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# “As long as the rain still falls we must cultivate”:<sup>1</sup> Africanist challenges to liberal education

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## Abstract

The role that education plays in developing countries has come under scrutiny in South Africa recently. Those who argue that in the South African rural context, education should be responsive to the needs of the local community have challenged the liberal assertion that education ought to aim at autonomy. A liberal education is argued to be rooted in a Western tradition and is therefore of no relevance in the African context. In this paper, I unpack the Africanists’ challenge and offer possible liberal responses to the challenge. I argue that the real test for liberal education is not simply to show that it can accommodate Africanist worldviews, but that it can have a transformative impact on power relations between black and white, First and Third World, developed and under-developed.

## Introduction

In South Africa recently there has been a flurry of interest in rural schools and rural education. The Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005), for example, funded an extensive study into rural education and a Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (DoE, 2005) was established in 2003 to look into improving the educational outcomes of rural institutions. Rural schools in South Africa suffer particularly gross disadvantages – not least of which is lack of resources, including water and electricity, and difficulties in attracting qualified educators. These conditions engender poor academic performance and often leave rural learners without the skills and knowledge to function on equal footing in the democratic dispensation. Aside from resource constraints, however, is an argument by Africanist theorists that the problem with rural

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“Emerging Voices: A Report on Education in South African Rural Communities”, Nelson Mandela Foundation, Cape Town, 2005, p.9.

schools is that their 'Western' orientated, liberal curriculum is not responsive or relevant to the needs of a developing country. The solution, therefore, to the poor quality of schooling in the context of developing states is that schools approximate the culture and norms of the local community and adapt the curriculum in the interests of development. Given the threat of globalisation on the economic systems and cultural practices of developing nations, and following the devastation wrought by colonialism and apartheid, the argument is that the task of education is not to try catch-up with or emulate developed countries, but to strengthen indigenous knowledge so that communities can control the trajectory of development on their own terms. The term 'rurality' is meant to clarify the linkages between schools and communities, to open up the opportunities education presents for development, and to illuminate the epistemological obstacles rural learners have in accessing education.

This essentially communitarian ideal of education contrasts with a liberal democratic conception of education, which is focused not on community interests but on individual autonomy. For the liberal democrat, education has a universal objective in ensuring that young people become autonomous, learn to engage in democratic dialogue and are able to reason about the conditions for justice. Such a discourse may diverge from the ideals of a community and a liberal democratic education is therefore of necessity distinct from community interests. In addition, education is centred on the individual in his or her own right and the role of education is to encourage learners to critically evaluate the many conceptions of the good life, including that of their own community, so that they can come to choose which is best.

This liberal conception of education has come to be associated with Western, developed nations, its historical roots traced back to 19<sup>th</sup> century political movements and writers such as J S Mill. For Africanist communitarians, liberalism is an expression of a tradition that has no relevance to African societies, in which (to put it simply) community (rather than the individual) is central and principles such as *ubuntu* define relations between people. As Ivison explains, liberal accounts are grounded in "a particular set of presumptions about power, the relevance of history and the nature of public reason" (2002, p.22). Amongst the challenges presented by postcolonial theory is that the liberal claim to have found universal principles ignores its own cultural location and therefore fails to recognise the ways in which a liberal education is an imposition on indigenous African cultures. At worst, then, a liberal democratic education is a form of cultural imperialism – and the Africanist response is to assert a fundamentally African education.

According to Odora-Hoppers:

The experience of the rural school learner in the local community outside the school is not only anathema but is also absolutely refractory to the Western-compatible, exogenously oriented establishments we call the school. 'Eyeless in Gaza', the rural school learner experiences school as the first point of cultural and epistemological disenfranchisement as the relentless and lifelong cultural debriefing begins. (2004, p.21).

The allegation here is that schools strip away cultural identity to replace it with Western norms, which are to be read as neo-liberal and individualist. Odora Hoppers implies that schools ought to be integrated seamlessly into local communities, that they should mirror and reproduce cultural norms and practices. The reasoning appears to be twofold. First, in affirming the cultural identities of learners, schools will boost the self-esteem of the individuals and their communities against the onslaught of liberal values. Second, without a disjuncture between what schools teach and community knowledge, learning will be more effective. That is, curriculum which is not culturally alienating promises better epistemological access.

In this paper I unpack three challenges that Africanist theorists present the liberal educators – and in each case present a counter argument: first, liberal education's attention to cultivating individual autonomy does not respect an African communitarian worldview; second, given the enormous challenges of underdevelopment, liberal education's focus on autonomy is misplaced; and finally, a liberal education overlooks, even denigrates, Indigenous Knowledge Systems. I will argue that while liberalism does contest much of the Africanist worldview, liberal education is nevertheless relevant to the African context in that it promises to be transformative on the side of justice and therefore ought to challenge the unequal power relations between developed and underdeveloped countries which is the trigger for the Africanist critique. In addition, it is because liberal education attempts to transcend context, to open up alternative ways of viewing the good, that makes it universally relevant.

## The African community vs the liberal individual

Beyond the geographic, economic and political boundaries that define rural schools, the one distinguishing feature (highlighted by amongst others, the Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005) that sets rural schools apart from their urban counterparts is their location within communities. As the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education puts it: "schools are not isolated islands and

are intimately interwoven with their communities and environments” (2005, p.12). This attention to community and relations between the school and home environment gives the arguments made by the Africanist theorists a communitarian flavour. For the communitarians, cultural membership is crucial in shaping individual identity and an individual’s norms and values only have meaning in context and in relation to other people. As Indabawa explains: “An autonomous person can only live within the contexts of a *specific time and space*, within which dynamics, cultures and ideologies also feature. . . The cultures or ideologies define whether or not any form of personal autonomy is required by the society as one of its educational ideals” (1997, p.192). Individual identity is weaved into that of a larger community and the community can therefore direct an individual’s education on the basis that the welfare of the group must be protected. Communities are viewed as having “unique assets” (DoE, 2005, p.13), both in terms of human resources and knowledge, which the school can draw on and, in turn, the school has a role to play in rural development.

Rural education is therefore described as a “special case” (DoE, 2005, p.12) – set apart from its urban cousins by its embeddedness and function in the local community.<sup>2</sup> The stereotypical image presented of the liberal individual as atomistic and unconnected is rejected in favour of persons who identify with and find support within a community. American communitarian, Michael Sandel, in his critique of Rawls argued that self-understanding was essentially constitutive of community. He writes: “And what marks such a community is not merely a spirit of benevolence, or the prevalence of communitarian values, or even certain ‘shared final ends’ alone, but a common vocabulary of discourse and a background of implicit practices and understandings within which the capacity of the participants is reduced if never finally dissolved” (1982, p.173). Individual identity and agency depends foremost on the strength of the group – with the Africanist spin on this often explained under the rubric of *ubuntu* (which sums up the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, or: a person is a person through other persons). According to Bangura, *ubuntu* “articulates a basic respect and compassion for others. It can be interpreted as both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic” (2005, p.12). This seemingly universal description of humanism is however distinctive, argues Bangura, on three major tenets: it is based on religiosity and respect for ancestors, consensus building and dialogue (2005). Apart from the first tenet, however, it seems that there is little distinctive here from liberal democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> Though the argument can also apply to some urban communities.

Democracy aims at consensus building and liberal democrats would have little to dispute with the assertion that "we need to acknowledge the diversity of languages, histories, values and customs, all of which make up a society" (Bangura, 2005, p.12). Rather, what Bangura does emphasize as characteristically African is, first, the importance of "collectivism and collective sense of responsibility" having precedence over individualism and, second, the uniqueness of "an African epistemology and cosmology" (2005, p.15). Tying these two points together in an educational project requires that indigenous knowledge generated by communities is accessed and utilized by schools.

For the Africanist communitarian, then, a standardised education fails to take into account the unique possibilities present in community knowledge and further disadvantages the rural learner. Education should repudiate a deficit model of rural areas, and instead draw on the social, cultural and knowledge capital of rural communities in constructing the curriculum (Odora Hoppers, 2004). The poor state of rural education is not blamed on lack of resources alone, but also on the failure of schools to respond to community needs and to take account of community values.

There is, however, no necessary connection between a community's choice of curriculum (however democratically the community choose that curriculum) and an education that prepares learners to participate in a multi-cultural democratic dispensation. It is possible, in fact, that a community would opt to educate their children into obeying traditional, authoritarian structures. The relativism inherent in the communitarian argument suggests that values of democracy, non-racism, non-sexism and equity are unwarranted if they do not feature as community concerns. Furthermore, the insularity of cultural groups entailed by the Africanist argument does not necessarily support dialogue across plural societies, and seems in fact to highlight differences between people rather than commonalities. As Wringe argues: "It is no fact of purely limited or local human experience that individuals are radically separate from each other in their experience of pleasure and pain or frustration and have each but one life to enjoy" (1997, p.132).

Although individuals may (and often do) identify themselves as members of a community and heed to its norms and practices, for the liberal democrat communities cannot claim rights over individuals. As Anthony Ellis explains: "because individual rights are ontologically prior to group-inherent rights, the moral significance of group-inherent rights is entirely a matter of the moral

significance of the individual rights that compose them” (2005, p.206). An individual’s rights cannot be shirked for utilitarian reasons, for this would provide legitimising grounds for slavery (as Rawls points out early on in *Theory of Justice*).

In addition, while the advocates of a rural education claim that rural learners can be linked to particular, identifiable cultural groups may be verifiable, these learners are also members of smaller groups (such as the family) and larger groups (such as the nation). Why then is the local community given precedence in determining educational goals? If education is funded out of state resources and governed by a democratic government, then arguably the interests of the nation state should have precedence over those of local communities. There are in fact grounds to argue against community involvement in determining curriculum. Though local cultural practices may offer a wealth of insight into the good life,<sup>3</sup> they are also repositories of oppressive practices, such as with the recent revival of virginity testing. Past practices are often viewed through an idealised lens while ignoring customs that sanctioned abuse of individuals. The attempt to revive cultural norms in a context very different to the historical circumstances they initially arose in is essentially an artificial pretence. There is little regard for how cultural norms have been shaped by apartheid or how they might have changed in the absence of apartheid. Cultures and traditions are shaped by and adapt to social and economic pressures and it is unclear which historical moment education ought to freeze into curriculum content.

## Education’s role in development

That education ought to have some instrumental value, to be harnessed to a development plan, is at the heart of the rurality argument. As Bangura explains: “We must provide conditions for the acquisition of knowledge not only for ‘its own sake’ but for the sake of humanity and African recovery and rebirth” (2005, p.15). For the Africanist theorist, the post-colonial state is marked by underdevelopment because of the exploitative nature of colonialism and apartheid and its persistent toll on African knowledge and

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<sup>3</sup> There is certainly much to be learnt from IKS and traditional agricultural methods are often superior to the pesticides and fertilizers of large-scale mechanised farming. IKS also challenges the teleological view of progress as a linear line from under-development to modernity.

identity. The prompt for development must therefore begin with a reversal of these nascent effects of colonialism. For Odora Hoppers: "endogenous development begins at the point when people start to pride themselves on being worthy human beings inferior to none; and where such pride is lost, development begins at the point at which this pride is restored and history recovered" (2004, p.23). The role of education, as I understand it here, is that it ought to respond to historical injustice by encouraging in learners a sense of 'pride' in their community (its culture, history and knowledge systems), which will in turn set in motion developmental processes. While many Africanist communitarians reject an education that is reduced to economic rationalism, where learners are simply prepared for their role in capitalist production, there is nevertheless a strong utilitarian function for education. Development and education are seen as parts of the same process – education essentially leads to development and development sets up the conditions for education. There is in this argument also reference to Black Consciousness, the need to overcome the psychological effects of colonial and apartheid ideology which dehumanised black people. But can claims to historical injustice set the conditions for communitarian rights over education in the present – or does the value of equality cover historical inheritance? And is the aim of education to fit in with a development trajectory?

While one obvious consequence of education is that it contributes to development – in that learners acquire skills and knowledge which enable them to take part in social and economic activity – development is not necessarily the primary objective of education. I take it that development refers to improvement in a community's economic, social and political structures and systems with the intention of enriching quality of life. There are at least two problems with defining education based on development needs. First, for liberal theorists, education has been defended as a right in itself, without reference to its potential benefits external to an individual's personal growth. In other words, if education was to prove to have no effect on economic expansion or voting patterns or even birth control (an often used reason for why women should be educated), the activity of education would still be defended on the grounds that it was important in advancing individual autonomy. Education should not be judged on its contribution to development but, as Bailey notes, "must introduce pupils to those activities and practices which can be considered as worthwhile in themselves and therefore fit to be considered as ends rather than means" (1984, p.180). The communitarian argument that in the interests of development, education should have the good of the community trump the choices of individuals is problematic. Amartya Sen has been influential in arguing for a capabilities approach to development,



which assesses progress to development by the extent to which individuals are free to act and make decisions about their lives. Sen writes: “political liberty and civil freedoms are directly important on their own, and do not have to be justified indirectly in terms of their effects on the economy” (1999, p.16). Development is both a measure of and dependent upon individual freedom – and the eye of educators should therefore not be on development indicators, but on “the expansion of ‘capabilities’ of persons to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p.18).

The second problem with an education defined by development needs is that while the stress for development is immediate and insular, education has a more ambitious, broader agenda. A development orientated education would lead to a different, and arguably inequitable, curriculum. The difference in the curriculum for rural schools would be as a result of how schools understood the community’s history, norms and values and how they defined the specific development needs of their context. The development needs of a community may be fairly minimal (to establish water infrastructure) or technically complex (improving ICT). The problem is that development cannot be treated in isolation from the broader context. Consider, for example, Odora Hoppers’ argument that community development depends on the individual’s “empowerment” which is “the process of enhancing the feelings of self-sufficiency in communities through identification and removal of conditions that reinforce powerlessness. Development must no longer be preoccupied with what people *do not have*” (Odora Hoppers, 2004, p.23). But justice requires that we are aware of what we do not have, that we can make legitimate demands on those who do. While self-sufficiency is of course necessary, inequalities in democratic society should be dealt with through state redistribution according to universally accepted criteria, as well as locally driven development. Important then for education is not only that learners are ‘empowered’ to engage in development themselves, but that they are ‘empowered’ to engage in democratic processes that determine how state redistribution is tackled. In other words, it is the development of a “sense of justice” that is crucial, a Rawlsian term that refers to learners acquiring the knowledge and values attended to in his Theory of Justice.

Africanists are mistaken in arguing that appeals for the need to guard difference trounce other values such as equity. While on a conceptual level it is possible to distinguish between socio-economic injustice and cultural injustice, Alex Callinicos argues that the “causal interdependence of economic and cultural injustice implies that any serious attempt to remedy the injustices of, say, racism or the oppression of women is likely to confront all sorts of claims for the redistribution of material resources” (2000, p.85). For liberal



egalitarians, therefore, redistributive justice must ultimately be the guiding principle – the appeal is to equality rather than difference in itself. An education system that pursues curricula with a specific development agenda in mind fails to appreciate the common purpose of education which is the development of rational and moral autonomy.

## Indigenous knowledge systems and African identity

But for the Africanist theorist, it is precisely the demand for social justice that is appealed to in the demand for an Africanist education. In the African context, community rights are asserted as a form of redress. The attack on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) by centuries of colonialism and apartheid must be made good by elevating the epistemology of the locality. Dani Nabudere argues that: “The struggle for African authentic development is. . . about an *epistemological revolution* and struggle for knowledge production that satisfies the demands for cultural identity and human unity” (2005, p.12, emphasis in the original). It is true that schools have purposively ignored indigenous knowledge systems and have uncritically pursued a technicist, scientific paradigm of progress. The impact of this has been to degrade African people and alternative ideas of development. The extent to which liberal doctrine was complicit with colonialism must be acknowledged, but today a liberal democratic education is essentially anti-racist. IKS has been included in post-apartheid education, for example, a curriculum which Enslin (1999) points out matches the central features of a liberal education.

There is, nevertheless, a question on the extent to which (liberal democratic) schools can truly integrate IKSs, given the way in which IKSs have been delineated from ‘Western’ systems. According to Bangura, while African knowledge is integrative, Western systems “are based on a concept that fragments African life derived from a Eurocentric division of labor theory which separates education from politics, religion, economics, and the social institutions of family, or group, or people” (2005, p.4). The assumption is that the separation between the knowledge of schools and the knowledge of the community is both arbitrary and artificial. There are, however, important reasons for the distinction, which hang on how knowledge is defined. Kai Horsthemke points out that there are three main ways in which knowledge is used: “*Knowledge that or factual knowledge, knowledge-how or practical knowledge* and, lastly, *knowledge of persons, places, or things or knowledge by acquaintance*” (2004, p.34, emphasis in the original). Factual (or propositional) knowledge is different from knowledge in the last two senses in

that it “has been argued to have three necessary and logically independent components: belief, justification and truth” (Horsthemke, 2004, p.34). This is a substantively rigorous definition of knowledge that schools should be most concerned with if education’s task is understood to be to induct learners into modes of practice that have rational and universally accepted logic. To assume, as the Africanist communitarians do, that all knowledge is derived as subjective data and its ‘truth’ dependent on people’s understanding or worldview, is to take a relativist position on knowledge. It fails to account for the way in which we are able to reason justifications for why we believe one thing and not another. Schooled knowledge therefore functions on different legitimating grounds than ordinary, everyday beliefs and IKSs need to meet the same requisite criteria to be taught (as knowledge) in schools.

## A liberal education in Africa

The issues of contention between liberals and Africanists run into difficult questions relating to identity, redress in the face of colonial oppression and continued disadvantage affected by globalisation, and the need to promote Black Consciousness. For the Africanist, a liberal education is an anomaly in Africa because it has Western roots, negates an African cultural identity and threatens the coherence of African values. Yet, liberal theorists have faith in an inclusive approach to diversity. A review of Western (American and British) literature shows a concern with how a common liberal education is able to accommodate minority group rights. Most recently, the question hotly debated is the degree to which a liberal education tolerates a show of religiosity amongst minorities – such as with the wearing of head-scarves by Muslim girls and the attempted suppression of evolutionary science from the curriculum by Charismatic Christians.

Arguments that liberalism is essentially able to accommodate a broad range of cultural and religious perspectives draw on the writings of liberals such as Rawls, who in his book *Political Liberalism* (1993) claims that universal agreement is possible on fundamental political principles even where there is a great deal of disagreement on other, non-political issues. Will Kymlicka (1995) argues that group-differentiated rights, which protect a cultural community from the impact of external political and economic decisions made by the larger society, are compatible with liberal theory as long as such rights do not grant members regulatory power over individual members.

But both Rawls and Kymlicka assume that liberalism's inclusive net only reaches as far as groups and individuals concur on liberal principles. The

difficulty with arguing that a liberal education can accommodate an Africanist perspective is that in practice there is much that would be deemed illiberal. Enslin points to a tension "between developing critical thinking and promoting respect for cultural diversity" (1999, p.185). As education exposes different cultural notions of the good life to be studied, respect for diversity may be fostered but learners may also question the credibility of their own cultural beliefs.

Underpinning much of the Africanist critique of liberal education is that it is perceived as a Western imposition and therefore a tool of subjugation. The real challenge then for a liberal education within an African context is not to simply show that it can accommodate Africanist worldviews, but that it can have a transformative impact on power relations between black and white, First and Third World, developed and under-developed.

This may just require better advocacy work on the part of liberal educators, who would argue that liberal education is in itself transformative. After all, an education that is critical, committed to justice and individual autonomy should undermine a state of relations that is undemocratic and inequitable. Rawls's Difference Principle (which states that the distribution of resources should always be to the benefit of the least advantaged) determines that inequalities as a result of birth or natural talent be compensated for through allocating additional resources to learners disadvantaged in this way. But what the Africanists point to is that resources alone are insufficient compensation. Cultural background (as well as debilitating levels of poverty) leaves African learners at a distinct disadvantage to learners from (middle-class, white) families where background home and community life resonate more easily with the lessons of the liberal classroom. Whether this argument is true or not depends on empirical investigation, but even if it were verified the fact that culture may act as a factor creating inequitable access to a liberal education does not refute liberal education's concern with overcoming inequality. The strength of a liberal education is its commitment to ensuring that all learners attain individual autonomy. Autonomy is justified for a variety of reasons, but principally on anti-paternalistic grounds which presuppose that individuals have the capacities to choose for themselves the good life (Wringe, 1997). In its Kantian formulation, people should be seen as ends and not means, so that nobody is expected to follow a preordained way of life. Bailey (1984) argues that a central characteristic of liberal education is that it pushes the boundaries of knowledge, as the title of his book suggests, 'beyond the present and particular'. A liberal education exposes learners to a world of possibilities outside of the limitations of their immediate geography principally by

emphasising the general and fundamental foundations of knowledge (rather than its specific application to a particular task) and with its concern in developing in learners the capacity to reason (Bailey, 1984). Bailey admits that: “liberal education, in the sense of its concern for the intrinsically worthwhile, can only become available for all in a relatively wealthy society” (1984, p.24). But if liberal education promises to be transformative – that is that it challenges inherited worldviews, allows people to engage in democratic processes and debates and encourages learners to imagine a better world – then it must be just as relevant in the African rural context as in the developed world.

## Conclusion

The debate around rural schools has raised a basic, but fundamental, question: what is the role of education? For Africanists, the answer lies in ensuring that education is grounded in the development needs of the local community and that cultural norms and practices are respected and safeguarded. In this paper, I argued that the Africanist call for a specifically African communitarian education emerges in reaction to liberal education’s perceived links to Western cultural supremacy and economic injustice. But the alternative role for education suggested by the Africanists is limited in several respects – principally it is inward looking. Western dominance is best countered (perhaps ironically) with a liberal education which hopes as its outcome to have autonomous learners able to ask critical questions, understand a range of perspectives and engage practically in democratic processes that take the world closer to justice. A liberal democratic education requires that learners are able to distance themselves from cultural particularities, as well as to reflect critically on the values and norms of dominant liberal discourses, so that they can come to choose for themselves the ‘good life’.

Rural schools certainly have problems particular to them, predicaments which require systemic effort and creative ideas. But to argue, as the Africanists have, that the problem with rural schools is that they fail to provide a relevant education is problematic. To build a democratic South Africa, rural learners need the same level of autonomy and critical thinking skills as their urban counterparts. In the end there are rural schools, but not rural education.

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