

# Indigenous Philosophy and Multiple Modernities

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## *Abstract*

The inception of the project of modernity resides in the projection of a self-fulfilling subjective rationality that leads both to better self-understanding as well as a control of the environment. Still, failing to serve a truly universal human agenda, modernity narrowly propagated the values of Western culture. Part of justifying such an ideological status quo is made possible by the colonial sciences that ascribed reason, logic and objectivity to Westerners and emotion, affection and oneness to the “other”. Operating within a binary framework of tradition and modernity and emotion and rationality, the colonial sciences like anthropology and ethnology created the notion of an indigenous culture and knowledge that is strictly traditional, static, oral and non-progressive. As such, rather than studying others in their entire milieu, the colonial sciences propounded an antithesis between traditional indigenous culture which is a seat of mythology, and scientific modernity that is empirical and technical. Such a quest systematically degrades indigenous knowledge, culture and philosophy for the paradigm of scientific and technological rationality. This paper argues that the solution to such Westernization of all human knowledge resides in the concept of multiple modernities which situates alternative movements in the world of globalization as attempts to contextualize modernity in different sites of knowledge and also allows for different cognitive dimensions that are mutually incommensurable. This allows for the contestation of indigenous, scientific, secular and other modes of knowledge.

*Keywords:* colonial sciences, myth of indigenous knowledge, multiple modernities.

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary engagement with a critique of grand metaphysical schemes, projects of modernization and adaptation of the latest achievements in science and technology reveals that, the ‘other’ of the main stream discourse is reexamining the confines of its existential condition. Here, transcending the value free and objectivist conception of the natural and social sciences, the role of ideology, power and knowledge nexus and the colonial sciences in creating relations of hierarchy is emerging as a focal point of analysis. At such a stage, the interrelated notions of indigenous knowledge and philosophy help to contest Western ideology concealed in a form of universal truth and dialogue. Hand in hand with such a critique, the positive inputs of respective cultures and civilizations must be utilized within the horizon of multiple modernities that contextualizes the questions of modernity in different soils. This paper tries to interrogate the role of the colonial sciences in creating relations of otherness and also proposes a research project centered on the affirmation of indigenous knowledge in diverse modern projects.

The paper starts off by introducing the opposition between modernity and indigenous knowledge. This is furthered by a discussion of the colonial sciences which seek to legitimate the

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status quo, affirm euro centrism and degrade nonwestern cultures. Finally, I will try to elucidate the positive contribution of indigenous African and Ethiopian philosophies in countering the grand narrative of modernity as a Western project.

## 2. Indigenous knowledge and modernization

According to Brouwer (1998) there is a current emphasis on the role of local indigenous knowledge for global society, hand in hand with exploring the technical aspects of indigenous knowledge and the centrality of local wisdom in proposing alternative versions of development and relations to the physical environment. Here, the major alternative conceptions of indigenous knowledge are “academic (ethno-science and human ecology) and development focused (farming systems and participatory development)” (Brouwer, 1998: 351). He further observes that indigenous knowledge these days is seen as the solution to the contradictions of development through an emphasis on sustainable development and harmonious coexistence as a solution. In the process, it is redefining the very notion of development driven by capitalism and is universalistic, consumerist and instrumentalist in its orientation. Thus, “in contrast to the past, when traditional knowledge was typically seen as obstacles to development, it is now claimed by some that these are pivotal to discussions on sustainable development resource use and balanced development” (*Ibid.*: 661).

Upon a recognition of the failure of developmental schemes, quantitative models of development and problems in the adoption of developmental schemes, indigenous knowledge is presented as an alternative paradigm and inclusive in realizing participatory development. Thus, “recognition of indigenous knowledge presented the development community with alternative experiences with which to challenge conventional development praxis” (*Ibid.*: 662). In order to add a holistic dimension to the conception of indigenous knowledge, there is a need to mediate the conceptual quest for knowledge with instrumental considerations and theoretical frameworks with technical efforts. Furthermore, a methodological orientation that seeks a true appropriation amongst indigenous and other systems of knowledge as well as translation must be practically instituted. There is a need to institute legal mechanisms to protect indigenous knowledge from piracy in the world of global capitalism and also to see the validity of indigenous knowledge in a fresh eye that goes beyond the Eurocentric perspective.

In considering the utility of indigenous knowledge, Morris (2010) argues that the essence of indigenous knowledge must be contextualized in the various practices of a culture towards the immediate environment. Upon recognition of the failure of conventional and Western systems of education, there is a current focus on indigenous knowledge and local philosophical thoughts and ideals. Still a lack of conceptual clarity exists in the field. Here, going beyond the ideological usage of indigenous knowledge as a category to degrade Non-Western cultures, Morris argues that indigenous knowledge “simply means the knowledge that ordinary people have of their local environment: environs meaning what is around us” (Morris, 2010: 1). Although there is a debate regarding whether the practitioners of indigenous knowledge are situated within the natural or human environment, one needs to affirm the intrinsic relation between the two. As such, “essentially humans are both natural and social beings, we are both actively engaged with the world and we view this world with a detached contemplation” (*Ibid.*: 2) Some of the main features of indigenous knowledge include local cultures and their crucial role in the construction of ideas, its dissemination to local cultures, verifiability, practical utility, non-systematic nature, dynamism and furnishing either a man-centered or bio-centered approaches toward the environment. Here one needs to ponder the viability and practical utility of indigenous knowledge in the African context.

For Derman (2003) the prospect of indigenous knowledge in Africa is presented in terms of the opposition between progress and tradition, modernity and culture. In Africa, the

indigenous knowledge of local communities is associated with oneness with nature, sustainability as an alternative model of development and resisting of Western influence. Thus, “development has overwhelmingly been viewed as antagonistic to indigenous peoples and knowledges” (Derman, 2003: 68). Furthermore there is an emphasis in peace and harmony brought by indigenous knowledge sharply contrasted to the conflict and chaos brought by Western technical knowledge. Still, what accounts for the instrumental and technical dominance enjoyed by Western systems of knowledge?

Based on the arguments of Doxtater (2004) the Western intellectual enterprise is characterized by the primacy of reason and logic as the sole gateway to the truth over other modes of cognition as well as an absolutist tendency that seeks to degrade other indigenous, local and alternative forms of knowledge. As such, “Western knowledge rests itself on a foundation of reason to understand the true nature of the world” (Doxtater, 2004: 618). Furthermore, the Western colonial paradigm envisages a hierarchical structure between Western and non-Western cultures, seeing Western knowledge as progressive and novel and non-Western ones as unchanging, fixed and uncivilized. Subsequently indigenous knowledge tries to counter the image of non-Westerners as innocent and uncivilized and serves as a model of resistance. Thus “indigenous scholarship argues against the homogenizing euro-master narrative that seeks to colonize indigenous knowledge” (*Ibid.*: 620). Because of Western bias and prejudice, indigenous knowledge is treated as illogical and non-objective and being unable to cope with the dynamics of nature and superiority of other civilizations. Furthermore, Western knowledge structure is characterized by the will to dominate other models of knowledge seeing itself as the litmus test for all knowledge systems and seeing indigenous knowledge as traditional and backward. Accordingly, “Euro-scholarship ignores indigenous knowledge for the purpose of promoting its own narrative structures based on Western knowledge that decides what is true” (*Ibid.*: 629). At such a point, one needs to assess the impact of trade policies of liberalization and free market economy on indigenous culture, philosophy and knowledge.

The increasing impact of liberalization and commodification of knowledge in the global world signified a narrow focus on scientific, technological considerations in higher education on the expense of indigenous knowledge. Seeing Western scientific knowledge as the ultimate standard, indigenous knowledge is seen as communalistic and underdeveloped. As such, “Despite growing support for the principles and practice of equal opportunity and multiculturalism, and the growing appreciation and apparent accommodation of Indigenous knowledges in Western institutions, higher education is still dominated by a Western worldview that appropriates the views of other cultures” (Morgan, 2003: 36). For a genuine participation of indigenous knowledge in today’s world, indigenous knowledge needs to transition from an object of analysis into an active enquiry.

Historically it was through both violent and peaceful mediums that indigenous knowledge was being transferred. The violent mode entailed the usage of non-Western resources to build empires whereas cultural contacts also led into learning from alternative modes of indigenous knowledge. Thus, “Occurring simultaneously with this process has been the appropriation of wisdoms and knowledges in the uses of medicinal herbs, hunting animals, and obtaining of “local knowledge” of edible plants and animals to allow survival in environments alien to Western understanding” (*Ibid.*: 37). Hand in hand with a dissatisfaction with dominant models of development, an attempt has been made to accommodate indigenous and other forms of knowledge. Still, such an accommodation required the search for cultural values harmonious to different systems of knowledge as well as the need to bridge the local with the global in the context of higher education. One also observes an antithesis between the goals of modernization and the inputs of indigenous knowledge within Western paradigms of development.

As McGovern (2000) puts it, there is a discord between indigenous knowledge that is seen as local and modern knowledge that is disseminated through the imperialistic intentions of

the West and its modernization schemes. Thus, “The form of education provided in schools has not been in and of itself beneficial for indigenous peoples. Modern forms of knowledge have been taught outside of the context in which they were developed” (McGovern, 2000: 526). Going beyond mere imitation, there is a need to understand the emergence and function of indigenous knowledge as well as its dynamism with alternative modes.

### 3. The colonial sciences and the antithesis between traditional indigenous culture and scientific modernity

Upon recognition of the role of the sciences in justifying colonialism and imperialism, there are different ways in which the notion of a colonial science is being understood. For some it refers to the body of knowledge produced in the age of colonialism in diverse contexts and for others it refers to the type of scientific enquiry carried out within the colonies. Within such a complex identifying the questions of oneness and otherness, the beginnings and ends of the colonial sciences and its diverging theoretical and practical manifestations is difficult. Also, for Schiebinger, “historians of colonialism recognize the problems of periphery models” (Schiebinger, 2005: 53).

The study of colonial practice and the way in which the sciences legitimized colonialism needs to be approached from social, political, economic and cultural angles amongst others. As Pels puts it, anthropology as a study emerged within the colonial discourse and its practitioners are still trying to dissociate themselves from such a colonial legacy. Thus “the discipline descends from and is still struggling with techniques of observation and control that emerged from the colonial dialectic of Western governmentality” (Pels, 1997: 164). Pels further adds that the three dominant ways in which anthropologists conceptualize colonialism end up legitimizing colonialism. First of all, some anthropologists see colonialism as an integral aspect of history and a way of refining human relations and civilization. Secondly, others perceive colonialism as a conscious procedure and operation which requires subjugation for the advancement of societies. Thirdly, others see colonialism as a manifestation of the fact that societies progress through adaptation. Lewis also charges anthropology with euro centrism and legitimating colonialism since as subject anthropology deliberately creates the notion of otherness, propagates perceived notions regarding the inferiority of others, provides an intellectual justification for colonialism and justifies the ill treatment of others in the name of scientific inquiry. Thus, “it is common for some anthropologists in the applied field, to attribute a group’s behavior in a particular situation to cultural conditioning, often viewed as highly resistant to change, and to ignore extra cultural factors which may be far more significant” (Lewis, 1973: 584).

Going beyond anthropology Sheperd identifies the colonial spirit of marginalization in the introduction of archaeology in Africa. Diversely phrased in terms of Africa as the cradle of humanity, precursor to human civilizations, the archaeological studies neglect genuine diversity and end up establishing Europe’s quest for self-affirmation. Thus, “such sites of political identification span the issues of the rang of culture, race and identity, and have placed archaeologically constructed knowledge in relation to phenomena of colonialism, nationalism, apartheid, slavery, and neocolonialism” (Sheperd, 2002: 189). Currently, in the world of globalization, Whitt argues that there is a continuation of the colonial science complex in a form of bio colonialism which perpetuates a false sense of otherness and exploits indigenous knowledge in a form of patent rights and commodification of indigenous knowledge and resources. As such, “this time around, it is not land or natural resources that imperialism has targeted, but indigenous genetic wealth and pharmaceutical knowledge” (Whitt, 2009: 15).

Amongst others, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze saw an intrinsic relation with the modern European concept of reason which contains within its tenets both the European notion of the self and the world, and the physical and ideological conquest of the African. Thus, Eze maintains “the

single most important factor that drives the field and the contemporary practice of African / a philosophy has to do with the brutal encounter of the African world with European modernity-an encounter optimized in the colonial phenomena” (1997: 4). For Eze, contemporary African philosophy needs to address the tragic history it shares with modern Europe. To this extent, Eze argued that modernity and colonialism cannot be separated. In the modern period “calculative rationality” which fostered instrumental relations to the world was developed, and this was particularly destructive to the fate of the African (Eze, 2008: 25).

For Eze, behind the greatest modern European philosophies and philosophers, was held an exclusivist assumption that Europe possessed the greatest achievements in human history, and that it should be imitated. For these views “Europe is the model of humanity, culture, and history in itself” (Eze, 1997: 6). Eze holds that, African philosophy labors under a betrayal of modern reason which meant freedom and emancipation for the European, and exploitation for the other. Furthermore, the Eurocentric assumptions are being echoed in the dominant philosophical, artistic, literary and economic models these days which all posited Europe as the normative ideal. Currently, abiding by Western models, Africans are trying to imitate liberal democracy, free market economy and an education guided by a science and technology that is detrimental to Africa’s own indigenous forms of knowledge and philosophy.

For another African philosopher, Mogobe Ramose, in order to actualize indigenous forms of knowledge and philosophies in Africa, on one hand one needs to expose the degrading of African local cultures and knowledge systems in the world of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and on the other hand research programs and projects must study and revisit previously suppressed African forms of knowledge. Ramose inaugurates the “authentic liberation of Africa” as a “two-fold” task (Ramose, 2007: 36). Critique starts with a questioning of “European epistemological paradigm” implanted on the African through colonialism, developed in the enlightenment and still functioning to yield the exploitation of the African. Secondly, there is a need to participate in the creation of “common universe of discourse” which renders justice for the oppressed taking into account asymmetrical power relations which led to the impoverished condition of the African (*Ibid.*: 36).

The limited status given to indigenous philosophy, culture and knowledge in Africa could be explained by the creation of the modern vs. traditional, individualistic vs. communal and indigenous vs. global dichotomy that serves Western ideology. For such an ideological structure, whereas indigenous philosophy and knowledge are non-technical, emotive and backward, modern scientific knowledge is instrumental and progressive. Here, one needs to look at the modern-traditional dichotomy introduced by modern European reason. Accordingly, “in the modern era of European philosophy, modernity appropriated knowledge for itself along with science, and left only dogma, mysticism, and mythology (also excluded from knowledge) for culture and tradition to be concerned with” (Eze, 1997: 74). Modernity degraded the status of indigenous knowledge and philosophy as the irrational and non-Western societies were portrayed as following ritualistic, religious and mythological ways of being. On the contrary, modern Europe and its rationality were developed as reflectively individualistic and as representing the most refined forms of civilization in human history.

Supporting such an argument, Mudimbe also claims the minimal role of African and traditional systems of knowledge emerges from the Western ‘colonizing structure’. In The invention of Africa Mudimbe characterizes by the ‘colonizing structure’ the general body of theoretical and practical knowledge which facilitated the physical and mental conquest of the African. This consists of forceful conquest of the continent, penetration of ideological constructs in the African mind and finally radical adaptation of indigenous forms of life to alien ways of being. “Thus, three complementary hypotheses and actions emerge: the domination of physical space, the reformation of native minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective” (Mudimbe, 1988: 2). Accordingly, alongside physical conquest one witnesses

extermination of indigenous knowledge and forcefully subsuming indigenous cultures and philosophy into the Western ideological structure.

#### 4. Multiple modernities and the contribution of indigenous philosophy

The idea of multiple modernities conceives modernity as emerging in a particular cultural, social, political and institutional framework. The conception also doesn't necessarily assume that diverse modern projects will converge on a historical path. Thus, "The core of multiple modernities lies in assuming the existence of culturally specific forms of modernity shaped by distinct cultural heritages and sociopolitical conditions" (Eisenstadt et al., 2002: 1). Starting from the year 2000 and the appearance of the notion of multiple modernities in the *Journal of the American academy of Arts and Sciences*, one witnesses a wide usage of the term in the analysis of modernity and discussions in the social sciences.

Conventional conceptions of modernity are informed by the bias of eurocentrism that sets Western culture as the apex of human civilization. Here one needs to analyze the connection between the affirmation of one's national identity and a quest for modernity. Discontent with Western narratives of modernity and attempts to find a space for multiple horizons of modernity led into the inception of multiple modernities. Thus, "the theory of multiple modernities has been developed out of a deep sense of frustration with the conventional or classical theories of modernization which, in some scholars' eyes, have failed to explain the diversity of modern societies found across the globe, especially in the second half of the twentieth century" (Ichijo, 2013: 27-28). The thesis of multiple modernities empirically affirms the existence of diverse modern projects and also challenges the normative prioritization of Western culture. Although it doesn't deny the successive development of Western modernity in different stages, still multiple modernities doesn't set such a project as a worldwide phenomenon or the litmus test for diverse modern projects.

Diverging interpretations of modernity emerge from the conflict between diversity and oneness, experience and seclusion and partiality and objectivity. For Eisenstadt, the world of globalization doesn't constitute the emergence of modernity in a global scale, conflicts among ideologies or a zeal for the past. On the contrary, one witnesses attempt to reground the project of modernity in different soils and cultural programs. As such, "all these developments and trends constitute aspects of the continual reinterpretation, reconstruction of the cultural program of modernity" (Eisenstadt, 2003: 517). Using the notion of multiple modernities one could explore the existence of an indigenous philosophy and outlook in the African and Ethiopian contexts.

Philosophically speaking, the existence of an indigenous philosophy reflecting on the fundamental questions of knowledge and born out of the local is questionable. Here, whereas the Universalist position claims that all philosophy as a rational exercise is global in its nature, the historicists emphasize the local, cultural and relative experience. Thus, one should ask, "Is the nature of philosophy purely speculative, practical, or both?" (Medina, 1992: 373). What further complicates the issue is the fact that whereas culture is necessarily bound to a temporal location, the philosophical quest always contemplates the universal.

Concerning the possibility of an indigenous philosophy in Africa, the question arises, is philosophy a mere contemplation that is purely abstract or is it dictated by cultural constructs, to what extent are philosophies driven by modes of cognition and not by external social and political considerations? The conception of indigenous philosophy in Africa is mostly narrowly conceived as a situated form of knowledge limited by space and time. Thus, one asks how independent indigenous knowledge is from culture and local values. Furthermore, indigenous philosophy in Africa is part of a critique of colonialism where the indigenous is the foundation of uniqueness, freedom and emancipation. Thus, "The debate over the role of indigeneity in African

philosophy is part of the larger postcolonial discourse” (Masolo, 2003: 22). Furthermore, using the Khunian conception of a paradigm, an attempt is made to identify the mutually incompatible and incommensurable nature of African indigenous and Western scientific knowledge thereby complicating attempts of communication and translation amongst the contending approaches. Resisting the attempt to confine indigenous philosophy to the local, all philosophy including the indigenous one for Masolo should be founded on our experience, interaction with others and the rational accounts of the human condition.

## 5. Conclusion

The genesis of the colonial sciences resides in the bias of Eurocentric modernity that bifurcates between modern, technical, subjectivist and progressive Western rationality with communal, affective, emotive and illogical cognition of the nonwestern world. In the African context, such a dichotomy has been used to legitimize the morality of colonialism and its contemporary dominance in a form of neocolonialism. Through contesting the notions of otherness, indigenous knowledge and philosophy, one could unravel the asymmetry that underlies the relation between the Western world and the others. On a positive role, indigenous philosophy also serves as a model of emancipation and the affirmation of uniqueness if successfully divorced from the myth of euro centrism that permeates the sciences.

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