

cultural expressions. This is the challenge of Indigenous research as it seeks to break away from colonial hierarchies and relations of knowledge production.

From a nation-building standpoint, it is just as important to acknowledge interconnections among knowledge systems as it is to discursively separate the categories of »Indigenous« and »the West« in order to offer a sustained critique of the historic negation of Indigenous knowledge systems. We also have to be able to address the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges into Western science sometimes without due credit given for the source of such knowledge. Europe is not the advent of human history; Westerners need to understand this and African children need to be immersed in a decolonized knowledge of self and society. In turn, they will have to affirm their decolonized outlook in their civic practices, social choices, and their interaction with political leaders and fellow citizens.

Obviously, Africa had an Indigenous knowledge base before the arrival of Western science. The epistemological polarity that continues to exist in our institutions of higher learning point to on-going relations of dominance between Western and non-Western knowledge systems produced by a long, colonial history and colonizing practices of hierarchizing knowledges. This hierarchy was achieved through the active denial, negation, devaluation, erasure, and open dismissal of Indigenous cultural knowledges. As a consequence, an epistemic polarity has continued to exist that manifests itself in a ranking of knowledge systems. This is harmful to the ways we come to know about our world, the social choices we make, the knowledge we embody and how we act within such a world for change. The urgency of decentering and re-arranging the existing hierarchies both in the academy and contemporary African societies is real.

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Indigenous Knowledge: An Engagement with George Sefa Dei

The primary aim of Professor Dei's paper is a defense of what he calls »Indigenous knowledge« against its devaluation and rejection by the Western academy. As such a defense it is a very spirited and polemical essay that takes direct aim at the relations of dominance between Western and non-Western knowledge systems. These relations of dominance were produced by the long history of European colonial practices. The impact of this period of colonization has indeed been quite deleterious for the epistemic orders of colonized societies. The process of colonization incorporated local cultural systems into a hierarchical order that was established between imperial and colonial cultural systems. Within this new hierarchical order, imperial cultural systems had to accumulate authority, information, legitimacy, normativity and other form of cultural capital at the expense of colonial cultural systems. The imperatives of these processes of cultural accumulation and dis-accumulation were such that local cultures rapidly lost normativity, legitimacy, epistemic authority and experienced major changes in basic sectors such as language, philosophy, religion and education. Thus Professor Dei is very much on point in coming to the defense of these Indigenous cultures.

Further indicating the importance of this defense is the fact that he is not alone. As is well established in the philosophical literature, scholars from these colonized areas have been highly critical of this imperial epistemic hierarchy and have sought to decenter and re-arrange it. In relation to Africa, one thinks immediately of Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Henry Odera Oruka, Kwame Gyekye, Wole Soyinka, Kwasi Wiredu, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, and V. Y. Mudimbe. Professor Dei's defense of Indigenous knowledge is very much in the critical spirit of the tradition established by the above authors.

In the course of his defense, Prof. Dei defines Indigenous knowledge as engagements with the land, identity, spirituality, community, local histories, local cultures, and resistance to the dominance and to

the universal claims of Western knowledge production. Indigenous knowledge, Professor Dei, tells us has been »primitivized, romanticized, negated or ostracized outright from the corridors of Euro-American conventional knowledge production«. (Dei 2015: 55)¹ This exclusion, he argues, has very little to do with the methods and rigor of modes of Indigenous knowledge production. Rather, he suggests that it has to do with the challenges that Indigenous knowledge poses to Western knowledge; in particular, its challenges to the universal claims of Western knowledge.

In support of his claims and arguments, Professor Dei outlines for us the methodology of Indigenous knowledge production. First and foremost, Indigenous knowledge production must be informed by »local voice(s), authenticity of selves and »epistemic saliency« of the Indigenous experience« (*ibid.*: 66) . In short, the first principle of Indigenous research is that it must be done with an Indigenous consciousness. The second principle of Indigenous knowledge production is its spirituality. This is the domain of subjectivity that cannot be colonized and hence is vital for anti-colonial resistance. Third, Indigenous research must be responsive to the land and responsible to the community in which it is being produced. In other words, the researcher must be respectful of the ways, histories and cultures of the community being studied. Fourth, Indigenous knowledge production must transparent and accountable to the community in which it is located. Fifth Indigenous knowledge must be »multi-centric« and not Euro-centric and uni-centric (*ibid.*: 74) By multi-centric, Professor Dei means that in the case of Africa Indigenous knowledge production must be Afro-centric and undertaken from a number of discursive perspectives. Sixth and finally, Indigenous research must be activist and politically involved in the sense of being anti-colonial and concerned with restoring the legitimacy and cultural capital of the formerly colonized cultural system.

Professor Dei's account of the challenges confronting the reconstruction of postcolonial cultural systems is I think a good general portrait. It certainly provides us with an excellent overview of the kind of reconstructive work that needs to be done. At the same time that it provides this overview, his work also confirms very well the suggestions of the group of thinkers mentioned earlier, who have also

¹ G. J. S. Dei, »Conceptualizing Indigeneity and the Implications for Indigenous Research and African Development«, *Confluence*, Vol. 2, 2015, pp. 52–78.

addressed this problem. Thus my critical remarks will focus on the areas in which I think that Professor Dei could have advanced further this project of postcolonial cultural reconstruction. In particular I will do two things. First, I will examine closely some of the restrictive consequences of his construction of the Indigenous/Western opposition. Second, I will suggest the need for an additional layer of categories that will enable a more rigorous theorizing of the negating and de-legitimizing effects of cultural colonization. These added categories should also be able to address with equal rigor and precision the challenges of postcolonial cultural reconstruction.

I Indigenous Knowledge

As presently constructed the category of Indigenous knowledge is caught in a polarization that clearly contradicts its stated definition. If defined as engagements with the land, identity, spirituality, local histories, etc., then Western knowledge is clearly a case of Indigenous knowledge. Western knowledge has all of the local features that are used by Professor Dei to characterize Indigenous knowledge. Indeed very significant portions of the knowledge produced in the West relate to the land, spirituality and all of the other elements in the author's definition. Consequently, if our author is to advance the project of postcolonial cultural reconstruction, he will have to rethink his construction of the category, »Indigenous knowledge«, and also his related rejection of the traditional/modern binary. The substitution here of Indigenous/Western is definitely not an improvement.

Professor Dei places special emphasis on spirituality as a defining mark of Indigenous knowledge that separates it from Western knowledge. In my view, this emphasis overlooks the spiritual heritage of the West – a feature that would definitely confirm its Indigenous status. In spite of being one of the most absolute rejecters of African Indigenous knowledge, we can see this tradition of Western spirituality in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the responses to it by philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers. If there is anything that Hegel's philosophy attempted to teach the West, it was how to continue to be spiritual in the rising period of rational and scientific modernity. Between his *Early Theological Writings* and *The Phenomenology of Mind*, we can observe Hegel wrestling with his Lutheran heritage and finally arriving at a dialectic

tical method of thinking that enabled him to surpass many of the religious practices of his day, but also to preserve their spiritual core.² Further, there is a very interesting convergence here between Professor Dei's claim that Western colonization could not conquer African spirituality and Hegel's belief that modernity could conquer Western religion but not its spirituality. Indeed Hegel's spirituality, his Eurocentrism, and the »multi-centric« nature of his philosophy – which incorporated multiple discursive perspectives – make his work an excellent example of what Professor Dei has called Indigenous knowledge.

If I am right in this insistence that we recognize the distinct spiritual heritage of the West, then this recognition helps to establish the local or Indigenous status of Western systems of knowledge. If indeed we recognize Western cultural systems as local or Indigenous, then it changes significantly how we can or should conceive relations and exchanges between these systems and the cultures of colonized societies. This indigenizing of Western cultural systems suggests that intrinsically they are quite similar to non-Western ones, and that the differences and claims that have elicited Professor Dei's defense have much more to do with the hierarchical system that was established between imperial and colonized cultural systems for strategic and accumulative purposes.

II Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science

Closely related to Professor Dei's category of Indigenous knowledge is the rather rigid polarity that he establishes between it and Western scientific knowledge. Although he asserts that »while I critique Western science knowledge, I do not posit a binary with Indigenous knowledge«, Professor Dei's paper does in fact rest on such a binary (*ibid.*: 58). Throughout the course of the paper, Indigenous knowledge is repeatedly set against Western scientific knowledge. Both are constructed rather monolithically, which heightens the differences between them and obscures the similarities and connections to which Professor Dei gestures quite often. Further, the monolithic constructions of these opposed systems of knowledge are firmly maintained at

² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967; *Early Theological Writings*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971.

the macro-level of societal systems of knowledge production. In other words, these macro-level constructions are never opened up so that we can see their various sectors and subsectors and thus observe any significant differences in impact between them from the imperially imposed processes of cultural accumulation and dis-accumulation.

The unfortunate result of this polarization between Indigenous knowledge and Western science is that it often forces Professor Dei to compare or oppose Indigenous spirituality and religion to Western science. These make for very inappropriate and unproductive comparisons and oppositions. In my view, more appropriate and much more productive comparisons can be realized from comparing Western science with Indigenous science and Western religion and spirituality with Indigenous religion and spirituality. The practice of the above inappropriate comparisons is well established in the Western literature on African thought. Thus, in a classic essay by Robin Horton, »African Traditional Thought and Western Science,« we can see clearly the results of such comparisons.³ Another significant example can be found in the work of Jurgen Habermas, particularly the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*.⁴ In both Horton and Habermas the pro-reason and pro-Western biases are so strong that African religious and spiritual thought don't stand even a ghost of a chance. They are condemned before they even speak a word. This is the position of negation and erasure from which Professor Dei and others have been trying to liberate a spiritually inflected construction of African Indigenous knowledge.

In my view, this liberation cannot be achieved within the above categoric framework of a polarized relation between African spirituality/religion and Western science. To increase the possibilities for liberation, this binary will have to be opened and reset. This resetting must get us beyond the illusion of the West as an exclusive, uni-centric tower of rational and scientific discourses as presented in the works of Horton and Habermas, and also here in the case of Professor Dei. This view overlooks the on-going production religious and spiritual discourses taking place in Western departments of religion, divinity schools, and in newly opened departments of contemplative stu-

³ R. Horton, »African Traditional Thought and Western Science,« in *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

⁴ J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

dies. Further, let us not forget here the millions of popular books on religion and spirituality sold in West, and the rise of Christian fundamentalism, particularly in the U.S. In short, this binary between Western science and African spirituality reinforces the erasure of the continuing impact of the Christian heritage on Western everyday and academic life, and puts African religion and spirituality in unequal exchanges that they cannot win.

III Historicizing Indigenous Knowledge

Finally in this rethinking of the category of Indigenous knowledge, we need to note here another problem that arises from Professor Dei's rather rigid use of the binary between it and Western knowledge. This fixed relation prevents him from adequately historicizing either of these two systems of knowledge. In spite of his claims to the contrary, Indigenous knowledge is for the most part stuck in the colonial period and is highly correlated with change in rural communities. What of change in urban areas like Accra, Nairobi, Kingston or Port of Spain? With more than sixty years of political independence and rapid urbanization behind us, we are now well into the post- or neo-colonial period. However they are theorized, these years of historical experience at nation-building and urban living must be reflected in Professor Dei's epistemic analyses. What kinds of knowledge do African states need in order to build the nation's they desire? Can this be done using just »Indigenous knowledge«? What has been the place of modern science in these projects of nation-building? Implications such as these for the post- or neo-colonial period should be much clearer given the time in which the author is writing.

IV Advancing Postcolonial Cultural Reconstruction

Given the above critical points, how does de-polarizing and opening up the concept of Indigenous knowledge advance the cause of postcolonial cultural reconstruction? It advances this project of transformation in at least three basic ways. First, it establishes the reality of certain fundamental similarities between Western and non-Western cultural systems – before, during and after colonization. Thus, in spite of the exaggeration of differences created by the strategic and accu-

mulative dynamics of colonization, both of these cultural systems have been characterized by basic subsectors such as language, religion, poetry, philosophy, music, and empirical knowledge production. Further, the ongoing productions of images, rituals, arguments, plays, poems, and empirical knowledge in the various subsectors of both systems have been driven by real needs such as the growth and legitimating of human subject formation, the legitimating of political rule, and the technical informing of economic production. Further, the clearer visibility of these fundamental similarities opens up for us possibilities of non-imperial exchanges, new models of communicative equality, and of more objective comparisons. Rather than aiding the building of hegemony, these non-imperial types of exchanges and comparisons would be motivated by advancing the growth of both societies and their peoples.

Second, this more objective acknowledging of similarities and differences between Western and non-Western cultural systems would enable us to see and analyze more carefully the mechanisms and processes of accumulation and dis-accumulation by which the exaggerating of differences and the erasure of similarities were produced during the colonial period. In *Caliban's Reason*, I tried to show that colonization brought with it the displacing of local cultural, political, and economic elites, and their replacement by foreign ones.⁵ This was a shift that generated major legitimacy problems and deficits for the colonial state and its new governing elites. Both the colonial state and its supporting sets of elites were experienced as illegitimate in the hearts and minds of the colonized population. The solution to this shortage of legitimacy was of course a combination of force and the re-organization of specific subsectors of the dominated cultural system to make them into producers and suppliers of needed legitimating symbols, arguments, reserves of normativity, and other forms of cultural capital.

It is around the imposing of such a system of simultaneous accumulation and dis-accumulation, of extracting surplus cultural capital from specific subsectors that were taken over, that we can grasp the decline in authority, influence and normative power, as well as other structural changes experienced by colonized cultural systems. This is the institutional nexus within which we can begin to account for the

⁵ P. Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*, New York: Routledge, 2000.

massive exaggerating and inflating of the differences between Western and non-Western cultural systems during the colonial period. It was also in this context that Western knowledge became a good example of what Professor Dei has called the knowledge of a particular group masquerading as universal knowledge. Crucial to the production of these exaggerations and inflations were the elevating of the discourses of reason, science and white supremacy. The latter had as its counterpart, the doctrine of Black inferiority, which was systematically integrated within the larger discourse of ›the negro.‹ The latter contributed greatly to the project building hegemony as it provided the measures of dehumanization that were used to justify the enslaving of Africans, the political disenfranchisement of people of African descent, and the imposing of Western cultural discourses and practices on them in order address the major shortages of legitimacy.

From this perspective of these strategically exaggerated differences, postcolonial cultural reconstruction must be founded on projects of reversing inherited patterns of accumulation and dis-accumulation, and of reorganizing severely distorted and malfunctioning subsectors that had been producing cultural capital for the colonial project. These strategies and policies of reversal and sub-sectoral reorganization have involved dismantling as much as possible of the imperial mechanisms that facilitated the extraction of surplus cultural capital. This has been easier in some subsectors than others. The regaining of hegemonic control over the linguistic and religious subsectors has been much more difficult than in the cases of music, dance or spirituality. Consequently, such projects of reversal and reorganization must be seen as ongoing efforts that are subject to major setbacks.

Further comprehensive projects of postcolonial cultural reconstruction must include well coordinated efforts at the re-establishing of real linkages between the cultural demands of subject formation, economic development, and political governance on the one hand, and the technical information, ideals, values, ideas, arguments, structures of normativity, and other forms of cultural capital that are being produced within the subsectors of postcolonial cultural systems. The restoration of the above supply and demand linkages is vital to the project of cultural reconstruction.

The third and final consequence of rethinking the category of Indigenous knowledge that I will address is the following. When we

open up this category to include the Western system of knowledge, it enables us to talk much more objectively, globally and comparatively about the modernizing of different systems of Indigenous knowledge. I have already noted Professor Dei's rejection of the category of »the modern«, but it is unavoidable. The category finds its way back in his analysis, particularly during Professor Dei's discussion of rural transformation in Africa. Further, whether it is in the urban or rural areas, knowledge production in Africa, the Caribbean, and other ex-colonial societies is undergoing a process that can be called modernization – a process that has a lot in common with the experience of the West. From my point of view, to be able to talk more objectively, globally and comparatively about similarities and differences in these ongoing processes of modernizing epistemic orders and practices would significantly advance the project of postcolonial cultural reconstruction.

Before departing, let me thank Professor Dei for writing such an engaging paper that has elicited these thoughts from me. It is my sincere hope that they will be of use.

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