Following these authors and Foucault (1980), the form taken by the debate on Africanisation must be historicised. It needs to be seen as a the product of the intersection of discourses of identity and power following colonialism and apartheid. As one of the disciplines which engages in researching and manufacturing personal and social identities, psychology is well placed to reflect both on the psycho-social consequences of various discourses of Africanisation, as well as on their implications for the nature of its practice.

This task is difficult because it is not only an intellectual exercise (if that was ever possible), but because it is emotionally and politically entangled in the past and future of the continent. It is as much about developing appropriate forms of doing psychology in Africa as it is about asserting and claiming the power, long denied to the majority, to determine this future. It is the emotive and painful elements of political oppression coupled to personal and group identity, and linked to political power, which are likely to lead to the overdetermined (and limited) form of potentially useful concepts such as Africanisation.

Appiah’s (1993) ideas are helpful in my view. He notes that if academics have anything to offer in this debate, it is in disrupting the discourse of ‘racial’ difference, essentialism, and privilege, which may be used in judgements of rights to engage this academic discourse. He also usefully challenges us to ask what project is served when we deploy identities like “African” or “black Afrikaner” or “white”. Rather than being essential, there are versions of such an identity which can be used in different projects. They may be used successfully in some projects (e.g. for many years the white nationalist South African project), but if the version used is not considered carefully, it can subvert the project. Thus he notes that American racism and the overdetermination of white identity in the South, prevented the emergence of a non-racial workers movement (or project), which was to the detriment of all worker interests.

Particular uses of racial categories can therefore cut across our interests because they blind us to these interests. At the present juncture, the press of our racial history can do

the same for the development of South African psychology, if we do not think carefully about the identities we deploy in different transformation projects. There are many projects and various identities to which they may be appropriately attached - women, African, black, South African, poor, to name a few. For example, the important project of promoting historically marginalised black authorship, requires the deployment of black (but not necessarily African) identity among psychologists (Duncan, Seedat, van Niekerk, de la Rey, Gobodo-Madikizela, Simbayi & Bhana, 1997).

In what follows, I offer a critique of some of the main points raised in discussions of the Africanisation question thus far. I go on to suggest that an exploration of the distinctions between modern and modernising societies, may take us further in developing the discipline and in delivering psychology to Africa, than our current focus on the European vs African distinction.

## **PSYCHOLOGY IN AFRICA AND THE CALL FOR AFRICANISATION.**

### **The issues.**

There are several key words that we need to note at the outset, because if they are not carefully examined, they can serve to bedevil our project. They include: “Eurocentric”, “traditional”, and “African”. None are neutral and that is a major element of the problem.

There are three central thrusts of the Africanist critique of psychology as Eurocentric. First, there is the fact that the discipline collaborated in the oppression of American blacks and in the African colonial project through the invidious comparison of the “primitive” (African) with the modern (Western) mind (Bulhan, 1981; Louw, 1986; Dubow, 1995).

Second, it has been argued that much of psychology (in the USA and South Africa) has had little relevance to the problems facing the black and poor. When it has paid attention to these populations, the discipline has used models which are unsuited to understanding the local conditions of life (Guthrie, 1980; White, 1980). This concern also has pragmatic elements as it relates to the effectiveness of psychology in resolving the problems of these populations.

Third, more specific to black Africa, it is claimed that psychologies imported to the continent do not accurately portray African life and mentality. This is because they are based on European and north American theory and data. A common feature of this position, is its call for the incorporation of an understanding of African epistemologies in developing and applying psychological knowledge on the continent. It includes a challenge to the external validity of knowledge claims developed outside the conditions that construct mentality in Africa. This issue begs the question: is the mainstream set of theoretical and empirical knowledge which has been developed in the modern world appropriate for Africa? This is the more complex matter to which I shall attend.

### **Eurocentrism.**

The Eurocentric / Africanist debate has produced some gains in the North American context and in South Africa. It has provided a position from which to critique conventional practice, and has played a role in re-directing more appropriate research and intervention to oppressed and modernising communities. However it has not begun to move beyond critique to develop an alternative account of what Africanisation of

psychology might be like. Efforts are being made (e.g. Serpell, 1992; Nsamenang, & Dawes 1998). However most material concerns itself with culturally appropriate extension of applied psychology and thickening of our understanding of local communities.

For example, Nigerian psychologist Akin-Ogundeji (1991:4), argues for teaching, researching and applying the discipline in ways that are culturally appropriate and divested of their European orientations: "In order to assert psychology, we need to identify our activities and approaches with the human and social realities in Africa. Our need is to re-align our theories, models and methods with the increasingly complex issues we have to deal with. The theoretical emphases of our research will need to change ... In developing countries such as ours, emphasis should be on the applicability of our research".

Akin-Ogundeji does not challenge the epistemologies of mainstream psychologies, although this may be implied by his assessment that "theoretical" emphases may change. His comment suggests that an important imperative of Africanisation is to increase the local relevance of applied psychology. This he shares with Carr and MacLachlan (1993) who assert a clearly modernist view of the discipline (theory and data largely intact), in their advocacy of a development role for the discipline in Malawi. Carr and MacLachlan fall foul of Owusu-Bempah and Howitt (1995) who accuse them of Eurocentrism and of perpetuating imperialism because they interpret African behaviour through the lenses of Western psychology. They use the term Eurocentrism to signal the interests they claim it serves (white peoples and their cultures). Their criticism is similar to several others and can serve as an example.

It is debatable whether Carr and MacLachlan's project wittingly sets out to assert white hegemony. Their adherence to a universalist and humanist position contains an ideology which asserts that the discipline, largely as it stands, has a positive development role to play in African settings. In terms of the assumptions of the mainstream scientific version of psychology, this is entirely reasonable, which is not to deny that such a view is problematic on metatheoretical grounds, or that it contributes to acculturation.

It is not entirely clear whether Owusu-Bempah and Howitt (1985) reject the deployment of psychology developed outside Africa or whether they only reject its Eurocentric elements.

They reject the idea of African universals, but suggest that African psychology "may be different" (ibid:462). They assert further that: "Western psychological ideas become dangerous once they are offered as the essence of human psychology" (ibid:463). One can only agree. But in questioning the universal applicability of certain Western concepts to African behaviour and mind, they do not seem to take issue with the neo-positivist enterprise of mainstream psychology. They conclude their critique thus: "to be of use and relevance, psychology in Africa must cease to be Eurocentric: it must be about liberation from, rather than conformity to the Euro-American world-view" (ibid:465). This quote seems to place the thrust of their critique in the pragmatic arena ("use" and "relevance"). A nice idea, but in the context of increasing globalisation (read Americanisation), it is perhaps unrealistic. In addition, a key problem with such suggestions is that they assume the existence of unitary "European" and "African" world views. As I shall note, Africa and Europe are first of all geographical entities which are

home to a range of subjectivities (and world views). Critiques such as those outlined above falsely conflate geography with ideology and thereby contribute to the essentialisation of European and African subjectivities.

At root what seems to be operating in the African and American theatres of debate, is that “Euro” is code for whites who have not lived under conditions of race oppression and colonisation, and cannot appreciate the world view of those who have. This is perhaps its most important contribution. It has led to important re-directions of psychological research, helping for example to create space for black experience as a topic of psychological research (e.g. Ogbu, 1981; Nicholas, 1993; Bodibe & Sodi, 1997; Duncan et al, 1997).

However, critics of Euro influence should be wary of totalising the psychology of Europe, east and west with that of the north Americas. This is simply mystification. It ignores the many different tendencies and fractures in what we call psychology today, where the Platonic ideal of psychological science is being increasingly challenged. None of those engaged in the debate about an African psychology address this fact. We should also be careful to consider the type of theory and the components of a specific theory which might be problematic in a particular cultural context. The critics, for the most part, do not engage this issue. Thus formal models of cognitive functioning, or explanations of pattern recognition, are likely to be less problematic than models of personality. The former provide explanations of more elementary psychological processes (Vygotsky, 1987). They are less vulnerable to attack on grounds of Eurocentricity, because they are possibly closer to hardwired processes (LeVine, Dixon, LeVine, Richman, Leiderman, Keefer, & Brazelton, 1994).

The structural elements of Freud’s system and process elements such as defence, may be similarly robust as universally applicable theoretical constructs. However the developmental component in psychoanalysis may be less so, as it contains propositions which are based on specific forms of social arrangement. Personality theories also inevitably contain implications for normal functioning and deviance. They contain teleological elements such as desirable (mature) end points such as genitality and self-actualisation which also reflect modern subjectivity.

It seems essential therefore, to disentangle the negative chauvinism of Eurocentric applications of our psychological knowledge and practice, from the philosophical and psychological frameworks that are the products of European and North American thought. . This is not normally attempted by those who assert Africanisation as a response to Eurocentrism. It is not the frameworks themselves which are chauvinistic. One can hardly claim that psychodynamic or learning theories are in themselves setting out to promote white hegemony. In our project to Africanise psychology, we should not confuse the chauvinistic elements of psychological theory and research, with the very different (and more difficult) problem, of whether the theory has the appropriate categories to capture the mentality of those it proposes to understand.

### **Africentrism.**

Africentrism is originally an African American influence. The projects of African American psychology in developing a psychology of the oppressed are very important for our context. They have developed an improved understanding of the psychological sequelae of ghetto life in America, replaced eurocentric models of the family with

models more appropriate to black family structures (Ogbu, 1981), and have enabled the positive assertion of psychological characteristics which have been fostered by black resistance (Jones, 1980). African American scholars have also been careful not to totalise black experience in the USA, being aware of differing class and community parameters. Nonetheless the historical markers of race oppression, like those in South Africa remain common to their project. It is of note however, that the methods and theoretical constructs which guide and underpin mainstream psychology are not replaced in the African American formulations. Mini-theories to account for particular aspects of black experience or identity are developed, but these continue to draw on notions from the grand theoretical traditions such as defense and reinforcement. In terms of methodology, there is often an appeal for careful descriptive work on aspects of the black experience.

In relating the African American experience to that in South Africa, we need to be aware of a key difference of psychological significance in the positions of American and South African blacks. Apart from cultural differences, the former are a minority group, both in the political and numeric sense, while the latter are not. This alone should caution us to avoid too free an adoption of African American frameworks.

### **Africanisation and folk models.**

Africanisation in psychology was really taken forward by early black American reformations of psychology. The major focus was not on what euro-psychology was doing in Africa, but was on how to deploy African identity in the service of the empowerment of black Americans. Africentrism is Pan Africanist and draws quite heavily on du Bois essentially racial notion of the category "African" (Appiah, 1993). It also exploits traditional African knowledge and philosophy as part of its identity project (Wiredu, 1980; Asante 1990).

In psychology, this is represented in Nobles' (1980) work. He states that the unique status of black psychology " ... is derived from the positive features of basic African philosophy which dictate the values, customs, attitudes and behaviour of Africans in Africa and the New World." (Nobles, 1980:23). He claims that while Africa contains a number of language groups with varied backgrounds, there are nonetheless core common psychological features of African societies, which include communality, unity of mind and body concepts and transpersonal elements.

One of the key problems with this position is that it often leads to a conceptual mixing of folk psychology and philosophy with their academic counter-parts. A formal psychological theory is not a folk model. Folk concepts involve everyday commonly held conceptions of mentality and causes of behaviour . Psychological theory provides a systematic higher order account of an aspect of mental functioning, formulated, critiqued and researched according to sets of rules which bind the research community. This makes it different from a folk theory, which is not formalised and in most contexts invokes authority or public opinion in order to warrant its claims.

All communities, including modern societies, have folk theories about mentality and behaviour (Andrade 1987), and it is important that these be understood on their own terms. Then these everyday or local accounts need to be understood at the level of formal psychological theory. And formal psychological accounts differ from everyday accounts by virtue of their attempts to go beyond such everyday explanations. Nonetheless, even

they have the characteristics of ethnotheories in that they inevitably embody prevailing notions of mentality derived from the society in which they were developed. In the West this would include a prevailing ideology of the importance of individual striving, rather than responsibility to the collective which is common in rural peasant and modernising societies on several continents (*ubuntu* in our setting) (Gilbert, 1997).

As Wiredu (1980) has commented, African philosophies are pre-scientific folk philosophies. Like Hountondji and Appiah (1993), Wiredu (1980:36) asserts: "African philosophy, as distinct from African traditional world views (ethnophilosophy), is the philosophy that is being produced by philosophers. It is still in the making." Thus if African philosophy seeks to be accepted as part of what is accepted as philosophy in the academy, rather than as a folk philosophy, then it should use the accepted analytical tools and conventions of the philosophical disciplines. The point is that there are rules whereby one plays the game called philosophy in the academy, and these differ from the rules which guide folk philosophising.

Similarly I would suggest that African psychology needs to be framed within the conventions of the discipline, if it is not to be confused with the ethnopsychologies of particular communities. The project of psychology in the academy is different from that constructed by other communities in order to provide explanations of social and mental phenomena. The key difference lies in the rituals of theory construction, method and proof which attend psychology.

### **A DIFFERENT DICHOTOMY?**

Africentric political projects have been central in the liberation of African colonies, and have been important in the assertion of positive African identity both in the USA and Africa. In both senses Africanisation has played a healing role. But when it is a psychological project, I believe difficulties may arise. On the one hand there is the danger of the essentialist biologism in the definitions of African used by those who have followed du Bois. On the other, there is the confounding of African geographical and metaphysical categories (Appiah, 1993). This is a common and serious problem in the discourse about the Africanisation of psychology. As a political liberatory project for African colonial subjects it is appropriate because the geographical identity makes sense. But in our psychological project we are dealing with the metaphysical realm. The metaphysical can be embraced in a psychology of the oppressed, who in this context are black. It must also be embraced when we pursue Africanisation of psychology in the more general sense.

Because our project has clear metaphysicality, Hountondji's (1983) words of caution are apt. When we call for "Africanisation", and claim ethnic specificity in psychological functioning, "culture" can become: "... petrified in a synchronistic picture, flat and strangely simple and unequivocal, and it is then contrasted with other cultures which are also trimmed and schematised for the sake of comparison." (Hountondji, 1983:160).

The "Africanness" of our psychology should not be driven by an over-determination of possible cultural differences of its peoples from those in the North or who are white. This is an essential point. We should be cautious in our use of "culture" as an explanatory variable, it is a seductive concept, with potential for abuse. This point was amply made in the 1980s by progressive psychologists and other social scientists (Swartz, 1985; Boonzaier and Sharp 1988). It seems that in the postmodern era, these

contributions and concerns need to be remembered, as “culture” and difference are celebrated anew.

It is essential that the validity of imported constructs deployed in the psychological understanding of Africans be validated against local forms of mentality and conduct. However following Hountondji, I would argue that the nature of African psychology should not be determined a priori as different, simply by dint of its location on the African continent in African cultures. The use of the term Africanisation in this problematic way, has led to a mystification of the *sources* of the sorts of mentality referred to as “African” by writers such as Nobles (1980) and Asante (1990) among others. Common usage sets up African mentality and folk psychologies to be culturally determined and unitary across Africa. This is half truth at best, and bears with it the essentialist difficulties already discussed above.

The cultural practices and activity theory literature is helpful in providing a more productive way to proceed (Goodnow, Miller & Kessel 1995). Following this tradition, the characteristics which have been labelled “African” and requiring local theorisation, may rather be seen as rooted in the sorts of small scale, rural economic and societal arrangements which are characteristic of much life in Africa (Gilbert, 1997). It is the material character of these settings, and their ideological heritage, which in complex ways give forth the social practices and psychological constructs which are held to be common to Africa. These phenomena are not solely a feature of African developing societies. What is not considered in labelling these elements “African”, is that many are characteristic of small under-developed rural societies throughout the world, including less developed areas of the European continent.

In our project to construct an appropriate psychology for the African situation, there may be profit in moving from the African / European dichotomy, to employ another dimension, in which the distinction is between modern Vs modernising communities. In this view, locally developed psychological knowledge becomes not a feature of a specific culture, but an account of the dialectic between mentalities and social practices which occur within particular cultural communities. Thus there may be great similarities in the cultural forms and mentalities across language or ethnic groups in Africa, and between African and other societies. These similarities would be predicted on the basis of the eco-cultural system which evolves as a function of the form of which the communities take as they make their existence.

Therefore it is not the continental or “racial” source of the psychological frameworks that we use in Africa with modernising communities that is the key issue. It is one among several concerns. It has an understandable potential to take on an emotive loading as a function of our history of oppression. But if this aspect is overemphasised, it has the potential to distract us from the important task of deploying the discipline usefully in the variety of worlds that exist on the continent.

Acting in a Eurocentric fashion as a researcher is not the same as drawing on the ideas of European scholars. The former has prejudicial overtones while the latter does not. As a cultural project in itself, the production of African psychology will founder if it does not take place in the dialogue between local and foreign perspectives. In this process, the key criterion should be, what framework best describes and explains the

phenomena of interest. The national origin of the system or its author should not be the issue that drives the process.

Africanisation of psychology is a necessary identity project, and an important endeavour if we are to engage fruitfully in psychological research and practice with modernising communities. The success of the project will be determined to a significant degree by the manner in which the concepts are developed. Essentialist and overdetermined uses of the concept of Africanisation, will lead to research practices which deny the variety of eco-cultural niches within which African subjectivity is made. This will distort knowledge production and limit the appropriate delivery of psychological services to the people of Africa.

I close with Appiah (1993:293) in order to emphasise the point that a key feature of badges of identity, is that they are practical devices:

“To accept that Africa can be a ... usable identity, is not to forget the completely different trajectories of the continent’s so many languages and cultures. ‘African’ can surely be an enabling badge; but in a world of genders, ethnicities, classes and languages, of ages, families of professions, religions and nations, it is hardly surprising that there are times when it is not the label we need.”

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